



FORBIDDEN BIKER WOLF

ROXIE RAY

**FORBIDDEN BIKER
WOLF**

**A SHIFTER
MOTORCYCLE CLUB
ROMANCE**

REJECTED RIDERS

BOOK 2

ROXIE RAY

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PROLOGUE

AMELIA

I was mated. I'd never escape him now. It didn't matter that the bond didn't feel... complete. There was something missing, leaving Eli enraged, enough so that after brutally claiming me, he'd locked me back up to consult his pack.

Of course, it hadn't taken him long to return. Eli never could leave his toys alone for long. The weight of his stare fell over me, catching me in front of the small mirror in my cell, fingertips tracing the raw wounds from his teeth.

"You like it, bitch?" he crooned through the bars on my door. Eli had caught me touching where he'd marked me. I was sure it brought him delight. It only made me sick. "That mark makes you mine. Can you feel it?"

The worst part was, I could. While the human part of me reviled him and wanted nothing more than to claw his face off, the wolf in me had accepted what had happened. No, she didn't love Eli's wolf. But as soon as the bond had clicked into place, she'd been ready to present to her mate. He'd taken full advantage.

Bile made my mouth sour. "What do you want, Eli?"

His face contorted into an angry sneer. "You're going to want to watch how you talk to me. You're mine, and you need to learn manners. Come. Stand up."

For a decade I'd been locked up; following orders was second nature now. I stood and waited meekly while he

unlocked the barred door and came to release me from the shackle. It was only ever on when I was walking around the facility. Now, though, I supposed I no longer needed it. Eli had tethered me to him, to this awful place, in a much more permanent way.

I stretched my toes and rolled my ankle as soon as the oppressive weight of iron was gone.

He gripped my upper arm hard enough to bruise. “Let’s go.”

In the kitchen, Eli sat at a table and watched me like a hawk. “Cook me something.”

Cooking hadn’t been a large part of my informal training—if you could even call it that—in his facility. Mostly I’d spent my time being berated and learning the importance of servitude while enduring countless experiments on my body.

I knew how to make spaghetti, though, so I set about the task, trying to ignore the ache in my neck and shoulder where the skin was healing. I couldn’t ignore the ache in my heart, though, the throb of regret and despair too massive to tuck away. This... this was to be the rest of my life.

“I can’t see it,” Eli grumbled.

“See what?” I didn’t look at him as I asked, filling a pot with water.

“The mating magic. I can sure as shit see the mark—” he sounded so pleased with himself, as if forcibly mating a female was something to be proud of “—and I can feel you, but it should be recognizable whether you’re dressed or not. I want the world to know you’re mine.”

I wanted to ask how the world would ever know I was his if he kept me locked up, but I knew better than to voice my deepest thoughts. Besides, there was always the bond, now. If I thought or felt anything too strongly... Eli would know. He’d explained how mate bonds worked. That once he marked me, he’d know my every thought, my every move, my every emotion. He’d said it with glee, and I knew he relished stripping me of every last dignity I had.

“I’m sorry,” I said instead, struggling to keep myself in check. While I couldn’t sense him in the way he’d claimed I’d be able to, I wasn’t about to risk provoking Eli.

He snorted. “Hurry the fuck up with the food.”

While I chopped onion and garlic for the sauce, I felt his eyes on me. They slipped over my body like slime, leaving me feeling filthy. Eventually he spoke, more *at* me than *to* me. “You’re the last white wolf, Amelia.”

My knees went weak at his reminder. I hadn’t always been the last. There’d been enough of us, small and hidden away, that we might have been able to come back from the brink of extinction. But that had been before the final hunt. Before Eli and his pack had found my family and told me I was the only survivor.

“So beautiful,” he added, like I would be glad to hear it. The chair scraped as he stood and walked over, fingering my white-blond hair. It fell greasy hunks down my back, brushing the tops of my thighs. “We’ll wash this tonight.” Like I was his puppy. A pet to take care of.

The knife in my hand felt heavy with anticipation. I realized that was coming from me—I was the one testing its weight. I was what was finding the best, strongest grip on the handle so it couldn’t miss when I drove it—

Eli’s long fingers covered the hand holding the knife. His body pressed against mine, hot and strong. I was going to be sick. “I can hear you now, Amelia.” Warning bells went off. It didn’t matter if it was true; I hadn’t hidden myself away enough, my anger seeping too far out.

He was so strong, an alpha unparalleled by any of the wolves at the facility. I didn’t even try to fight as he took my other hand and placed it flat on the cutting board, like it was an onion ready to be chopped. Gripping my knife hand so tight it hurt, he moved the blade until it hovered over my pinky.

I knew better than to beg.

The blade came down, chopping the top half inch of my pinkie finger clean off. It rolled to settle next to the minced

garlic. The agony blazing up my hand helped me forget about my neck, at least. My stomach rolled and bursts of pain-driven light filled my vision. I could feel my heartbeat pounding in the bit of finger that remained. God, the pain was blinding. Worse, he'd done it with ease. Right after putting his mark on me, he'd mutilated my body.

Eli would be my mate forever, but it was difficult to imagine forever taking very long if this was how it would be. My mouth tasted like acid, and I grabbed a towel to hold tight to the wound.

“You’re fucking useless,” he sighed. “And stupid. But you’re going to give me powerful pups. Rare and strong. I’ll find the secrets in your DNA and make them mine, too. I want you to think about that tonight. Now get out of my fucking sight.”

Cradling my bleeding hand against my chest, I hurried out of the kitchen. No one protested as I ran past them. They all knew I belonged to him now. Where would I even go? This was my first time moving without a guard through the facility, and I proved all their assumptions right. I was too beat down to even pretend I could escape.

I knew better and chose my room instead.

My “room” was on the third floor of his facility. A small space with a bed and a toilet and a small chest with a few clothes in it. Eli never missed an opportunity to remind me just how dependent I was on him. There wasn’t a single thing I could have that I didn’t have to beg him for first.

One of the females of his pack was cleaning—and most likely searching for any contraband. Which was absurd because who did I know? Where would anything even come from?

She sneered at me and left, not bothering to re-make the bed. The room stunk of bleach. At least a breeze was helping move the acrid scent out quickly.

A breeze.

I sucked in a sharp breath and crept, disbelieving, to my window.

It hadn't been shut all the way. The female must have been rushing and forgot to lock the latch. I bit my fingernails as I stared at it—excepting the missing nail. The drop from my window was substantial. As a shifter, I was able to handle hurt. I'd heal quickly. But if I broke too many bones...

Yet if I stayed in the room, ignoring this chance, I knew what would happen. Eli would breed me. Every time he mated with me, our connection would grow stronger, until I didn't have a single second of peace in my day. As it was, I already felt stained with the bond currently in place.

Without hesitating, I made the window look locked, making sure to leave a fraction of a space to keep the mechanism open. Then I went to the bed, laid down, and waited, my heart trying to pound its way out of my chest.



ELI HADN'T COME for me. I'd waited, hungry for food and fearful of him, until the sun went down, and the moon rose high. Other than a guard coming by the door of my room and checking its lock, there'd been no one.

The facility was almost silent, everyone but the guards asleep. Eli kept humans as his security at night, his pack "too good" for such a menial job. Besides, he often bragged about how he was "outside" of wolf society. How no one even knew he was out here.

For the first time since being captured, that isolation was an asset.

I moved like a whisper. My few articles of clothing were wrapped up in my sheet to make a bundle. Tying it in a sling, I crept to the window, peering down.

There weren't any guards visible. I couldn't be sure, but if I was going to do this, I needed to do it now. With care, I opened the window. The blast of fresh air was almost enough to make me cry.

Crawling through, I held onto the windowsill as I dangled, searching in vain for a foothold. There wasn't any. Deep breath held tight in my lungs, I let go.

The drop was fast and the landing hard. Despite bending my knees and rolling upon impact, a shock of pain lit up my knee and hip. I bit down my scream.

No one came running. The blaze of pain was becoming an insistent throb, but I was able to stand. With gritted teeth, I began to lope toward the outer perimeter of the facility. Every so often I'd hear one of the guards, or smell them, and managed to tuck away into the shadow of a tree or bush before they could spot me. My heart pounded in my chest so hard I thought it might punch its way out.

Was I really doing this?

Adrenaline spiked and, despite the pain and a certainty that this couldn't really be happening, that I wasn't actually doing this, I reached the security fence. It was high, and I didn't think I could climb it with my leg. Frustrated, I glanced around, searching for anything I could use.

Aha.

Scrounging, I found a large enough rock and a sturdy branch. Using the rock as a fulcrum, I wedged the branch under the wire of the fence, braced it on the stone, and pushed down with all the strength I could muster.

With a rattle of protest, the wire of the fence bent up in slow degrees. My strength petered out, but I'd managed to bend it up enough to create a narrow gap. Small enough for me to slip under. Sweating and wriggling, I scrawled under, ignoring the barbs that scraped and scratched my skin. My pants caught solidly enough that they made noise as I jerked free—as well as earning a deep cut along my hip. I tensed and waited for the guards to come find me.

And then I was on the other side of the fence. Alone—still, no one came running. The first time in ten years.

I rubbed at the mate mark once more, set the sling down, took off my clothes, and packed them as well. How long until

Eli found me? Would I let him take me back alive?

No. I couldn't worry about how well the mark worked. I couldn't worry about getting caught. And I'd much rather die because of this than live the rest of my life being his breeder.

Shifting took effort, particularly with the pain in my hip. But soon I was a wolf and already felt stronger and faster. Using my teeth, I picked up my bag and booked it.

For a while I just focused on distance. The further away I got, the more time I could buy before Eli and his pack were out hunting for me. Eventually, though, my scent would render the miles I'd gained useless. So, when it felt like I'd covered some distance, I smelled around, searching for water.

There was a river. I tried to gauge how deep it was, but it was too dark, the black waters frothing and not revealing its secrets.

I'd come this far. The thing was, when you risked everything, there was no obstacle that was too tough.

Praying, I leaped into the water, finding it deep enough my paws didn't touch the bottom. It was freezing, my bones aching from the cold and my mind going fuzzy. I thought I'd be able to swim across, but the harsh tug of the current forced me to reconsider. I paddled to keep my head above water and let the river carry me away instead, praying I wouldn't black out from the cold before I hit land. I had to trust the river.

I hoped it would spit me out far enough that I'd never have to see the facility or Eli ever again.

RILEY

“Tell him it’s going to be thirteen months before we can fit him in.” I was sick of customers thinking they deserved rush jobs.

Liam looked at me like I was crazy. “He’s not going to like that. He mentioned paying whatever it took to get his bike moved to the front of the line.” There was a gleam in Liam’s eye as he said it. That’s because Liam was a kid and new to this job and life. He had money, but he was at that place where *more* always seemed like the best offer.

I snorted. There was a time when I would have jumped at that kind of offer and asked an exorbitant price. After all, I’d been young once, too. And *more* had been on my mind as well. But enough had changed that I was content to be an asshole now. “Tell him he can pay as much as he wants over the invoice, but we’re not free to work on it until thirteen months from now. He can take the spot, or he can find another shop.”

The color blanched from Liam’s face, and I felt for the kid, really. He was as sweet as they came, which made being in one of the toughest motorcycle clubs in the states a strange fit. Yet Liam did fit in, even if the violence wasn’t something he participated in eagerly.

No one was going to push him there, but if he was going to work for me, he needed to get bigger balls. Between being the second in command to the Black Pack’s alpha, Tex Jones, recovering from a short but violent battle not too long ago, and

running my custom bike shop, I didn't have time for babying anyone.

Not customers and not Liam.

He squared his shoulders and turned in his chair to deal with Mr. I'll-Pay-Whatever-You-Want. It was important for people to learn that money couldn't buy fucking *everything*. Sometimes the wait was what made a thing so sweet.

Although, sometimes it made a man bitter when the thing he wanted most in the world was something he couldn't have.

Unwilling to sit with paperwork and bleak thoughts any longer, I left the office to check out what was happening on the floor. We had two custom orders in. One job was souping up a bike for racing, which meant yeah, it had to look good, but it had to run better. No heavy details. Nothing extra that would take away from its speed.

The other job was more my style. Refurbishing an old bike and making it beautiful. A rideable piece of art that would look damn fine going down the highway. My hands itched for a tool and a place to work on it.

Unfortunately, having grown my business into something that has a thirteen-month-long waitlist meant there was far more management than I cared for and not enough time on the floor.

The bell for the front door rang, and Tex's voice rang out through the shop. "Where's my girl at?"

Jess popped up from the speed job. It turned out she was a decent mechanic with hands small enough to do finesse jobs my big guys struggled with. Currently there was a strip of grease on her cheek, and her blonde hair was pulled back into a tight bun.

She only had eyes for Tex. "Right here," she crooned, before skipping across the floor in her coveralls to jump into Tex's arms.

Here we go again. I rolled my eyes, though I wasn't really that irritated.

It was safe to assume she was done working for the day. They were already kissing, and when Tex and Jess started kissing, they tended to disappear. For hours.

“Get a room,” I grumbled.

Tex broke off making out with his mate just long enough to wink at me. “Great idea.” Hands cupping her ass, he carried her out the door. Just before it swung shut, he stuck his head in. “Hey, there’s that deal with the Colorado Reds. Mind following up with it? I want someone with experience there.”

So, he came to steal my employee away *and* send me on a job? What a fucker. I grinned at my best friend and the alpha of the Black Pack, because fucker or not, he was one of my favorite people. “Sure.”

I didn’t particularly want to oversee an arms deal, but I didn’t want to hang around and watch my best friend and his girl get cozy all day, every day, either. I was happy for them, truly. And the idea of a pup being added to the mix had me excited. But it was hard to watch someone have complete and true love and know it wasn’t going to happen for you.

A long history of girlfriends going horrendously wrong was enough to let me know finding a true mate wasn’t in the cards for me, as much as I’d hoped it would be.

“When’s the deal?” Liam sidled up near me, hands in his pockets. “Want me to come along?”

“Tonight. And no, I don’t think this will be a big job.” Actually, I had no idea how it would go down. Things had been shaky at best between the pack after the war with the Gray Pack. But if things did go sour, I didn’t want Liam in the line of fire until he was ready for it. “Do you mind taking lead for the rest of the day? I need to go ahead and ride out.” The deal was happening near the Wyoming and Nebraska borders. The Red Pack chapter from Denver was riding up to buy some weapons from us, needing to better defend against the small packs of Grays still antagonizing the area. “And I’ve gotta call Dave.”

Dave being the new head Alpha of all the remaining Gray Pack club. The man had been like a godfather to Jess, and I was grateful he'd saved her life. Tex wouldn't have survived her death, so really, all our pack owed him.

Older and wizened, he hadn't truly wanted to be Alpha. He was the former second and had enjoyed being on his own. But after Tex had killed Theo, the pack had needed a leader.

It was temporary—someone would come challenge Dave or he'd choose to step down and there'd be a fight to see who the next one was. We led by strength and dominance, not democracy.

For now, though, he was the best we all had. Pulling out my phone, I dialed his number.

“Yeah?” Dave already sounded over the day's shit. He was going to love me.

“Going to make a sale to the Colorado Reds.” I waited a beat then added, “They asked for arms to deal with some Grays.”

“Shit.” I could almost picture the look of irritation Dave was wearing. He might be the current Alpha, but the Gray Pack was a mess. Most charters had chosen to split from the club, making smaller packs across the states. While smaller packs might seem less threatening, it actually made policing them real fucking hard.

The Black Pack were still working as enforcers. It wasn't that we needed everyone to get along and hold hands, but we shared the planet with humans and other species, and the only way cohabitation worked is if there were some ground rules that didn't get fucking broken.

The Gray Pack had shown a real knack for breaking the rules.

In turn, we'd shown a talent for shutting them down when they pushed too hard.

“They yours?” I asked, though I suspected they weren't. Dave wasn't interested in more fighting. He was just trying to keep what was left together long enough to rebuild.

“Fuck no. If they’re antagonizing the Reds, they get what they get. But I’ll try to get some information on what’s going on there.”

“Thanks. Let me know.”

He hung up. Not one for words unless it was with Jess. Then he got all nice and warm and fatherly. A real chatterbox for her. Hysterical, really.

“Liam, you’ve got the shop for today and tomorrow. The wait list is the wait list, and people can stay on it or fuck off. Got it?”

“Yeah,” the young recruit said, though he sounded far from confident. “I got it.”

With that, I returned to my office and grabbed the to-go bag I always kept stashed. It held a change of clothes, some cash, a backup phone, and a Glock.

Then it was out to my bike. A Harley Davidson Street 750 was my go-to for longer rides like the one I was about to take. Harleys were the kind of sexy, steadfast bikes that were easy to work on and drive for hundreds of miles with no issues. I kept my Ducati for tearing around Rapid City, when speed was more important than comfort.

Bags loaded and gas topped off, I texted Brandon, the Black Pack leader for Nevada. His guys were the ones transporting the arms from North Dakota down, splitting the profits with us. He hit me back with the coordinates for the meet up, and I was off.

As I covered the miles, the sun moved down toward the horizon, the colors melting in the sky like the crayons my mom used to put in the oven to re-shape. It was her way of making something usable from the broken bits of colored wax because my dad sure as hell wasn’t going to buy new ones.

We’d sit in front of the oven door, peering in as the bits and pieces puddled into cupcake tins. Afterward, I’d struggled to wait for them to cool, eager to see the new rainbow colors they’d make.

I learned how to make even the shittiest situation work for me from her.

And I'd learned to hate the colors blue and purple, because they often shaded my mom's cheeks and arms after my father had been drinking.

While there was comfort in the open road and long, flat highways, I was lonely. A pack was, by definition, more than one. But Tex was spread thin, trying to help Dave transition everyone into a world post-Theo. Maybe I should have brought Liam, if only for the company.

But no... I knew I'd made the right call.

It was just that this was the sort of shit the pack used to do together. But then the war had happened, and Tex had found his mate, and suddenly the way we did things changed. I didn't begrudge Tex his mate but fuck, I hated moments like this, when there wasn't even a car's headlights in sight. When it was just me, and my brain could point out how many women I'd fallen for. Treated well. Pampered and cared for and hoped for a future with. Each and every one had burned me.

It was a hard pill to choke down, that was for sure.

My wolf chose that moment to whine within. He wasn't ready to give up. He seemed so goddamn sure we'd find the right mate. The more I let the loneliness ride me, the more irritable my wolf got.

Just as the openness and solo ride started to rub at me the wrong way, I pulled into the place Brandon said he'd meet me. Sure enough, there were ten bikes parked outside a small chapter clubhouse.

They were waiting just inside. I had enough time to piss, slam a beer, and make sure my weapons were ready and the arms were all there before it was time to roll out again.

We were meeting the Red Pack in a parking lot five miles south of the clubhouse. It was a deserted lot in an old mall that had been shut down because no one went to fucking malls anymore.

The Red Pack were waiting for us. They had fifteen guys to our eleven, something that irked me. We were doing them a solid by selling them the guns at a reasonable price—there was no need for the show of force.

Not if everything went down the way it was supposed to.

My wolf's hackles were up as we walked into the dark, empty space. He didn't like the feeling of the exchange. *Fuck*. Sometimes I wished things could just be easy.

Brandon was the appointed lead. It was his deal, and my presence was solely to provide a representative of the alpha to let the Red Pack know Tex had his eye on the sale.

"We've got your guns." Brandon nodded to the back of the van that had followed us. One of his pack members swung the doors open to showcase the inside, packed with automatic and semi-automatic weapons, along with a fuck ton of ammunition. More than enough to defend territory.

The leader of the Red Pack walked over and perused the selection, like he was at a goddamn fancy store instead of a deserted parking deck.

"Looks good," he finally said, and it took everything I had in me not to make a smart-ass retort. What the hell did he think they'd look like? Nerf guns?

"Cool." Brandon had the keys to the van in his hand. "Where's the money?"

The Red's leader pointed to a large duffel bag near their bikes. Hand held out, he said, "toss me the keys, and we'll get out of your fur."

I sneered. Brandon didn't need my help—this wasn't his first deal—but the leader in me was having a hard time keeping quiet. This motherfucker forgot who he was dealing with.

Brandon, though, was quick to address the issue. "I'm gonna need to get a look at the money, first." At this, Brandon's second walked over to the duffel and reached down to unzip it.

Several things happened at whiplash speed. The first was that a hidden Red Pack member snuck out of the shadows near the bikes, a pistol pointed at the second's head at the same time Brandon's man yelled, "There's no money!"

Everyone pulled their weapons, the concrete floors and walls loudly echoing the sounds of guns being cocked.

The air was filled with the acrid stench of tension, and I was on high alert, my wolf raging within at the double cross.

Brandon asked, "Where's the money?", managing to maintain his cool demeanor. I'd mention his composure to Tex—we valued guys who could stay calm and focused when shit got tense. Though I was sure he was raging every bit as much as I was on the inside.

The leader of the Reds sneered at us. The condescending prick. "Here's the thing. We helped you out when the Gray Pack started a war. Plenty of chapters of our pack showed up, fought for you, and all of us experienced losses. I see these arms as... reparation for the people we lost."

Crimson painted my vision. The Red Pack sounded like they thought they'd done us a favor. It wasn't a favor—it had been a fight to protect *all* of us. Not some beef between gangs that needed settling. They thought they had issues with the Gray Pack *now*?

They didn't understand just how bad it would have been if Theo had been left unchecked. Ungrateful bastards.

Brandon rocked back and forth on his heels, pretending to consider. Finally, he said, "Well, now, I hear you. The thing is, if you'd wanted to make a deal like that with Tex, you should've done it then. But this arms deal, now? It's with me. You didn't fight in *my* war. You didn't do *me* a favor. So, if you want the guns, you're gonna have to pay."

The other leader's face scowled. He swiveled so his gun was pointed directly at Brandon's head. In turn, I aimed at him, ready to take the piece of shit down. Black Pack didn't tolerate deal breakers.

Everyone was balanced on a thin wire that threatened to snap at any moment.

“Give me the keys,” the Red Pack leader demanded, waving his gun in threat.

“Money first.”

I wasn't clear who shot first. But the Black Pack second who'd been sent to look at the money sprung up, taking a bullet to the shoulder, before whirling around to attack. Shots fired all around, the deafening sound of gunfire and shells masking anything else.

We all ducked and rolled for cover, using the cement pillars and the van to shield us. The Red Pack didn't have as much available cover and Brandon sent a message to the pack. *Kill them.* For all his cool, he wasn't going to let a pack shoot at his brothers and walk away.

I was all for it.

Pressed hard against the cement pillar I'd tucked behind, I loaded a fresh magazine and peered around, shooting fast. *Pop, pop, pop, pop.* I emptied the magazine with methodical precision, making sure all my shots found a mark.

The scent of blood spiked the air, and after only a few intense minutes, the Red Pack members were down. Using caution, we fanned out and made sure that *down* was also *dead*.

“That fucking sucks,” Brandon muttered. “The club could've used that cash.” The war had tapped everyone's resources—both in money and in bodies. Brandon was trying to rebuild, something I could appreciate.

“I'll have Tex reach out to their prime alpha and see if something can't be done. This was unacceptable.” I kicked one of the bodies, venting my anger. It had been a long ride and a short shoot out. My nerves were fried.

Worse, shit like this was just going to keep popping up. Dave was doing a lot to try and curb Gray Pack bullshit, but if other packs decided to have a pissing contest with us, my life was going to stay busy and complicated.

Too busy to do my job, which I loved.

Too complicated to ever dream of finding a woman.

“I’m headed back now,” I grumbled.

“That’s cool. We’ll take care of the bodies,” Brandon replied. His face was stony, but I could feel his disappointment and frustration at how the deal had played out. “None of our guys got seriously hurt, so there’s that. I’ll call Tex to thank him for sending you.”

“Happy to help.”

I wasn’t, really. I mean, I was glad to help with pack stuff. But I missed the security of being around *my* pack and *my* brothers. I was just so fucking tired of this kind of bullshit. Plus, now that the deal had gone sour, Tex was going to want to start overseeing more. Which meant *I*, along with my brothers, would be overseeing more.

After settling a few more details, I was back on my bike. It was worth staving off sleep if it meant getting home to my bed at my loft. I’d ride back, get a big ass meal at Mama Lou’s, and go pass out in my loft. Maybe, if I let myself get tired enough, I wouldn’t have time to feel the hole inside me before sleep dragged me under.

AMELIA

I layered the concealer on heavy, using a sponge to try to blend it in. There wasn't much I could do about the scarring of my mate mark, but the concealer helped to mask the discoloration.

The woman in the mirror was someone I didn't recognize. After tumbling free of the river, I'd had to make do in the woods for several days, hunting and eating as my wolf and sleeping wherever I could tuck myself into. Eventually, I stumbled upon a road. That road had led me to a small town. That small town had a convenience store.

I'd stolen the hair dye.

I'd stolen the makeup and the scissors.

I'd stolen some discount Halloween contact lenses. They made my eyes an absurd green, but it was better than the icy blue I normally had, a pale shade that made me too easy to identify for me to risk.

Then I'd run until I found another town. In a gas station bathroom, I'd dyed my white-blonde hair a dark brown, cut it to chin-length, and popped in the contacts. Using the makeup, I covered the mate mark as best I could. I wiped myself down with paper towels and water from the sink, trying to erase as much of the stench of living outdoors as possible.

A few days were spent hiding, sleeping, and finding the courage to keep going. I collected supplies, paying for none of them. There was a close call with store security when I'd nabbed a tent and sleeping bag. If I hadn't had a shifter's

speed and strength, there was no way I'd have avoided being caught.

The close call had rattled my nerves, but what choice did I have but to keep going?

Money was an issue. I pickpocketed as I was able, kept my eyes glued to the ground for any loose change. Guilt followed every theft, every sneaking action. It was a mean existence, and I was tired. I needed a new plan.

I needed a job. There'd been an ad in the city paper for a waitressing position, and I'd called, not feeling hopeful. But the woman on the phone, Kitty, had a pleasant voice. She'd told me to come in for an interview.

It would be my first interview, ever.

If it went well, this would also be my first real job. While I couldn't tell where Eli was, the mate bond occasionally sent flashes of his anger. I supposed I should've been happy the mate bond wasn't complete, that if I couldn't figure out where he was, maybe he couldn't sense me, but there was enough of the bond activating to leave me scared all the time.

There'd be no stopping for me. I'd be running for the rest of my life. The job would have to be temporary.

But it will be worth it to stay away from him.

Finger-combing the short, brown locks, I turned my face back and forth, trying to be okay with who I saw. I missed my pale coloring, the reminder of what I was. A white wolf. Seeing the dark hair and green eyes was like looking at a stranger.

Which means no one else will recognize me, either.

Bolstered by that thought, I stuffed my toiletries into my bag, slapped on some deodorant, and tucked in my clean t-shirt. This job would work out, and I could stay for a few weeks, at least. I could save enough that moving on wouldn't be so hard or require so many shortcuts.

The clerk at the gas station glared as I exited the restroom. Cheeks burning, I picked up a pack of gum. I couldn't afford

to spend anything, really, but flying under the radar was critical. If buying a cheap pack of gum helped him forget about the time I'd taken in the restroom, it was worth it.

He rang me up, and I paid in nickels and dimes that I'd stolen from a fountain in front of a museum. Something about my appearance must have telegraphed my absolute appalling situation, because his irritation softened into something almost like pity. God, this was where I'd fallen. To a low where a clerk pitied me for paying in small change.

"Thank you," I muttered, cheeks burning with shame.

"Be safe," he replied, before tossing a candy bar next to the gum. I smiled, a movement that still felt foreign on my face. He couldn't know that I'd never feel safe, not really.

The gas station was across the street from the place I was going to interview. A diner, Mama Lou's. Rapid City wasn't a small town, and I prayed it would offer the anonymity I so desperately needed.

Stepping through the front door, I was immediately surrounded by the scents of a cook range used to churning out eggs, pancakes, and bacon. The space was cozy and clean but basic. No one even looked up as I entered, too focused on their own little world. I could disappear here, I thought.

It was perfect.

Game face, Amelia.

A young woman in an apron, her ginger hair pulled up in a high ponytail, popped over.

"Sit anywhere you like, honey," she said in a voice sweet as caramel. She couldn't have been more than thirty years old but had the same genuine familiarity that my grandmother once had. A welcoming presence that made anyone near it feel at ease.

"Oh. I'm here for an interview?"

At that, her face brightened. She came over and held out her hand. "Of course! I'm Kitty."

As we shook hands, I caught her scent. She was another shifter. Panic tried to spike in me, but I sensed she wasn't a wolf. Some kind of... cat. *Mountain Lion*. My brain connected the dots as I remembered my father speaking fondly of the Mountain Lion packs of the Rockies.

My eyebrow arched as the name and her species clicked. "Kitty?"

Her nose wrinkled and I knew she smelled my wolf. Her smile grew larger. "Yeah, it's a nickname. Katherine's the full one, but I like Kitty just fine. It's fun to be on-the-nose, you know?" She gestured toward some doors near the kitchen. "Go on through there and take a right. Gus is in his office, and I'll be there in a sec. Gotta freshen up some coffees first."

With that, she was off, making her fast walk look bouncy somehow, a pot of coffee appearing in each hand as she headed to the booths and tables.

It was eight in the morning and most of the seats were already full. The hum of conversations was relaxing. I'd spent a lot of my life in silence in the facility. When I wasn't isolated, I was being screamed at, ordered around, or ruthlessly mocked. Hearing the normalcy of this place was a comfort that made my soul ache, the hole the facility had carved out threatening to fester.

Following her directions, I pushed through the doors and found myself in the kitchen. There were three cooks, all working seamlessly. Only one looked up at my entrance. He gave me a quick smile and nod before turning his focus back to the rows of sizzling bacon in front of him.

Again, I was struck by the easy nature of the place—how people were friendly, but without really seeing me. I didn't want to be seen or remembered.

There was an open door at my right. Inside was a large, messy desk. Behind the desk was a man with thick eyebrows and a long face. For a moment, I was afraid to speak. If he was anything like Eli, interrupting his focus would earn me more than a few harsh words and possibly a slap. *You're here for a*

reason. He isn't Eli. I held one breath, counting to five, before exhaling.

“Gus?” I asked as I stood in the doorway, twisting my fingers in front of me

He looked up from a stack of papers. There was no sense of irritation, just surprise. My heart hammered away. “Can I help you?” Gus’s voice was warm and rich, like the coffee I’d been allowed to drink ever so often at the facility. I wanted to drown in it now.

I’d already fallen in love with Mama Lou’s. The companionable way the staff had, the crowds that were more focused on their plates than the people around them, the smells and the noise of it all... my stomach fluttered in anticipation of being able to be a part of it, if only for a little while.

“I’m hoping I can help you,” I ventured, trying my best to be brave. “I’m here for the waitress position.”

Gus’s face lit up and his shoulders relaxed. He waved me in, enthusiastic. “Thank you, Jesus,” he muttered toward the ceiling before indicating I should take a seat. “Kitty see you?”

“She said she’d be in in a—”

“Second,” Kitty said, smoothly coming into the office, shutting the door behind her, and sitting. “Can’t leave the customers with a half-empty cup, you know.” There was a message there of what level of service they expected, despite the mom-and-pop feel of the place.

My insides twisted. I needed the job. But God, I really *wanted* it, too.

“Tell me why I should hire you,” Gus stated, “and hand me your resume.”

That twisting cinched tighter into a knot of fear, and I swallowed. “I don’t have a resume, sir. This will be my second job. Ever.” It was a lie. The only job I’d had, aside from being Eli’s experimental guinea pig, was being a thief, I supposed. But I didn’t want to sound so completely inexperienced they’d laugh me out the door.

Those bushy eyebrows pressed together, and Kitty peered more closely at me. I'd been under a microscope in the labs, and it wasn't a place I enjoyed. Shifting in my chair, I decided it was best to rip off the Band-Aid, so to speak. "I don't know how long I'll be here. I need the money, but I don't have any papers. No resume, no license, no social security. I don't have a bank account. I need to be paid in cash, under the table."

Sensing the tension rising, I quickly added, "But I'm a fast learner. I can work long hours and I don't get tired."

I held my breath. I knew how shady I sounded, but I'd figured out that some parts of the truth were the only ways I could explain my situation.

"You running from the law or a lover?" Kitty asked bluntly. I wasn't surprised she'd figured out my situation. I'd all but spelled it out. But now I was in, so I may as well be in all the way.

"I wouldn't call him a lover," I answered, bitterness coating each word.

Gus leaned back, rubbing at his jaw. "Shit. What's your name?"

My heart sank. He wouldn't be able to take me on, and he was finding a nice way to turn me down. What had I been thinking, trying to just walk in with nothing to offer? I'd have to scrounge around for another job, most likely at a less savory establishment. "Amelia."

It was my real name, but I thought it was common enough I didn't have to worry about it being used to track me.

"You're on trial here, Amelia. We need the help. All I ask is you give me as much notice as you can before you leave." Gus steepled his fingers under his chin. "Any drama, any at all, and I gotta let you go. We're neutral territory—you know what that means?"

I nodded. While I hadn't learned much in Eli's facility, I picked up things from listening in over the years. There always seemed to be pack politics that were talked about. "Between two rival packs?"

Gus nodded. “As long as you’re not affiliated with either of them—”

“I’m not.” I wondered what packs were in the area. If they were Brown, I’d have to leave. There was too much risk I’d stumble across someone who’d run to Eli. But as I was the only white wolf, I could truthfully say I didn’t belong to any rival packs.

I didn’t belong to a pack at all.

“Good, because I can’t have their trouble at my door. Work hard, keep your head down, and I can meet your conditions.”

My relief was so stark I almost felt sick with it. I gripped the edge of his desk to hold myself steady. “Absolutely. When do I start?”

Amelia reached into a box behind her and tossed me an apron. “Right now, honey. But first, I’ll have them cook you up some breakfast. I imagine it’s been a while since you had a hot meal?”

My clothes were hanging off me. Eli had kept me underfed on purpose to keep me weak. Being on the run with only stolen cash limited my food even more. Tears pricked at my eyes, making the contacts itch. I blinked them back. “Thank you,” I managed.

“We’ve all been through shit,” Gus said, “and a nice deed helped us out. Just don’t burn me.”

Standing, I tied the apron on, Kitty handed me some pens and a small order pad. “I won’t,” I promised as I smoothed the front of the apron down. It was clean and starched and felt like a fresh start. Something I wanted so badly it hurt.

“I’ll have a name tag for you tomorrow,” Kitty promised. “Let’s get you fed and going.”



MY FEET ACHED in shoes that didn’t quite fit (purchased with yet another five-finger discount), and I was so tired my brain felt like soup. But after a seven-hour shift, I’d made more in

tips than I had in all the pickpocketing I'd done since escaping.

The customers were easy, they tipped well, and it had taken me no time to figure out the rhythm of Mama Lou's. Absolute tickling happiness at landing the job kept me focused through every table, and now I had three tables left and an hour to go.

Touching the cash in my apron, I thought I might even have enough for a night at the local hostel. With a hot shower. My wolf purred within me at the idea of not having to sleep outdoors again. It wasn't winter yet, but the tent I'd stolen wouldn't be shelter-worthy as soon as the cold came on.

My three tables consisted of an older gentleman nursing a coffee while reading the paper, two women grabbing a late lunch before they headed back to work, and a group of four men who smelled like they'd hit the bar early and were grabbing food to sop up the booze.

Then the front door chimed and something in the air caught my wolf's attention.

Slowly, I turned. My mouth went dry at the sight of the man standing just inside. He was pushing his sunglasses up, revealing sharp hazel eyes and a handsome face. The man had short, brown, wind-swept hair. A tight white t-shirt showcased a heavily muscled torso. He was in a leather jacket with patches all over it, an outer layer that looked more like a warning sign than something he wore for warmth. Jeans worn thin hung from his frame in the most delicious way.

My wolf pricked up, *very* interested. She'd never had a reaction to anyone. Well, not like that. We'd both experienced revulsion for every person at the facility. And when Eli had forced his claim on us, my wolf had acquiesced out of instinct to the bond. This was new. It was... warm, like kindling slowly catching and beginning to build.

Then he looked at me, and it was as if energy was plunged straight into my gut, a dagger of awareness, of attraction, of something demanding I couldn't understand.

And I couldn't afford to.

Wrenching my attention away, I went back to bussing tables in my section, praying the stranger sat in Kitty's.

My skin hummed and buzzed, like the stranger took up all the energy in the room and was pushing it at me. I suddenly needed the shift to be over. *No drama*. And no strangers. I couldn't afford any connections beyond co-workers, and even those I'd have to keep at a distance.

The man was obviously pack, too, and Gus had made his position clear regarding that. Why else would a man who smelled so sharply, so wonderfully of wolf be dressed like that?

I was so focused on shoving all the strange feelings back into a compartment I could ignore that I missed the way the table of men had turned their attention to me.

"Come here," one of them said. Sighing, I made my way over. They'd asked for a lot, and I suspected I wouldn't be getting much of a tip from them.

Smile plastered on my face, I asked, "What else can I do for you gentlemen?"

That's when one of them grabbed my wrist hard enough for bones to grind together and yanked me onto his lap. Within, my wolf snarled and snapped, furious. But my body? It was flung right back into the facility. Into Eli's presence, where I'd freeze each time he pulled me to him, hoping if I was still enough, his attention would be over fast.

Cold froze every inch of me, and my throat constricted so my protest couldn't squeak out.

"You can do a lot for me, sweetheart." The words came in muffled, my ears full of panicked static.

Shit, shit, move! Move!

Scrounging within, I tried to grab a hold of the thread of strength I knew was there. The strength that had given me the ability to jump out a window and throw myself in a river, just to get away.

Just as I found it, a shadow fell over the table.

Looking up, I found two hazel eyes staring down, flashing with danger. He was so *big*.

“Let her go, *now*.”

The stranger’s voice was sharp as a blade, and I knew in that instant that the man himself was just as deadly.

RILEY

“Let her go, *now*.” My wolf was banging against my inner walls, eager to come out and teach these motherfuckers a lesson.

As soon as I’d spotted the new waitress, I’d known something was up with her. For one, she was a wolf, but I couldn’t scent out what kind. She smelled like no pack I’d ever met before. The fact that she was a wolf and solo also snared my interest.

Wolves rarely did well on their own. We all chose packs for the protection and the comfort of companionship. If she was packless, there was a fucked-up reason for it.

What I knew for certain was the tang of her fear had spiked the air as soon as the human had grabbed her and pulled her on his lap. While I couldn’t place her type of wolf, I sure as hell knew *that* smell. The stench of terror.

I also recognized how her body froze and her eyes went blank, as if she were disappearing into herself. They were all signs of abuse. All the signs I’d witnessed my mom display for years while my father lorded over us.

It didn’t matter that I was exhausted from the ride and the incident with the Red Pack. As soon as I understood what was happening, I was at the table in a flash.

The human didn’t let go of her. They all had alcohol clinging to their breath and skin, despite it being early afternoon. Exhaling sharply, I tried to give him one second

more, due to the boozy delay in his stupid fucking brain. No one could say I wasn't considerate.

"Find your own table, buddy," the man slurred instead. "She's not fighting to get away, now, is she?"

A low growl issued from my throat. The waitress's eyes—green, but not natural?—went wide, her nostrils flaring. I could see her fighting within, trying to get the connection between brain and body to function. Poor, sweet thing. If there was one thing I refused to tolerate, it was abuse and harassment.

"I'm trying real hard to be nice here," I managed. At this point my wolf was almost rabid. "But if you don't let her go in the next five seconds, I'm going to rip your goddamn throat out." I pointed to the patch on my vest that showed my rank in the Black Pack. "See this? It means I can do whatever the fuck I want."

Before the man could say something stupid, the human next to him elbowed him hard. "He's a fucking shifter, dude."

That got the drunk's attention, cutting through his machismo like a hot knife through butter. He practically shoved the poor waitress off his lap, and I caught her as she stumbled.

When we touched... shit. I didn't know how to explain it. Just that my wolf, which had been riding me close enough that I was in danger of shifting, suddenly calmed down. He was interested in her, completely forgetting the assholes in the booth. All his focus was on the woman currently regaining her balance and stepping away from me like my touch was poison.

You're welcome, a sarcastic voice in my head said. The one that expected the worst in females because that was the bulk of my experience with them.

Another voice slapped that thought down. *She's scared of you, too. Tread gently.*

It was by far the stronger voice, and I was inclined to listen to it. Pushing my hurt away, I nodded to her before she made

her escape. As soon as she was safely distanced, I faced the men again.

“If I ever see you around here again, you’re going to be my next meal. I’ll make sure you’re alive when I start eating you, too. Got it?”

Pale faced and trembling, they nodded frantically before scooting haphazardly from the booth and stumbling out of the diner.

I waited for the door to shut behind them, arms crossed, a bit disappointed they’d listened. A fight would have been a nice way to work off some of the bad thoughts that stuck to me during my quick trip south.

“They didn’t pay their bill.” Kitty moved beside me, looking at the abandoned table in disgust. “Worked that poor girl for over an hour.”

“I’ll take care of it.” I didn’t want to pay their bill, but I wasn’t going to let the new girl get stiffed on top of harassed. That shit wasn’t right. Pulling my wallet out, I threw two fifty-dollar bills on the table. “That should cover it.”

Kitty placed a hand on my shoulder, gently turning me to face her. The woman had worked at Mama Lou’s for as long as I could remember, keeping tabs in town to report to Hunter, her alpha in the mountain lion pack. “That’s real nice of you, Riley. And thanks for handling those jerks. But your help stops here.”

Hackles up, I stiffened at being told what to do. She cocked her head to the side as if to say *are you serious?* So, I swallowed down the dominant part of myself as much as I was able.

“Why?” I managed, only sounding a *bit* curt.

“Because she’s not going to be here for long.” I picked up the warning in Kitty’s tone, loud and clear. It brought on another unbidden memory—this time of the women I’d helped. Each one of them was running, and while most of them got it figured out, there was always the chance of them bolting out of fear.

What kind of bad was the new girl running from?

“What’s her name?” I asked instead, like Kitty hadn’t just encouraged me to leave the waitress alone.

“She says it’s Amelia,” Kitty grouched. “I’m serious, Riley. She’s sweet, and she was up front with Gus about what she needed.”

My wolf was practically vibrating with interest now. We’d always been suckers for women in need. The whole “coming to the rescue” thing had been my *modus operandi* since my twenties. Never mind that it never worked out, and the women usually cheated, stole, or lied (or all three) by the end of it. “What does she need?”

Because I had no doubt that something terrible had happened to Amelia. It didn’t take someone well-schooled in trauma to see it. But I was so familiar with the signs of hurt I could be a goddamn PhD at this point. And Amelia had all the signs.

Kitty let out a soft snarl. “She needs to be left alone. So, if you want to eat, you better park your ass in my section. That, or leave. Her shift’s almost over, anyway.”

I wasn’t getting anywhere with Kitty. My stomach growled, and that settled things.

For the moment, at least.

I sat in her section, and she said she’d put in my usual order. Instead of feeling the fatigue of the road, my energy was amped again. Thinking about Amelia was like being given a complex problem to solve. I wasn’t sure I could walk away from it, even if I knew I should.

She can tell me she doesn’t want or need my help, I finally decided. I wasn’t going to be pushy, but she deserved to have someone looking out for her. The protective streak in me was determined to make sure that, at least as long as she was in town, nothing bad happened to her.

While Kitty was back in the kitchen, Amelia stepped out into her section. She’d pulled her hair back into a fresh ponytail, but it was cut so short that large chunks fell around

her face. The dark brown made her pale skin stand out. I wondered again about the green of her eyes. I was certain they were contacts, not some kind of magical ancestry the way Jess had discovered she had.

Amelia was in disguise.

In disguise, on the run, and clearly carrying a lot of fear and baggage toward men. My heart lurched into my throat, as if trying to yell out to her it would be okay.

At that moment she glanced up and caught me looking. I held my breath, afraid she'd flinch or run. But to my absolute wonder and delight, Amelia offered me a tentative smile, tiny but sweet.

I returned the smile.

When she started walking toward me, something in my gut went crazy. Like my wolf was chasing goddamn butterflies or something. It was good she was only here for a bit, I thought, because I'd be in serious trouble of yet another heartbreak otherwise.

When she stopped at my table I took another good smell of her, curious about her heritage. Maybe her folks were from Europe or something. Her nose twitched, and I chuckled as I realized she was doing the same thing.

"Thank you," she said. Her voice was soft and melodious. "For helping me out. I was caught off guard."

"You shouldn't have to be on guard when you're at work."
Or anywhere, sweetheart.

Sweetheart? Lord, I was in trouble.

Her cheeks grew rosy. "It's my first day. Now that I know what to expect, I can be more careful. I can take care of myself," she tacked on quickly. A bit defensively as well. Like she was worried I'd think she was weak.

How could I tell her I understood how deep and hard your strength had to be when coming out of a terrible situation? That survivors are anything but weak?

"I don't doubt that," I said instead. "I'm Riley."

The rosiness deepened, and I stared, enthralled. “I’m Amelia.” She didn’t hold out her hand. I remembered how it felt to touch her, like I was being shocked by a taser... but in a curious and pleasant way. “I’m sorry you had to step in. I’m sure you didn’t want trouble.”

I heard the underlying worry. *She* didn’t want any trouble. Did she count me in that category?

“It’s okay,” I said.

Amelia shook her head, those loose chunks of hair flowing back and forth. “No, really. I’m sorry, and I’ll be more careful, I promise.”

My heart was breaking for this girl, who was a wolf but acting more like a deer. Like she needed to placate me, or I’d turn her into dinner. I reached out and grabbed her hand, desperate for her to understand.

As soon as our skin touched, I felt it again. A zap of heat that struck me straight in the chest. “Amelia,” I said, voice husky. “It’s okay. Really. It’s all going to be okay.”

Her throat moved as she swallowed, and the scent of her panic slammed into me. Amelia gave another quick smile that didn’t reach her eyes before jerking her hand from mine.

She turned and walked away quickly, just as Kitty was bringing over my food. Amelia might have been scared, but Kitty was furious. She set my food on the table roughly and narrowed her eyes like her stare was a weapon.

“Riley, don’t push it.”

“She came over to me,” I said, grabbing my fork and knife.

“So help me, if you hurt her, I will find a way to kill you.”

Kitty was only doing the same as me. I understood it. She sensed the pain in Amelia, the fear that clung to the young waitress like a second skin. “Kitty,” I said honestly, “if I hurt her, you won’t have to find a way. I’ll let you do it.”

Because the truth was, I didn’t know that I could leave Amelia alone.

But I'd never survive being the cause of a woman's pain.

AMELIA

Everything ached by the end of my first shift of Mama Lou's. My arms, my legs, my hip, my back. And, unexpectedly, my heart.

Riley.

I wished he'd never come in. Oh, I was grateful he'd forced those awful men to stop. Kitty let me know the far-too-large tip on their table was courtesy of him as well.

But from the moment I'd set eyes on him, it was like there wasn't room in me for anything else. Every saltshaker I refilled, or soft drink I brought out, or table I wiped down... it all became background noise to the obsessive thoughts of him playing out in my head.

It wasn't just that he was the most attractive male I'd ever set eyes on. It was the way my wolf, constantly alert and cringing, finally relaxed around him. Like she trusted him to keep her—us—safe.

I'd never be safe, and it was dangerous to ever believe otherwise.

So, when Kitty gave me the go-ahead to leave, I was out as fast as I could be, with promises to return early the next day. Down the way, I found a small nook between buildings to count out my earnings. My mouth went dry. There was enough to get a hotel room if I wanted. To take a hot shower and have a door I could lock before I went to sleep.

My ankle twitched, a lingering pain from when I'd dropped from the window of the facility. It had healed, along with the rest of my wounds. But it seemed to flare up any time I started to think I could breathe. Like a constant reminder of just how tenuous my grip on freedom was.

I *could* stay in a hotel, but I wouldn't.

Saving was my best bet. If I had to up and run at the drop of a hat, it was better to do so with cash in my pocket.

Sighing, I crammed the cash into my bra and started hiking.

I'd gotten used to long walks, at least, and it was no longer uncomfortable to cover miles in the wrong-size shoes. My legs were getting stronger, and after being on my feet for the entire shift? I'd wake up stronger yet.

Strong was good. It was necessary.

As I reached the suburbs, I stopped at a small convenience store and loaded up on some canned beans, a couple of large bottles of water, and, in lieu of the comforts of a hotel room, I allowed myself a chocolate bar.

Carrying the plastic bag, I walked so I looked casual, but I scanned everything about my surroundings. The sidewalks, the windows of the brick houses, and the roads. When I was certain no one was paying attention, I ducked into the woods.

Once under the cover of trees, I broke into a jog, following the path I'd made that morning. Deep enough in the woods that I didn't think anyone would stumble on me, I found my tent where I'd left it.

Relief flooded my body. Setting the bag of food down, I made a quick search of my perimeter. Smelling the trees and bushes, stopping and listening, and checking the ground for any tracks. All I found were the signs of squirrels, rabbits, birds, and a small family of deer.

No signs of Eli, or any of his wolves. No signs of humans, either.

Just me and my tent.

If you could call anything I owned *mine*. The shoes, the tent, the clothes? All stolen.

The wad of cash rubbed against my sternum, like a reassuring hand. *Not for long*. Soon I'd have money, and I wouldn't need to steal. Hope surged, and I wanted that. I wanted the pride of taking care of myself in an honest way.

Until then, though, this was what it was. Survival using whatever means necessary.

In my tent there was a small towel, a second set of clothes, and some soap. Grabbing these, I went to the nearby stream. It was chilly, but I didn't mind. The brisk water felt good on my aching limbs as I washed my body and my hair, and then the clothes I'd worn that day. I scrubbed those extra hard, making sure none of the stench of those awful men remained in the cotton.

When I was finished, I hung the damp items from tree limbs, used the small towel to dry off, and dressed in the second set of clothes. I noticed some brown soaking into the towel. I'd need to get some more hair dye soon.

Back at the tent, my favorite time of day came.

I took out the contacts, putting them into solution in a small plastic container. Blinking rapidly, I enjoyed the freedom of my eyes being mine again. My shoulders slumped, some of the knots in my back begrudging as they released.

Hungry, I opened the bag to take out some water and the chocolate bar. Something with too many legs scurried over my fingers, and I screamed, yanking my hand to my chest.

Heart wild and breathing ragged, I swallowed the rest of the scream, though it echoed in my mind. A brown spider scurried out of the bag and across the floor of the tent. Moaning in terror, I took one of my shoes and brought it down, fast and hard, squishing the little fucker.

It was, I realized belatedly, a wolf spider. Ironic? Foreboding?

Or maybe I just really hate bugs.

Too many years of being locked in a room where insects were allowed to crawl around left me terrified of all things that scurried. Everything else about the outdoors was perfect. My wolf and I loved the sun and the moon, the scent of the trees, the sounds of the natural world.

But not bugs.

My system slowed, and I froze, listening hard. My scream had been short, but it had been loud. Shutting my eyes, I leaned into my auditory sense, seeking anything new—anything *wrong*—in the surrounding area.

The hairs on the nape of my neck rose.

Slowly, I shifted to all fours and stuck my head out of the tent flap. Nothing sounded or looked unusual. All my neighbors were the same animals I'd been sharing the area with since I'd arrived. Yet my skin crawled like someone was looking right at me.

Minutes stretched like taffy, long but not nearly as sweet. The sense that something was out there didn't go away, but nothing hinted that there was anyone there. No smell, no sounds, nothing to see.

Eventually it was dark enough that I gave up, pulling back into the tent. Even then, it took an hour or so before the sensations dissipated, leaving me exhausted as I crashed from the adrenaline. I saved the chocolate, knowing I was too tired to even enjoy it.

If Riley was here, I could enjoy more than chocolate.

My back stiffened. That had been an errant thought... and unlike any I'd ever had. I couldn't deny that Riley's presence had been soothing, his wolf's strength apparent in the way he carried himself. But to have a... a sexual thought?

An awful shiver ripped down my spine, and I curled up, knees tight to my chest. The only person I'd ever been with had been Eli. My neck burned at that, and I tried to scrub him from my mind. The memory of him was like dirt coating my skin, reminding me of how ruthlessly he'd used my body.

Only he'd been sure to let me know, over and over, it was *his* body.

Not mine.

If that was sex, I wanted no part in it. And since Eli was my mate, the chances of my body truly wanting anyone else was slim to none. He was sure to explain to me that that was how the mate bond would work.

Eli had insisted that the more he fucked me, the tighter our bond would be. Thank God I'd run before he could make good on that after he'd bitten me.

Toxic thoughts were making sleep feel impossible, despite how long and demanding the day had been. Sighing, I decided there was nothing wrong with using the idea of Riley to get to sleep. That couldn't be dangerous, right? If it wasn't the man himself, but just... like, a mental exercise?

I pictured how he'd looked as he stood in Mama Lou's doorway, his clothing tight, and the scent of leather and wind clinging to him. How his muscles had bulged and the tattoos on his arms moved like water as he walked. As I imagined it, I forced my toes to clench... then relax. Same with my legs, my fingers, my arms. Clench then release.

By the time I reached his hands braced on the table, the way the drunk human had trembled in awe and fear of Riley, eager to let me go, my eyelids were heavy and my breathing even.

In my mind, I let Riley scoop me up to carry me away from the men, away from the restaurant, away...

He carried me into a large shower. The tile was clean and bright, the water so warm I shivered. With care and tenderness, Riley pulled off my shirt and pants.

"Is this okay?" he asked at each step, waiting for me to give permission before moving.

Heart running crazy, I stood still and watched him. Riley was slow and methodical as he stripped down. I swallowed as he lifted his shirt up and over his head, his abs well defined and strong. Ink painted his skin in designs I longed to study.

“Let’s get you cleaned up.”

I stared at him. “I’ll never be clean, Riley. Eli made sure of that.”

But the large man shook his head and smiled. “He tried to, but he didn’t succeed. Come here.” The low rumble of his smooth voice slipped over my skin like velvet. I stepped closer. Riley moved behind me, and I heard the click of a bottle.

“I’m going to wash your hair.”

With that, his strong hands moved soap into my choppy locks. I moaned when fingertips scrubbed my scalp in tight, firm circles. Using his hands, he massaged and cleansed.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered before guiding me back into the water. It sluiced through my hair, sending all the filth of my time outside down the drain.

Mesmerized, I watched as he added soap to a washcloth. “I’m going to clean your body, too.”

I bit my lip, scared. No one had ever touched me this way. Any moment, a slap or a pinch would come. Except Riley was gentle as a lamb. The cloth moved in careful circles and strokes. My neck, my back. Riley dropped to his knees and wiped down each of my legs, my feet.

“Thank you,” I whispered, seeing the brown filth I’d carried with me run down the drain. When Eli had touched me, it always left me feeling dirtier than before. This was new and different and wonderful. Terrifying but wonderful.

“We’re not done.”

I looked at him, curious. “What else is there?”

Riley placed a palm on my lower belly, brushing against the curls just below. “We’ve got to make sure you’re okay here, too.”

I shouldn’t want it. Being touched there hurt. Sometimes I’d bleed after. “Riley...”

“Do you trust me?”

The damned thing was, I did. Intrinsic and sure, I knew I could trust him. My body and wolf understood that this was a man who wouldn't hurt me.

"Yes."

"Spread your legs."

I did, sliding them apart, knees shaking at the knowledge I was bare and wide open. Exposed.

Riley slipped the cloth between my legs, running it softly along where my thighs met my core. The outside of my most tender spots. The touch was... tantalizing. My breath caught and a pulse began in my belly, a throb of hunger I couldn't understand.

"We don't use soap on the inside, baby," he crooned.

In a shaky voice I asked, "What do we use?"

"Tongue."

I swayed and Riley caught my hips, holding me up. "May I?" He looked pointedly at my wet and aching pussy.

This was something I'd overheard guards and crude members of Eli's pack talk about before. It sounded appalling when it came from their venomous tongues. But looking down into Riley's earnest, hazel eyes... I wanted it badly. I wanted to feel his mouth on me. I wanted him to taste me.

"Yes," I whispered.

He didn't break eye contact as he moved closer, his tongue flicking out and disappearing into me. I felt him then, the wet, firm press of his mouth against my sex. My body quivered and tightened, the contact so intimate, so sensual, I short circuited.

Then he began to lap at me and oh, how every inch of me hummed in pleasure. The rough and wet glide of his tongue sent waves of pleasure through me. Without thinking, I spread my legs more, trying to give him better access.

Riley took one leg and hooked it over his shoulder.

Oh. Oh.

He speared me gently, slipping inside of me, teasing my sensitive hole. There wasn't any force, no grabbing and or shoving. Everything was a slick, easy glide. Riley swirled his tongue, and I grabbed the side of the shower for support.

A ball of pleasure churned between my legs, and I knew I needed something more... but was unsure what. This was such a far cry from how I'd been touched in the past. Yet I wanted it, wanted more of it.

Needed it.

Riley moved his tongue from within and dragged it forward until... ah! Oh. He found a bit of flesh that sent jolts of pleasure each time he passed over it with his tongue. He sensed what I desired and sucked the tender bit into his mouth.

It was like a storm, the lightning jerks of pleasure followed by thunderous waves of need, over and over. I wasn't sure what was happening, but I knew I couldn't bear it if it stopped.

He pulled hard, then, and the ball within me squeezed tight for all but a moment before exploding out, a bang of sensation that had me screaming his name. I ground down on his mouth, seeking more of it.

Eventually, though, the rush faded, and I sagged. Riley helped me slide down, his smile the most comforting sight of my life. "See? All clean. All better."

Then he guided me around to all fours and mounted me. I was too sated from his mouth to seize up, so his cock slid in with ease, filling me. My wolf howled with happiness, and I gave into the feel of him as Riley gripped my hips and moved.

The pressure of his cock sliding in and out had me crying with pleasure, his name tumbling from my lips. This was different. It didn't hurt. I wasn't pierced or invaded. It felt right, like I was made whole by this connection of our bodies.

Riley upped the tempo until the wet slap of his hips against me and our moans echoed off the shower walls.

"Baby, I'm going to—" He growled, fingers digging into my hips—

I sat up with a start, heart thudding wild and, to my dismay, my hand between my legs. Wet. There was a residual hint of the pleasure from the dream, a warm and languid sensation running from my core to my toes.

I'd been *touching* myself while asleep. Heat prickled at my cheeks despite the fact that I was alone.

But wow. *Wow*.

I... hadn't known my body could do that. I knew of sex and, when I'd been a teen, there had been some experimentation with my body. But then Eli had taken pleasure from me, had burned it away and salted the earth of my body with his. After him, I had no desire to be touched.

Ever.

By Anyone.

That part of me was erased. Or so I'd believed. But Riley, a man I'd met one time and under duress, was now visiting my dreams. And it had been *delicious*.

I chewed my lip, willing the heat of my flesh and rapid heartbeat to fade. I wasn't sure I wanted to feel this way. I sure couldn't afford to. There was too much at stake to get trapped by something. Like candy, the dream had been something that *felt* good... but that didn't mean that it was.

Besides, I had no assurances Riley would be like that. I couldn't trust he'd be what I needed. Slow. Gentle. Willing to stop at any point.

I shook myself like I was a wet dog, trying to free the lingering good feels from my limbs. Then I tucked myself into my sleeping bag while leaving my hands *outside* of it.

There'd be no more of that tonight.

And preferably forever.

RILEY

Where was the line between protective and creepy? I wasn't sure, but I was damned certain I was toeing it.

Mama Lou's was busy again. I'd already been in for breakfast, but Kitty had been quick to put me in her section, away from Amelia. The lion shifter had also stayed so on top of my table there wasn't a chance to check in on the new wolf.

Her scent was so unusual. I'd spent the entire time trying to place it, but in the end, I had no clue.

My routine after breakfast should have included going to the garage, making sure paperwork didn't pile up a mile deep, and then heading to the clubhouse for Pack business. My days were long and busy. So why was I staring at the restaurant, waiting for Amelia to leave?

I'm just making sure she's safe.

There'd been those asshole drunks, but I had a feeling they were a coincidence. Someone else had Amelia on the run.

My phone buzzed. Irritated, I looked at the screen. Tex. I answered, hoping this wasn't him needing me for something. What I was doing—guarding Amelia—felt like a priority to my wolf.

“What's up?” I aimed for casual but knew I sounded just as distracted as I was.

“I was calling to ask that about you.”

“Nothing’s up with me. Same old, same old.” The diner door opened, but it was only customers exiting. I wondered if she’d leave by the front or the back. Maybe I should change my location?

“Interesting. My understanding was that your same old included being at your shop. Yet I’m here, and Liam says you haven’t been in yet today.”

I stifled a frustrated growl. I’d need to teach Liam about giving out my business. Then again, Tex was the alpha, so the poor kid had to tell him what was up. “My same old can involve some changes in habit,” I grumbled instead.

Tex laughed on the other end. “Sure. You’re the most predictable man I know, Riley Fletcher. Don’t be mad, but I checked in, wanting to make sure you were okay.”

By checked in, he meant he’d used the pack bond to sense my emotions. I realized I’d been so focused on Amelia that I hadn’t put up any walls around my feelings. *Fuck. Busted.* “And?”

“Are you really going to make me pull teeth? Where the hell are you?”

A heavy sigh escaped me. More folks left Mama Lou’s. The lunch shift would be over soon. Amelia had been there since 5am. She’d be finished soon, I was sure of it. My watch said it was almost two in the afternoon.

“I’m checking up on a wolf,” I hedged. Tex was my best friend, but as my alpha as well, sometimes his nose got real deep in my business.

“A single wolf? Should I be worried?”

Lone wolves were a mixed bag. They could be alone by choice, a rarity. Dave, the current Gray Pack alpha, had chosen to be a lone wolf before being shoved into the head of the pack. Usually, though, it was exile, or they were crazy. Those ones you needed to be careful of. They’d stir up trouble real quick.

Then again, there were those like Amelia. Running from something.

“I don’t think so, but I’m making sure.” It was my job as second in command to follow through on threats, so I wasn’t acting totally out of line. This was a tomato, to-mah-to thing. At least, that was what I told myself.

“Riley, this sounds a lot like a woman.” There was a tiredness to Tex’s voice I understood but resented. He’d stayed single for most of his life, only dallying here and there. When Jess came into his world, that had been it. Since we’d grown up together, though, he’d been at my side through every romance and heartbreak I’d been through.

Too many.

“It is a woman, but it isn’t like that.” Fuck, the only way to end this grueling call would be to fess up. Tex had caught the scent and wouldn’t let it go, otherwise. “Look, there’s a new waitress at Mama Lou’s. She’s a wolf, but I can’t tell what pack. But she has... the look about her.”

I let that sit for a moment. Tex knew my mom’s history. He knew the look just as well as I did and hated it just as much.

“Did she ask for help?”

“She hasn’t had a chance yet. I’m still a stranger to her. But Kitty warned me she’s probably not here for long.”

“So why are you keeping an eye on her? She’ll be gone soon.”

The thought of that punched me in the gut far harder than it should have. It was probably just that I couldn’t stand a woman in pain and danger, but still... Amelia was clearly taking care of herself. Or trying to, at least. So, what if she left?

“I think she’s running from someone. If she is, he could be coming after her. That could spell trouble for our community, so I’m doing my due diligence.” It sounded weak to my ears, but any reasoning was still a fair argument.

There was a long pause. Finally, Tex grunted. “Okay. Keep me updated. And Riley, be careful, will you?”

I knew he wasn't talking about some pissed off angry male wolf picking a fight with me. Tex was worried about my heart.

“Yeah. Okay.”

The door swung open, and it was Amelia, slipping through like a slim, pale wraith. The brunette of her hair shone with a brassy-green tint in the sunlight, a sure sign she was coloring it, and the color was fading. She scanned the street carefully before hopping down to the sidewalk and taking off at a quick walk.

“Gotta go,” I said before hanging up on him and starting to follow Amelia.

In the most non-creepy way I could muster.

She moved with a lithe grace I could appreciate. Like many female shifters, she was tall. But where muscles would have been on a healthy shifter, Amelia was slim enough that her collar bones and elbows jutted. She had the look of someone who'd been starved for too long.

My mouth tasted like copper. I'd bitten my cheek out of anger.

Amelia crossed a street and made a turn. Staying back, I kept up with her. A few times she stopped and looked over her shoulder, forcing me to duck and hide. Her instincts were good, and I admired them, even if they made keeping an eye on her from a distance difficult.

Amelia covered a couple miles, walking straight into a suburban neighborhood. Puzzled, I stared at the brick houses and well-manicured lawns. It wasn't a scene I was familiar with. Did she live here? If so, then why was she on the run?

It wasn't until we'd gone around a block twice that I realized something was up. Especially when she ducked into the woods behind one of the cul-de-sacs.

We moved through the woods. She was light on her feet and seemed comfortable among the trees. I was concerned about how she could be protected if she moved in isolation like this. Anyone could grab her in these woods, and no one would be the wiser.

My concern shifted to horror when Amelia walked up to a tent that looked as if it had been pitched for a while. Tucking myself behind a tree, I watched in disbelief as she put her bag inside the tent before stretching and crawling in.

Amelia was living inside a *tent*.

It didn't matter that she was beautiful or that my heart did strange things when looking at her. Any woman deserved better than a tent. There were no defenses. No heat. The weather was warm enough now, but what about when winter came?

I'd meant to stay hidden and leave as soon as she'd made her way safely home. But that had been assuming she *ad* a home.

Steeling myself, I walked slow and loud over to the tent, making sure she could hear and scent me. The last thing I wanted to do was scare the shit out of the poor girl. "Amelia?" I said as I got close, squatting just outside her tent.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice came out strained and scared. I could smell the acrid tang of her fear coming out of the tent.

"I wanted to make sure you got home safe," I admitted. "So, I followed you. I get the impression you're in danger and running."

Her snort was bitter. The front of the tent unzipped, and she stuck her head out, staring me down. "And the way to make me feel safer is to follow me home?"

Sitting on the ground, I crossed my legs and held my hands up. "That's fair." She didn't come further out of the tent, so I put my hands in my lap. "I'm sorry for that. How long have you been staying here?"

Her nose wrinkled as if she were deciding whether to run or stay. I held my breath. "Amelia, I'm not going to hurt you."

"I can't know that," she replied, but she also slowly exited the tent, squatting near me. Staring at me. My wolf scratched and whined within. The hurt and pain radiated off her like heat

from a furnace, and he wanted nothing more than to comfort her and her wolf.

“You’re right. How long?” I asked again because I needed to know what I was working with. My mind was already spinning with some fixes that needed to happen ASAP for Amelia.

“Um... in this spot, maybe two weeks. It takes me a while when I get to a new place to find where to set up and get to know the area. This has been longer since I actually have a job.” Anger flashed over her fine features. “I need that job, Riley. You can’t tell them I’m living here.”

My mind flashed to my mother once more. How strong she could be in the face of insurmountable odds. She could have had broken bones, a blackened eye, cuts and scrapes, and she’d still be able to steel herself enough to be a formidable presence when needed.

It was complete and utter bullshit that women had to build up that kind of strength. They deserved to be strong through choice, not because men beat the shit out of them and hurt them until it was either grow strong to survive or perish.

“I won’t have to,” I said. “Because you’re not staying here.”

“I don’t have anywhere—”

“I have a small studio apartment above the bike shop I own,” I said, cutting her off. Amelia’s cheeks pinked so I quickly added, “It’s not where I live. I live at the Black Pack clubhouse. The apartment is for situations like this. When I run into someone who needs help.”

Her eyes watered, turning red quickly. The weird green contacts she was wearing probably made crying uncomfortable. I wondered what her real eye color was.

“You don’t have to pay me rent,” I added. “You’re trying to get on your feet, I can see that. It’s close enough to Mama Lou’s you can walk. But it has a kitchenette and a shower.”

Her eyebrow quirked. “Are you saying I smell?”

She did, but not like how she thought. There was a sweet, floral quality to her scent. Like honeysuckle and sunshine. But also something sharp, and cold, like the morning after an ice storm. The opposing qualities were intriguing.

“No. I mean, you smell fine. But the shower has hot water, something I imagine you’re short on out here. So, would you like the space? You’ll have the keys. I’ll be right downstairs during the day. There’s a security system. At night, I’m only a few blocks away, along with my entire pack.”

I’m offering you safety, I wanted to say. Let me protect you.

My wolf was panting, eager for her to say yes, unwilling to let her be too far from our home.

She bit her lip. “No rent?”

I shook my head. “I can help you with food, too, if you need it.”

“I need to learn to fend for myself,” she shot back, defensive. Then she flinched. “Sorry. I just... I’m going to have to leave at some point, Riley. It’s important that I be able to do things on my own.”

My heart was a crushed soda can, but I nodded for her sake. “Yeah, okay. But if you stay at my place, you need to make me a promise.”

“I... don’t know if I can.”

She was so damned scared. Afraid to trust and terrified of not trusting at the same time. Whoever she was running from had done a fucking ringer on her. For a moment, I prayed she’d stay long enough for him to find her. Because as soon as he found her, he’d find *me*.

And I had a lot of opinions on how he’d treated Amelia that I’d like to express with my fists and the sharp blade of a knife.

“You only have to promise that if trouble finds you before you can run, you’ll come to me. I’ll protect you.”

Her throat moved as she swallowed, and I loved every inch of the long column and creamy skin there. “Why?” she whispered. The tears finally fell from her eyes, streaking down her cheeks. Without thinking, I reached out to brush them away.

Amelia didn’t flinch from my touch.

Because there’s something about you I can’t stop thinking about.

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

She hesitated only a second longer before nodding. “Okay. Thank you. Let me grab my things.”

“Tell you what,” I said. “I’m going to go get my bike. That way I can carry you and your things to the apartment before it gets dark. Will you be okay until then?”

“I’ve been fine this whole time.”

I wondered if she knew there was a difference between fine and surviving. My heart lurched as I prayed, with all my might, that she got to experience the difference one day.

“Yeah, okay,” I said instead.

Then I went to get my bike, wondering whether helping Amelia was going to help get her out of my head...

Or if I’d just signed my heart away, to be paid in increments with interest I couldn’t afford.

AMELIA

Being on Riley's bike was terrifying. I would have thought that being tossed and carried down a river for miles and surviving a three-story drop would make me fearless toward things like this, but no such luck.

As we sped back toward the city, my heart attempted to escape out my throat several times. My experience with any vehicles was limited. Once Eli had me locked up in his facility at fifteen, I hadn't been in a car, truck, van, bus, or anything until my escape.

Even then I'd avoided it if I could.

Riley took a turn, and even though I got the feeling he was slowing down for me, the centrifugal force and tilt of the bike had me clinging to his strong body in a grip that had to be painful. I didn't like being out of control like this.

I didn't like trusting him in this way.

Riley was offering me a place to live. He was being careful with me. My wolf didn't balk at his presence the way she did most men. There were so many ways he could lower my defenses, and I couldn't, *wouldn't* allow that.

"Are you okay?" He shouted back at me as soon as we were upright again.

"Peachy," I managed. I wanted to throw up.

When we pulled into a parking lot, I was surprised to find not some small mechanic's garage but a large and modern building. There were glass walls across the entirety of the

front. Inside I could see the mechanic's stations, but the motorcycles there were like works of art.

The sign said, "Blackhawk Custom Motorcycles."

The loud rumble of his bike shut off, and I waited until Riley indicated I could get off. My knees were wobbly, and he grabbed my elbow as I teetered. "You sure you're okay?"

"I've never been on a bike before," I admitted, handing him the helmet he'd loaned me.

"Did you like it?"

"No." His face fell at that and, surprising myself as much as him, I rushed to clarify. "I liked the wind in my hair and how, when we went down a straight stretch, it felt like running full tilt as a wolf. But I don't like having my life in someone else's hands."

His hurt softened and Riley nodded. "I imagine you don't."

It stung, seeing the understanding in his eyes. Some part of me wondered if, as soon as he left, I should head to the bus station and catch the first ride out of South Dakota. My wolf whined at that. She was desperate to rest and, as much as it scared me, she seemed to trust him.

Riley grabbed my things, shouldering them with ease, and headed to the side. I monitored the windows as I followed. "Why isn't anyone here?"

"It's close to time for a pack meeting," he said over his shoulder. "I told Liam—he works for me, he's a good kid—to let everyone head out early for the day. I figured it would be easier for you to not have to meet new faces just yet."

My fingers flexed. How many men worked here? How long were they there each day? Did they have access to the apartment? How many exits did the apartment have?

Was I walking into another trap?

Riley stopped short. When he turned, his nostrils were flared. "What are you scared of?" He looked around, scanning for an enemy, the set of his shoulders shifting into something wary.

“The... how many people work here?”

“Five, give or take. Liam is new but I’m training him up to be a co-manager. Then I’ve got three other packmates. Oh, and Jess, my alpha’s mate works here. Sometimes we hire temps, but right now it’s regulars.”

His brows pressed together as he looked at me. “Are you worried about my staff? You don’t need to be. They stay downstairs. They’re all Black Pack and good people. Jess is a woman, if that helps.”

It didn’t. Eli had women in his pack and working at the facility, and they were every bit as cruel as he was.

“I swear. You don’t have to worry about anyone.”

“Okay,” I answered softly. I’d be worrying no matter what he promised. My experiences had taught me that words meant nothing, and letting my guard down was setting myself up for pain. But Riley seemed to need to believe I could relax, so I’d let him.

Riley led me to the side of the garage, where a staircase led to a door upstairs. He pulled out his keys and unlocked the door, holding it open for me.

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but it wasn’t what I discovered inside that door.

Studio apartment was right—it was a cozy space. But after living in a tent and, before that, a jail cell of a room? It was spacious. There was a small kitchenette just past the door. Riley’s hand pressed softly on my lower back and my skin caught flame from the contact. “There are pots and pans, a microwave, and even a small oven. No dishwasher, I’m afraid.”

“It’s nice,” was all I could manage. I was tempted to pinch myself because this totally couldn’t be real.

The walls were painted an olive green, the kitchen cabinets all white. Past the cooking area was a tiny bistro table in black. The living room and bedroom all shared the same space, with a small, two-cushion couch in cream facing a flatscreen tv hung on the wall. The bed was adjacent, the black frame

simple. It had drawers underneath, built into the bedframe. Dusky red sheets and a thick comforter made the mattress look plush and decadent.

My limbs threatened to cease working if I didn't lay down soon, it looked that comfortable.

Riley brushed past me to a set of doors. He opened one to reveal a tiny utility closet. It had just enough room to fit my tent inside. My bag was placed at the foot of the bed. He opened the second door, and I could see the shower and toilet inside. The bathroom was a closet, but it came with a door and a lock. When was the last time I'd been allowed that kind of privacy?

His keys jingled as Riley pulled off the one he used in the door and placed it on the bistro table. "That's the key. The shop is open from eight in the morning to six at night, but the noise shouldn't be too bad."

"I'll be at work for some of that time," I said.

"There's hot water and a generator on the off chance we lose power. The TV gets all the channels. The bed," he reached down to pat the mattress, "is comfortable."

My system shut down at the sight of his palm on the mattress. Of course, I wouldn't be here rent free. Of course, all of this was too good to be true. My wolf and I were tired, and that's why I'd allowed myself to hope that this would be different.

Inside my head, Eli's voice was already snide as it reminded me if I didn't have money, I had other things to pay him with. My stomach soured, and I swallowed back bile.

"Please," I managed through constricted vocal cords. "Don't ask me for that."

Riley's body had ceased to move, taut as a bowstring. "Don't ask for what?" He made to step closer then stopped when I pulled back.

"Please don't ask for sex for this place. I'll pay you money or find someplace else, but I just can't, it hurts too much—"

my words were garbling as tears flowed again, my nervous system flaring in panic at the thought of sex.

“Oh, no,” Riley rushed, rubbing a hand through his hair, mussing it. “No, no. Amelia, no. No sex. I would never ask for that. I meant it when I said this place is free for as long as you need it. You’ll never owe me or any of my pack your body.”

Blinking back tears, my breath hitched. Clenching my fists, I willed my body to calm. I was so tired, and it was becoming difficult to rein in my emotions. “I’m sorry,” I gushed, dashing snot from my nose. “I just—”

“You don’t have to be sorry, either.” Riley appeared so torn, like he wanted nothing more than to take me in his arms but knew the harm that could do. I found I appreciated his desire to comfort me just as much as I valued his restraint. The weight of my panic began to lift.

“Thank you for this.”

He nodded, curt. “Of course. I’m going to drop off some groceries. I know you said you’d get it, but tonight you should just make this place yours. I’ll leave them outside the door and knock, okay?”

I tried to smile and knew I was a glass ready to shatter at any moment. If I said anything else, even something nice, it would undo me.

“The shop’s closed, the alarm is set. I’ll leave you the code for it in case you need to leave. No one can get here, and no one knows you’re here but me, okay? This is a safe place, Amelia.” Riley walked over to the door, and I couldn’t help but notice how large his frame was in the small apartment. Yet I didn’t feel worried about that. There was comfort in his size, even alone in this place.

As he stepped out the door, he turned and said, “Sleep well, Amelia. Rest. If you feel up to it, come into the shop tomorrow, and I can show you around and introduce you. If you don’t want to, that’s okay, too.”

Then he left, softly shutting the door. Despite all his kindness, I couldn’t help running over and throwing the

deadbolt as soon as it was closed. I kept my palms pressed against the door, like I could keep the whole world out if I was just strong enough.

It was quiet.

No birds or insects, no wind in the branches. There was the sound of Riley's motorcycle as it drove away and then... just me. The hum of an air conditioner.

I checked in with my body. My nerves were shot but there was a new energy blossoming. Enough that I felt comfortable taking a shower.

It was glorious. I ran the water so hot it scalded, leaving my skin pink. There were shampoos and conditioners already in the bathroom, along with fluffy linens and scented soaps. Most were brands marketed toward women, causing irritation to crawl across my skin like ants.

As if I could be remotely upset Riley had shared the space with other women. Probably girlfriends. I was just a hot mess he wanted to help.

I found a robe but was distressed to find the hot water had leached even more of the brown from my hair. White-blond strands stood out among green and brown. I'd have to wake up early enough to find some dye and color it before work.

There was a knock at the door, and I froze. Then the heavy clod of boots on stairs as Riley left again, true to his word. He hadn't even tried to see if the door was unlocked.

I rubbed at my sternum, feeling strange about it. About him and the turn my day had taken. When I opened the door, I found bags filled with milk, cereal, pasta, sauce, some ice cream, cans of soup, and, leaving me in complete shock, a box of brown hair color.

Taking shallow breaths, I brought everything in and put it away. Then I ate ice cream for dinner, straight from the tub, so I wouldn't have to do dishes. Fatigue was catching up to me. When it all was cleared up, I had one last chore.

Snooping.

I peeked in every cabinet in the kitchen, finding only the supplies he'd mentioned. The table beside the couch had a few delivery place menus and a list of numbers for people I had to assume were pack.

The drawers under the bed had sweatpants in several sizes, as well as a few plain t-shirts. Nothing out of the ordinary and nothing suggestive.

The surprise came from the bedside table. In its drawer was a thick sketchbook and some pencils. The sketchbook wasn't new, the cover ripped along several of the spirals where it was bound.

Crawling under the sheets, I thumbed through it.

There were so many drawings. Some were excellent, others not so much. Different handwriting also graced the pages. I flipped through pictures of butterflies and sunlit meadows, flowers and cats and abstract shapes. Messages greeted me along the way.

You can do this.

You're so strong.

Nothing will break you if you don't let it.

You'll laugh again.

At the back of the sketchbook were a few empty pages. They called to me, whispering ideas and inspirations I'd never experienced before. Nervous, I tried to stop the hand holding the pencil from trembling so much.

My family, my pack, my people had been erased from the world. Eli had tried to erase me as well.

I didn't want to be erased.

I put the pencil to the paper and began to draw.

RILEY

Amelia must have slipped out early because I didn't see her leave for Mama Lou's. I wanted to go eat there, but as much as my wolf was desperate to see her (I was, too, if I was honest), I knew from past experience that it was important to let her feel like she had some space.

After all, my best intentions meant shit if she saw me everywhere she went. I might be protecting her, but Amelia could just as soon think I was stalking her.

Talk about the message I didn't want to send to someone reeling—and running—from abuse.

I clicked through some inventory reports on my computer, but my mind was replaying her words in the apartment the night before. It stung to think she believed she'd have to have sex just for a roof over her head.

Worse, though, was how she'd sounded, looked, and smelled when she talked about sex. Like sex was a punishment. Something grueling you put your body through.

Something went crunch, and with disgust, I realized I had squeezed the computer mouse too hard. A crack went up the middle of the plastic. "Cheap piece of shit," I grumbled, throwing it into a trashcan.

"Need me to scrounge up another?" Liam was watching me curiously, but he had the smarts not to ask what was wrong.

"Yeah. Thanks."

While he was out searching for a replacement, I dragged my hands over my face. I hoped Amelia had stayed. I hoped she believed me when I'd said I'd never, ever ask her for sex.

No matter how hard we tried to stop it, I was aware there were packs that made sex mandatory. All females were expected to present when asked, no matter the male. And there were packs where the males not only took advantage but were rough and cruel when they did.

It burned me to think a pack might have done that to Amelia. I'd give anything to know which one it was, if that was the case. I'd have choice words and fast fists for them.

Amelia was gorgeous and mysterious. It wasn't that I wouldn't have sex with her if it were on the table.

She was... enticing, to be mild. Her slender frame and long neck appealed to me. Her breasts were high and firm, and her hips and ass sculpted from all the walking. I didn't love the brown hair coloring or the green contacts, but I wasn't going to push her to show me what she looked like. I wasn't going to pressure her to do anything at all. She deserved better.

Liam came back in with a new mouse, setting it gently on the desk. Then he put a stress ball next to it. "Just in case, you know," he said mildly.

Cheeky kid. I punched his arm, and he smiled as he headed out to work on some bikes.

He'd come at the right time, interrupting thoughts I shouldn't be having. As much as I wished I could show Amelia that sex could be all pleasure—fuck, it *should* be all pleasure—I wouldn't be going down that road.

That kind of behavior from me could do more harm than good, and I wouldn't hurt a hair on her head.

Glancing at the clock, though, I realized how much time had passed. Enough that she should be back from work. I scanned the workroom and the windows beyond, but there was nothing beyond the normal.

Had she snuck by?

Another thought stopped my heart: Did she even stay the night? Or had I made her run?

I wasn't going to be able to sit there and work. Blood coursing, carrying my worry to every cell, I knew I needed to make sure Amelia was still there.

Some of the guys and Jess waved to me as I headed to the front door. I ignored them, shouting, "Be right back."

Then I was flying up the stairs to the apartment. At the last second, I reeled myself in, so the knock was gentle instead of a hammer.

I sweated as I waited. It was a small ass apartment, why wasn't she answering? I was going to have to go to Mama Lou's and see—

The door opened, and there was Amelia, looking mildly surprised. She'd redone her hair with the dye I'd added. It looked better, the green and brass colors gone, and a rich, chocolate brown remained.

"Hey," she said, a question in her voice. Probably *what are you doing here, weirdo?*

"Hey." God, I was about to look like a dumbass. Just being in her presence seemed to short circuit some important parts of my brain. "How was... um. How did you sleep?"

Some pink stole into her cheeks as Amelia said, "Well. God, so good, really. I can't remember the last time I slept on a mattress like that." There was something in her tone that suggested she wasn't using hyperbole. She truly couldn't remember.

How... how in the fuck did someone go long enough without sleeping on a comfortable bed that their memory faltered? Just what had happened to her?

"I'm glad," I managed. "And the food was okay? I didn't know what you liked, so I just grabbed some basics."

"Basics are important, and food is food," she said, leaning on the doorframe. Her hair brushed at her neck, and the t-shirt that hung too loose on her. Loose enough that I saw some

makeup hastily brushed on at her neckline. Was she covering up fingerprints? The marks of someone choking her?

Before I could ask what had happened, she stepped to the side. “Want to come in? I just made some coffee.”

I knew the gift she was giving me, and I was moving before I could even decide if it was a good or bad idea.

The small apartment smelled like coffee, and I saw the French press sitting on the counter. Amelia shut the door and grabbed two mugs, looking like she was already comfortable in the space. My heart squeezed at that, because I understood just how rare being settled in a space could be for a woman on the run.

Sitting down at the small table, I let her control the pace of the conversation. My wolf was eager and interested, wanting to know more about her and curious about her wolf. But not rushing was the best strategy to getting to know someone like Amelia.

“Do you take anything in your coffee?” She poured out two mugs.

“Nope. Black, please.”

She brought a mug over to me before proceeding to put an obscene amount of sugar and milk into hers. When she saw me gawking, Amelia gave a small smile. “I haven’t had a chance to drink a lot of coffee or have sweets. Turns out I’ve got a major sweet tooth.”

Immediately, I made a mental note to pick her up some chocolate, cookies, more ice cream, and candy.

“Indulge away,” I replied. “You deserve it.”

Her cheeks went rosy, and her eyelashes fluttered as she looked away. “You don’t even know me.”

“Not yet,” I admitted. “But I’d like to get to know you.”

Amelia shifted on her feet. I didn’t miss that she’d remained in the kitchen, keeping distance between us and putting her body closer to the door. “Riley... I’m not sure that’s a good idea. I’m trying to make this work for as long as I

can, especially as you and Kitty and Gus have been helping. But I'm not here to stay."

She was one of many shifter women I'd let use this apartment. Women on the run or trying to escape a bad relationship and get back on their feet. Pack politics made everything harder, and domestic violence was hard enough as it was. This was how it went. They stayed, but then they were eager to be out on their own.

Yet when Amelia said it, I ached with longing and disappointment. My wolf skulked within me.

Stuffing those emotions down, I nodded. "Yeah, I get that. I won't push you. But since I'm letting you stay near my business and my pack, could I get some basic information, at least? Like if you think our territory is at risk of this guy?"

Amelia seemed to weigh in before her shoulders sagged. "Yeah, that's fair. So, you've figured out I'm on the run from a guy?"

"It was an easy assumption to make. Female wolf, alone in a new pack's city. You haven't checked in with either alpha, so you don't want anyone to know you're here. Someone's following you, and the logical next step is a man."

Amelia let out a bitter laugh. "I didn't even know I was supposed to check in with alphas."

This pricked my interest—and my concern. Respect for territory and checking in with alphas was basic wolf etiquette that should have been taught to her.

"What pack are you running from?"

Her lips pressed into a pale line. "I can't tell you the specific pack. But I'm running from a brown pack."

Brown. Okay, that was something. The Black Pack was on decent terms with the Browns, but like the Reds, it was a tenuous thing. We worked to help them by selling arms and occasionally lending support to fend off Gray Pack attacks. But they were still their own entity, and they didn't live by the same tenants Tex and his father had put in place.

Some of the individual packs were small and tended to practice the same ass-backwards ideals the Gray Pack had insisted on.

“Close to here?”

“I came here by bus,” she said with a sharp emphasis. I wasn’t going to get enough specifics today to narrow it down, which was a real fucking shame. The more time I spent with Amelia, the more certain I was that some piss-poor alpha somewhere needed his ass handed to him.

Or, preferably, his life ended.

“I’m guessing that you won’t give me the name of the guy then?” I made puppy dog eyes at her and pressed my palms into a praying position.

The corners of Amelia’s lips quirked up, but she shook her head. “I’m sorry, I’m not ready for that.”

“Don’t be sorry.” I took a sip of coffee. “I know I’m being nosy. I just want to make sure you’re safe, and my people are safe.”

“I get it.” She gave me a tentative smile. “And I appreciate it, really.”

“One last question. Has he ever found you before? Have you run away before?”

The pain that flashed across her face was excruciating to witness. Amelia was suffering so deeply. My wolf keened within me. “No.” Her voice was strangled. “He hasn’t found me yet. And this is the first time I’ve run. It was the only opportunity I ever had.”

“Then you were smart and brave to seize the chance.” Standing, I took my mug to the sink and began to wash it. My mind was lingering on how she’d said *yet*. Like she didn’t believe she could be free. My heart broke all over again for her.

Turning to face her, I felt our closeness in the small kitchen. Amelia hadn’t moved away from me. My heart

hammered in my chest, and it was like her body was a magnet, tugging emphatically at me.

Green eyes met my gaze, and I knew what I'd add, along with the candy. A proper pair of colored contacts, not some off brand costume ones. Still, I didn't need to see her irises to fall into that gaze.

My attention dropped to her mouth, where she was chewing her bottom lip again. It was swollen and red from all the worrying, and I wanted to replace her teeth with my mouth. I wanted to kiss her so soft and slow that she wouldn't be afraid.

I cleared my throat. "I'm downstairs for a few more hours, and then I'll be at the clubhouse. The alarms will be set."

"I know," Amelia said softly. "You said that last night."

"Oh." I rubbed the back of my neck, knowing I needed to get out before I did something stupid. Stupid for me, and possibly harmful to her. And the last fucking thing I wanted was Amelia hurting because of me. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then?"

"If you'd like."

Oh, I'd like. I found myself wanting to see her every day.

Time to go.

I ducked out at that, not even bothering with a goodbye. I might be a sucker for women, but I was something even worse around Amelia. I was besotted, and that wasn't something I could afford. Not when she would need space and was a flight risk.

Frustrated, I told Liam I was going for a ride. Being downstairs from her was still too damned close. I needed fresh air and to clear my head.

Hopping on my bike, I hit the highways until it was time for a pack meeting. As I eased into a parking spot at the clubhouse, I'd managed to ride out the worst of my wanting. The thing I couldn't shake, no matter how many miles I covered, was the need to protect her.

It was feeling more and more like that was an offensive job, not defensive. If I could just get the name...

Tex and my brothers were seated already as I slid in, to the right of Tex. He shot me a curious look before calling the meeting to order. We covered the usual bullshit. Incidents with other packs. Gray Pack news. Things were holding there, at least.

“Look, incidents are going to keep happening, even with Theo dead,” Tex said. “We got in skirmishes before, and we’ll be in them again. It’s the nature of the wolf to test boundaries, territories, and claims. But if you experience any disrespect like the Red Pack showed Brandon, you cut it to the root right then and there. I didn’t fight a war to be patient with a bunch of pissants.”

There were some shouts and cheers of agreements and fists banging on the table. The pack was doing well, we were holding our rank as one of the top packs, and my brothers were in good spirits. Their cheer flowed along the pack lines and hit me hard. I embraced it. I hadn’t known how much I needed their strength.

“Anyone got anything else?” Tex asked the group, but he was looking at me.

“Yeah,” I said. There was no point in keeping Amelia a secret. “I have a new girl living above the shop.”

Everyone stilled, giving me their attention. They all knew what that apartment was for and took it seriously.

“She’s going by Amelia. She’s getting paid under the table at Mama Lou’s, so if you go there, be nice and tip well.” As if they wouldn’t. Black Pack was always generous with tips, knowing how hard blue-collar jobs could be. “She’s run away from a Brown Pack but won’t give me any names. Not of the city or members. I’m not going to push her, because I hope she’ll tell me on her own.”

Liam leaned forward, his elbows on the table. “What happens if you get a name?”

Find the fucker and murder him. “We’ll run him through some channels, try to see what kind of abuser he is. Some don’t care about who runs away, they just move on to the next victim. Others, though, will hunt their victim down. I get the feeling hers is the latter.”

Tex nodded. “Based on what we find out, we’ll also know the size of the pack and any allies they might have. Either way, the asshole dies. But if we can avoid taking on the whole pack, we will. Sometimes, with abusers, the pack is happy to hand the bad wolf over to us.”

And sometimes it’s a bloodbath. Not just the rotten apple but cutting down the whole damn tree.

For Amelia, I’d do it all. Which was something I knew I’d need to evaluate, sooner rather than later. I couldn’t afford to be stupid over a girl. I’d miss the signs that warned me a woman was *cheater* or *mean* or *betrayal*.

There was a hunger in my brother’s eyes that lifted my spirits. They didn’t tolerate abusive shit, either. We might not take the most judicious route when it came to enforcing good behavior, because we weren’t exactly “good” guys. It was a *do as I say, not as I do* situation. But the end result was always something we could be proud of.

“One more thing,” Tex said, pulling my thoughts back to the meeting. “We keep a guard on the shop. Just one, and he doesn’t stay too close—we don’t want to spook the poor girl. But any sign of strangers, I want to know. And tomorrow, when Jess visits the fairy realm, she’ll see if, should it come to it, we could hide Amelia there.”

Jess was the princess of the fae, so I had a feeling they would agree. But the thought counted for a lot. Tex didn’t know much about Amelia. None of them did. But as soon as I’d hinted that she was in trouble, my brothers rallied.

“I hope it doesn’t come to that. I’m trying to earn her trust so we can wipe that fucker off the face of the earth,” I said. “But I’m grateful, brothers.”

Getting help protecting Amelia had been easy. Getting her to trust me was going to be difficult and time consuming.

Keeping myself from falling for her? Felt too close to impossible for comfort.

AMELIA

Kitty mentioned that on Thursdays the money was better with the evening crowd. She said if I felt comfortable working around a more boisterous crowd, she'd switch shifts with me so I could keep adding money to my savings.

In that moment, I loved her for her generosity.

But working later meant experiencing my first morning in Riley's small apartment with nothing to do. He was downstairs working, and I didn't want to bother him. At least, that's what I told myself. It was probably closer to the truth to say I *wanted* to bother him, to run into him and talk to him and spend time with him.

Those weren't feelings I could encourage. Being on the run still felt new, despite having been at it for weeks. I was never certain how long it would be before Eli found me. It was imperative I be able to run without a second thought, and currently all my thoughts were centered on Riley.

I cleaned a little, but I was unsure of how much I was allowed to touch or change the place.

Then I tried watching TV, but I hadn't seen anything in over ten years. The jokes and types of shows available fell flat or contained storylines of happiness that were too foreign to understand and left me bitter. I found myself too restless on the couch to watch.

My skin stretched too tight in this tiny place of safety and domesticity. Eli's voice was at the back of my head, reminding

me I didn't deserve this. I hadn't earned it. But I'd earned a severe punishment when he found me.

The walls pushed in, and my chest squeezed as tight as Eli's fist. My inhalations turned to wheezes and my limbs trembled. Any second a blow would come, my body screamed, regardless of my head seeing no one was there to hurt me. Eli didn't need to be near me to hurt me, I discovered. His spirit was always there, ready to torture. I needed out.

Flinging myself out the door, I scanned the perimeter of the apartment. Riley had assured me time and time again that there was a security system, that I was safe here. But the facility had a security system, too. One that kept me locked in.

There was no one around, yet I felt eyes crawling all over my skin, like I had when I'd been sheltering in the tent. Acid crept up my throat, and I saw spots, certain for a moment that Eli had found me.

It didn't matter that no one approached or said my name. The only sounds were cars on the nearby road, and the guys working in Riley's shop downstairs. I didn't know if I could trust my senses. I didn't know if I could trust *anything*.

When the mate mark at my neck began to burn, I panicked and ran down the stairs. At this point, I had a vague knowledge of the area, and I ran as hard as I could toward the closest patch of forest nearby.

The band around my chest didn't start to release until I was well into the trees, and the sounds of the city were quickly disappearing. Still, I ran.

After about a mile, I forced myself to slow, dragging in ragged breaths and listening. Were there footsteps? Shouts? Had someone followed me?

There was nothing but the birds and small animals and rustling leaves.

Shaky, I turned in a wide circle, looking for the attack. While I'd isolated myself by coming to the woods, I realized the instinct that drove me here was the open space. Out here, I

could run any direction. I could find weapons like large sticks and rocks.

I wasn't locked in and trapped.

The hurt in my neck had disappeared when I'd fled. Maybe... fuck, had it been in my head? Was it a signal that he was near?

Should I run to Riley and pray for protection from a mate I hadn't even told him about?

Or should I take off, protecting him and the Black Pack while gaining precious distance?

My brain throbbed with indecision. I looked at the cheap watch I'd picked up recently. I still had a few hours before work. I sure as shit wasn't going back to the apartment just yet. But I hadn't grabbed my bag or money or anything when I'd run.

Let me out, my wolf begged. She was scratching at me, eager and pleading.

I hadn't allowed myself to shift since healing from the river. My coat was a beacon for *anyone* who might see it. If there was only one white wolf and she were spotted, that news could get back to Eli.

Yet she was a part of me. And keeping her locked up like Eli had kept me was wrong. I had to be better.

Decided, I stripped and put my things between some roots of a tree, covering them so they were hidden. Then I shifted. It was a wonderful sensation. Painful—I hadn't done it in so long that the snaps of bones and pulls of muscles felt new and fresh.

But also like I was sinking into myself.

My coat immediately caught the strands of light filtering through the branches, and it looked like stars lighting up along my fur. A pang struck my heart at the loveliness of the white fur, thick and long and as white as paper.

A gift from my parents, my pack. My history woven into my skin, a beautiful and horrible reminder of what had

happened to us. But painful memories weren't why I'd shifted. I'd become wolf so I could *move*.

I took off at a light run, getting used to the sensation of being able to move for movement's sake and not because I was running *from* anything. The breeze tugged at my fur, and I tried to remember the last time I'd let my wolf out for the joy of it.

It had been when my family and pack had been alive.

Anguish had me surging forward, the memories scoring my brain like scratches. My father and brothers, all large and proud wolves, their white fur blending in with the snowfall near our home. Our pack had been small. White wolves tended to isolate, to try and stay away from the other packs.

My father had said it was because we didn't want to be pulled into their violence. White wolves were rare from the start and, particularly with the males, they were large and formidable. Despite being a fairly passive species, the other wolves saw our strength and beauty and envied it.

So, they chose to eliminate the source of their envy.

But then, before Eli and his pack, before the hunters and the systemic elimination of my species, there had been happiness. Running with my mother through forests thick with evergreens. Learning to hunt moose and bear with my father and brothers, our mouths red and fur pink with blood.

Warm fires in our house, one of us reading a novel to all the others for hours before bedtime. I'd grown up in a small community, but I'd not once felt lonely.

Now they were all gone. All but me.

Shivering, I charged ahead, executing sharp turns, leaping over fallen logs, trying to burn out all the helpless rage I had churning inside of me. My coat was too heavy for the warm weather, but it didn't matter. The wind and freedom kept me cool and light on my feet.

I roamed those woods because I could. Animal instinct guided me. I caught scent of a rabbit and prowled a bit,

seeking it out. But the rabbit was standing near a warren, and, with my sharp wolf ears, I heard the tiny cries of babies.

Hunger was a constant, but I hadn't been *that* hungry since getting the job at Mama Lou's. Kitty kept me fed and busy. A mostly full belly and a tired body meant I didn't spend much energy on how I *felt*.

But why? I no longer only held room for the hurt and frailty. Now that I'd been out of the facility and on my own feet for weeks, there was room for anger.

Unquenchable wrath for what had been done to my family and pack. And for what?

While I didn't have a watch I could look at, I knew I needed to shift back and start heading to work. The thought of it helped me push the wild emotions into place. They were still there, but when I found my clothing, shifted, and dressed... I was in control of myself.

The run had done some good, even if it had opened the hatch on my most painful memories. Because they were also my most wonderful. I'd forgotten the sense of family, the love and support, the sheer fulfillment of spirit that came with being in a pack. I'd shoved them away, too afraid of the hurt that might come from remembering them.

As I made my way back, the sensation of being watched had vanished. Everything felt... normal.

Except for me. As I let myself into my borrowed apartment to grab some things, I could only see what I'd lost. I'd been with Eli so long I'd shredded any sense of self identity. Tucked my history in a box so I could survive. I'd forgotten just how much had been stolen from me. The closest thing I'd felt to how I had with family had been when I was near Riley. Safe and warm. Protected and seen.

In my small bathroom, I applied more makeup to the mate mark. The angry red of the scars had finally faded, but the raised bumps of shiny flesh were still there. Sighing, I made sure my t-shirt fell so none of it could slip out, just in case.

At Mama Lou's, things were already picking up. I could see what Kitty meant about the crowds, but I was feeling at home enough in the diner to start tallying the tips I was likely to make that night. It would be a lot more than I was used to and would go a long way toward my emergency fund.

It didn't take long to get into the hustle and grind of waitressing. I was deep into the rhythm of it when a shift in the air caught my attention. I looked up, heart skipping, to find Riley. He was staring at me with a fondness that I didn't understand and certainly didn't deserve.

I was so aware of him, I'd known the moment he walked through the door. The thought had me swallowing hard.

He made his way over to a table in my section, taking a seat and waiting. Kitty had left for the day, and I wondered if he'd known that. She'd worked diligently to try to keep him out of my section. The lioness was trying to protect me.

The throbbing in my chest suggested she wasn't far off course.

I moved to Riley as if in a dream, the sensations of warmth and safety coming down over me like a protective net at his nearness.

"What can I get for you?" I asked, notebook in hand.

"The porterhouse, rare. Potatoes, green beans. Tea to drink. And I have something for you, too."

My pen stopped scratching down his order. "What? You've already done so much—"

But he was already sliding a small gift bag across the table. My pulse thundered as I opened it. When I saw what was inside, my brows pressed tight. I was puzzled. "What am I looking at?"

"Contacts." Riley's deep voice rumbled with pleasure. He was proud of himself. "I've noticed your eyes get pretty red by the middle of the day. I figured what you were wearing was the cause. There are several shades of green, brown, and even purple in here for you to choose from. But these are

professional-level contacts. Optometrist approved. There's also some solution and cases in there."

As if to make his point, my eyes itched fiercely. But that was due to the tears threatening to burst forth. "Thank you," I managed.

Needing to step away, to catch my breath and get my bearings, I ran to the back and put his order in before stealing into the bathroom. My hand pressed at my sternum, and I rubbed the skin hard, like I could push Riley out of the space he was making inside of me.

Because I knew I was falling for him. His kindness and generosity was wearing down my walls. We hadn't spent all that much time together, but he was a staple of my every day. Either in the restaurant or coming to check in on his way to work, Riley was there. Always kind, always unobtrusive, always looking at me like I was the most interesting girl in the world.

Stranger still, my wolf was totally content around him, pushing me to get closer and stop running.

It was that which surprised me the most. Eli had mate bonded with me. My wolf should have been craving him this whole time. I should be fighting her each and every day, refusing her insistence to return to Eli. Yet, at the moment, she was yearning for me to go crawl into Riley's lap.

These feelings were new and unwanted because they would make running so much harder. Because I would have to run someday, and it was harmful to delude myself that my life could be different.

I tossed the stolen contacts in the trash and tried out one of the green pairs. They slipped in, cool and light. When I blinked, I couldn't feel the edges anymore. No more grating sensations as I looked around. And in the mirror? The woman staring back didn't seem as crazed.

She looked normal. And the pink flush to her cheeks was healthy.

I was in so much trouble.

There was no more time to linger in the bathroom. I had tables and orders to tend to. But God, the difference the new pair of lenses made already! For one, there was no thick plastic sitting on my eye. These were thin and filmy, moist and barely noticeable.

One of the chefs dinged. “Order up!”

I grabbed the mammoth steak for Riley, along with his sides, and carried them over.

“Are you okay?” he asked as I set his food down. “Did I overstep?”

I met his worried stare, and it took him a moment, but the smirk he flashed me was pure heaven. Or sinful as hell. “They look good,” he offered. “Much more natural and pretty. Though you don’t need any help in that department.”

Blushing I tucked my hair behind my ear. “I’m nothing special.” That’s what Eli had reminded me of, day after day, year after year. I wasn’t anything fun, or smart, or special. Just another dumb bitch who happened to have good breeding.

Riley’s face grew serious, the cut of his cheekbones gorgeous but looking sharp enough to cut. “Amelia, listen to me. You don’t know much about me, but I have no reason to lie to you. None at all. So, hear me when I say you’re the most beautiful woman in this room.”

“You don’t have to—”

“You’re damned right I don’t have to. But I want to. You get that, right? I want you to feel safe. I want you to have food and shelter. I want you to know how pretty you are, how strong and impressive. And so, when I say you’re the most beautiful woman in this room, it’s because I want you to know it.”

Each inhalation burned, my lungs too tight. “I... thank you. You’re... pretty, too.”

Oh God, why had I said that? It was just that being near him left me so senseless, unable to find my footing. Riley made me float when I needed to stay on the ground.

He smiled so the corners of his eyes crinkled. “I bet you say that to all the guys.”

It took me a second to understand that he was teasing me. “Oh, no, I—”

“Shit, Amelia, relax a bit. Go do your rounds, I know you’ve got folks waiting on you. I’m glad you like the contacts. They look good.”

It was strange, but I didn’t want to run. I wanted nothing more in that moment than to ignore everyone else in the world so I could sit and talk to him more. Just be near him.

Which was exactly why I nodded primly. “Thank you, they are much more comfortable.” Then I turned on my heel and tried, miserably and without luck, to forget Riley and focus on work.

RILEY

“**W**hat do you need, Clay?” I was busy on my tablet, using the sketch software to mock up some skins for our newest client’s bike.

“I think your girl is paranoid.”

Ever since I’d explained where Amelia had come from, Tex had rotated brothers who stood guard and watched out for her. The other week she’d caught Jack off guard, running from the apartment like a bat out of hell. He’d lost her, and I’d been out of my mind until he replied that she’d returned to the apartment and was headed to work.

I’d had to go in just to make sure she was okay, but also to give her the gift. It had brought me great pleasure to see her emerge from the restroom with fresh green eyes the color of moss. Rationally, I knew it wasn’t her true eye color, but it was such an improvement on the violent green of before. It softened Amelia.

Since then, though, I’d insisted the guards stay closer, even during business hours.

“What makes you say that?”

“She keeps peeking out the blinds. I can see her shadow pacing from within. She hasn’t had a seat since she woke up, man. Looks more like a tiger in a cage than anything else.”

Tendrils of worry wound through me, digging in until I pushed the tablet aside. “I’ll go check on her.”

It took Amelia a minute to answer the door when I knocked, but when she saw me, her whole body sagged. For a moment it looked like she wanted to press her face to my chest and fuck, I wanted her to do just that.

“What are you doing here?” Her gaze kept sliding over my shoulder, scanning the area outside. She was pale with shadowed half-moons below her eyes.

“I came to check on you. Are you... okay?” I scented the air, and she was terrified, the acrid sharpness of it cutting into my heart and common sense. It took effort not to scoop her up then and there.

A small tremor ran through her. “No,” she whispered before gesturing to me to come inside. As soon as I was in, she shut the door and turned every lock into place.

“I’m going to sound crazy, but I think someone’s been watching me.” Her voice was thin, and Amelia hugged her arms tight around her. “Every time I go outside there’s this sensation, like someone is there. But when I look, I don’t see anyone, and when I try to smell, I only smell the scents of you and your pack that are in the shop.”

Realization dawned on me. She wouldn’t be able to decipher which smells were brothers at the shop and which were those on guard duty. Guilt was like a gut punch, leaving me weak and stunned. I should have thought of that. I should have thought of her needs and not just my desire to see her safe.

“Okay, so I can explain that.”

Her eyebrows shot up, her arms wrapped tight around her middle. “How?”

“Tex, my alpha, agreed that you needed a guard. My brothers have been watching over you.”

I didn’t think it was possible for her to go paler, but Amelia’s skin blanched, and I worried she was going to pass out. I reached for her, but Amelia stepped away, flinching. Wounded, I asked, “What’s wrong?”

“You thought I needed a *guard*?” She was shaking, then, and I realized it wasn’t from fear. She was *pissed*. “You thought I needed to be locked in, too? Aware of every move I make? Are you keeping fucking tabs on me, Riley?” Amelia’s pitch hit a high, trained note.

Oh. Now I was seeing this situation through her eyes. “I’m a fucking idiot,” I groaned. Backing away with my hands up, I found the small couch and sat down. It gave Amelia a straight line to the door, so she wouldn’t feel trapped by me. It also made me smaller, letting her feel like she had more power.

“You’re not being guarded because we think you’re a threat. And no one tells me where you go or what you do.” Mostly, I knew, but I didn’t want to add to her panic. “But Tex deemed it best to protect the pack from anyone who might be after you. And moreover, we all want to protect *you*. That’s all it is. You’re not trapped here.”

She grabbed a duffel bag I hadn’t seen. It was packed full, and my inhalation cut short. Amelia tossed it over her shoulder. “So, I could leave, right now, and no one would stop me?”

I glanced over the apartment. Everything was clean and tidy. It looked just like it had when she moved in. Amelia was still prepared to run, despite the weeks in my apartment. It struck me like a dart that she’d always been ready to run. To bolt without a second thought. Because she was smart and aware, and she was a lone wolf—always on the lookout for traps and predators. And I’d fed right into her fears. My blood moved like ice in my veins.

“Yes.”

Her lips pressed tight, and she took several steps toward the door, her hand on the handle. Some bastard had hurt her that badly. My wolf was losing it, flinging himself around inside me in a riot to get to her. To punish someone else. Rage and protectiveness, both so fueled it was hard to see straight, my wolf was riding me hard. I didn’t move, though.

Amelia turned the handle and still I sat. She had to see I wouldn’t stop her, no matter how much I wanted to. But fuck,

it was hard to restrain myself.

She gnawed at her bottom lip before releasing the handle and dropping the bag. My chest cracked open as she squatted right where she was and began to shake with violent sobs.

“Amelia,” I said, throat thick and making speech hard. So, I held my arms open and when she saw them, she sniffled and came over, sitting on my lap and burying her face in my neck. My t-shirt quickly grew warm and wet with her tears. I rubbed soothing circles on her back, letting her sob until her cries became soft hiccups.

“I’m sorry,” she said into my neck. I tried not to react to the whisper of her breath on my skin, willing my cock to understand that this wasn’t the time. My body obeyed, but it was a near thing. Being this close to her was lighting my nerves up like Christmas.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about. I should’ve told you. I thought it would make you more worried, but now I see how scary it must have been for you.”

“I... don’t have good experiences with guards.” It was a tiny admission that spoke volumes of what she must have been through. Especially as she used a plural. *Guards*. Just what kind of fucked up situation had she run from?

I waited until she was calm, relishing the closeness. Her scent, her heat... it was enough to make me forget everything but her. But the buzz of my phone in my back pocket was a stark reminder. I shuffled us so I could pull it out. Clay.

I shot him a quick text. *Everything is fine. Be out soon.*

Amelia seemed to realize where she was—my lap—and how close we were—very. Her back went rigid, and her cheeks blossomed into red roses. She scooted off lamentably fast. “Sorry.” The back of her hand swiped under her nose.

“Again, nothing to be sorry for. You were scared and had every right to be. But... would you like to come meet everyone? You can place faces to names and smells. It might make them less scary.”

Amelia worried her lip again before nodding with finality. “Yes. That’s a good idea. Especially if they’re being kind enough to look out for me.”

“That’s my girl,” I said without thinking. Our eyes locked and something sparked there. A fierce tug pulled at me, and my wolf whimpered under its spell, seduced by Amelia. Needing her. Like water. Like food. The words hung between us, and I suddenly, hungrily, desperately wanted nothing more than for them to be true.

I wanted Amelia to be *my* girl.

There was no longer any concern she’d hurt me like the others. My wolf was obsessed with her, eager and insistent that we keep her close. There was something there I couldn’t explain, but it tied me to her in a way that made me think I’d die if she left. Just find a hole to curl up in and stop trying.

Fuck me. Clearing my throat and looking away, I opened the door for her. “Let’s go downstairs. Everyone will be happy to meet you.” And I would have a moment to get my shit straight because what was that thought about?

Clay was the first introduction. He’d come out of hiding and was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. He wasn’t who I would have chosen, with his rough look and even rougher manners, but he was a complete gentleman.

“I’m sorry if I scared you,” he said to her, looking genuinely abashed. “I called Riley because I was worried for you.”

Amelia swallowed before shyly saying, “Thank you for worrying. It’s nice to meet you.” She even held out her hand, and he took it softly, shaking once and letting her go. Even Clay could sense how desperate Amelia was to not be trapped.

We left him to go inside. One by one I introduced her to my technicians. Then Jess popped out, her coveralls filthy and hair in a tangle and eyes bright with delight. She rushed over and thankfully pulled herself just short of sweeping Amelia up in a hug.

“Oh gosh,” Jess said. “You’re gorgeous!”

I waited for a bad reaction, but Amelia smiled. It was big and natural, and I realized that I'd seen her smile before, but not like that. Not so unguarded and free. Jess was a woman, and I wondered if that mattered. All I knew was I wanted to see Amelia like that all the time.

“So are you,” Amelia answered. It was true—Jess was a looker. But from the moment I'd seen her with Tex, there'd been no attraction for me. She was my alpha's mate, a tough fighter, and a badass. But that was it. “You're the alpha's mate?”

Jess wrinkled her nose. “I mean, we could argue that Tex is the alpha's mate.”

Before Amelia could get confused, I explained. “Jess is an alpha and half fairy. It's why she smells.” I pretended to wave away a foul stench. Jess punched me in the shoulder. Amelia watched it all with wide eyes.

“Are you really?”

“Half fairy? Yeah. My mom was a fairy, and my dad was a gray wolf. And a total asshole, too. Anyway, I'm glad to meet you. Come by the clubhouse soon, okay?”

Amelia was still smiling, but it was growing tight, and I wondered if the sudden amount of attention was wearing her thin. I steered Amelia toward my office, where Liam was and, more importantly, where everyone else *wasn't*. He perked up as we walked in. “Hey, boss.”

“Just Riley, Liam. And this is Amelia. Amelia, this is Liam.”

They shook hands.

“Liam's the youngest in our pack,” I offered. “He's a great designer, though, and a solid mechanic. So, I hired him to help me with the shop.”

Amelia looked around the office, where photos of some of our best jobs hung. “I don't understand. You work on motorcycles... but art?”

“Come here.”

Sitting her at my chair, I pulled the tablet I'd left over. "See this? It's a drawing software. We do work on engines and whatnot, but primarily we paint and model motorcycles for clients. See?" I pointed to the contours of the bike we'd be getting in soon and showed her how I made layers over it in the program so I could draw and sketch possible designs.

"I've never seen anything like this," Amelia said in wonder, gently touching the screen. She jumped when her touch brought up an icon. I laughed and saved my work before pulling up a blank document.

"Here." I handed her the stylus. Then I showed her how she could change the tip size, the color, gradients, and more. "I'm going to go out in the shop for a bit. Do you want to play with this while I do?"

"Are you sure?"

"Sure am. Ask Liam if you need help, okay?"

I left her then, doodling on the tablet. Strange, though, that she'd never seen one. And she didn't have a cell phone that I'd noticed, either. Where had she been living that these things were foreign to her? The thought gnawed at me.

Throughout the rest of my shift, I took moments to glance through the windows of my office and watch her. Amelia would occasionally have the tip of her tongue sticking out, or her forehead would wrinkle. But she was invested in the tablet, and it was strange and wonderful to witness her focused and deriving pleasure from something. She deserved contentment and happiness and so much more.

I just wished I could be the one giving it to her. But beyond what I was currently doing, I couldn't dare to dream about that. Too many times I'd let myself hope, and it had only left me burned.

When it was time to close shop, I collected her. "Okay if I look?"

She nodded and handed over the tablet. On the screen was a digital painting. She'd taken one of our motorcycle pictures and created a full image, making it look as though it were

racing through a forest road. She'd drawn a rider on it, slim and leaning in, the speed of the bike evident in the movement of the image.

It was ridiculously good.

"Amelia, you can fucking *draw*," I said. "This is incredible."

She gave a slight shrug. "I used to draw a lot when I was younger."

"Why did you stop?"

Her eyes dropped. "I wasn't allowed."

Alarm bells rang, and I hated whoever her abuser was once again. Not allowed? She'd been so guarded, keeping her past close to her chest. But then these tidbits would leak out and rage would threaten to swallow me up. She was wary of guards. Shielded from technology. Fearful of being trapped. Not allowed to do art. There were abusive situations and then there was being kept prisoner. But if that had been the case...

Why wouldn't she just tell me? I couldn't do *anything* if I didn't understand the full scope of the situation.

The worst part was feeling helpless to make things better for her in that way. To make her not have to panic each time something felt off.

I couldn't. Not if she didn't let me.

But I *could* help her understand she didn't have to face this alone. "Let me cook you dinner tonight." It slipped out, but I found I was keen on the idea. I wasn't ready to be apart from her. "I'll bring over supplies."

Amelia tucked some hair behind her ear. "Yeah, okay. Give me half an hour to shower and stuff?"

"I have to run to the store anyway. That's perfect."

We stood for another moment, awkward and unsure as children. Finally, Amelia ducked her head and all but ran out, waving her fingers as she left the shop. Clay was still outside, and she nodded to him as she went up to the apartment.

I stood a moment longer, wrestling with my wolf's joyous reaction. My brain wasn't as on board as my heart and wolf were.

She was ready to run only hours ago. You're letting yourself get too close. She's going to hurt you.

But it was becoming clear it was too late. Amelia wouldn't have to cheat or steal or lie to hurt me. The moment she chose to go, I'd be crushed.

Until then, I supposed, the only thing I could do was try and enjoy whatever time with her I had.

AMELIA

Meeting everyone working below where I was staying eased much of the chronic stress I'd been experiencing. Seeing faces, hearing voices... it turned them into actual people instead of just dark figures in my imagination. I wouldn't be as scared when I smelled them near the apartment.

At the same time, I was utterly exhausted by the time I made it back inside the tiny studio.

It was taxing, meeting new people without knowing if I could trust them. Trying to appear normal when all my instincts shouted to run and hide. It didn't matter how kind and welcoming Riley's pack was... I couldn't shake the hold my past had on me.

And I'd have to leave them, too, when it was time to run. It was growing difficult to consider leaving Riley. What would it do to me to add people like Jess and Liam to that mix? They were sweet and kind and generous. Things that could lead to friendships. Relationships would be baggage, and I couldn't carry any more than I already had.

Moving around the apartment, I tidied what little there was to pick up, just to be doing something with my hands. I shouldn't have said yes to dinner. I knew better, and yet, as soon as he'd asked, I'd been eager to agree.

My wolf slinked inside of me, preening and happy. She wanted Riley here.

In case you forgot, we have a mate, I thought bitterly. Normally I tried to forget the hold Eli had on me, but now it

seemed prudent to remember. Nothing could happen with Riley, even if I wanted it to. I still wasn't sure I did want it to.

My wolf was sure, though.

Frustrated with myself, I took a quick shower. The moss-green contacts were such an improvement over the costume ones. My eyes were less scratchy and red, and the color felt more natural. I missed the icy blue of my natural eyes. I missed my blonde hair.

I'd say I missed being me, but Eli had done a damned good job of making sure I didn't know who I was. What did I like? What did I want? At the moment, all I could allow myself to desire was *not Eli*. So long as I wasn't locked up by him and free of the facility, that had to be enough.

There were no easy answers but, as I slipped on a t-shirt and buttoned some cut-off shorts, there was a knock at the door.

Sighing, I went to open it, ignoring the fluttering in my stomach. Riley was there, arms full of paper bags. His hair was damp, so he must have showered as well. *He doesn't waste time*, I thought with amusement.

As he shuffled in, the collar to my shirt slipped a bit and panic speared me—I hadn't reapplied makeup to the mate mark after my shower. *Careless*, I scolded myself. The kind of carelessness that could screw everything up worse than it already was. I slapped my hand over it.

Riley gave me a quizzical look. "Something wrong?" He was looking at my hand. If I moved it, he'd be certain to see the mate mark.

Palm sweating and heat rising in my belly, I tried to sound natural. "Oh, just pulled a muscle, I think."

"I can rub it if you'd like." *Lord help me.*

My wolf said *yes, please* while my mouth blurted, "No, thanks. I'll just go take some pain meds. Be right back!!" I rushed to the bathroom and shut the door, chest heaving with fear. What would Riley do if he knew I wasn't just running from a cruel boyfriend, but a mate? As open as Riley seemed

about what little he knew of my past, it was my understanding that many packs took mate bonds seriously.

With trembling fingers, I smeared the thick concealer over the marks, frantically trying to blend in the edges.

“Are you okay in there?” Riley sounded like he was on the other side of the door.

Pulse ticking up, I worked faster. “Fine! Just a minute.”

Finally, I had to trust it was good enough. But just in case, I knotted the t-shirt at the front, drawing it tighter around my neck. Hopefully it would prevent slippage.

Riley was in the kitchenette when I came out, large knife in hand and vegetables laid out on a cutting board. The scent of salt tickled my nose. “What is that?”

“Scallops. I’ll wrap them in bacon and fry them after cooking down the veggies.”

I must have made a face because he paused, looking worried. “You like seafood, right?”

Shy, I shrugged. “I’ve never had it.” A part of me wanted to admit more. To tell him Eli hadn’t permitted me anything but the cheapest cuts of meat, and usually only what was left over. Most of my meals had been oats, beans, and rice in some assortment or other.

Not exactly wolf-friendly foods.

My stomach growled, and I kept my mouth shut. Riley’s features relaxed a bit. “I’ll make some of the bacon separate, then, just in case you don’t care for it.”

As if I’d ever be picky over food. Especially food someone prepared for me just because they could. The thought gave me pause...

No one had ever cooked for me like this. They either shoved leftovers at me or I paid a restaurant for the dish. If I was paying, it meant choosing the cheapest dish. Usually one or two sides, really. Money wasn’t something I was willing to part with frivolously, and I’d learned to live with hunger.

My stomach twisted and affection for Riley grew like roses within, beautiful and sweet... but with thorns. I wasn't sure I could keep accepting his kindness. It was beginning to hurt.

"I showed Liam your art," he said as he chopped onions. "He was just as impressed as I was. You're really talented."

A blush prickled its way over my cheeks. "Thank you. I used to draw a lot as a kid. I'd forgotten about it, honestly, until recently. There's a sketchbook in here, and I used a few pages. I hope that's okay?"

Riley's smile washed over me like sunlight, warming me all the way to my toes. "Hell yes, it's okay. Want to hear the story about that sketchbook?"

I nodded and sat at the small table, drawing one knee up to rest my chin on.

"A couple of years ago this apartment had its first guest. Mary. She was a Red Wolf from Mississippi. The packs there, especially the smaller ones, tend to be a bit... old fashioned in their views." The way he said it made it clear he had opinions on 'old fashioned,' and none of them were favorable.

"They believed in arranged marriages. The alphas and men of the pack would try to sell their daughters to whoever they thought would help breed the strongest pups."

Cold slithered down my spine before pooling like ice in my stomach.

"She ran from her arranged mate, desperate to escape before he forced the claim on her." Without thinking, my hand wandered to Eli's bite. "Her pack was relentless, but Mary found me and Tex. We let her stay here, helped her make some money. And, when she okayed it, we went to have a chat with her pack, so they understood she wasn't coming back and they didn't need to bother looking for her."

The threat in his voice as he recalled this was low and ungodly intimidating. Eli was strong. Very strong. Too many times I'd witnessed his strength. Worse, I'd been on the receiving end of it. But for a moment, I wondered if he was strong enough to take on someone like Riley. My wolf was

certain Riley would win, though there was discomfort there, too. She whined at the idea of a confrontation between her mate... and this man she liked far more.

Riley didn't notice I'd let my thoughts wander. At the stove, he started heating a large, cast-iron pan. "Mary started the sketchbook, using it as an outlet. Then she left it for others. Every guest I've had up here has left an image or some words. A collective voice to remind you—and others—how strong you can be. And to let you know you aren't alone in this experience."

The lump in my throat made it difficult to swallow. The sentiment was nice, but I was alone. So much more than he could imagine. "I like looking at the images. And seeing all the different skill levels. Even the ones that are amateur are so genuine that it makes them lovely."

Riley nodded. "I agree. And I'm glad you're adding to it. Most of the women added just before they left, though. I hope you're not planning on running again? Not yet?"

The hopefulness in his voice wounded me as it hooked me. Riley was reeling me in, steady and strong, and the more I fought to get away, the deeper his hold grew. It should cause a panic, yet I found myself smiling as I said, "Not just yet."

I watched him cook. He possessed a confidence in the kitchen I envied. My own skills were still budding, and my end results were just as often disasters as they were successes. He chopped quickly but with precision, his knife a blur. The pans behind him were sizzling, and he was able to move back and forth between tasks with ease.

Eli thought men who cooked were weak and "womanly." But watching Riley gave me the opposite impression. It was sexy as hell.

So far Riley had made most of the conversation. My life was so secretive, and I was guarded, so contributing was a challenge. But he had been nothing but kind to me from the get-go, and I decided I could open up a little to him.

“I think I might try to find an art store.” My fingers twisted in my lap. Riley focused extra hard on what he was doing, a clear sign I had snagged his interest. “Maybe get some sketch pads, pencils, that sort of thing.”

“Yeah?”

Oh, he was trying too hard not to sound excited. But Riley gave off the impression of a puppy attempting to not wag their tail—and failing miserably.

“Yeah. But I don’t know where the closest shop is. Or if a bus connects.”

“I could take you.”

My heart skipped a beat, though if it was because of his offer or the thought of being on the motorcycle again wasn’t clear. “I wouldn’t want to be a burden.”

His wry smile sent molten heat sliding from my belly down. “You could never be a burden, Amelia.” If only he knew how many times Eli had been sure to drill into my head that a burden was exactly what I was. “Unless you’re scared of the bike?”

I looked away. “Maybe a little.”

“I could teach you to drive one.”

Biting my lip, I shook my head. “I don’t have a license.”

Riley had been plating our food; his hands paused mid-air. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

“And you don’t have a license? Can you at least drive a car?”

“No.”

Storm clouds moved into his hazel eyes. “I’m going to venture a guess that it wasn’t your decision.”

“You’d be correct.”

The conversation hung there, an ellipse I was unwilling to complete. Finally, he sighed and brought our plates over. The

food was decadent. The mix of briny scallops and rich, fatty bacon had my mouth watering. He'd sauteed some sort of greens on the side, adding garlic and onion. Next to all of this was a large hunk of bread, smothered in butter and toasted until golden and crisp.

"This is amazing," I breathed. "Thank you."

Riley managed to appear embarrassed. "I don't cook a bunch."

I stared at my plate, and then up at him. "What? But you are so confident in the kitchen! Why?"

"One, almost all the brothers at the club house can cook. So, we rotate who makes huge, family-style meals. My turn only comes up once every few weeks. And two, when I cook, I prefer it to be for somebody. It used to be my mother, or—"

He stumbled, but I was able to fill in the blank. Girlfriends. That's who he'd cook for. I took a large bite of scallop and moaned at the buttery sweetness of its flesh. I wasn't his girlfriend, but if I wasn't mated already, I'd want to date Riley for that bite alone.

My heart seemed to wither at that. My life had been a series of paths splitting... and the choice for the direction forward stolen from me. If my family had lived, where would I be? If there'd been no Eli, no forced bond, could I have had happiness? *True* happiness, not these borrowed moments?

I could have been destined for so much, and I would never know. It gutted me.

"So now..." I chewed, knowing I was moving into uncharted territory "... there's no one?"

"Nope." Heat burned in his gaze, and I felt scorched by it in the best possible way. Thought it was hard to believe someone like Riley was single. A woman would be crazy not to snatch him up.

"And you want to teach me to drive a motorcycle?" I could picture it—Riley pressed close behind me, his arms wrapped around, leaning into me as he showed me the basics of driving and riding. I could almost smell his scent wrapped around me

and feel the wind in my hair as we cruised the streets of Rapid City.

I took a large sip of water, but it did nothing to cool me off.

“Do you have any siblings?” Clearing my throat, I hoped he hadn’t noticed how unraveled I was becoming.

“No,” he said. “What about you?”

Grief did what the water could not, cutting through my arousal like a knife. “I had brothers. Two. Both older.”

“Had?”

It was too much. Mace and Jet had been protective and bullies, sweet and irritating as hell. They’d been my idols, strong and fast and capable. That hadn’t stopped them from being cut down. Thinking about them made my heart feel as if it would be torn to pieces all over again.

“I don’t think I can talk about it. I’m sorry.” I stared at my plate and pushed food around.

Riley’s large, strong hand covered mine, stilling it. There was a hint of mechanical grease under his fingernails, and his skin was rough and calloused. My hand looked tiny under his. “You don’t have to be sorry, Amelia. I’ll take whatever you’re comfortable giving. No more.”

His words startled me, and I stared at him, searching. What was he asking for? Hoping for?

For that matter, what was *I* hoping for?

“I appreciate it.” If ever there was a time to remove my hand, that was it. Instead, I let it linger, enjoying the contact. Small jolts traveled up the arm from where he was touching me, and my wolf was positively languorous, wanting to roll around in his touch, his scent, his everything.

“My mother was hurt,” Riley said, the words rough. “Her mate, my father, used to hit her. I would try to stop him, but for a long time he was larger than me, so I just gave him another target to wail on.”

Understanding clicked in my mind. No wonder he was so sensitive to women like me. He'd seen it, too. Experienced something similar. "Where's your mother now?"

His throat moved as he swallowed. "She died when I was eighteen. A car accident."

"Oh, Riley, I'm so sorry." I knew all too well the pain of losing family. It was like a piece of you was carved out, and you'd never be able to get it back.

"Sometimes..." he looked down at his plate, now empty. "Sometimes I wonder if she caused the accident on purpose. My father's temper was getting worse and worse, and his violence was escalating. With my being old enough to leave the house, it seems like she saw... she saw an out."

My pulse thrummed in my throat, anxious and out of rhythm. "Why didn't she leave? Why didn't you take her with you?"

I hadn't meant it to sound like an accusation, but Riley pulled back, defensive. "They were mates," he said, as if that explained everything. The response made me queasy. "She couldn't have. Some bonds can't be broken, even if you want to."

I was going to be sick. My shoulder ached. "Where's your father?"

"He left as soon as she died. Said he was glad not to be tied down anymore. I haven't seen or heard from him since." So, his father had rejected him, leaving Riley right after the loss of his mom. Sounded like a real winner.

"That's terrible."

Riley just grinned. "Nah, I was happy to see the fucker go. If he'd stayed, I might have challenged him just to pay him back for all those years of torment. But he left, and Tex and his dad made sure I had a spot in the pack. I worked hard alongside Tex, and now he's the alpha, and I'm his second. The Black Pack is one of the largest and strongest in the country. I'd say it turned out okay."

He sounded like he almost believed it. But I knew. I heard it and felt it, my wolf leaning in, too—here was someone who'd been wounded like we had. A kindred spirit. A person who could try to be brave and try to live as best they can, but who kept their deepest desires buried.

Because we knew true pain and hurt, and we knew just how cruel life could be.

I wondered what Riley's deepest desire was.

"Thank you for telling me that," I murmured. "It helps me understand you better."

He gave me a dreamy look, full of sensual longing. "And are you ever going to help me understand you better?"

The worst part was I wanted to. Every instinct but one was pushing me to confide in him and let Riley in. But that one still holding out was the instinct that helped me survive Eli. I wasn't prepared to ignore it when it had kept me alive. "Maybe," I offered, unable to completely refuse.

The air in the apartment seemed to be growing thick and syrupy, clouding my mind and self-preservation. My belly was full of incredible food. Riley had cooked for me, cared for me, and had trusted me enough to share with me. Desire coursed through my body, foreign and heady.

My wolf was losing her damn mind, wanting nothing more than for me to present for him. To let Riley erase the memory of Eli from my body. As if it could be that simple. If anything, it scared me. Nothing good had come from her instincts before. She'd submitted to Eli, after all.

Something was seriously wrong with me. Broken within. As much as I liked Riley, I had no guarantee he was *actually* different. And I couldn't afford to try and find out.

"I have an early shift tomorrow," I said instead, grasping for sanity.

He took the hint and grabbed our plates, carrying them to the sink. Riley looked ready to start cleaning up, so I moved fast to stop him, putting a hand on his forearm. The muscles there felt like steel under my fingertips.

“I’ll clean up. As a thank you for tonight.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I know you don’t. But neither do I.”

We stood like that at the sink, bodies close enough I could feel the shiver of heat coming off him. The air was spiked with the scent of arousal—his and mine. Riley was watching me intensely, gaze lingering on my lips.

There wasn’t time to resist. Instincts I’d never known were in me drove me. I pressed up on my toes, drawn to his firm mouth, closing the distance further—

A sharp, piercing pain in my neck stopped me in my tracks. It was the mate mark, and fear flooded my system. It felt as if Eli were right behind me, witnessing the betrayal I was about to commit. Jesus, I’d almost kissed Riley. He stood, trying not to look confused, but it was obvious he was. And, I suspected, a bit hurt.

Mouth dry, I headed to the door, holding it open for him and being very clear it was time for him to leave. My shoulder throbbed, and I shuddered. How could Eli haunt me like this? What was he able to sense through the mate bond? Just because I didn’t usually feel anything from him didn’t mean there wasn’t something there, right? Without meaning to, I scanned the periphery, certain at any moment his face would show, leering, from the shadows.

Riley stepped past me. He looked around as well, searching for an enemy he knew nothing about. “Is something wrong?”

He would think I was a paranoid freak and a tease. Rubbing a hand across my nervous belly, I shook my head. “No.” It was a lie. Everything was wrong. I was falling for Riley, and soon I didn’t know if I’d be able to trust myself around him. If I couldn’t keep instincts at bay, where did that leave me?

But I’d never be free from Eli, so really, all it left me was screwed.

“I’ll look around, just to be sure. But you’re safe here, okay?”

Mute, I nodded. There wasn’t anything there. I was sure of it... mostly. But I couldn’t let Riley stay.

As he started to descend the steps, though, I stopped him. He’d brought food and cooked for me. He’d listened and been considerate. The least I could do was not weigh him down with my baggage. “Thanks again for dinner. And for introducing me to your packmates.”

His smile flashed bright in the darkness. “That’s just a handful of them. Next time I’ll take you to the clubhouse. We can make a day of it. Art supplies, driving lessons, and then dinner with the pack. It’ll be fun, I promise.”

How could he be planning more? I knew I was so broken that it showed, yet here he was, investing more energy into me. I didn’t deserve it, and yet, “Yeah, okay.”

The pain had subsided, and inwardly I cursed. It was probably all in my head. Eli had changed me, it seemed, down to my core, ensuring I’d always think of him. I despised him for that, along with so many things.

But I didn’t have to let him ruin everything. I’d just need to be careful as I allowed myself new experiences.

And allowed new people to get a bit closer to me.

My wolf scratched at me, letting me know just who she wanted closer. She was only thinking of how good Riley could make us feel. Like that dream that had left me damp with sweat and slick between my legs. *What do you know?* I challenged her.

But the residual hunger in my body agreed with her, not me.

“Goodnight, Riley.”

“See you soon, Amelia.” My name dripped from his lips like honey, slow and sweet. “Thank you for eating with me.”

He made it sound like we’d done so much more.

Oh, God. I was going to need another shower. A long, cold one.

RILEY

A backlog of paperwork faced me, and I was not feeling it. I knew it was because I'd been so focused on Amelia, but honestly? I didn't give a shit. After cooking for her last night, I knew she'd be the only thing on my mind.

She'd opened up, telling me snippets of her past. If I could continue to foster that trust, Amelia might clue me in on the asshole that had done such a number on her. That would be a pleasure.

Until then, I was going to have to keep giving her space and letting her instigate. Which wasn't something that came naturally to me. My wolf in particular was more than ready to show her exactly how enthralled we were. I pawed and whined, relentless as a teenager with a crush. But I was a seasoned adult, and I knew how to wait.

My phone rang. Jack. "What's up?"

He sounded breathless. "I've already called Clay and Tex. You and Liam need to meet me outside *now*."

The old man was never curt like that unless something was wrong. *He's the one watching Amelia.*

Fear gripped my heart, and I practically snarled at Liam while grabbing my Glock. "Follow me."

We stormed out and around, finding a wary and pissed Jack standing near the bottom of the steps of Amelia's apartment. The man's hackles were up for sure. "What the fuck is going on?" I demanded as I jogged to him.

“You packing?” he asked instead. Not a question that assuaged my concern, that was for damned sure.

I nodded.

“Let me show you something.”

Liam and I trailed him. Liam was texting Clay and Tex updates so they’d know where to meet us. Jack crossed a small side street nearby and walked to a large patch of bushes near a bus stop. The same bus stop I knew Amelia sometimes used to get around.

Jack pointed to the ground behind the bushes. “Boot prints.”

Squatting, I got a good look at the impression of large boots in the clay and debris. When I glanced up and across, I had a perfect view of my shop—and the staircase leading up to the apartment. A fucking stakeout.

“Found this nearby, too.” Jack held out several shreds of clothing—denim, a red piece of jersey, some white cotton from socks. “Smell ’em.”

I held the cloth up to my nose and cursed as I inhaled. The scent was strong. “Wolf,” I said. “And an alpha.” Within, my own wolf was growling and prepped for a challenge.

“Yep.”

Liam crouched next to me, reaching his hand out. I pressed the cloth into it, and he sniffed, too. “What do you think happened?” he asked.

“I think someone has been watching Amelia from here.” This was the exact scenario we were supposed to be protecting her from. I glared. “How did we miss this? How long was this fucker here?”

“No clue. Some of the cig butts are older, but they could be from anyone. You asked us to watch *her*, Riley. Not perform a whole damned search.” I bit my cheek. He was right, and Amelia wasn’t pack. If I’d wanted more, I needed to be specific. But knowing I’d come so close to failing her was going to eat at me. “But you don’t have anyone posted when

you're with her, so I bet they were here last night," Jack said. "And I'd guess they saw something they didn't like. Got real fucking angry and shifted before taking their clothes off."

Liam paled. "Shit."

There were only a few wolves who couldn't control their shifting. Most were pups, learning the ins and outs of their wolves. Some were those grieving so deeply they simply didn't care. And some were so angry they had no control over themselves. Those were the ones that were dangerous.

My hands curled into fists. A male with a volatile temper was stalking Amelia. He'd gotten close. I wondered if he saw me entering her apartment last night. I fucking hoped so. I hoped he saw my face and came after me so I could rip his goddamn head off his shoulders.

"Possessive motherfucker," I hissed as I stood.

Tex and Clay approached. While Liam filled them in, Jack and I began searching the area for any other signs of Amelia's stalker. There were some cigarette butts, a few more shreds of the clothing, and a tree that had been marked with piss.

What if I hadn't invited myself over last night? What if I'd left for the clubhouse, and Amelia had been grabbed?

Tex approached, and I could sense the anger rolling off him. It fed into mine, and I knew we were both ready to brawl. "They were in my territory," he growled. "I consider this a threat to the entire pack."

"They've been watching Amelia." Anguish mixed with the venom in my tone, and Tex clapped a strong hand on my shoulder.

"I know, brother. If someone had done this shit to Jess, I'd lose my goddamn mind."

I appreciated his empathy, but it wasn't the same. "Amelia's not my mate." It felt strange to say it, bordering on regretful. Like maybe she *should* be my mate. If she were, my anger and thirst for retribution would be justified. Instead, I was sounding just as possessive an asshole as the one after her.

I didn't have the emotional energy to analyze that just yet.

"She's under your protection, though, Riley. Which means she has the full backing of the Black Pack. You know that."

I did. But why had he mentioned Jess if he was thinking from a pack perspective? Was my attraction for Amelia that obvious?

More to the point... did I care if it was?

"Bring her to the club tonight," Tex ordered. "We'll have a big dinner. I'd like to meet her, and I know Jess has been hoping to get to know Amelia better. It's important she see how much support she has. I don't want her to feel alone."

My wolf let out a whine. I knew exactly how he felt. Amelia didn't have to be alone if she'd just let us in.

"Yeah, that's a good idea."

"For now, though, why don't you and Liam canvas the area as much as possible. I'll have Jack do some rounds with the other local wolves and see if they know anything. And Clay will get some of his guys over here. We're doubling the guards."

That wouldn't be necessary. I wasn't going to let Amelia be out of reach until we caught the son of a bitch who was watching her. If it was her abuser, all the better. If not, well, I had no problem doing what was needed to get the information Amelia was reluctant to share from him.

Tex started to walk off, but I grabbed his elbow. "Wait." I cleared my throat, heart ticking up in speed. "I don't want anyone to tell Amelia about this."

My best friend's brow furrowed. "Riley, she was tough enough to leave. She can handle this news, and she needs to know to be on the lookout."

He wasn't wrong, but... but what if Amelia discovered someone was watching her? Would she trust me and my pack to protect her?

Or would she do what she keeps warning she'll do and run? I remembered how she had bags already packed. No ties

to keep her near.

My chest cinched so tight it was difficult to breathe as I considered what it would be like to go up those apartment stairs and find the place empty. All signs of her erased, nothing remaining except the sketches she added to Mary's notebook.

It hurt too badly to contemplate. Like my heart was being gouged out.

"She's already looking out. She hasn't stopped since she came into town. Don't you think she deserves a bit of peace? A chance to not worry a bit?"

I was full of shit, and I knew it. Based on Tex's expression, he knew it, too. I was certain my panic was sending signals through the pack bond that a blind man wouldn't miss.

"Okay." He didn't like it, but he didn't have to. Tex had his woman, and I wanted to believe he was giving me space to find mine.

Huh. Not too long ago, I'd been one hundred percent convinced there wasn't anyone out there for me. When had that changed?

I hated that I was relieved when Tex left. There was a downside to having your alpha be your best friend. Sometimes they know you too damned much.

"Liam, let's get to it," I barked. Anything to distract me from thinking too hard about my feelings for Amelia. My young brother was more than eager to prove himself, and we conducted a thorough search of the area in only a few hours.

There was nothing helpful. Fucking infuriating.

Maybe Liam could sense how frustrated I was because he asked me if I wanted to grab a coffee with him. As one of the newest and youngest members of the club, Liam tended to follow rather than lead. Of course, we all knew he had the potential to be a leader. Call it animal instinct if you want, but with some people you just know.

Liam had not yet realized his full potential. It was Tex's and my hope that we could help him figure it out.

Liam chose a coffee shop that was not in our normal territory. It was unfamiliar to me, and despite being only thirty years old, I immediately felt too old and out of place in the hip space. The walls are lined with art showcasing colors and shapes and themes I couldn't understand. When I went to order coffee, the man behind the counter asked me which kind.

“Just plain, black coffee.”

He gave me a bored look, and I heard Liam snicker. “We have French press, espresso, cold brew, drip—”

“Drip,” I snarled. The man leaned back, mildly shocked and more than moderately irritated. Liam ordered the same thing, and while he had been the one to propose getting coffee, I pulled out a large wad of cash and paid before he could. Then, feeling bad about losing my temper, I slid a twenty into the tip jar by way of apology.

We took the coffee to a booth near a window.

“How did you even find this place?” I glanced at the street outside and realized I didn't recognize much in this part of town.

“As much as I love being in the pack and living in the clubhouse,” Liam said, “sometimes I just need a place where no one knows who I am. Besides, there's good people watching here.”

I could understand that. After my mother died and my father ran away, Tex and his father took me in. Immediately, I was surrounded by new brothers and family, had a place to live, and the means to pursue my interest in designer motorcycles. What I didn't have was a lot of privacy.

“Do you have any idea who is after Amelia?” Liam sipped his coffee and winced before reaching for the plastic creamer cups, opening and dumping several into his coffee.

“Don't know more than what I told everyone at the house.” It bothered me that I still knew so little about Emilia's past. Now I knew for certain that there was someone out there watching Amelia, and unless she clued me in to whom it might be, my hands were tied.

Liam's eyes strayed to the counter, and I turned around to see who he was looking at. A young woman who looked close to his age was standing and chatting with the man behind the bar as she ordered a drink. Turning back around I gave Liam a knowing look. "Now I see why you chose this coffee shop. 'People' watching."

My brother cast his gaze down and blush furiously. "She reminds me of someone I once knew."

Much like Amelia, we didn't know much about where Liam had been before he joined our pack. When we found him, living in the streets, starving, and sleeping under sheets of cardboard, no one pressed him for details. Eventually he told us a story many of the pack were familiar with: a tyrant of an alpha mixed with backwards thinking resulted in a strong, opinionated wolf like Liam running rather than trying to challenge.

Knowing what I did about his aversion to violence only added to my understanding.

Hearing about a girl, though, was totally new. "I didn't realize you'd left a girlfriend when you ran from your pack," I said sympathetically.

"Oh, it wasn't anything like that," he rushed to clarify. "We knew each other when we were much younger. But then I discovered she was killed by a rival pack."

My heart ached for him. He was too young to have experienced that kind of pain. I'd been too young as well, growing up far too quickly in a house with an angry and violent father. Tex's father had been murdered when we were young men. I wondered if we'd ever be able to live in a time when a wolf's life didn't start with violence or heartbreak.

"Have you talked to her yet?"

No need to answer, it was written all over his face. Not only was Liam reluctant to hurt anyone, he was also too scared to go after what he wanted. In many ways he felt like the little brother I never had, and a light bulb went off in my head.

“With strange wolves skulking about town, you should practice fighting a bit more.”

Liam’s face soured. “You know I don’t want to have to kill anybody. That’s not me.”

“Yeah. And I want to be sympathetic, but the fact of it is, you’re in a club that deals with violence every day. The gray wolves are unstable; Dave is doing his best, but we all know his time as Alpha is limited. Now we have strangers in our territory. If you want to be able to come to coffee shops to stare at pretty girls, I’m going to need to know you can do whatever needs to be done to defend yourself.” I knew I sounded too aggressive, taking out my frustrations from earlier on him. But I was so worried about Amelia, and I didn’t want to have to worry about Liam as well.

The young wolf didn’t look convinced. I added, “I have some anxiety I need to work off at the gym. You’d be helping me and learning at the same time. and who knows, maybe you can gain a little confidence and ask that hot thing for her number.” The gym would be good for me. Working my body until sweat dripped and muscles ached was a surefire way of getting out of my head. Currently being in there wasn’t doing me any good. “Unless you want to ask for it now?”

Liam’s skin flared a mild shade of green at the thought of talking to the woman. The poor kid was too sweet for this world. I hated that the way to keep him safe was to try and remove some of that sweetness.

He agreed, though, in part because I think he liked the idea of helping me out. Whatever it took. As we rode back to the clubhouse, my thoughts refocused on Amelia, and ways that I could convince *her* to open up a bit more.

The fact was, my wolf had been on high alert from the moment Jack had shown us the evidence of a stalker. We didn’t like the idea of someone in our territory. But we loathed the threat to our woman. Because that was who Amelia was becoming in my heart.

For better or worse, I was thinking of her as mine.

And I would do whatever it took to protect what was mine.

AMELIA

Breakfast shift hadn't been as busy as I would have hoped, and I tried not to feel blue about the tips that I had made. After all, I was staying somewhere for free, and I knew I'd be able to save up a healthy amount even with off days.

Eager to stretch my legs and walk home, I was startled to find Riley waiting for me at the employee entrance, leaning on his bike with arms crossed. At the sight of him, my wolf perked up and let out an interested growl. My stomach tittered, and I walked over to him, appreciating how strong and handsome he looked.

“What are you doing here?”

The corner of his mouth lifted as he said, “Giving you a ride. Do you feel up for an adventure?”

Despite his casual stance and easygoing tone, something felt a little off. Perhaps it was the way the corners of Riley's eyes tightened or the way he scanned the area behind me with tiny flicks. “Is something wrong?”

“Nah, nothing's wrong. I just wanted to give you a ride. We talked about going to the art supply store, remember?”

I remembered a lot about that dinner and the things that were said, but mostly I remembered how desperate I'd been to kiss him and how much that terrified me. Maybe nothing was wrong. Maybe, like me, Riley was aware that we were entering dangerous waters. Perhaps he was just taking care of his heart.

That made him a lot smarter than me.

“Okay.”

Once again, I found myself writing on Riley’s bike, my arms wrapped tight around his strong middle and the wind tugging at my clothes and hair. This time though, having done this before, I found myself enjoying the ride instead of fighting back the urge to vomit. It didn’t feel as absurd any more to consider letting him teach me how to ride.

If I had a bike, Eli wouldn’t be able to track my route on buses. The kind of freedom a motorcycle would offer was tantalizing. The thought of riding without Riley though? Miserable.

We pulled up to a nondescript store in the strip mall. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected but it wasn’t the gray cement and light up sign, along with multiple posters advertising fifty percent off if I bought two or more products. In all honesty, it seemed tacky.

Inside was a different story. First, there was a smell of freshly sharpened pencils and cleaner, as well as the sweet scent of untouched paper. While the lights were harsh, I was delighted to see aisles clearly labeled.

Without waiting, I hurried to the aisle labeled sketching. My breath caught. There were notebooks of every size. I traced by fingers along the tops, eager at all the potential laid out in spiral-bound books in front of me. Riley appeared with a small cart, and I began to put some of the least expensive pads inside.

“Are these the ones you want?” he asked, pointing.

“They would suit my needs just fine.” Of course, I wanted the nicer pads, their paper smooth and creamy. But I wasn’t about to blow a week’s worth of tips on a hobby I’d only just picked up.

He must have suspected my reasoning because he picked out a few of the nicer notebooks and put them in the cart as well.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m buying you art supplies,” Riley said, his eyes teasing and his smile wide.

“No, you’re not.” My hands went to my hips. “You’ve already done too much.”

He was having none of it. “Amelia, I make more than enough money. Even with the share that goes into the black pack’s coffers, I have plenty. You’re trying to get on your feet, and if purchasing you some art supplies will help bring a little sunshine into your life, I consider that a worthy investment.”

I was speechless. I hadn’t experienced kindness for so long. Riley kept heaping these sweet acts onto my plate, filling it until I wasn’t sure I could handle it all. Swallowing, I nodded, letting him know that I wouldn’t fight him on this.

Besides, when I had to run, I wouldn’t be taking the supplies with me. To travel fast, you had to pack light. If I thought about it as an investment in the apartment, a way of leaving more for the future women to come, it was easier to stomach his generosity.

With that decision made, we added in pencils, charcoal, some alcohol-based markers, and even a large box of crayons. The box, with the perfect tips all lined up in rainbow order, appealed to the child in me who wanted to remember the time before the facility.

When it was time to ring up our purchases, I made it a point not to look at the register. Riley paid and carried the bags to the bike. He stored them with my backpack then hopped on and patted the seat behind him.

“Ready for the next stop?”

In truth I was exhausted. I worked a full shift, and now all I could think of were the notebooks and art supplies and how much I wanted to play and explore with them in the quiet solitude of the apartment. But Riley had just paid for everything.

He was being generous, and I decided I could be generous, too.

“Where are we going?”

“Clay is in charge of dinner tonight at the clubhouse. That means he’ll be making ribs. He makes the best damned ribs in the Dakotas, and it will give you a chance to see where I live and meet more of my brothers and my pack.”

My chest clenched as I thought of all the people that would probably be at the dinner. *It’s free food, I told myself, and it will make Riley happy. It’s the least I can do after all he’s done for me.*

It helped that my wolf was keen to continue spending time with him. And we’d be with a pack, right? More wolves would mean more protection and safety. Something I hadn’t experienced in far too long.

By the time we pulled into the parking lot in front of a large warehouse looking building, I’d mostly convinced myself that I could muster the energy for the next few hours. It didn’t help to see so many bikes lined up one after the other like dominoes in the front.

Stress coiled tight in my belly. Riley took my hand in his, and I squeezed it hard as he led me inside. The first thing that slammed into me as soon as we were through the door was the noise. Even on its busiest days, the restaurant never sounded like this. There were hundreds of voices all competing, becoming a sound wave that held the force of a tsunami.

Next, the scent of all the wolves packed into the clubhouse assaulted my nose. It wasn’t unpleasant necessarily, but my wolf and brain short-circuited trying to identify each individual smell. There are simply too many, and despite the clubhouse being large and open, the sensation of being boxed in intensified.

More than a few curious glances passed over me as Riley walked me through the crowds. I recognized Jess and stayed focused on her, hoping I could trick my brain into ignoring the heat and press of bodies.

She smiled as we approached, her hand looped through the elbow of a tall man. Tex. The alpha’s strength rolled off him in the same way it did Riley. A kind of confidence that couldn’t be faked.

He held his hand out to me, and I shook it. “It’s nice to meet you, Amelia.”

“Thanks for having me.” My voice rang small and weak in my ears, but maybe that was because the blood whooshing in them muffled everything.

“How are you enjoying work at the restaurant?” Jess moved close to me and put her hand on my shoulder.

“It’s fine.” I knew I sounded rude, but I was beginning to struggle with staying calm. Maybe I’d been a lone wolf for too long, but the mass of bodies around me was not a comfort. If anything, for the first time since I’d escaped the facility, I was beginning to feel like I was locked in.

A quick glance over my shoulder showed the exit farther away than I would have liked. The path was also blocked by all the laughing and boisterous black pack members.

Panic rose in my throat like bad meat.

“We’re glad you were able to join us.” Jess’s eyes twinkled. “Clay is one of the brothers, and aside from being an excellent cook, he’s celebrating securing a large deal with a modeling company. He does security, and this deal will bring in a ton of money to the pack.”

I knew she was trying to make me feel at ease, talking about normal pack affairs. But I didn’t belong to any pack. Not anymore at least. There was something acutely painful seeing what my future could have been like had we not been hunted to the brink of annihilation.

My wolf was seriously struggling. She didn’t like being surrounded by people she didn’t know with no exit easily in reach. Desperation moved her into pacing and scrabbling within, making my unease ramp up to low-key terror. What surprised me then was how she didn’t insist that *I* do something. No, she was reaching out to Riley’s wolf. Trying to connect with him and let him know that something was not right.

And then, there it was. A connection with his wolf. It was tenuous and thin, but I could sense the emotions within me

projecting to him. His reaction was immediate.

Riley put his hand on my lower back, moving close to me. He led me off the main floor. I should have felt relieved but all I could think of was what the connection meant, and if he could sense me, would he be able to sense Eli through me? Would Eli sense *more* of me?

Spots formed in my vision, and my knees liquified. The hand on my back moved so that it was wrapped around my waist, holding me up. “Amelia? Is everything okay?”

My tongue was too thick in my mouth to answer. I needed space. I needed air, my lungs pumping too quickly to be efficient as I hyperventilated. I needed—

There was no finishing that thought because the lightheaded buzzing at the base of my skull grew, and I wavered on my feet before falling into oblivion.

RILEY

While I had experienced communication along the pack bonds for most of my adulthood, the feel of Amelia's wolf reaching out to mine was a unique experience. Not that I had any time to enjoy it. Because her wolf? It was in pain.

The night air was substantially cooler as we made our way out a side door. "Here," I said, steering her to a beer crate beside the brick wall. "Sit and put your head between your knees."

Amelia had gone nearly limp in my arms, and at one point I was pretty sure she lost consciousness. Worry ate at me like acid.

She sank onto the seat, leaning forward so that her torso dangled over her knees. Crouching beside her, I rubbed Amelia's back in soothing circles.

Is everything okay? Tex reached out.

I think she's having a panic attack. We're okay but I will probably take her home. Tell Clay I'm sorry I missed his celebration.

You know he won't mind. Take care of her and let me know if you need anything. And be careful—we don't know where those fuckers are.

I knew it had been Tex's hope to convince Amelia that she had the support of the pack, and we both were eager to find out just who was chasing after her. But I hadn't considered

what a sudden influx of pack might be like for Amelia, and I felt like an asshole.

“How are you doing?” I asked Amelia, reaching out with my wolf to see if I could connect with hers again. I couldn’t, but there was the idea of a connection there, something that felt like a door that could be opened again. I found I hoped it would open again soon.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice rough with tears. Amelia’s shoulders began to shake. The sounds of her crying tore at my heart.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” I said solemnly. “I didn’t think about what it might be like for you, shoved in a space with a ton of new folks.”

She managed to sit up, leaning against the brick wall, her head tipped back and her eyes squeezed shut. The moonlight shown in the wet tracks down her cheeks, painting her skin silver. Her mascara was running, and I caught a glimpse of pale blond eyelashes.

“Even before... before my ex, my pack was never large,” she said, those gorgeous and full lips moving with every word. “We got together frequently, like two to three times a week for family-style meals. But there were never more than twenty to thirty people at a time, and even that was a rarity.”

“Sounds cozy, though.” I began to finger comb her hair, occasionally sliding my thumb down to wipe away her tears. Amelia’s skin was soft as silk and just as smooth.

She smiled. “It *was* cozy. Cozy and wonderful, and I miss them so damned much.”

Her voice cracked, and I felt sickness rock through me, worried about where this was going.

“Is there a reason you didn’t run to them after you escaped?” I knew from many of the women I’d helped get on their feet had been forced to give up their families because their families had been the ones trying to sell them into a bad mating.

“There’s no one for me to run to,” she said, her tone so bleak it chilled. “I have no one.”

Her eyelashes fluttered open, and Amelia stared up at me, the contacts not hiding how pain stricken her eyes were. “Everyone is dead.”

A punch to the nose would have hurt less, wouldn’t have shocked me as much. “What happened?”

Amelia sniffled a little before clenching her jaw resolutely. “I was fifteen. My brothers and I were sprawled on the floor playing a card game. Dad was helping mom clean up in the kitchen after dinner. I needed to use the restroom, and so I headed to the bathroom, which happened to be at the back of the house. While I was in there, I heard the sound of wood splintering and my family screaming. They screamed so much.”

She wrapped her arms tight around her waist, appearing to be holding herself together. “I was scared. I froze, Riley. I just froze and stayed as quiet as I could in the bathroom. Eventually, the noise stopped. when I walked back out, I walked into a bloodbath.”

I didn’t need a description; I could picture it easily for myself. The sprawl of limbs and coating of red on everything that was familiar.

“I didn’t know what to do. So, I ran from the house, hoping to find someone else in the pack. but when I got outside, all the neighborhood doors were open. There were screams coming from several houses and masked men with guns.” Her voice shook as she spoke. “I tried to run then, to duck away before anyone saw me. but I didn’t escape, because I ended up running straight into my... the man I ran from.”

“He kidnapped you?” Rage roiled through me, volcano hot.

“Yes, but I didn’t know it at the time. He was out walking, he claimed when I ran into him. And he promised to hide me and help me. He took me back to his place, and for the first

few weeks, he was kind and promised he wanted to help me heal.”

“That mother fucker.” Knowing that her ex hadn’t just hurt her but had preyed on her vulnerability was a punishable offense in my eyes.

“It wasn’t until later that I realized he had no intention of letting me go. That his promises for help and healing were lies. By the time I realized his plans, he’d already put a lock on my door. That was ten years ago.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and leaned hard against the brick wall. Every ounce of self-control was devoted to not flying into a rage. Jesus fuck. She’d been *locked up* for *ten goddamn years*.

Ten years of being someone’s prisoner. Of having your wolf locked up, subjected to the rules and whims of another. It would be an absolute hellscape for any wolf. That Amelia had survived and managed to escape was a wonder. And the way she was putting her life back together and trying to move forward was a testament to her strength.

“I’m so sorry that happened to you.” Without meaning to, I reached out and held both her cheeks between my hands. My thumb brushed over her soft lips. “No one deserves that.”

My wolf was keening within, attempting to reach across to her wolf, to reassure her that she was no longer alone. That she had me at her back.

Through tremendous willpower, I stopped myself from dipping down to kiss her. Oh, I wanted to. I wanted nothing more than to taste her sweet mouth. but I wasn’t going to be like her ex. I refused to take advantage of Amelia when she was clearly so vulnerable.

She was so fucking beautiful, her eyes large and luminous. Her chest rose and fell quickly with shallow breaths. I could feel the want in her as well. Her wolf was just as interested in me as mine was in her. I suspected Amelia desired the kiss almost as much as I did.

The situation was a hundred times more complicated than any relationship I'd had previously, but I'd also never felt so drawn to a woman as I did to Amelia. It was like every time we were together, the electricity was turned up, crackling and snapping along my skin and jump starting my pulse.

"No matter what happens, you will always have me in your corner," I promised. "I will always be here to protect and support you."

Her throat moved as she swallowed. Amelia licked her lips before saying, "I don't deserve you."

"You might be right about that. You deserve better."

That earned a hint of a smile. "Don't be ridiculous, Riley. You're the best man I know."

I thought about all of the fights I'd been in, the violence I'd committed, the bodies I'd put into the ground. I was far from the best man, but maybe I could be the best man for Amelia. Lord knew I wanted to be. "Tell you what, I think it's time I get you home."

Amelia allowed me to help her up. Without thinking, I held her hand as I walked back to my bike. She didn't pull away, instead choosing to twine her fingers between mine. We rode back in silence, but I didn't miss the way she held me a bit tighter.

By the time we got to her apartment, my wolf was more than content and eager to get to know her better. I was never going to push Amelia, but that didn't mean I didn't love every hint that maybe we could get closer.

I followed her up the metal stairs to the front door. She hesitated before turning around and leaning on it. There wasn't a whole lot of room at the top of the stairs, and our closeness had my skin feeling tight with longing.

Her green eyes teared up at me, luminous and deep enough I was in danger of falling in and never being able to find my way out again.

"I'm sorry you had to leave your party for me."

“Please don’t be sorry. I should have asked instead of springing it on you.”

She chewed on her bottom lip before saying, “You couldn’t have known, and I didn’t feel in danger there, just overwhelmed. I guess I’m just broken when it comes to crowds now.”

“You’re not broken,” I insisted vehemently. “Trauma is buried in you. It’s mixed in with all the good. You didn’t choose to put it there, and the way that it’s changed you has made you stronger. One day, you’ll see how strong you are, and on that day you won’t be as afraid.”

Amelia surprised me then by pushing up on her toes, bringing her mouth close to mine. I could feel her shaky inhalations, and I froze, making sure she was in charge of every moment.

She held there for a long time, lips inches from mine. But then, finally, she closed the distance all the way and pressed our mouths together.

The kiss was unsure and unsteady. Amelia’s touch was tender, like she wasn’t sure what she was doing. She’d been with her ex for 10 years and kissed me like it was her first kiss ever. I didn’t know if that was true, but I knew instantly that I never wanted to kiss anyone else ever again.

Stumbling and awkward, her tongue slipped out and traced my bottom lip. Groaning, I moved my fingers into her hair, gently tilting her head to deepen the kiss. Amelia moved against me, and it was all I could do to keep from pressing her against the door to let her feel the effect she was having on me.

She pulled away quickly, covering her mouth with her fingers. I burned for her, wanting nothing more than to kiss her again. My body yearned so hard it hurt. Instead, I said, “It’s been a long day, and I bet you need some rest.”

Amelia’s answering smile was full of gratitude. “Yeah,” she agreed hurriedly. “Look, Riley, about the kiss—”

I pressed a fingertip to her mouth to quiet her. “You don’t need to explain, and I sure as hell don’t want to hear an

apology. if you still need to talk about it tomorrow, we can. Okay?"

Amelia nodded before reaching behind her to turn the doorknob. "I'll see you tomorrow, then?"

"I hope so."

She went inside, and I lingered on the top stoop, waiting until I heard the deadbolt slide into place and her light footsteps move away from the door. My lips tingled with the memory of hers, and while I wasn't sure what tomorrow was going to bring, I was going to enjoy the memory of that kiss for the rest of my life.

AMELIA

I dragged at Mama Lou's in the morning, every table and order a struggle. That was entirely due to the fact that I hadn't slept a wink, my brain obsessing over the kiss. I played it over and over again in my mind, trying to find a way to regret it.

So far, I hadn't come across a single reason I could hold on to.

Kitty pressed a mug of hot coffee in my hand. When I looked at it, I could see the creamy light color that proved she knew how I took the drink—with milk and a ton of sugar. Grateful I nodded to her and sipped deeply, heedless of the temperature.

"Thanks," I murmured.

"Is everything okay?" Kitty asked as she wrapped silverware, prepping for the day.

The thing was, everything *was* okay. "It really is," I managed, startled at how disbelieving I sounded.

Kitty laughed. "You sound like you aren't sure!"

Her easy-going nature was infectious, and I found myself grinning from ear-to-ear. "Maybe it's just been so long since things were okay, but I don't know how to feel about it."

While her face softened, the pleased look in her eyes blossomed into something bright and wonderful. "Oh, sweetheart. I imagine you don't. But trust me, it's a good

thing, and I'm so happy for you. Does this mean you won't be disappearing anytime soon?"

At the reminder of what had brought me to the diner in the first place, I rubbed at the mate mark hidden beneath my t-shirt. It occasionally ached, but I found that there were entire chunks of my day now where I didn't agonize over Eli. I'd stopped looking around every corner, certain he was looming in the Darkness ready to grab me.

When did that happen? When did I stop living on borrowed time and terror?

"I'm hoping to stick around a bit longer," I answered with a smile in my voice.

Kitty pointed a fork at me. "Good. I like having you around. What do you think changed?"

As if I needed to think about it. I knew right away what had changed. Riley had come into my life. Riley had given me a safe place to stay. He listened to me and took care of me. I'd been so certain after my panic attack that he would realize I was too hot a mess to save. Instead, he'd understood and made sure I felt safe.

"The people around here are very nice," I answered, knowing how non-committal it was.

She gave me a shrewd look. "I bet I know exactly who has been nice to you."

"Please don't be mad at him," I begged. "If it weren't for Riley, I would still be sleeping in the woods or jumping around from hotel to hotel. He's been really good to me."

"Has he put the moves on you?"

My blush started at my toes and didn't stop until it reached the crown of my head. "Actually, I'm the one who kissed him." The words tasted candy sweet in my mouth, my blood rushing hot and warm with the memory.

For a moment, Kitty looked scary as hell, and I worried I'd said something wrong. But then her laugh escaped. "I should have known he wouldn't be able to leave you alone."

“It’s not his fault,” I argued, horrified that I’d somehow gotten Riley into trouble with this fierce mountain cat of a waitress.

“It’s absolutely your fault,” she teased as she stood, carrying a bucket of wrapped silverware. “You’re too sweet and pretty for your own good. Hell, if I swung the other way, I’d be head over heels for you, too.”

My blush intensified, and she strolled out of the kitchen to the front, chuckling the entire way. The burn in my stomach was new. Usually, all the strong emotions there were linked to shame and guilt. This, though, was almost akin to pride.

When I headed out to the main room, I saw Riley sitting in my section, like my talk with Kitty had manifested my desire. Nerves crackled, and I prayed that he wasn’t upset about me kissing him.

“Will you have your usual, sir?” I hoped that I sounded as lighthearted and teasing as I’d tried for.

“Sure will,” Riley said amiably. But before I could turn to put his order in, I found his strong fingers wrapped gently around my wrist, holding me at the table. “Amelia, are you free this afternoon after you get off work?”

He knew as well as I did that he was the only person I spent time with when not at Mama Lou’s. I appreciated that he made it sound like I might have a life that wasn’t just peeking out of windows and waking up from nightmares. “I think I’m free,” I teased. “Why?”

“Because I think we should talk about that kiss.”

Those same nerves that had been popping and crackling with pleasure now rose in my throat like bile. Was he upset with me? Did he regret letting me kiss him?

Then his thumb rubbed a soothing circle on the inside of my wrist. “It’s nothing bad, Amelia. And I’d like to keep it from becoming something you don’t want.”

My first instinct was to argue. To tell him only I could decide what I wanted.

That instinct caught me off guard. That's not who I was. I didn't argue. I didn't have opinions. Eli's voice shot through my brain like lightning, searing me to my core. *"You don't have wants, bitch. You want what I want. Anything else doesn't matter."*

My hand drifted up to my shoulder, and I grabbed the mark. It throbbed with the memory of Eli, a pain that seemed to melt down my arm and back like hot oil, burning every inch as it traveled.

Riley's gaze grew worried. "Amelia, you can say no if you need to. I just thought you'd like a chance to... define... any parameters you might want. To give me boundaries so I don't fuck shit up with you."

Ah! It hurt, and I breathed heavily through my nose, clenching my jaw until the hurt of the mark backed off enough to clear my mind. As the fog of pain lifted, I realized what he was saying. Riley wasn't sad about my kissing him, or angry, or anything like that. He... he wanted me to kiss him again. And he was worried about pushing me too hard or too fast.

My body lit up like a firecracker. "I'd like that."

"You'd like me not to fuck shit up?" He looked so innocent I couldn't help the bubble of a giggle that popped out of me.

"I'd like that, too. But no, I meant I'd like to talk. Just... not at the clubhouse?" The idea of having to go there with the kiss on my mind sounded like walking straight into hell.

Riley grinned. "No clubhouse. Just you and me. I was thinking it would be more of—" Suddenly, his bravado seemed to disappear, and Riley became like a nervous boy. It was seriously endearing. "More of a date?"

A date. The word felt funny, and I rolled it around a few times in my mind, testing it out. I'd never been on a date. Not once. But I found the idea appealed to me deeply. My wolf was in full agreement, eager to spend as much time with Riley as I could.

“Okay.” I smoothed my hands down my apron, certain my palms were sweating with nerves and excitement. “A date it is.”

With that, I turned and fled to the back, in part to put in his order and in part because if I was going to make it through my shift without shouting in relief and joy, I was going to need to keep busy.

Still, all my steps had pep in them, even after he left for work.

I was going on a date with Riley.

RILEY

I wasn't sure I'd ever put this much thought into a date before. Amelia was special, though. As awful as her panic attack must have been, I was grateful for it because it had shown me how fragile she was. It also proved that the attraction I felt wasn't one-sided.

Fuck. That kiss. I wanted a million more of them. If I was going to make sure that could happen, though, I needed to keep Amelia comfortable. Most of my date ideas were for places that were crowded and noisy, or expensive and fancy. None of those things would put Amelia at ease.

The stairs rang out under my boots as I made my way up to her door.

While I still had my kutte on, I'd elected to put on fresh black jeans and a button-down black T-shirt. My hair was slicked out of my face, and my cologne was fresh and pine scented.

Amelia opened before I had a chance to knock.

I could have howled from pleasure. Damn, she looked amazing. Blue skinny jeans hugged her shapely legs. She had on a V-neck t-shirt that showed the perfect hint of cleavage. The field jacket she was wearing was oversized and army green, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. She'd redone the brown in her hair recently, and the sun caught the red highlights from the dye.

Mostly, though, I couldn't stop looking at the sparkle in her green eyes. She was looking forward to this.

“You look unbelievable.” It was no lie. Despite where I was bringing her, I was certain I wouldn’t be able to take my eyes off Amelia for the whole date. When you had the most beautiful thing in the world on your arm, I was certain everything else fell away.

A pretty blush bloomed on her cheeks. “Thank you.”

I could sense her nervousness, but I hoped it was just pre-date jitters and not fear. The last thing Amelia needed was to be scared. Especially of me. It would crush me if she ever felt threatened by me. That was the kind of man my father was. I’d never be that way. I’d worked too hard to make sure that fucker left nothing in me beyond the sperm he’d donated to my mom and a healthy passion for hurting those who hurt others.

“Ready to go?”

“Yes, but...” Amelia worried at her bottom lip. “Where are we going?”

The last time I’d tried to surprise her hadn’t turned out well. As much as I loved seeing the look on someone’s face when my surprise went right, Amelia’s need for control was more important. “I’ve never been to the art museum. I thought we could check it out? And then, if you’re up for it, some driving lessons.”

Her smile lit up, and my pulse went wild at the sight of it. God, she was so fucking beautiful. “That sounds perfect!”

When Amelia slid behind me on my bike, it was smooth and confident. Like she belonged there. My chest clenched, and my wolf howled within at the rightness of it, the way her body felt like a puzzle piece clicking into place next to me.

She held on without needing to be asked and, while she clasped tight around my waist, there was no quaking or stiffness when I started the bike and pulled out of the garage’s parking lot.

The art museum was one of those places I’d always wanted to go but never found the time or excuse to do so. Before, keeping Theo and the Gray Pack at bay had taken up

almost ninety percent of pack time. We were always making sure boundaries were respected and they stayed in check. There hadn't been "spare time" for things like museums or hobbies. Work and club, that was it.

Now, though, we had some breathing room. Not much, but I'd take it. Though I'd spoken to Dave that morning, and he wasn't feeling the same. In fact, he'd cursed Tex out for asking him to be alpha.

It wasn't the first time he'd complained about it, and it wouldn't be the last. He wanted a replacement we could tolerate, and he wanted them *now*.

Poor guy.

I was glad to have some time for moments like this, though. Who knew when a turf war could spring up, or a gun deal gone wrong, like what had happened with the Red Pack? I suspected Tex knew how I felt about Amelia and was attempting to delegate my duties as much as possible, but eventually club shit would drag me back.

Until then, I planned to enjoy myself.

The Dahl Art Center was bright and spacious. Because Amelia had a day off mid-week, we were there when it wasn't busy. I'd planned that on purpose, wanting to make sure she didn't feel overwhelmed by strangers.

As we stepped into the gallery, Amelia grabbed my hand and beamed up at me. "This is amazing. And you've never been here?"

"Nope."

She looked incredulous. "How long have you lived in Rapid City?"

"How mad would you be if I said most of my life?"

Amelia pretended to look offended, but the corner of her mouth kept ticking up. "Unbelievable. If I'd been free to go out, I'd live at a place like this."

Something about that phrase, *free to go out*, rubbed me raw inside. It didn't take a genius to pick up from the snippets

Amelia had given me that her ex was a controlling and abusive fuck. He'd preyed on her at her most vulnerable and locked her up. But I was still coming to the understanding that Amelia had been in a cage, essentially.

Like, all the time.

I'd seen so much evil shit in my life, but knowing she'd been caged for ten years was so atrocious it made me sick. And murderous. Definitely murderous.

"Are you okay?" She was looking at where we held hands, and I realized my grip had tightened. I relaxed my hold immediately.

"Yeah. Just... I get angry at your ex."

Her eyebrow arched. "Angry sounds like an understatement."

I realized she was teasing me. *Teasing*. It was such a normal, healthy response that it startled me. Amelia was jumpy, timid, paranoid, scared. She only relaxed enough around me to talk. To tease, though?

That was a good place for her. I wanted to make sure she could feel safe enough to let loose even more. An idea was starting to come together in my mind. "You lead the way," I offered.

Amelia did, moving slowly from space to space. She stared at the indigenous artwork for a long time. When I asked her about it, she said she liked the sense of community she felt from some of the art, but also the pain and rage in others. "I don't know anything about being in an Indigenous community," she admitted, "but I recognize that pack life might have some similar experiences."

I remembered that her whole family had been slaughtered by men. Yeah, I bet she empathized with a lot of the pain in the art. But, I hoped, she also saw the beauty. There was a lightheartedness to some of the native art that spoke to me—a deep strength in being able to laugh and find beauty no matter how hard the world screwed you over.

As we moved deeper into the gallery, one piece snagged Amelia's attention enough that she sat, cross-legged, on the floor in front of it. Despite some strange looks from other patrons, I sat next to her, sprawling my legs out so I could look up at the work.

It was a tapestry, the colors vivid in blues, greens, and purples. It showed two bodies facing each other in a sort of dance, with stars in and out of the shapes. The name was "Heavenly Bodies," by the artist Grete Bodogaarde.

"What has you captivated?"

Amelia's head tilted as she considered my question and the tapestry in front of us. "The two bodies are separate, not touching. But there's a sense of... *clicking* between them. They're different colors, and the energy between them is different. If I look at the green body from one direction, it appears violent. Like the blue one is flinching away and shielding from an incoming blow."

My mouth tasted sour as I could see what she was seeing. I hadn't before. The colors were peaceful and flowed, and without Amelia's lens, I never would have noticed. How many times had I witnessed my mom throwing an arm up over her head to shield herself? To shield me?

Amelia moved her torso, leaning in. "But if I look at it from this direction, all the violence slips away. It's a dance. A mirror of two souls, connected by the stardust we're all made of. Because we are all made of stars. The good people and the shitty people and everyone in between."

Her critique took my breath away. How could she see so much? Allow herself to feel so much? No one would fault a person who'd been through what she had for hiding in a turtle shell, unwilling to look out. Yet here she was, not just looking, but *seeing*.

"Do you like it?"

Her nose scrunched. "I do. I guess... I see myself in it. When I look at it one way, it's who I was. But I like that I can shift and see who I could be. Someone who dances with stars."

“And with someone else,” I added. “There are two people in the image.”

She reached over and took my hand, sending my wolf into a flurry of playful excitement within. “Do you think... you have to have someone? To be happy?”

Ooph. Now it was like she saw straight into me. My deepest worries and fears being dragged to the surface. For her, though? I could handle it.

“Not too long ago, I had to ride out of state for a club matter. I was solo and had too much time to think. Maybe it was because Jess and Tex found each other recently, but I questioned whether there was a perfect mate out there for me.”

Her hand got still, and Amelia tensed like she was considering pulling away. I held it and pulled her hand into my lap, stroking along her palm. “I didn’t think there was. I’ve had a lot of heartbreak. Not like yours—just failed relationships where I was cheated on, or taken advantage of, or lied to. It felt like I’d be lucky just to find someone who didn’t treat me like shit, even if we weren’t a perfect match.” I sighed. “I believed that would have to be good enough.”

The figures in the tapestry seemed to move the more I looked at it. “I decided to be happy on my own. Or, maybe, to fake at happiness until it became real. I didn’t want to believe in a perfect mate, and I hated having Tex’s true mate proving I might be wrong.”

“My parents were true mates,” Amelia said softly. “I always assumed there was one person out there for me. But then someone else found me first, and he ruined me.”

I squeezed her hand and scooted closer, daring to put an arm over her shoulder. Amelia allowed it, even leaning into me as we continued to take in the art. “He didn’t ruin you, Sunshine. If he had, you’d never have been able to run.”

She didn’t argue, but I sensed Amelia didn’t agree with me. That was the thing about abuse, especially the long, sustained kind. It could tear a person so far down they couldn’t see they had all the tools to get back up right there. Shit,

sometimes it wrecked a person so completely there weren't any tools left.

I didn't think that was the case here, though.

A security guard moved through the room, coming just near enough to Amelia and me that I knew we were being watched. Amelia must have noticed, too, because she stiffened. Her breaths ramped up and grew shallow.

The scent of her fear filled my nostrils. I didn't wait to find out what was going on.

Standing, I scooped Amelia into my arms and headed for the exit. Several guards noticed and started to approach, causing Amelia to shrink into me like she needed to burrow inside and disappear. "She's not feeling well," I said firmly, not slowing my stride. "We'll be right outside if you feel the need to question us."

No one was dumb enough to try and stop me. As soon as we were out, I found a quiet bench and sat, keeping Amelia on my lap, my arms holding her close. I waited as she shut her eyes. I could practically feel her focusing, attempting to calm down.

"That's it," I coached. "When you're ready, tell me five things you see around us."

"What?" She sniffled.

"Look around and tell me five things you see."

"Um... a Japanese Maple. Another bench. There's an old man walking to his car. His car? And I see the museum doors."

"Good job. Now take five breaths in and out."

As she released her first exhale, I said, "Japanese Maple."

On her second I whispered, "Bench."

On her third, "Old man going to his car. He's crabby today and going to get some soup. He'll feed the crackers to some birds later."

Amelia giggled, though it was strained. "How do you know that?"

“I don’t, but when I’m old, that’s all I’ll do. Walk around museums until I’m hangry then eat soup and feed crackers to birds.”

“That sounds nice.”

“One more deep breath.”

She did as I requested, and on the last exhale, I whispered, “The museum doors. The museum is free. You’re allowed in and out as you wish. You’re at a museum that doesn’t have a room to lock you up in. You’re with me, who would never let you be locked up again. And now we’re outside of those doors, and we don’t have to go back in.”

Amelia sagged against me. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re going to have to stop apologizing eventually.”

Amelia’s shoulders shook a bit with laughter, and I knew she was going to be okay. “What happened in there?”

“The guards. I know they’re just doing their job, but...”

“You had guards?”

Her life with her ex was taking a new shape, one I didn’t fucking like. Not one bit.

“Yes. I was locked in a room for most of the day, when I wasn’t being trained to be a good female. When I wasn’t with my... ex, he had guards posted to make sure I couldn’t run.”

She’d been in a fucking *prison*. She’d told me it, told me all those details, yet I had refused to put the picture together as a whole. Knowing there were guards, too, meant it wasn’t just one bad guy treating a girl like shit. It was an entire pack abusing someone. It was fucking barbaric.

“I’m sorry you experienced that. And I’m sorry it’s made things so hard.”

“How come you get to say you’re sorry?” She pulled back to shoot me a wry look.

“Because I’m not apologizing to you for something out of my control. I’m empathizing with a shit situation. Totally different.”

Amelia frowned, but I could tell she was digesting my words. “Want to get out of here?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’m so—” she bit her lip to stop herself. “This was nice. I’m glad you thought about it. Maybe... maybe when I’ve processed a bit, we can come back and look some more.”

“Anything you want, Sunshine.”

The nickname had popped into my head in the museum. Maybe it was how she seemed to light up the room when she was staring at the art. Or how my heart seemed to shine when she was near. But as soon as I said it, it felt perfect.

Amelia was my sunshine.

We got on my bike. Initially, I’d planned on taking her to a small dinner, but her freakout made sitting in a restaurant seem too stressful. Instead, I carved my way out of the city and into the Black Hills.

There was a small gravel strip near the park I liked to leave my bike in when I went for a run.

When she got off the back of my bike, Amelia turned in a full circle, staring at the wilderness, her mouth open in a small “o”.

“Like it? This is one of my favorite spots.” The sweeping hills, the blue-green of the trees, the red and gold rock of carved out hills. There was so much room to just *be* out here.

“For what?” Amelia was still surveying the large expanse in front of her. It was the exact opposite of a cage.

“Hiking. Camping. Running.”

She glanced at me then back out to the tree line. Wistfulness danced along her features. “It’s amazing.”

“Want to walk around a bit?”

She nodded and allowed me to take her hand again, pulling her off the road, off the trail, and straight into the woods. Immediately the scents of my bike, the city, and all that other shit faded. All that remained was the crispness of the air and

the slight kiss of humidity that promised rain in the next few days.

We hiked in silence, taking in the sounds of woodland animals and the crunch of our boots in the debris. I continually scented the air, but there was no one around but us. It wasn't just a precaution, it was instinct. There was a female beside me, and my wolf demanded we be on guard for her.

"Who are you smelling for?" Amelia finally asked, a quaver in her voice.

"Lions, mostly. Some of the nearby mountain lion pack will roam over here, and I know you don't like surprises. They're nice as hell, though, and not a threat."

"Is that Kitty's pack?"

"Sure is. Headed by an alpha named Hunter. He's close to Tex, and the lions have helped us out more than once. We do the same for them. But I know meeting strangers can be intense for you, and this isn't an area you're familiar with, so ___"

Amelia's hand squeezed mine, and she pulled me to a stop. Glistening greens pierced straight to my heart. "Thank you. For understanding, I mean. It's nice to have someone think about my needs so much. And who doesn't make me feel embarrassed because of them."

"Meeting your needs is my top priority." I hadn't meant it to come out sounding so sexual, but Amelia blushed deeply and wouldn't look me in the eye after. My cock got hard, and I wished she'd understand just how true my statement was. Instead, though, I squashed down my desire and gave her an out. "And you don't ever have to feel ashamed. How long since you've let your wolf run?"

Amelia's back straightened. "A couple of weeks. But the last time I did, I... felt like I was being watched. Like I wasn't safe. I haven't gone out far enough to run because I'm afraid of being alone."

"You're not alone now," I reminded her.

Amelia shook her head, suddenly wary. “It’s okay. I don’t need to.”

We all needed to. Our wolf was an integral part of who we were, and letting them out to run free, to be the animal we were, helped strengthen our bonds with our other half. I hadn’t run in far too long, and the tapestry had provided some inspiration.

“Look up,” I said.

She did, peering through the leaves to the sky, where dusk was painting the clouds in color, and the tiniest pinpricks of stars were beginning to peek out.

“Let’s shift and run together. Wolves are wild, and they need to be free.”

She still looked nervous, tugging at the hem of her t-shirt. As much as I knew her body would be a fucking masterpiece undressed, Amelia needed to feel safe. “I’ll turn around,” I promised. “I won’t look until you’re shifted. Yeah?”

Amelia hovered in indecision for just long enough I started to mentally prepare myself for being shot down when she nodded. “Okay. Turn around?”

I did, shutting my eyes for good measure. Behind me came the shuffle and swish of clothes coming off and falling to the earth. Then her smell changed, ever so slightly, the addition of fur and... snow?... tickling my nose.

A nudge in my back told me I could turn around.

I turned around and stopped short, jaw hanging. The wolf in front of me was large for a female. My wolf would only outweigh her by a bit, and that was saying something, as I was considered large for a black wolf. But it wasn’t the size that had me stunned into silence.

Amelia’s coat was a perfect white, shaggy and soft.

I’d suspected she wasn’t a brown wolf, despite her claiming that was her pack, but this?

“Oh, Sunshine,” I whispered. Synapses were firing overtime. Her family, murdered. No one out there for her.

Well, no fucking shit—despite the Black Pack’s best efforts, the White Wolves had been eradicated. Wiped into extinction.

All, it seemed, but one.

AMELIA

He looked at me with absolute reverence. My heart was wild in my furred chest, and I shifted my weight from paw to paw, not knowing what I was waiting for.

“How can you exist?”

I could sense the hurt and anger he felt on my behalf. Riley, sweet Riley, was making connections with what I’d told him and what he was seeing. He understood that when I said I had no one, I meant *no one*.

I trotted close to him, timid and worried. But when Riley’s hand brushed through the fur on my head, I leaned into the touch. At that moment, it didn’t feel like I was alone anymore. I had someone now. The touch was heaven, my wolf’s need for connection finally feeling truly satisfied.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” Riley crouched down and moved his hands over my fur until I was stretching and preening with pleasure. That is, until his hand moved close to the shoulder where Eli had bitten me. My fur covered the mark, but when Riley’s hand brushed near it, a stinging sensation throbbed. Reluctantly, I pulled back, shaking my head with my ears perked.

“That’s okay,” he said. “I should’ve asked first.”

If ever there was proof the mating mark hadn’t completely bonded me to Eli, this was it. Riley wasn’t reacting like he could sense it, smell it, see it. If only my skin in human form could erase that terrible mark...

“Well, now I can understand why you’re so secretive.” He plopped down beside me and began to take off his boots. “Your existence isn’t something you can exactly broadcast.”

I whined a bit, the sound low in my throat. Riley put his hand out, and I butted it with my head, allowing the comforting touch. Eli always insisted this was what made me special, being the last of my kind. The only thing about me that was special, according to him. Well, I didn’t want to be special in that way. Being the last of my kind only felt like a travesty, not a goddamn honor.

Especially when Eli had played a goddamn part in the murder of my family.

“Hey,” Riley murmured, rubbing between my ears in a low, soothing way. “I’ll keep your secret as long as you need me to. But you should know the Black Pack will do whatever it can, use every last one of our resources, to keep you safe.”

I shifted from paw to paw, wary. Why would they do that?

“Because you deserve to be safe, Amelia. Every woman deserves to be safe.” Riley was able to intuit my thoughts, my feelings. He answered my unspoken questions.

As if I needed another reminder of how different Riley was from Eli, here was a new one. Yes, he thought I was beautiful in my wolf form. He understood what made me rare and cautious. But, even now, he saw me as *me*, not as a rarity or a coveted prize.

Sitting with that recognition was too much... it led me into hoping for things to be different in ways they never could. I needed a distraction from the wanting of Riley, because I was starting to desire him in ways I knew I shouldn’t.

Catch me if you can. I leapt away and took off through the woods. I heard his curse and the scramble to undress and laughed in my heart. When he started to chase me, my adrenaline spiked. Only instead of fear, I felt merry and free, eager to push my body to its limits and see just what Riley could do.

It turned out Riley could do a lot. He was fast and agile. Soon the thundering of his massive paws came racketing from behind. The sensation of being chased super charged my panic. I risked a look back and almost stumbled. Riley wasn't just fast and able to keep up with my tricks and turns; he was *massive*. The black of his fur reminded me of a cloudy night sky, onyx and encompassing.

And he was *Riley*, not Eli or his awful pack. This was play, not a hunt. The panic quickly abated, and instead there was a surge of joy.

He closed the difference, and I nipped at him before digging deep and pushing harder.

For hours we ran, chasing and playing, exploring and hunting together. It was the longest I'd been in my wolf form and God, my soul felt alive.

It was full on dark by the time we found our clothes, shifted back, and got on his motorcycle. My cheeks hurt from grinning, and I snuggled into Riley's back as we rode. At my apartment, he did as he always did and walked me to the front door.

"I don't think I've ever seen you smile this much." He reached out and tucked a windblown strand of hair behind my ear. I leaned into the warmth of his touch, my heart in my throat. "It's nice."

"It's because of you." It was the gutsiest thing I'd said in... well, maybe my entire life. But it was also the truth, and one I refused to deny any longer. Every step of this journey with him I'd withheld a part of myself, resisting how my wolf and my heart longed for Riley. I told myself over and over that it was too risky. That I couldn't get attached. That I'd just end up hurt again.

Unleashing my wolf and running with his had changed me. I could still taste the wind and smell the forest on my skin. He'd been beside me every leap and bound of it.

"Kiss me?" I asked, looking up at him through lowered eyelashes.

Riley's eyelashes flickered in surprise. But he said, "Absolutely," in a way that had my insides go gooey. Riley gently cupped my face between his hands and lowered his mouth to mine. His breath was sweet, the licorice root he'd found and chewed earlier still lingering. The kiss was a brush, a whisper, but it managed to feel like a match head striking true, instantly igniting my hunger.

My fingers buried in his hair, tugging gently at his roots and pulling him to me. I crushed my mouth to his, my wolf eager and loving being more assertive. Riley paused, and I took advantage, nipping at this lower lip, letting him know it was okay.

That I wanted this.

Should I have reached behind me to open the door without relinquishing the kiss?

Probably not.

Did I?

Damned right, I did. I grabbed the front of his kutte and pulled him inside, ignoring the fact that whoever was on guard from his pack was most likely witnessing my attack. Riley followed willingly, a deep, sexy rumble coming from his throat.

As soon as the door was shut and locked behind us, I pushed him against it. I could sense his wolf wanting to regain footing, to be the alpha Riley was and take control. It wasn't a test, but if it had been, he passed with flying colors, for Riley didn't act on his wolf's impulses.

He knew how critical it was that I initiate each step that came next.

Hunger like I'd never known flared bright within me, and I devoured his mouth while shoving his kutte off his shoulders. It fell to the ground. Riley buried his hands in my hair while I skimmed my fingers under his shirt hem, feeling the hard flex of his stomach under my touch. Energy pulsed between my fingertips and his skin, riveting and exciting.

Hooking my fingers, I drew his shirt up and over. When Riley made to do the same for me, however, I stopped him. Makeup hid my mate mark well enough, but it wasn't perfect. I knew I'd have to tell him about it eventually, but I was so fucking hot I couldn't bear to stop right then.

"I'm not ready for that," I gasped as he kissed along my jawline. I bit back the words, "I'm sorry," but he must have known because he whispered, "It's fine," against the shell of my ear.

Shivers racked down my spine, and my nipples drew tight at the wet heat of his breath in my ear.

Wanting to show him I was still into this—because God, I so, so was—I slid to my knees and set to work on the button of his fly. "Amelia," he warned, voice deep and husky. "I don't want you to do anything you don't want to."

"Good thing I want this, then," I replied as I jerked his jeans and briefs down, freeing the thick, hard length of his cock.

I'd worked hard to avoid looking at Eli's cock every time he claimed me. With Riley, I drank in the sight. It was long and thick, the veins beautifully marbled. I lightly gripped the base of it, marveling at the thickness of it, the rock-hardness of his cock.

"Fuck," Riley moaned, hips bucking. A dribble of precum leaked from the tip, glistening and enticing.

My tongue darted out to catch it before it could fall. The saltiness of it hit my tongue and my wolf went wild within, surging against me in a desperate bid for more. As if she needed to—I was already there, eager to explore his body with my mouth and tongue.

I swirled my tongue around the plump tip, tracking all the sensations and tastes. Then I licked up and down, making sure no bit of him was skipped. Riley petted my hair and moaned. His hips shook with strain.

"What now?" I asked, kissing the tip and the sides.

“Would you—” the rough, thin quality of his words delighted me “—put as much of my cock in your mouth as you’re able?”

As soon as he suggested it, I wanted nothing more. I wrapped my lips around and slid down, savoring every inch. He was large, and before long my jaw ached and my mouth was stretched wide. Yet I didn’t mind the discomfort one bit.

When he brushed against the back of my throat, though, I gagged and pulled back. Just enough to fit the rest of him into my hand. Moving with care, I began to bob my head, his cock sliding in and out of my mouth. My tongue rasped against the underside, and he twitched in my hand.

“Fuck baby,” he groaned, his butt clenching as I worked. “That feels so fucking good.”

As I became accustomed to the sensations, to the feel of him, I started to play a bit. Sometimes I’d lightly twist my hand as I pulled back. Or I’d gently slide my teeth along his length, earning sharp hisses. I loved when a move would have him gripping my hair, the roots screaming in the best kind of pain.

At my urging, he began to buck, thrusting into my mouth. Riley’s rhythm picked up. His hips flexed and his abs were pulled taut. My eyes watered as I took his length, faster, a bit deeper. But I found I wanted it. I wanted all of him.

But suddenly Riley pulled all the way out. “Babe, I’m going to come.”

“I want you to,” I moaned, almost a beg. “Let me swallow you.”

It was insane. I was insane. But I was also, suddenly and urgently, insatiable. My wolf rode me close, demanding we take him into us as many ways as possible.

“I—” he started to protest but I wasn’t going to give him a chance. I’d always be grateful Riley treated me with respect and care.

As if to show him how committed I was to this decision, I took him deep. Past the gag reflex. I sucked hard, tonguing

him. His cock twitched more, and then a hot burst hit the back of my throat. His musky tang flooded my mouth, and I swallowed, over and over, milking him.

With each swallow, a coal in my chest burned hotter. It was a fierce, demanding heat, unlike anything I'd felt in my life. My wolf, maybe? But something deeper than that. Taking him into me, even like this, seemed to unlock a box hidden deep within, and it wanted *more* of him.

Slowly, Riley pulled free. He slapped one hand on the wall to hold himself up, his pupils blown wide. "Amelia." It was a growl, possessive and hungry, and I felt the rush of wet between my legs.

Still licking my lips, I allowed him to help me stand. My knees ached but I didn't care. My throat stung, and it felt like triumph.

"Your turn," he snarled, fingers going to my shirt. The shirt that, if removed, would broadcast my deepest secret. Whip-quick, I grabbed his wrists. Riley raised a questioning eyebrow.

"I'm... not ready to be naked. All the way."

He swayed, absorbing this. For a moment I worried, but I shouldn't have. Riley nodded. "Keep it on. We don't do anything you don't want. Ever."

I released a shuddering sigh along with the hold on his wrists.

"But now I want to know how the fuck I'm supposed to taste you."

Lust crawled through me with hot nibbles. Taste me? Yes, *please*.

"I... I can lose the pants."

His smile was devilish and made me want to laugh or die of want or both, maybe, at once. "Whatever you want, Sunshine."

So, I slid my pants off, slow and careful, leaving them and my underwear in a pile. Riley put strong hands on my bare

hips, and I didn't jerk away from the touch. No, I leaned into it, letting instinct take over.

"How do I do this?" I asked, cheeks and neck burning. With Eli, he'd only taken. I'd tuned out as much as I could, trying to imagine being anywhere else. Instinct helped, but it wasn't a guidebook or anything.

"I want you to be comfortable." Riley moved us toward the bed. "So, I'm going to lie down..."

He did, stretching that long, strong body out and looking all the world like he was cut from stone by a master.

"Okay," I said, grinning.

"And you're going to crawl on me."

I did, awkward and wobbly, unsure but confident he'd show me how. I sat on his abs, the wet smear of my pussy resting on his bare skin. Riley's eyes squeezed shut, and he groaned. "Come up more. Put your knees on either side of my shoulders."

I leaned back, dizzy with want. It felt scandalous, what he was asking. Indecent.

Perfect.

So, I settled my legs where he showed me and refused to think about how close my core was to his mouth. And then he erased all thoughts by licking me, long and deep, down my center.

I shuddered and grabbed the headboard for support.

Riley swiped his tongue once more, languorously slow, moving through my folds like honey. Gasping, my hips bucked. His firm hands grabbed them at once, stilling me. He pulled me closer.

Riley began to taste me in earnest, and it felt so good, but I wasn't able to let go. Unlike the dream, this was real. My body was actually straddling his face. As pleasurable as it was, and as much as I wanted more, this was an action...

And I couldn't shake the worry about consequences.

What if Riley wanted more after this?

What if I did?

What would happen to me? To my mate bond?

“Hey.” Riley’s voice rumbled across me, and I shivered from the sensation. “Are you okay? We can stop.”

Sweet mother, why did he have to be so *good*? Everything would be easier if Riley wasn’t so damned perfect and understanding. “I’m okay,” I managed.

“Look at me,” he ordered. I dropped my gaze, stunned to see how sexy and dirty it was to meet his intent stare, his mouth hidden by my body. “Good,” he crooned, and I could have purred. “Now sit on my face and take what you want. You’re not going to hurt me, Amelia.”

My wolf overrode my concerns. We dropped down, finding his tongue, and writhed. Oh, oh, *oh*. I wasn’t going to hurt him. I knew Riley meant physically, but I trusted the metaphorical part as well. This was okay. It wasn’t permanent.

I... deserved this.

He groaned as I began to rock, riding his tongue. The increased pressure was just what I needed, and I felt the quickening in my lower belly. The tight coil that promised release. As I moved, Riley devoured me. His hands moved along my hips, my lower back, sliding under the hem of the t-shirt.

Soft whimpers fell from my lips as I grew closer to a crescendo. I released the headboard and gripped his hair, working his mouth for all it was worth.

Heat built quickly, but not where I expected it. Just behind my sternum a coal lit up, growing in heat until it was scorching my insides. My mind and heart were caught in the inferno. At its center was Riley.

When I came, I came *hard*, the climax striking swift and sudden. I howled, my toes curled, my body stiff. Everything pulsed, and the heat in my chest gushed through me, singing every inch.

It felt like forever before I had control of myself. I slid down Riley's chest, crumpling on top of him. He stroked my hair and back, chuckling in amusement.

"What?" I asked, sated and sleepy yet humming inside with wonder.

"I told you that you couldn't hurt me," Riley teased.

"Wouldn't want to, anyway." I pressed a palm to his chest, marveling at the strong and steady beat.

"Good."

I wanted to ask him about how it felt. Was that intensity normal? Was sex only that much better because I wanted it? Because it wasn't Eli?

Or was something more happening between Riley and I?

But I couldn't ask him anything without admitting to being mate bonded. I wasn't ready for that conversation. For now, I'd have to wonder in my head. And pray.

Pray a *lot*.

Because while Riley had insisted that I couldn't hurt him, I was positive the reverse wasn't true.

He could hurt me in ways Eli never had, and Riley wouldn't even have to touch me to do it.

RILEY

“**S**top moving.” Amelia waved her paintbrush at me as she scolded, making me flinch further as I imagined all the paint flecks I’d be scraping off the floor later. “Riley!”

It had been ten days since we’d made love. Each day, hour, minute I felt luckier and luckier. Amelia was blooming, and to be trusted enough by her to get to witness it? That was special.

“Sorry, Sunshine.” Inhaling, I made myself still again. Stretched out on her bed naked was exactly how I’d hoped our afternoon would go. Being the subject of her painting? That I hadn’t expected.

Not that I minded. I loved watching Amelia being passionate about something. Like now. Her gaze would dart to my body, and then the tip of her tongue would sneak out as she concentrated on the canvas in front of her. The brush made tiny whisper sounds, the air conditioner droned, and I attempted to think sexy thoughts.

That’s what she’d asked me to do.

Because she wanted to paint me while hard.

It had always been obvious that Amelia’s experience with men had been limited and terrible. But she clearly didn’t know how hard—pun intended—it was to keep an erection with no action for long periods.

Shit. I could feel my cock flagging.

“Let me see a nipple.”

Amelia's brow furrowed as she processed before a smile slowly formed. She reached down and pulled her t-shirt up. No bra. A pale pink nipple flashed, the color so light it scarcely stood out against her creamy skin. Her breast was as perky and perfect as an orange, with the threads of blue veins peeking through.

Ethereal was the word that came to mind.

Blood rushed back where I needed it. Painfully so.

"Are you always so easy to arouse?" Amelia teased.

"No. You do this to me, babe."

Sunlight filtered in through the window as it began to set, reaching across the room to shine on her. I could see where the brown hair dye was beginning to fade again, the roots starting to show just enough that her real hair color was revealed. A blonde so fair it was almost white.

Considering her wolf's coloring, I wasn't surprised.

Her eyes were blue, too, like glacial crevasses. Now that she felt safe with me, Amelia had stopped wearing her contacts when it was just the two of us. I cherished having that, a sort of secret just between me and her.

Pink dappled her chest, her neck, her cheeks as she blushed. "You're ridiculous."

"If you say so. How close are you to being done?" My calves were starting to ache, and I had an itch I would soon be desperate to scratch.

"How good do you want it to be?" Her nose wrinkled before her shoulders dropped. "Actually, I'm nearing the end. I don't think I can look at you like that much longer and not have you inside of me."

I groaned at her words, cock twitching as if it could already feel the wet heat of her pussy.

Ten days of this. Of my staying at her place more than the loft at the clubhouse. Ten days of absolute bliss. I drove her to work and picked her up. I delegated more of the shop's jobs to

Liam so I could spend time buried in her slick heat, tasting and loving her body.

Amelia still kept her shirt on when we made love. I knew it might take time. I could imagine how she might feel the need to keep one last barrier up, protecting herself. As for myself, I couldn't imagine any more barriers.

That was because every time we made love, there was a heat so intense in my chest it ached. A fierce sort of pain borne from longing and, if I was truthful, love.

"I'm ready when you are." I wiggled my hips, my rock-hard dick swinging until she laughed. "I've been ready."

The more we made love, the more I was reminded of Tex and Jess. A tiny kernel of hope was growing rapidly inside, watered by my affection for her and thriving in her light. My Sunshine. I refused to say it out loud, but I hoped she might be...

Well, best not to even think it. I didn't want to tempt fate. A lifetime of pain had taught me not to count on a good thing. Especially if it seemed *too* good. I wanted to know Amelia was on the same page before I admitted what I hoped was really between us.

"Fuck it." Amelia set her brush down before flashing me a devilish smile. "I'm not going to finish this before I finish you."

"Shit, Sunshine, you know just what to say." I rolled onto my back, my cock thick and hard on my belly. Amelia was shimmying out of her pants when my phone rang. It was the tone I'd assigned to Tex, so no letting it roll over to voicemail.

"Make it fast," I said as soon as I'd answered.

"Dave's at the clubhouse and needs to talk. We've got other pack shit to go over, too."

"And this has to happen right the fuck *now*?"

"You got better plans?"

I didn't want to be rude regarding Amelia, especially as she was arching a quizzical eyebrow at me. "I have more

appealing plans,” I ventured instead, adding just enough hint to my words that what I’d been hoping for was vastly more appealing than a club meeting.

A moment passed before Tex responded with far too much amusement. “I see. Well, can you wrap it up in two?”

Could I? Considering how hard I’d been, and for how long, I was pretty sure I could bust a nut in under sixty seconds. But it wasn’t all about me, and Amelia deserved—and needed—time. As if understanding, she shot me an apologetic look... before pulling her pants back on.

“You owe me so fucking bad, Tex,” I growled before hanging up on him. “I’m sorry. Club shit’s come up.”

“Is everything okay?”

“I’m sure it’s just bullshit club stuff. Boring business.” I had no idea what it was, but I wasn’t going to burden her with my concerns.

“Gives me time to work on this without distraction.” Amelia winked. I stepped around to see what she’d done so far. It wasn’t finished—but I could see exactly where she was going. And it was *good*. Amelia had the kind of innate talent others envied.

“You’ve made me look better than I am in real life.” I pointed to the abs and the details of my tattoos.

“We’ll have to agree to disagree there.” It came out as a purr, and when I looked into her eyes, they were molten with lust.

Tex fucking *sucked*.

“I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

“You’d better.” With that, Amelia stood on her tiptoes and kissed the side of my cheek before picking up her paint brush, swirling it in the color she wanted and focusing on the canvas.

Which left me to get dressed, tuck my hard on into my waistband, and make a quite uncomfortable ride over to the clubhouse.

Inside, Clay was grabbing beer at the bar. He made sure to draw me a pint as well. I nodded my appreciation as we headed into church. Tex was already at the head of the table, and Dave was in my usual seat. That wasn't an issue. As a guest, I was happy to let him have the chair. Besides, it wasn't like I wanted to be there any longer than necessary.

As soon as I settled in a different seat, Tex's stare honed in on me. "You look happy." It came out almost like an accusation.

I laughed. "I am happy. And pissed that you dragged me here. Major cockblock, asshole."

The corner of my friend's mouth twitched. "Sorry. But club shit has to come first."

I wanted to point out that if our roles were reversed, I wasn't sure he'd pick the club over Jess. Then again, Tex was mated to a female who happened to also be an alpha. Jess was comfortable taking her place as a club member as well as Tex's mate.

Dave sank back in the chair, his face lined and tired. An older wolf to begin with, being the fill-in alpha for a pack as large and malicious as the Gray Pack had been was clearly aging him. "Good to see you, Riley."

I nodded. "Dave."

Tex folded his hands on the table, leaning forward. "Shit's getting real frayed in the Gray Pack."

Dave grunted like Tex was underselling.

"The Rapid City pack is doing okay—Lilly is helping the girls gain confidence and more of a role within the pack, there haven't been any turf fights, and the drugs and weapons aren't being sold to good people. It's not great, but it's a hell of a lot better than it has been, thanks to Dave."

The grizzled alpha didn't look pleased. "I'll be honest. I've got a target on my back." He coughed, long enough and hard enough that I caught Tex's worried expression. It was a good thing Jess wasn't in on this meeting; Dave was like a father to her.

“Sorry. Long days and longer years are starting to have their way. Which, unfortunately, the younger males in the pack have noticed.”

In the war against the Gray Pack, I’d seen Dave fight. He was decent, and worthy of the alpha status he currently held. But packs were led not by decency, but by strength, and looking at the man now... his strength was waning fast.

“The only reason I haven’t been challenged for leadership yet is your proximity,” he continued. “Having Tex backing me is keeping us safe. But I can’t hide the fact that I’m old as shit and unable to control the pack. If we don’t find a real replacement soon, the challenges are going to start.”

He didn’t need to add that he wasn’t going to win a challenge.

“Shit,” Clay grumbled.

“Correct,” Tex added. “We need to start finding some challengers who won’t try to go back to the old ways. I’m not going to make the same mistake I made last time. If someone takes over the Gray Pack that threatens the peace we’ve created, I’ll take them out. I won’t wait like I did with Theo.”

My gut lurched. Only the strongest would be aiming for leadership. Natural alphas with strength and ferocity to boot. Tex was a damned fine warrior and tough as nails, but I didn’t like the idea of him having to constantly fight. Jess would like it even less.

“So, what are you suggesting?” I asked, chugging my beer after.

“I need Clay and Jack and some others to start reaching out to see who is thinking of challenging Dave. Try to find some natural born leaders we could stomach being in charge.”

Clay cleared his throat, looking embarrassed. “That’s what I needed to talk to you and Riley about. This new contract is padding our accounts, but it’s taking way more effort than I expected.”

I looked my brother over. He had bags under his eyes that normally weren’t there, and his stubble was threatening to turn

into a full-on beard.

Tex frowned. “What do you need?”

“I need to pull the brothers I have watching out for Amelia.” Clay shot me an apologetic look. “Which sucks because we’ve found more signs that there are wolves in our territory. Stealthy motherfuckers, too. But I won’t be able to keep the contract if I don’t, and we could really use the money.”

Alarm sent my heart racing, and my skin went clammy. And they’d had me leave Amelia *alone*? As if sensing my ire, Clay held up a hand. “There’s someone there now. I’m just saying I can’t do round-the-clock surveillance.”

I turned to Tex. “What the fuck? We promised to back her!”

Both Tex and Clay had their hands up. Tex didn’t flinch away from my anger. “And we’ll still offer it. But she needs to move in here. If she doesn’t want to stay in your place, the clubhouse has plenty of guestrooms—”

“You want to take a woman who was trapped and abused by a man and stick her in a building with even more strangers, most of whom are men?”

I’d pushed too far. Tex’s face changed from sympathetic best friend to alpha. “Riley, this isn’t up for discussion. I’m offering a solution. I like Amelia and, if I’m honest, I like her for you. You’ve been negligent of duties here, but I’ve tolerated it because I did the same fucking thing with Jess.”

His mate. His *true* mate. Again, there was a fleeting suspicion that Amelia might be more than a crush, but—

My wolf was desperate, pushing against this plan to leave Amelia unguarded. “Okay, so you understand—”

Tex didn’t let me finish. “Pack comes first. It did with Jess, and it does now. Dave’s here telling us he needs help. That’s going to include some financial help, too, as well as scouting out potential alpha replacements that could win a challenge when it comes to it. Clay is offering to infuse our pack with a fuck ton of cash, but he needs his employees free to do that.

You're my fucking second in command, Riley. If you want Amelia protected, we need to do it here."

Anger, frustration, and fear bubbled wildly in me, threatening to spill over. This was made worse by the fact that Tex wasn't wrong. I'd been avoiding the clubhouse, spending almost all my free time with Amelia. I'd let her consume my life. Shit, I'd even stopped looking for whoever was stalking her, trusting my brothers to find them so I could be next to her.

The clubhouse was the safest spot, especially if I needed to start going on road trips.

"Let me have the weekend," I said, offering a compromise. "Let me take her on a trip, just the two of us, and tell her what's happening. I'll come back, and I'll be ready to do whatever you need, but..." my voice threatened to break. Tex, probably sensing how torn up I was through the pack bond, nodded.

"Thank you." Turning to Dave, I nodded. "Sorry. I do want to help, I just—"

"You got a girl," the old alpha said nonchalantly. "I get it. Forgiven."

Clay clapped a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "I'm sorry, Riley, you know I wouldn't be asking for this if I thought there was any other way. But I didn't want to leave my greenest guys in charge of someone you're so into."

"I get it, I do." I stood. "If that's everything, I've got a weekend to plan."

Get out of here, Tex thought at me. And tell Amelia I'm sorry this is all I can offer her.

I wanted to reassure him that she'd understand. The problem was, I wasn't sure it would be the truth. It had taken Amelia this long to trust me, and she still didn't let herself be all the way vulnerable. She still kept her shirt on while we fucked, like she needed to be able to run at any second.

Stress stacked on my shoulders like boulders, and I left the clubhouse feeling more like Atlas than myself.

I'd given Amelia my word. I'd also promised Tex. Now I had a single weekend to try to find a way to keep both of those promises.

AMELIA

“**A**nd you’re sure you don’t mind camping? I know you, uh, spent a lot of time in the woods before.”

Leaves crunched under our feet as Riley and I hiked through the woods. I still couldn’t believe he’d contacted Mama Lou’s to get my shifts covered for the weekend. Then thoughtfully picked out some new gear for me. The pack on my back was a nice one, with padded straps and a belt around the waist that helped distribute the pack’s weight more evenly.

“Sleeping in the tent wasn’t the worst part of that,” I replied with a chuckle. “I liked the freedom of it.” At that time, I’d been so thrilled to simply not be locked up. Living out of a tent had left me exposed, but it had also left me with the ability to run if I needed to. I couldn’t fault the forest.

“Okay.” But Riley reached back a hand, and I grabbed it, giving him a reassuring squeeze. The sweetness of his concern was like honey, coating me all over.

As we walked, I considered how different I’d become since Riley had entered my life. My body was stronger for sure, with the weeks of walking to and from work. At his recommendation, I’d added in some pushups and squats before bed. Eli had worked hard to keep me weak. With decent meals and regular exercise, though, I could relish the sensations of growing strength.

More than that, though, the dark shadows that lingered in my peripheral had begun to diminish. I was sleeping better and deeper now that we shared a bed, my wolf able to trust him

enough to not be on high alert at all times. When we were out, I didn't feel a need to scan the scenery, sure that Eli or one of his pack members were waiting to grab me.

My neck ached from time to time, with occasional sharp pains that had me wondering how much of the pain was the mate bond and how much was in my head. The more time I spent with Riley, the more it seemed like the latter was the case.

If so... did that mean I could somehow leave Eli truly behind? Could I move on with my life?

The leaves were changing colors and dropping as we hiked, the air thick with the scent of loam and the crisp hint of winter. Fall felt like the shedding of a skin, preparing for a rebirth in Spring. It seemed like a good time to tell Riley everything.

Being honest about the mate mark would be difficult, but it was naive to believe I could hide it forever.

But I'd wait until we got to camp. This weekend was his idea, after all, and I didn't want to ruin it off the bat when I came fully clean about Eli.

"Tex told me about this area," Riley said as we made our way far off the beaten path. "Said it can do wonders for connection."

Butterflies danced inside me. I was already so connected to Riley. Each time we made love, a searing sensation grew in my chest, a kind of heat that made me think I'd combust in the best possible way.

Sex with him was different from with Eli. For one, Riley always made sure I found pleasure. Over and over again. For another, there was a... tugging sensation, like we weren't just connected bodily, but spiritually.

I hoped I could ask him more about that as well.

"Here we go." Riley unslung the backpack he'd carried and looked at the spot. It was ideal, the ground mostly even. Nearby, I could hear water. Most of all, though, it was *private*.

We unpacked and set up camp, moving together with ease, anticipating the other's needs. There was no room for the loneliness and isolation I'd lived with at the facility. Ten years of feeling cut off erased in a few weeks with this man.

My body hummed with happiness. Actual, authentic happiness. It flooded through me with its golden warmth, chasing away doubt and pain. I was shedding the skin of who I'd been with Eli, and it was glorious. Magical.

Dusk soon hung over us with stars blinking like lanterns. Riley had a fire going, the warm heat of it crackling against my body. The smells of woodsmoke, canned beans, and trees were enough to simultaneously settle myself in my bones while escaping into a place where it was just Riley and me.

I smiled at him. "This is amazing."

"Yeah." He stirred the pot. It was then, in the orange glow, that I saw what I'd been missing: something was weighing heavily on him.

"Is everything okay?" Panic fisted my chest, squeezing hard. Had I done something wrong? Was he mad?

Riley moved close and wrapped an arm over my shoulder. The reassurance I apparently needed, as I immediately melted into him, nuzzling close.

"I don't want you to worry." He moved his hand into my hair, finger-combing the threads.

"I want to worry about you," I replied and found that I meant it. How strange, to discover not just the capacity to find joy and pleasure in my life, but the emotional room for concern for someone else. I wasn't consumed by fear anymore; there was space now, larger than I could have hoped for, and I wanted to fill it with Riley.

His chuckle was as warm as the fire. "I like that. I like you, Amelia."

Like wasn't enough to describe what was between us, but I understood exactly what he meant. That somewhere along the way, we'd grown into something that went beyond like,

possibly even beyond love. A burning pull that demanded we surrender to it and to each other.

My body moved of its own accord. I moved so I could straddle Riley. His large, strong hands gripped my ass, pulling me close enough I felt the hard line of his cock at just the right place. Sucking in a breath, I rocked against him.

Something released within me, allowing my wolf to guide my body as much as instinct. It was a desperate thing, a need so deep I couldn't fathom it. Instead of flinching away in fear, though, I leaned into it.

I let go, deciding to trust my feelings. To believe in whatever this was with Riley.

Raking my fingers through his hair, I brought my mouth to his and kissed him slowly. Slow, but with such hunger and intensity that I ached between my legs. Riley's tongue slipped inside my mouth, and he swallowed my groan.

Cupping his cheeks, I deepened our kiss, growing feverish with my need. Deep in my chest the heat that came with making love to Riley kicked into gear. It used to frighten me, the intense flare that threatened to reduce me to ashes. Now I wanted it. I wanted all of him.

"Amelia," he moaned, before lifting me and twisting to lay me down on the blanket we'd spread beside the fire. It was dark, the trees blotting out the moon, so our bodies were bathed in orange glow.

Riley kissed over my shirt, sucking at a nipple through the cotton fabric. I arched into him, glad I'd decided to go braless. The cotton grew wet and rasped against the sensitive tip, unraveling coils of pleasure that fed the wetness between my legs.

He kissed his way down, pushing my t-shirt up so my breasts were exposed. Riley took a breast in each hand and kneaded them, squeezing and massaging until I was writhing. He sucked at my nipples, drawing them deep into his warm, wet mouth, until I thought I'd die if he didn't touch me.

"Please," I begged, reaching for him.

“Let me taste you.”

I nodded, and Riley kissed his way down my hips. Fingers hooked into my waistband, and he drew my pants off me, taking my panties off at the same time. I was exposed, but instead of shying away, I let my knees fall open.

Riley cursed and looked at me with dark delight. “Gorgeous, Sunshine,” he murmured. “So wet for me.”

I was, too, the air moving across the slick, sensitive flesh between my legs. Riley moved down, pulling my legs over his shoulders. When his tongue flicked against my folds, I gasped.

“You taste so fucking good.” This was followed by a deeper drag of that blessed tongue, parting my folds smooth and slow. My lower belly grew tight and needy.

“More,” I begged, burying my hands in his hair and pulling him to me.

Riley obliged. He licked and sucked until I was delirious. He skimmed past the place I needed him most, teasing while my eyes rolled and my hips bucked. Riley’s chuckle rumbled through my sensitive flesh. “So hasty.”

Finally, when I thought I’d lose my mind from need, he slipped two fingers into me. First, he scissored them, the stretching sensation new and coaxing. The heat of the fire caressed my skin; he caressed deep inside of me.

“Oh!” I gasped as he swept over a spot that made my body seize with potential pleasure, the wave of it slamming up against a last, single dam. One that had been built, stone by stone, over ten years in the facility, with Eli as the mortar.

“That’s it, Amelia,” he crooned, stroking me within while I keened. I was afraid to let that final wall down because what was on the other side was enormous and unknown. I was scared I’d drown in it.

My wolf wouldn’t let me hold back. She urged me to accept Riley, to pair with him. She rode me hard, eager.

Riley sucked at my clit then, pulling and stroking with his tongue at the same time. The firm, direct pressure was enough

to put a hole in the dam. It couldn't withstand the pressure any longer.

I came hard enough it hurt. My body jerked and seized, toes and fingers clenched as I ground against his face and fingers. Liquid lightning slithered through my veins as the torrential rapture ripped and rolled through me. I felt burst open, like all of me was flowing out into his mouth.

Like Riley was devouring me in the most glorious way possible.

I let it happen. Almost blind with the orgasm, I sank into the bliss that undid me.

The climax ended, and I'd been hollowed out. Nothing remained within of the wall I'd built. Riley had opened the gateways for the storm that was *me*, that was Amelia, to cleanse out. I was hungry. Voracious and starved for something to fill where that old Amelia had been.

I wanted to fill it with Riley.

"Shit, baby," he groaned, the bottom of his face glistening with my juices. "Did you feel that?"

I laughed, the bubbling lunacy of the question delightful. I knew he wasn't asking about the orgasm. Moving as though in a dream, I shifted us so he was on his back. I quickly stripped off his clothes before I straddled him again, sinking down slowly on a cock so hard it pierced me, splitting me and filling me up with no room to spare.

We both groaned, and I moved my hips slow, circling and just allowing myself to feel. But my skin crackled, and something beyond me demanded more. We needed to finish this, to complete some primal ritual I hadn't known we'd started.

The moon managed to peek through, its light calling to me, instructing me.

I stripped off my t-shirt so that Riley and I could both be naked, could both be pure for this final stage.

“Your tits are so gorgeous.” He managed to sit up while still staying imbedded in me. Riley kissed my nipples, my chest, my clavicle—

He froze, going rigid. My wolf sensed his immediate flare of anger. Of betrayal.

That’s when I realized what I’d done. Our connection had short circuited my common sense, and I’d forgotten about the mate mark. Eli’s mark. Which was currently directly in front of Riley’s wide, disbelieving eyes.

One second, we were wrapped up together, and the next I was being dumped on the ground as Riley skittered away from me as if I were a venomous snake. The pain of rocks and sticks cutting into my skin were nothing compared the wound in my heart.

“What the fuck is that?” Riley was shaking, his eyes yellow. His wolf was close to the surface, and both of them were *furious*.

I tried to cover the mark with my palm, as if that could erase it. As if I could hide it from him. “I meant to tell you—”

“When? When did you think it would be a good time to tell me?”

His tone was strained and dangerous. For the first time, there were threads of fear of Riley weaving through me. Shivering, I pulled my knees close. “I wanted to, but—”

“Amelia, stop!” Riley sounded as if he were pleading. The pain in his every movement cut at me like shards of glass. “Just *stop*. Mating is... it’s forever. *Forever*. You can’t just chuck a mate aside for someone new!”

Chuck *aside*? Was he kidding with that? Risking serious injury and my *life* wasn’t chucking anything, it was surviving.

“But he—”

Riley shook his head with a violence that had me swallowing my explanations. The absolute agony rolling off him was beating into me, matching my own. I just needed to

make him understand that I didn't want this, that Eli had forced it on me.

He stood, grabbing his clothes as he did. Riley refused to look at me. "I can't be here right now. I just... I need some fucking space. This whole time you knew. You knew you belonged to someone else, and you toyed with my feelings anyway!"

"I swear, I wasn't toying! Can't you understand? He forced me but I *want* you!" I clawed at the dirt, trying to get a grip on something, anything.

He paced, manic. Our connection shook with brutal force, straining under two hearts breaking. "I thought you could be mine." His voice cracked. "That we could belong together. But you've belonged to someone else this whole fucking time, and I—" He faltered, and Riley slapped himself on the side of the head a few times, as if beating down the voices in there begging him to stop. *Listen to them*, I pleaded.

When I went to touch his leg, though, he jerked away. I moaned, low and painful. It hurt too much.

Tears were overflowing, making the world blurry. Riley managed to get his pants and boots on while I sobbed and hiccupped, naked and covered in dirt.

"Damn you, Amelia." He said it quietly, an agony-ridden cut that I felt deeply. "I can't forgive you for doing this to me. For making me think I could actually have love."

As if I were the one at fault. As if I'd asked for this.

"I'll call Jack to come pick you up." His shirt was on. Suddenly, the calm facade shattered as Riley whirled and punched a tree so loud that I heard the bones of his knuckles crack. I flinched away from his strength and fury. He held the broken hand, staring at the bloody knuckles like he was surprised to see them.

"Riley, you're hurt—"

"No." Flat. Cold. "You don't get to be concerned about me anymore. My heart can't take it. I'll have Jack come pick you up. When he brings you back, I need you to pack up and leave."

I'll give you money, but I just..." he sniffled, swallowed a choking sound. "I can't be near you anymore. I can't bear it."

My mouth was dry, and my cheeks were wet. I didn't know what I was supposed to do or say, but I was terrified that this moment would slip by, and then it would be too late. Yet how was I supposed to make Riley listen?

He answered that for me by taking off, running through the woods. Running away from me. Still naked, shaking, and weak with the pain of his leaving, I had no chance at catching up with him.

Fuck, I *hurt*. My bones groaned and joints ached, like the pain of Riley's rejection was locking them up.

I pulled into a ball, not caring about how filthy I was. My contacts burned with the salt of my tears, and I pulled them out, throwing them into the fire. My wolf was distressed, howling in my mind as if I could do something to fix it right then. Time ceased to have meaning. There was only the hurt.

What could I do?

I spent too long on the ground, succumbing to a long and brutal crying jag that left my abs sore and my eyes swollen. It was time to move. I damned well wasn't going to be naked when Jack showed up. I had no idea how long I'd laid on the ground, but that didn't send me rushing. Lethargic, I found my clothes and pulled them on. Twigs in my hair caught on the collar of my t-shirt. My pants were gritty and uncomfortable.

Good. I didn't deserve comfort. I'd finally discovered what love felt like. I was in love with Riley, as was my wolf. I'd had something precious, and because I was too chickenshit to tell him everything about Eli, I'd lost it all.

I doused the fire with water, covering it with sand after. Dully, I went to take down the tent.

A branch snapped, and my wolf went on alert. I scanned the shadows and tree silhouettes around. "Jack?" My voice was rough, gnarled like the roots in the nearby earth.

"Not this time." It was a familiar voice, but not one I'd ever wanted to hear again. One of the wolves from Eli's pack.

The Facility.

I turned, prepared to bolt, when I caught the scent of the second man. Then the third. They'd surrounded me. There was nowhere to run.

I'd rather die than go back. Dropping to a crouch, I got ready to fight.

That's when the bolts of the taser struck me. Electricity jolted through me, my muscles convulsing and inoperable. I fell with a crash, jerking on the ground, my teeth clenched as I was filled with electric pain.

Rough hands grabbed me and rolled me onto my stomach. The taser stopped buzzing but my muscles were still out of commission. A plastic tie was secured around my wrists and my ankles. Worse, a silver muzzle was slipped over my mouth, the pain of the metal sizzling against my skin. It wasn't enough to kill me, but it was enough to make thinking next to impossible.

Shifting was out of the question.

"There we go." One of them slapped my ass before hauling me up and tossing me over his shoulder. "About fucking time. Eli's been losing his shit, sweetheart."

I bounced on his shoulder painfully as the men started through the woods. "I didn't think that fucker was ever going to leave you alone. But he *left* you, left you, didn't he? We've been waiting, and he isn't coming back."

I screamed then, ignoring how the silver bit into my skin.

"You're the one that chose an isolated location," one of them teased. "Ain't nobody coming to get you."

He was right. We made it to the road, and there wasn't a single car, motorcycle, or person in sight. Just a large, black van. The back popped open, and I was unceremoniously tossed in. Metal siding bruised me as I landed. There was a grate separating the back from the front two rows of seating.

I was in a cage.

Locked up, just like I'd been.

As the gravel rumbled under the wheels, the enormity of my situation settled around me. I'd lost Riley, my love. We weren't mated—he'd never be able to find me. Eli had. I'd thought those sensations of being tracked and watched, the pains in my mate mark, had all been paranoia. But he'd been there, waiting for a chance.

I'd be taken back to the facility.

I'd be hurt.

Eli would whelp me, bringing babies into the world that he could mold into his own image.

And I would never, ever escape again.

RILEY

The first thing I did was shoot a terse text to Jack. I knew he'd be on his way soon; Amelia wouldn't be alone for long. The ride back to the clubhouse was excruciating. In part because my wolf fought me every inch of the way. He wanted to go back, to listen to Amelia. He railed me, trying to make me feel guilty over leaving her. He didn't give a shit about the mark on her shoulder.

But I sure as hell did.

Every scar came from a tooth that belonged to another man. *Amelia* belonged to another man. I knew she'd been running from a bad situation, but fuck, what was I supposed to do with this information? I couldn't be with her. Knowing how much I'd already been with Amelia was becoming something sticky and tainted that I wasn't sure I could ever be clean of.

And the fucking heartbreak. It shredded my insides, over and over, until it felt impossible to breathe.

Yet I managed to get back to the clubhouse, ignoring my wolf and desperate for some distance, some way to understand what had just happened.

How the woman I was certain was my true mate was actually mated to another all along.

Tex was waiting for me as soon as I stormed through the door. "Felt you from miles off, brother. What's wrong?"

I swallowed hard, unwilling to shed tears. I was angry and heartbroken and so goddamn confused. But Amelia had made

the choice. She'd kept herself protected and hidden. And because of her choice, I'd fallen so fucking hard for her.

"Amelia," I managed, voice cracking. I took the half-drunk pint of beer out of his hand, chugged the rest, then tried again. "Amelia has a mate."

Tex's frown was deep. "What do you mean, she has a mate?"

"I mean when I took her shirt off, there was a goddamn mate mark on her shoulder."

The memory of it spit and hissed within, like grease hitting the fire. Jess came around with two fresh pints. Wordlessly, she handed them to Tex and me before hopping up on the countertop, her blue eyes soft with concern.

Why wasn't she angry? Why wasn't Tex pissed off?

"Tell us everything from the top," Tex ordered.

I slammed the pint glass down, beer slopping over my hand. I ignored it, pacing as I started. "I was going to have her move in here after this weekend. We've been doing so well, and her healing seemed... Jesus. I just... when we were together, it felt so fucking intense. Way more than any woman I've ever dated. Like there was a string tied to each of us, constantly winding tighter. I thought—" I stopped, certain I would choke on the words.

"You thought she was your true mate," Jess supplied softly.

I nodded. "But because she seemed so fucking wounded and hurt, I wasn't going to push it, you know? But she can't be my true mate. Because she bears the mark of another. All this time was a fucking waste."

Once more, it was as if my insides were ripped apart. I swayed, nauseous. I'd been such a fool. Hadn't I told myself I wasn't going to get a mate? Not a real one, a true one? And then Amelia had been there, and I'd let my guard down.

Tex was raking his hand through his hair. He still looked concerned, not angry.

“How are you not pissed off?” I exploded, shoving his chest hard. “Aren’t you the one always warning me not to fall in love with every woman I come across?” A low growl issued from Jess’s throat, her eyes going golden. Tex didn’t react, though, rolling with the hit.

But he did lock gazes with me, and I saw the steel of my alpha in them. “I’m here for you, and I’m fucking sorry that you’re so hurt. But you’ll recall that you once saved my life and my mate’s by staying my hand, even if it meant fighting me.”

I had done that. Tex had been certain Jess had betrayed him and had moved to stab her with his hunting knife. Despite his being alpha... I’d stopped him. Because I’d recognized who Jess was. His true mate.

This wasn’t the same. Jess had been unmated, just born to a shitty pack and an even shittier father. Amelia had kept something as huge as being fucking *mated* from me. I’d given her a place to stay, safety, food, art, the chance for a normal life... and she’d hidden herself from me.

“Where is she now?” Jess asked carefully, but I heard her worry. Did she think I’d hurt Amelia?

“I left her at the campsite. I texted Jack to pick her up and bring her back.” The words sounded dull, a knife worn down to uselessness. Some part of me was dying, I was sure of it, and that necrosis would soon spread.

My wolf was frantic, howling and keening so loudly within that I thought I’d go crazy from it. If he didn’t get the message... I wasn’t sure how I’d live with his noise and losing Amelia

Tex, though, straightened. “You left her alone?”

I stiffened. “That sounds an awful lot like an accusation, Tex. It was only for a short while, and who would find her there?” As I said it, though, cold dread settled low in my belly.

Tex growled. Jess had already been moving and was tossing him keys for one of the pack’s vans.

“Where are you going?”

He got right up in my face. My wolf went on guard, and the masculine alpha energy between us crackled, dancing along the line of a challenge. I didn't want to be alpha—too much of a fucking headache. Besides, Tex was good at it, and my best friend. But at the moment, I was ready to take a swing.

“I promised her my protection, Riley. I'm sorry you feel fucked over, but that is my *word*. It was your word, too, and we'll discuss the consequences of you disregarding that. I get how hurt you are—” he searched my eyes, and I knew what he saw. And I knew, in my gut, our roles had been reversed, with me fighting his stubbornness regarding Jess. “But pack honor comes first. *Always*. So, I'm going to get Amelia because we know for a fucking fact that wolves have been stalking her in my territory, and we swore to protect her.”

It was ice in my fucking face. The hurt was still there but the rage had been snuffed out, leaving only smoldering embers. Jesus fuck. I'd left her in the middle of the forest with no way to get out.

I'd isolated and stranded her. My stomach felt like it would drop straight out of me.

We raced to the van, Jess climbing in the back. Tex was already driving before I'd finished buckling my seatbelt. We sped out of town while hurt and anxiety warred within me.

Tex didn't stop watching the road, but he drew me out of my head with questions. “Why didn't we sense she was mated? There's always a scent and a sense of... ownership that pervades my senses when I'm around a mated female.”

Jess gave him a playful shove. “Ownership is wishful thinking.”

Jess was an alpha female, almost unheard of. Tex had needed someone willing to go toe to toe with him, though.

He was right, though. I'd known immediately when he'd mated her. Her scent had been nonexistent before, thanks to a charmed necklace, but there was... an instinct that made her

relationship status very clear long before anyone saw her mate mark.

But Amelia had smelled unmated. She'd acted unmated. There was no magic, no *anything* to signify that she belonged to another. Just the mark.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"And she was able to have sex with you, too, right?" Tex asked, pulling onto the highway.

My bones ached with the memory of the sex. Potent and primal. "Yeah."

Jess leaned between the seats. "Even before Tex bit me, there came a point where the thought of being with anyone else just felt impossible. After he mated with me, the idea of being with anyone else makes me physically ill."

There'd been none of that with Amelia. I understood now why she'd insisted her shirt remain on while we made love, but aside from that, it had been all mutual pleasure. Why hadn't she revolted against a man who wasn't her mate?

"Maybe it's because they aren't true mates." I stumbled through my thoughts, seeking threads that would validate my pain. "But it doesn't fucking matter. She belongs to another."

"Another that she took a lot of risk and pains to run away from," Tex countered.

My mouth went bone dry. "You can't run from mates."

"And yet she's been here all this time." He was being gentle but pushing against ideas formed from memories I didn't want to recall.

"Just fucking drive," I managed, staring out the window and trying to shut myself down. We'd get Amelia to the apartment, but after that...

I pressed a bag of frozen peas to my mom's arm. The arm I'd just had to set, praying my inexpert hands didn't fuck up the break more than my father already had.

We were both covered in bruises that were quickly rising, the purple and green of them painful to the touch. Her eye was black, and I was worried her cheekbone was cracked this time.

With her good hand, mom cupped my chin. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused.

“Why don’t we leave him?” At sixteen, I wasn’t large enough to fight him off. Oh, I fought him, if only to take the brunt of his anger off my beautiful mother. But dad was strong and vicious, the alcohol in him making his hits harder. “Just pack up and get the fuck away?”

“Language,” she scolded, her voice scratchy.

“Don’t worry about my potty mouth, mom. He’s going to kill you one day.”

A weak shake of her head. “He won’t, baby, he won’t. For better or worse, he’s my mate. He’s made me a part of him, and he’s a part of me. I feel his anger before he steps through the door. How can I leave that?”

“I hope he feels the pain he inflicts,” I snapped. Anger danced below the surface, but it distressed me to discover it wasn’t just directed at the abusive fuck I called “dad.”

“I imagine that’s why he drinks. It numbs his pain.” There was a dry irony to my mom’s response that I would have appreciated if we weren’t covered in bruises and cuts from his fists.

“Is it really that strong? The mate bond?” My voice sounded small in my ears.

My mom took my face in her hands, so gently her touch was a whisper. “It is. It is so strong, Riley. Which is why you’ve got to promise me to be careful. Don’t just mate the first pretty girl who steals your heart. You’ve got to make sure, because I couldn’t bear it if you were tied to someone you didn’t love.”

A tear slid down my cheek, and she caught it with her thumb. “Do you love him?” I asked.

“Some part of me does. The mate bond makes sure of it.” The words came out hollow and coated in regret. But I understood, far more than I wanted to. Mom wasn’t going to run. She couldn’t run.

So, I’d have to stay, too, until I was big enough to protect her.

We pulled off the highway, close to the park now. My heart was in my throat. I hadn’t been able to protect my mom. A car had killed her before my dad had a chance. But I’d spent the entirety of my adulthood trying to help unmated females escape the situation my mom had been trapped in.

I was good at it, and I loved hearing about how those same women thrived when they got back on their feet. They just needed some time and safety.

The two things I’d ripped out from under Amelia in my upset.

“Shit,” Tex cursed, reaching across to the glove compartment and pulling out a Glock, which he handed back to Jess. My own gun was in my hands immediately, and I heard the whir of our windows rolling down.

I saw why. Three men were jogging toward a black van in the parking lot. Amelia had been tossed over a shoulder. They were fast, and panic rose in my throat as they tossed her into the back of the van like trash, before getting in and preparing to speed away.

“Go faster,” I hissed at Tex. As if I couldn’t hear the whine and strain of the engine as he gunned it.

The van was on the road and speeding up when we got in range. Jess leaned out the window behind Tex while I took the passenger window.

“Shoot the tires!” I screamed. “Amelia’s in the back!”

Jess was part fairy and a deadly shot. Because I was head of so many risky trades, I wasn’t too shabby, either. The repeated blasts of the weapons were minimized by the wind whipping the sound away.

It took five shots fired before the back tire of the van exploded, leaving shredded rubber on the road. The van swerved, pulling back and forth, before Jess managed to shoot out the remaining back tire.

On a curve they were taking too fast.

The van slid then flipped, rolling until the two remaining tires were in the air, spinning.

We were out before Tex had fully parked. My wolf was screaming to get to Amelia.

When the doors opened, though, and the men stumbled out from the van, I didn't think. *Pop, pop, pop, pop.* My finger never left the trigger. I caught one in the shoulder, one in the temple, and the third in his gut and kneecap.

Tex and Jess were on the two still living. Dropping my gun, I ran like hellfire to the back of the van. My wolf's strength flared through me, and I wrenched the beat-to-shit doors open.

Amelia was crumpled on the ceiling, her arms and legs bound. She was unconscious. When the van had flipped, she'd flipped with it.

Sick, I crawled in, afraid something serious might be broken in her.

Knowing something would break in me forever if she was permanently hurt.

She inhaled, deep and gurgling. Wet, sucking breaths.

Shit. *Shit.*

"Tex!" I screamed. "Get Noah on the phone right fucking *now!*"

I stroked my thumb across her cheek, terrified of touching her and making something worse. "I'm sorry, Sunshine. Hang in there. You fucking hang in there."

AMELIA

Despite pain radiating across just about every surface of my body, my wolf was quiet. This surprised me because she'd gone fucking bananas when we were snatched up. That was probably because I was surrounded by Riley's intoxicating scent now.

Apparently, I'd lost so much of my damned mind that I was hallucinating his smell. That was less than awesome.

My thoughts were slugs, marching along in slick, painful trails. I was grabbed. Tossed in a van. There'd been gunshots and Eli's men yelling.

Then the world had flipped. I'd felt like I was sick, like I was flying, and then I'd felt nothing.

Now I felt a shitload of hurt. Hell, even my toes were pissed off. But my wolf was calm, so I choked down the anxiety fighting to surface. Being afraid right away wasn't going to improve my situation.

"Looks like you're waking up." The voice was male and soothing. And unfamiliar. If he worked for Eli, he hadn't learned to add the sneer in yet.

"Don't want to," I mumbled. My eyelids were sticky.

A cool washcloth moved over my face, wiping my forehead, my eyes, my cheeks, and my lips. Which were cracked and dry, and I was suddenly and intensely thirsty. My lashes fluttered as I opened my eyes.

I didn't know who was standing over me, but I scented him, and a familiar scent was mixed in with his individual one. Black Pack.

Riley's pack. And Riley's scent was still all around me.

I shuddered, scrambling to shove emotions back down. I needed to be clear headed, and if I let the hole that was my heart open up now, I'd be swallowed by it. "Who are you?"

"Noah. Doctor for the Black Pack. And you're Amelia, Riley's..." he stumbled there, not knowing what to follow with.

I did.

Riley's rejection. Riley's discarded. The woman Riley despised.

But you're here. My wolf nudged insistently within, forcing me to make connections despite my pounding headache. If I was with a Black Pack doctor... had Riley come back for me?

I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling hot tears escape. That kind of hope was too dangerous to hold onto. "What happened?"

"Some men were kidnapping you. You were unsecured in the back of a van that flipped. You've got a goose egg on the side of your head and some nasty bruises, but no broken bones or internal injuries. How do you feel?"

Jesus, how was I supposed to answer that?

"I don't know." Rather that than too much of the truth.

"Do you feel up to talking? The alpha would like to have a word."

I wanted to laugh at the idea that I could even tell an alpha no. But I supposed it was generous they were letting me think I had a choice. "Sure."

Noah proceeded to help me sit up. Bleary eyed, I took in the bed and room I was in. It wasn't a hospital room, but a chic bedroom inside an open apartment. I could see the

kitchen, the sitting area, and huge windows that showed Rapid City beyond.

Clutching the sheets pulled over me, I tugged them up to my nose and inhaled as deeply as bruised ribs would allow. “Am I in Riley’s room?”

Noah tipped his head in a soft yes. Fear and hope mingled horribly within. His scent soothed me, and I wanted nothing more than to see him again. But he was also the one who’d hurt me and left me alone.

The front door opened, and Tex walked in... followed by Riley.

My heart clenched at the sight of him, like he was the reason it continued to beat. As if my ability to continue living was entirely in his hands. Hell, maybe it was. Based on our last interaction, that didn’t bode well.

Riley didn’t look at me as he and Tex took seats.

“Are you okay?” Tex asked.

“I’m alive.” It was the truth, but not the full truth. “And I’m not captured anymore, and that’s... that’s good.” My voice shook at the end, but I kept my shoulders pulled back.

Tex nodded. “I think it’s time we know exactly who you’re running from and why, Amelia.”

My breath hitched. Tex held out a hand. “You’re still under our protection, but as we saw today, things are escalating. Someone attacked you in my territory. I have rights of retaliation.”

Riley’s fists clenched, and he crossed his arms tight.

I tried to focus on what I’d just heard. The most important part of which was that I was still under their protection. After what had happened with Riley, I hadn’t been sure that was still the case. For the moment, I was safe from Eli. From Riley and the hurricane-like destruction of heartbreak? That I wasn’t as sure I was safe from.

“Okay. May I have some water?”

Riley lurched from his seat wordlessly, clomping to the kitchen. He grabbed a glass and poured water from a pitcher in before coming back and setting it—gently—on the table nearest me. I didn't dare grab it when the chance we could touch remained. Instead, I waited until he was back in his chair, silent and stewing, before I drank.

There was no more putting it off. And fuck, I was tired of the secret.

“Riley knows part of this, but not all of it.”

He pressed a hand to his chest, like pushing his heart back inside. *You and me both, buddy.*

“I'm a white wolf.”

Tex's eyes flared wide, but he remained silent. Riley looked at the floor.

Sighing, I continued. “I'm also the last of my kind. My pack was systematically hunted down until near extinction. When I was fifteen, my pack, the last pack, was slaughtered by wolves in masks. I managed to escape.”

I fiddled with the sheet, hating the flashes of that violent night that lit up in my head. “Or so I thought. A man, a brown wolf, found me. Eli.”

At the name, Riley's gaze finally jerked up, pinning me like I was a butterfly to examine. A shudder ran through me, but I was going to do this. I had to be brave. “Eli started out kind. Offering me a safe place to stay. Trying to... to woo me. But his idea of a safe place was actually more like a fortress. I found myself locked up. Literally. There was a lock on the door of my room.”

My mouth tasted sour like bile. “From the age of fifteen to twenty-two Eli experimented on me. He wanted to know how strong, how fast, how ‘superior’ white wolves were. He wanted to see what made us a threat. As if we'd ever be a threat again. Extinct species don't threaten anyone.” Bitterness coated my tongue. “They kept me starved and weakened. In a way, that was to my advantage. When I turned twenty-two, Eli

decided to... to try and breed with me. He wanted his genetics to be bolstered by mine. To create a new race of wolves.

“But I was so malnourished my heat never came. Not that he...” My body burned at this, like I was suddenly back underneath Eli. “Not that he cared or didn’t try.”

Riley cursed under his breath, and the anger boiling off him filled the room. I didn’t know how much was directed at me. “There were more tests after that, regarding my... fertility. But then, at twenty-five, heat came. And with it came Eli.

“He forced a mate bond on me. I think he believed that would make me conceive. But it never... it never felt complete?” How was I supposed to explain this part? Me, who knew so little about these things? “I could sense him sometimes, but it was like the connection just wasn’t there.”

My voice was getting tired. As was my body. Tex leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

“That answers a lot,” he said. Riley was finally looking at me, and it almost hurt more than when he refused to.

“How so?”

Tex tilted his head. “Well, with mating bonds, there’s usually a scent and a sort of... message... that’s projected from the female that comes with the bite. You don’t have either of those things, so there was no way to know you were mated.”

This was new information for me. My parents had kept talk of mates and mating to a minimum in our household, wanting my brothers and I to have as much childhood as was possible in a pack. Eli certainly hadn’t explained the specifics, only threatened.

I heart skipped a beat. What did this mean?

“Where were you kept?” Riley spoke for the first time, his words sharp. It was both a question and a demand, and I flinched at the intensity of it.

But I’d held out for too long, and his hurt, the hurt I’d caused us both, was because of my secrecy. “It was called the

facility. I know... I know it's North. But I'm not sure how far or specifics."

"How did you escape?" Tex asked quickly, cutting Riley off from growing aggressive with his questioning. I wished I could go back to sleep and possibly not wake up. The pressure of all that had happened was crushing me. My wolf was the only thing keeping me present.

"It took ten years for someone to grow careless. The night that Eli forced his bite on me..." my voice hitched, the slimy memory of it sliding through me, "I was... hurt. Then locked up in my room. Only whoever had been cleaning it left my window unlocked."

Something strange was growing within me. When I spoke of Eli or being captured, all I felt was shame and fear and hurt. But escape? God, I thought I was experiencing *pride*.

"I made it look as though it was still locked, and I waited. At night, when Eli tended to use more humans than wolves to guard, I slipped out. It was a three story drop to the ground."

Tex shut his eyes against that while Riley's nostrils flared.

"I was hurt, but not so hurt I couldn't run. I took off. I didn't know what direction I was going, or where things would lead, but the instinct to run was all I had. Eventually I shifted, carrying my stuff in my jaws, so I could cover more distance."

"How did they not hunt you down?" Riley's tone was rapt, and my wolf leaned into his voice, yearning for him.

"I came across a river. It was cold and fast, and I didn't think twice. I just let it carry me."

"Fucking hell," Tex murmured.

"You could have died." This from Riley, sounding more like an accusation than anything else. He was still furious with me, I supposed. Some part of me wondered if I deserved it. If Eli had been right all along, and I was just a piece of trash.

"Death would have been preferable to staying," I managed. Steel formed within. It was true. I'd rather die, even now, than be locked up at the facility again.

To my surprise, Riley gave a slight nod of approval. Or was I imagining it?

“How long were you in the river?” Tex, ever pragmatic, stuck to the story.

“Long enough to lose consciousness. I woke up on the shore. After I dried off, I shifted again, got dressed, and started looking for a town. I found one, stole what I needed. That’s what I did, running and stealing, before coming to Mama Lou’s and Rapid City. I ran and waited for Eli to find me.”

I could see Tex’s mind turning the facts over and over, looking for something useful. “A river that large. I’m thinking the Missouri. Riley?”

“Yeah, definitely. You came south by river then moved west until you got here.”

Hearing him speak to me was awful. His beautiful voice, the care there... I couldn’t bear it. Not knowing he felt like he did. Like I was a liar and not worth his time. My wolf scratched at me as if arguing. What did she know?

Fatigue was becoming an issue I couldn’t ignore. Riley seemed to sense it, reaching out to clap Tex on the shoulder. “Let’s let her rest.”

Tex pinned me with a look. “You’re safe here.”

“I just need to sleep a bit, and then I promise to get out of your hair.” This I said more to Riley than the alpha. He’d made himself clear. I was no longer welcome in Rapid City. “I can leave town in the morning.”

“That would be a mistake,” Tex said. “You need healing, not just sleep, and it’s clear that Eli’s the one who’s been stalking you all this time. Now I know something about the wolves we’ve been trying to catch.”

Wait, what? “How long have they been here?”

Riley looked away too quickly, and then I knew. Eli’s pack had been here all along. The only reason I hadn’t been grabbed earlier was my proximity to Riley, second in command to one of the most powerful packs in the country.

But it hadn't been in my head. I'd been right when I thought I was being watched. Stalked.

And sensing Eli through my mate mark.

I could be sick. He'd kept that from me, knowing I would run if I found out. Because running was going to keep me safe. Instead, Riley had used misinformation to keep me tethered to him. His own trap.

Cold slipped through me, and I wrapped my arms tight around myself. Now Eli had found me, and I was trapped between him and Riley. There was no way I could escape without at least one of them catching me.

Tex picked up on my tension, his eyebrows shooting up. "It hasn't been so long." A half-truth I could practically smell. "And now we can attack them without provoking pack issues. They've crossed into our territory and tried to kidnap someone under my protection. We'll find where this facility is located, and we will shut it down." There was a venom to his promise my wolf delighted in.

Moreso when Riley snarled. "Eli is going to pay for hurting you. For contributing to the decimation of the white wolves. Those crimes won't go unanswered." She shivered with pleasure at a strong male swearing vengeance. *Traitor*. She didn't understand like I did. Animal instinct had saved my ass, but it didn't get the nuances of trust.

I wasn't sure how I could trust Riley again.

"Sleep now," he said, giving me an odd look. "We'll talk more in the morning."

Noah moved to my bedside, having been almost statue-like in the room. I'd forgotten he was there until he handed me a cup with some liquid inside. "You can shift to heal faster, or you can take this and sleep some more."

If I let my wolf out, she'd probably present to Riley right then and there. But I also hated the idea of being drugged. Still, it seemed the lesser of two evils, so I held out my hand for the medicine. When I had it, I drank it down in one gulp. It tasted bitter but went down warm. Almost immediately a

floaty feeling crept in behind it, my body light while my eyelids became incredibly heavy.

Sleep. I'd sleep, and then I'd have the clarity to figure out just what the fuck I was supposed to do.



IT WASN'T JUST Riley's smell that surrounded me when I woke up. His heat and warmth were wrapped around me, along with the weight of his arm draped over my waist.

I allowed myself a few minutes of sinking into the touch and pretending this was how it was. How it could be. Using an artist's eye, I sketched the image of us lying together into my brain, painting it in color and with love.

Then I sat up and moved away, because I couldn't pretend anymore. The hurt was deep, and I knew it would fester.

Riley grumbled at my movement before realizing I was awake. He sat up as well, eyes alert. Scanning me like I was broken. As if he didn't already know the answer. Yes, I was broken. Beyond repair.

"Did you sleep okay?" he asked.

"I could have moved to the bed." It came out more sharply than I'd meant, but I didn't apologize.

Riley looked pained. "I should've listened to you."

My throat stung. "Yes, you should have. I've never experienced hurt like that before, Riley, and I've experienced a *lot* of hurt. More than you can know."

I wasn't sure where the anger was coming from. I was the one who'd made the mistake. I should have told him sooner. I shouldn't have let myself be complacent. I shouldn't have let myself get so carried away that I forgot about my mate mark. When I was with Riley, it was like forces stronger than me were at work.

That scared the shit out of me.

"I believe you. It was fucked up, and I broke a promise to you. I broke my pack's promise as well, and you were almost

kidnapped because of it.”

His words hit as hard as the sides of the van had when I’d been tossed about. “You *left* me.” My voice broke, and I pulled in tight, wrapping my arms around my knees. A turtle in need of a shell. “It took *everything* for me to trust you.” I left the second bit unspoken, but it hung in the air between us: I wasn’t sure if I could trust him anymore.

Riley slid back so he was resting against his headboard. His features were hard with regret. If he’d been Eli, I would be on the floor and receiving a beating for talking back. Riley wasn’t even hurling accusations at me.

Though, I supposed, he’d already done that.

“I’m going to tell you more about my mother,” he said. “Not as an excuse, but so you understand why I... why I behaved so badly. “You don’t have to forgive me, but I’d like you to know.”

“Okay.”

“As I got older, and my father’s violence got worse, I began to beg my mom to leave. I was certain he’d kill us one day. It was impossible to understand why she stayed.”

Riley pressed his palms into his eyes. “I pushed and pushed, and she finally explained that she *couldn’t* because of the mate bond. That even if she wanted to, she was forever bound to my father. So, I let it go, believing that she didn’t have a choice.”

My heart creaked under the pressure of his confession. I could picture him, young and desperate, being told that nothing could change. I’d been told that over and over, having it drilled into me until I almost believed it.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Me too. When I saw your mate mark, it’s like... it’s like it ripped away that belief. If you could run away, could feel something for someone other than your mate, then... my mother could have, too. So why didn’t she leave?”

Riley stopped talking, but I saw the way his body shook with tiny sobs. Unable to help myself, I scooted close. My wolf and I needed the nearness, needed to comfort him. “It isn’t the same. What happened to you and your mom isn’t fair or okay, but it sounds like the mate bond was solid. I’m not sure mine is. The more distance I have from Eli and the facility, the more I believe it didn’t fully snap into place.”

“Why do you think that is?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s definitely there. My mark will occasionally burn or ache. But... well, my feelings for you were—are—real. Intense and terrifying. It’s like we’re connected on a deep level I didn’t even know was possible. Do you feel it?”

He nodded, and I exhaled with relief. “Maybe your mom agreed to the mate bond. Your father might not have shown his true colors. And Riley, when I say running was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, I don’t just mean physically. I mean I second-guessed myself every step of the way. I spent weeks sure that I would be caught, maybe even that I deserved to be caught.”

“Oh, Sunshine.” He buried his face in my neck, inhaling deeply. “You never deserved that.”

“Neither did you. Or your mom.”

He slid his arms around my waist. “I want to try something.”

“What?”

“I want to try to bite over where Eli did. Maybe, if we bonded, it could erase him from you.”

A wave of nausea rolled through me. He pulled back, looking at me with a question in his eyes. “What?”

“I love you, Riley. I do. But you hurt me when you left. You’ve been so solid, so *there* for me, and all it took was one surprise for you to run.”

“You’re right. Sunshine, I was sure I loved you before, but nearly losing you made me realize you’re all I ever wanted. I

hate that mark on you, but I imagine you must hate it even more. Let me try to erase it and make a mark of my own.”

My wolf wouldn't allow me to ignore her. His words resonated, and it jerked hard at that thing within me that seemed to be tethered to Riley already. He meant it. Every word. I could sense his remorse and shame at having reacted so badly.

He truly wouldn't do it again. This was no empty promise.

“I love you, Amelia. So fucking much. But I won't do anything you don't want, ever.”

I bit my lower lip, contemplating. “I'm scared.”

Riley's eyes flew wide. Hope skated over his features as he moved toward me. “Of me?”

“Of everything. I... Riley, being in that van... I thought my life was over. It's difficult to picture a future right now, and you're asking for forever.”

His disappointment rolled off him, but Riley nodded. “I understand that. All I can say is I can't imagine a future that doesn't have you in it. I don't want to.”

My pulse quickened. That I understood. Because while I couldn't picture where I'd be in a day, a week, five years... I wasn't interested in it if Riley wasn't with me. Even after he hurt me, I still wanted him.

“Let's try it,” I whispered, scared I'd change my mind. This was a chance to get rid of Eli. I'd be crazy not to take it.

Riley swayed, the relief stark. Then he settled next to me, our bodies touching. That same intense energy began buzzing. “Thank you,” he breathed. “Thank you for trusting me, Amelia.” He kissed me once, so tender I ached all over. There was no tongue, just the hot whisper of breath and promise and love.

I was dizzy by the time he broke the kiss. “May I?” He pointed to my shirt. I nodded. He slipped it slow and careful, up and off, pausing every now and then to give me a chance to say no. My patient Riley. His eyes fell to my shoulder.

I wanted to cover that hideous mark, but Riley... he looked at it differently this time. He didn't see it as a part of me, but something inflicted on me. "I hate this for you," he said, brushing a thumb over the mark. I worked not to shy from his touch. "This should always be a choice."

"Well, I'm choosing now," I replied, firm.

He kissed my neck, licking and nipping until my nipples were taut. I ran my hands over his shoulders, feeling the strong muscles of this man who wanted to love me forever. Not breed me or lock me up or covet me. He wanted me to choose what was best for me.

His lips moved from the shell of my ear down. My heart thumped painfully in my throat, and I tensed as Riley's lips neared the mark. *This is it*, I thought, my wolf jumping for joy and fear in my heart. The fear grew rapidly as a burn started in my shoulder. It was like claws scoring my skin, jagged and cruel. I bit back tears. "Do it now," I pleaded, scared if he waited, something terrible would happen.

I was stiff and Riley bit down, only to release me almost immediately.

"Fuck!" His hand flew to his mouth, and when I pulled it away, the skin around his lips was blistered and red. As if Eli's mark had burned Riley.

It was too much. I'd hoped, somehow, that he'd figured it out. That I could actually be free of Eli.

"Hey, hey," Riley soothed, petting my hair. "Don't cry. It was worth a shot. I'm already healing, see?"

It was true. He'd be red for a while, but not worse for wear.

"I'll never belong to you," I choked out. "You'll never belong to me."

"Sunshine, that's not true. I've belonged to you the moment I set eyes on you. I believe in my heart that we're true mates. And if that bond is like a marriage vow, then it's 'til death do you part'. I'm inclined to give Eli a slow and painful death, and then the bond will be over."

“I want to believe that’s true.”

But I wasn’t sure I actually did. Still, Riley wasn’t ready to give up on me. I had to make the choice, once and for all, not to give up on him.

“We’ll figure this out, Sunshine. I swear it.”

RILEY

Waking up with Amelia in my bed fulfilled my soul on its deepest level. But knowing how close I came to ruining what I had with her was equally devastating. I'd hated my father, despising his quick temper and the way he shoved—often literally—my mother and I away. Amelia had experienced an abuser worse than that, and she had no family left to turn to.

She needed to be able to trust in stability, and I'd shown her the opposite. Just like my father, I'd lost it when I got upset and pushed her away. I'd made it about me, selfish and unthinking. It was a gut punch to understand how, despite all my hopes, my father had shaped me, after all.

Her hair had slipped down, splayed on the pillow. The neck of the t-shirt she was wearing was too large, pulled askew in sleep, revealing a few of those awful scars. The ones that marked her as Eli's.

My teeth ached and jaw throbbed as I recalled trying to bite her. Pride and need had motivated me, a desire to try and erase the thing that had upset our relationship. Foolish. Amelia had said yes, but...

You rushed it. It wasn't special. It wasn't caring. It was still selfish.

My wolf had been furious with me because he wanted to mark her. Desperately needed to claim Amelia. But even he'd known it was too fast and for the wrong reasons.

Amelia slowly woke up, and there was a flash of fear in her ice blue eyes before the warmth moved in. I'd caused that initial flinch. It was hard not to show how much that hurt. But it was also an important reminder of the consequences of being a selfish bastard.

No more. Amelia first, always.

“Good morning, Sunshine. How are you feeling?”

Her arms stretched overhead. The bruises from her attacker's grips were already starting to fade. “Better. I needed sleep. Were you here all night?” I couldn't tell how she felt about it. Amelia was being cordial and relaxed, but she wasn't overly affectionate, either. My wolf was nervous, warning me to tread carefully.

“Yeah. Is that okay?”

“It's your bed,” she responded, and I bit back the urge to pry for a real answer. We needed to talk, but I didn't have time just yet. Still, leaving things as stiff as they were was a hard bite to swallow.

“Listen, I didn't want you to wake up without knowing what's happening, but I need to head out.”

Amelia bolted up, alarmed. “Where? Why?”

“One of the men who tried to kidnap you survived being shot.” Not that I'd chosen that. If it had been up to me, I would have added a bullet right then and there to his head for daring to hurt her. “Tex has him, and we're going to see if we can find out where Eli is.”

There was no missing the tremor that went through her at the mention of her ex. Shit, he didn't deserve the title “ex” — ex implied that consent had been had on both ends, and Amelia sure as hell hadn't consented to being a prisoner or his mate. I wished I could reach over, pull her to me and comfort her. Not just wished but needed. I didn't, though.

My needs were pale in comparison to hers.

“I don't want you to leave me alone.” Amelia's voice was small, and she shrank into herself before my eyes. All the

confidence and strength she'd developed over her time in Rapid City had disappeared. I wondered how much my actions were responsible for that. More than I wanted to admit to. Fuck, I was a stupid asshole.

"I know. But we're getting information in ways I don't want you to have to witness." While I wouldn't give her details, I'd screwed up by hiding her kidnapper's presence from her. The best thing I could do to start repairing trust was tell her the truth, even when it was ugly. There was more to it, though, than just that. "And I don't want you to see me as I do it."

"Why not? You don't think I want revenge? Do you think I'm too weak to handle it?"

I rubbed at the back of my hair. "No. I don't want you to see me be more of a monster than you already do."

"I don't think you're a monst—"

"Hey," I stopped her, gentle. "I know. But we've got some shit to sort. I don't want the interrogation to color your idea of who I am."

"Is it who you are?"

Jesus, this was hard. "Yes, it is. Being part of a club like this has forced me to get good at some real shitty behavior. And in this case, I'm looking forward to it. He's part of Eli's crew, and I'm... eager... to spend some time with him." I risked a peek at Amelia, who was pale and drawn. "Does that bother you?"

"I don't know. But I hear you, Riley. And you're right, I don't want to see it."

"Okay. I should get going, then."

Amelia stiffened but she didn't back away from me. My wolf was pushing out, trying to reach hers, attempting to soothe her. We sensed her neediness, strong yet fragile. "But what if Eli comes while you're gone?"

"One, I'll still be in the clubhouse, but tucked away downstairs. Two, most of our best fighters are here and on

guard. Jack, who I think you'll really like, is outside this door. He's older but chill as hell and a good guard. He'll guard you with his life."

It took another moment before the fight went out of her. It didn't feel like a win. Amelia was back with me, where she belonged. I'd spend the rest of our lives making sure she knew I belonged with her, too. But for us to truly be able to do that, Eli needed to be out of the picture.

Permanently.

"Okay." Amelia snuggled back under the covers, pulling them tight under her chin. She didn't look at me as she tacked on, "Good luck."

It was physically painful to drag myself out of bed after that. My wolf kept fighting me. He insisted we get back in bed and make sure our mate was okay.

I reminded him that the best way to make sure she was okay was to find Eli and rip his throat out. And I ignored his insistence on thinking of her as a mate. I still wasn't sure what we'd do about that.

By the time I reached the room where the fucker we'd caught was being held, I'd settled into the proper mindset for the nasty job that needed to be done. I'd need to focus entirely when we started. Distractions made for mistakes, and I'd already fucked up enough recently. I wasn't planning on more screw ups.

Tex was waiting for me, along with Clay and Liam. The latter looked green, and we hadn't even begun. He stared at the tray of "tools" we'd use during the interrogation.

Shit. I should be trying to get him toughened up. This was part of our life. The Black Pack did a lot of things right. We promoted women within our ranks. We treated our mates with respect and equality. We tried to lift our brothers up by investing in their interests and businesses. We protected those who needed protection.

But we were still a club. Our goals were good, but our means could be as bad as we needed them to be. Morality

didn't have a place in this room or when it came to the dickhead chained to a chair.

Fuck. This could be a teaching moment. But it also could break Liam, hurt him in his head. I didn't want to be the one to strip him of that gentle compassion. As much as I wanted him strong, it was because I adored the kid. His gentle heart worried me *for* him, but it was also what set him apart.

I wouldn't be the one to force him to change.

"Liam," I barked. The kid's head jerked up. "Do me a favor. Grab a notebook and some pencils and take it to Amelia. See if she can draw what the facility looks like, or Eli, or whatever. We'll compare it to whatever this asshole says and see if he's being truthful."

Liam's shoulders relaxed, and he trotted out, clearly happy to be given a job that would help us without needing to be present for this. He was like that. Always there for a brother, ready to lend a hand. This was one way I could return the favor without embarrassing him.

You think that's wise? Tex's voice spoke in my head. *You were the one insisting he needed to learn how things really work. Toughen up.*

I shrugged. *And you're the one who told him he didn't have to kill if he didn't want to. How's this better than taking a life? At least shooting a motherfucker in the head is short and fast. This won't be.* After a pause, I added, *He's an asset without having to be tough.*

He nodded in agreement.

"All right," Tex said, his drawl slow and cold. All attention was on the prisoner now. "I don't need to tell you what's about to happen. You've got eyes, right?"

The man in the chair didn't move. When his gaze slid over to the tray Liam had been staring at, I added, "For now. He's got eyes for *now*."

Our prisoner's throat bobbed, but other than that, the stoic facade didn't drop. Not that I expected him to just start squealing. Eli was organized, his men good enough to evade

us while in our territory, and there were more than a few scars on the man that suggested he wasn't a stranger to violence.

My heart skipped a beat at that, anticipation dancing in my chest. If he wasn't new to hurt, it meant I'd have to put in a *lot* of hurt to get what the info we needed. It wouldn't be fast or easy.

I smiled, malicious and eager.

But then Tex surprised me by pulling a vial of some blue shit out of his pocket. He paced around the chair, making sure the man saw it. "You may not know, but my mate is half fairy."

A nasty smirk appeared on the man's face. "I didn't know Black Pack liked to fuck filthy half-breeds." He spat at Tex.

Tex backhanded him so fast I barely saw his hand fly. Blood splattered the floor, and I heard a tooth skitter across the cement. The copper scent of an enemy's blood riled my wolf. It was past time we got started, and I didn't know what the fuck Tex was pulling with the vial or talking about Jess.

"You're going to be saying a lot," Tex growled, "but you aren't going to slander my mate."

"I ain't saying *shit*." Blood dribbled from split lips as he spoke. I started to step in, red coating my vision. This asshole was going to suffer. Only Tex held up a hand and stopped me.

He shook the vial again, the blue contents swishing around. "The benefit of having a mate who's part fairy is we have access to potions. Potions like this, a truth serum."

The man squinted his eyes, as if he could parse out whether Tex was bluffing by looking close enough. Except it wasn't a fucking bluff, and that made me angry all over again. The threats, the tools, having me here? What was the point if Tex was just going to give the fucker a truth serum?

Magic felt like mercy, and I had *zero* interest in showing mercy.

My alpha picked up on my frustrations, turning toward me in sympathy. "Riley." My name was a command, and I

stiffened. “Any information we get under duress is suspect. You know that as well I do, right?”

He wasn’t wrong. We usually got *enough* information from anyone we were forced to torture, but a large amount of effort was often expended trying to parse out which tidbits were authentic, and which were bullshit spouted in the name of pain. “Yes,” I grumbled.

My best friend shrugged. His callousness was starting to rile me. If it was *his* mate who was under attack, *his* mate who’d been abused and hurt, he wouldn’t be okay with just a truth serum. He’d want vengeance.

I knew this because I’d witnessed it. Tex had gone crazy over Jess being in Theo’s sights. He’d pulled out all the stops, starting a fucking *war* to protect her.

“I’m going to get the truth from him,” Tex continued, ignoring my bubbling anger. “But what happens to him after that is up to you. I couldn’t give a shit one way or another. Play however long and hard you want with him.”

That gave me pause. Oh. *Oh*.

The smile that formed on my face was diabolical. “Got it.” I had plans for the prisoner.

With permission to hurt someone who’d done too much hurting in his lifetime, I was able to back off and let my alpha do his thing. I even helped, grabbing the man’s jaw and forcing his mouth open. He struggled, but I was strong. Tex emptied the vial into his mouth, and I clamped a hand over, preventing him from spitting it out.

Tex held his nose until we saw his throat bob as he swallowed.

Within seconds our prisoner’s pupils were blown so wide the iris disappeared.

“Tell me what you do for Eli.” Tex stood next to me, and I found comfort in his presence. He was helping me. He’d understood what Amelia was before I did. The irony didn’t go over my head.

“I’m... part of the retrieval team.”

“He needs an entire team to retrieve one woman?” I snapped, goading. Amelia was strong and getting stronger, but I still remembered when we’d first met. Too thin and jumpy, she’d have been easy to grab.

“Not just her.” To his credit, the prisoner seemed determined to not give us more than we asked for.

“What do you mean, not just her? Who else?” My stomach heaved, and I knew Tex was feeling the same. What the hell was that bastard Eli up to?

The man shook his head like he could stop the serum from working. It didn’t. “The facility stores... several wolves. Sometimes they escape. We’re tasked with finding them.”

Storing wolves? For what purpose?

“Why are they stored? What does that mean?” Tex was vibrating with rage. This had been happening, and he’d had no idea. None of us had.

“Eli likes to experiment.”

Jesus, I had to admire this fucker’s ability to only give the bare minimum. It didn’t matter, though, I’d heard enough to know Eli deserved to be put down a thousand times over. “Where is the facility?”

The prisoner shook his head. “Don’t know. Near the Missouri. We relocate and deliver the packages to Eli at a bunker.”

So... Eli didn’t trust his men. Bad for us for gathering information. But good for us for the future...pack unrest made fights easier. Afterall, no one went out of their way to defend assholes.

“Then tell me where that is.”

He rambled off some coordinates. Tex raked a hand through his hair, looking older than he had when we’d first stepped in. I imagined he was picturing all the captured wolves and feeling like he’d failed them somehow. Considering he

was also working to help keep the Gray Pack in line, I wished he knew he wasn't failing anyone.

It was fuckers like Eli failing everyone by being monsters.

"Do whatever you want with him," my best friend growled. "I'm getting a team together. We're putting an end to this."

He left. I was alone with the prisoner.

"How long have you been after Amelia?"

The prisoner spat again, more flecks of red peppering the floor. "Shit, it feels like we've been tracking that whore forever."

I broke his pinky finger for that. "She's no whore. How did you find her?"

"Eli found her, you stupid asshole. He's *mated* to her. But you already know that, don't you?"

This slashed through me like a dirty blade, leaving me with a bloody wound that could fester if I wasn't careful. But I had Amelia now. And she wanted to be with me. For her, I wouldn't let a fucking mark that had been forced on her influence me any longer.

No, that wound was already healing.

"Eli never had her. If they were mated, she wouldn't have been able to run from him. I bet it pissed him off to discover his prize could just walk out the door."

The prisoner snarled. "He went crazy. Scoured the surrounding towns for weeks. By the time he found her, *you* were there." Triumph blazed within. "He couldn't grab her with you and your stupid pack all around."

"Why'd he stop trying to?"

"He didn't want to keep having to watch her slut it up with you. Besides, Eli's an important man. Unlike you, he doesn't spend all his time simpering behind a piece of tail."

He was trying hard to goad me. "Good," I growled. "I don't want to be anything like him."

I wanted violence. I wanted to rip him apart piece by piece so he felt pain for hours before bleeding out. But I also realized I wanted to be with Amelia, more than anything. More than wasting any more time with dipshits like this one.

I wasn't sure what I'd been looking for in my line of questioning. But I'd heard what I needed to.

"You're in luck," I said as I went to grab a hammer.

"Why? Cause you just love torturing so much?" He was trying to sound tough but there was a whine in his tone that was unmistakable. If I wanted, I could make this guy piss his pants. But I didn't want that.

"Nope. You're lucky I'm in love, and I'd rather look at her face than yours."

"You won't be looking at her long. Eli's coming for her. And he'll slaughter every single one of you who tried to keep her away from him. We've been watching for weeks. We know how many of you there are. We know where you sleep. We know where to hit you hardest."

So, she'd truly been right and not paranoid. These guys had been trailing her, and it was only my presence that had kept her safe so far. Until I failed in that and failed her. My hand gripped the hammer tighter.

"I'm second in command for one of the largest, strongest packs in America. Eli's a toddler picking a fight with a grown ass man. We'll spank him real good. And Amelia will be safe and happy. With me, if I'm lucky."

"And yet here you are, pussyfooting around." The bastard sneered at me. "But she's sloppy seconds. She's filthy and defiled. If you knew half the shit Eli did to her. Disgusting. Perverted. And the bitch loved every second of it."

I refused to allow him to badmouth Amelia one second longer. The hammer was up and swinging before I could think twice, the blunt end connecting with the fucker's temple. It sank into the skull with a wet crunch, lodging in the brain matter. I left it dangling there, walking away from a corpse without a single regret.

AMELIA

There was a timid knock at the door. As much as I didn't want to see anyone that wasn't Riley, I had to accept I was a guest in the Black Pack's clubhouse. They were protecting me, despite the fact that I'd done nothing to deserve it.

Pulling on one of Riley's clean t-shirts—it dwarfed me, looking more like a dress than anything—I opened the door. Liam was there. I remembered the younger man's face and gentle demeanor from my introductions to Riley's employees. Riley spoke fondly of Liam, and some of my unease dissipated.

He appeared far more panicked than I did, something I found endearing. “Hey, Liam.”

“Amelia.” His face flushed red, and I saw he was carrying a sketchbook and a fresh box of pencils. “Riley wanted to see if you could maybe draw where you were kept?”

I gnawed at my lower lip. “I spent most of my time inside the facility.” The white walls and thick, steel doors flashed in my mind. But there had been days when Eli had allowed me outside, escorted by guards, to walk around and get fresh air. “But there are some parts I remember.”

He nodded. “Anything would help. Do you want company while you draw?”

My initial instinct was to say no, to retreat back into Riley's bed, surrounded by his smell, and wait for him. But Liam was a sweet kid and besides, I suspected he was here

because he didn't want to participate in the interrogation. "Sure."

His face brightened at that, and his earnestness almost made me smile.

Liam followed me inside, going to the small kitchen and grabbing some water while I brought the art supplies over to a small table and prepared. A shadow chased my movements because the pad was clean and brand new. So were the pencils, their charcoal tips fresh and pointed. These items should be used to make something beautiful.

Instead, I'd be tainting them with the facility.

Sighing, I sat and shut my eyes, sinking into memories I'd rather leave alone. But there was a stirring of emotions within me I wasn't used to. Anger. Fury. Determination. Riley had ripped me open when he'd left, and I discovered I hadn't healed like I'd thought.

I'd locked the infection in, and it had soured.

It was unfair that running for my life hadn't been enough. That getting and maintaining a job hadn't been enough. Those were good things, to be sure, and I was proud of myself. But all I'd done was move my fear and hatred of Eli to the backburner, only to forget it was there. Now it was bubbling over.

Drawing the facility and facing what Eli had done to me was a terrifying necessity, and I forced myself to face it.

While Liam found a motorcycle design magazine and sat near a window, I started to my pencil across the paper. Gray bloomed and smudged as I worked furiously, going through page after page.

The shapes were rough, and the strokes thick and angry, but I captured the images I could remember well. There was my window, up high. It had been locked, a tease that yes, there was a world outside and no, I wasn't allowed into it. Here were the laboratories, their sleek concrete and glass exterior hiding the torture chamber labs within. The perimeter fence as

well, too tall to scale, with barbed wire ringing the top all the way around.

Soon there were several sketches of the facility that were quite good. Good enough to send a shiver through me when I studied my work. Liam noticed my work had slowed and came over, looking. “These are excellent.”

My exhalation was shaky, and sickness rocked through me. Living in that place, even for a short while and only in my head, was taking its toll on me. “Thanks, I guess.”

Liam smirked. “Yeah, I get it. Why don’t you draw something that makes you feel good?”

My first thought was Riley. But I wasn’t ready for that. My emotions regarding him were nebulous and painful. I loved him. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. But I was also hurt, and the trust I’d built up had been damaged. “I’ll do something bittersweet.”

“I’ll join you, so you won’t feel alone.” Liam sat at the table, using a fresh sheet of paper to make his own art. *So you won’t be alone.* My wolf registered that faster than I did. She wanted that more than anything. No more isolation. No more standing off to the side.

She wanted a pack, and I didn’t know how to explain that wasn’t something I thought we could have.

For a while, the only sound was the scratch of pencil on paper. I focused on small details, ignoring the whole. Black eyes. Shading and creating negative space to showcase the softness of brilliant white fur. I tried to add some movement, to make the shapes dynamic. Tears welled in my eyes as I looked at a sketch of my family. My mother and father leading us as a pack, teaching us how to hunt. My brothers and me wrestling and playing in the snow, our fur so white it almost disappeared.

“Your family?” Liam was looking over.

I nodded, blinking back tears. “They’re all gone.”

“I’m sorry.”

I glanced at his work and sat up straighter. There was a wolf there, fur dark and shaggy, teeth bared. Liam had managed to convey the pride and violence of the male. Clearly an alpha. As horrific as the wolf looked, the drawing showed hints of tenderness and care. “Who’s that?”

“My father.” A muscle ticked in Liam’s jaw. “A monster. I ran away from home because of him.”

So much generational hurt in the Black Pack. My hurt was wildly different, but I recognized how it stayed with you. Molded you in ways you wished you could scrub out. I might not have experienced my own family hurting, but I could sympathize with how hard it was to carry the weight of the past. “I’m sorry.”

He snorted, amused.

“What?” I asked, worried I’d said something wrong.

“Thank you.” Liam leaned back, his face relaxing from the frown that had accompanied talking about his father. “Usually when I talk about it, people tell me I’m lucky my dad is so strong. Or, if they lost parents or had real shitty ones, they say things like ‘at least you have a father’ or some shit like that. It’s nice to just hear ‘that sucks’ or ‘I’m sorry’, you know?”

I didn’t, but I understood what he was saying. The emotions in the drawing spoke plenty. There was admiration in the lines, the angles, the strong profile of the wolf. But choosing to show such ferocity, knowing that was how he viewed and remembered his dad, also told a story.

“Family can be complicated,” I finally said. “Mine were killed when I was a teenager. We were fighting all the time, but it was the usual growing pains stuff. But I didn’t *know* my family or my pack all that well. I remember them as larger than life. Who knows how flawed they might have been? Who knows if I’d still speak with them if they were alive?”

“You probably have a good sense of them, though.” Liam was looking at me curiously. His gaze dropped back to my drawing. Sometimes I remembered them like this, clear as day.

But most of the time, I struggled to recall the sound of their voices, or their individual smells.

“Not really. A few years after Eli, I buried as much of them as I could. There were too many times I’d find myself hoping that any moment they’d show up to save me, only to remember they were all dead. It was like having them killed over and over again in my heart. So, I erased them to try and protect myself.”

“Oh, Amelia.”

I gave a half-hearted shrug. “It was survival. And it’s done. I don’t have a family anymore and trying to remember them clearly isn’t going to change that.”

“Hm.” Liam’s fingertip traced the image of his dad’s wolf. “I thought the same about running away. I was so sure that leaving would cut them out of me. But the fact is, they’ll always be my family, whether I’m there or not.” His chair scraped across the floor as he stood. “But if being in the Black Pack has taught me anything, it’s that family comes in all shapes and forms. There’s the one you were born to, and there’s the family that you make. I’ve gotta say... my made family is the best damned family I could dream of.”

Liam gathered the drawings. “I’ll take these to the boss.”

“You can tell them the first town I really got my bearings in was Peever. Maybe that’ll help.” I hadn’t stayed there long. It was small, and I’d stolen a lot of my supplies there. I didn’t know how close it was to the facility, and I hadn’t stuck around to find out.

“Will do. And good job, Amelia.” His praise was surprisingly uplifting. Something like pride flitted through me.

“Your company made it easier. Thanks.” It was true, too. The young male was quiet and easy going.

The young wolf blushed and ducked out, leaving me alone in Riley’s space. Well, not entirely alone. I had my thoughts to accompany me, and Liam’s comment had given me something to ruminate on.

The family that you make.

There'd never been room in my heart for a family after Eli. It had been too terrible to consider. Eli had wanted a "family." But he meant children he'd bred from an unwilling mate, genetically modified to be his perfect, obeying soldiers. No one in their right mind would want that.

Riley had managed to help open a door that let me consider love. A mate—a real one, not one forced on me—and the life that could bring. For once, it seemed like I might be allowed some happiness.

But a *family*?

What would that look like for someone like me? What would it be like to embrace a pack like the Black Pack, and to allow them to embrace me? And would they even want to, after I'd brought so much trouble to their front door?

I wasn't sure, but no matter what, for my heart to move forward, I needed to talk to Riley.

RILEY

Goddamn, the first thing I was going to do when this bullshit was over was buy Amelia a cellphone. I wanted to talk to her so bad. Hearing her voice was like oxygen, and I was asphyxiating.

Clay was setting up some of his security software so we could try to pinpoint the facility as much as possible. He excelled at hunting using technology. It helped the pack out a lot, but at the moment, I was growing impatient. Waiting was excruciating.

“Try and see if you can speak to her,” Tex said, tapping the side of his head.

“It only works for pack, mates, or if we’re shifted,” I grumped back, irritated that my concerns were painted so clearly on my face.

“I know.” Tex gave me a knowing smirk, and yeah, I knew I wanted Amelia to be my mate. I hoped she’d want it, too. But wanting and having weren’t the same thing, and there was a mark on her shoulder to prove that. She *couldn’t* be my mate, no matter how my heart yearned for it. Hearing him suggest otherwise was irritating as fuck. “Try it,” he gently ordered.

What a stubborn asshole. Frowning, I closed my eyes and thought at her, picturing her icy blue eyes and now familiar scent. *Amelia?*

Riley?

My pulse ramped up, and my heart soared. She answered. She *heard me*. I was too scared to ruminate on what this could mean. It sure as hell meant something, though. For the moment I was overjoyed to have a connection with her. *Are you okay?*

Yes. I sensed some hesitation but decided not to push. I didn't want to jeopardize whatever magic was happening right then. *Liam was here. He's nice.*

For a moment my wolf growled, threatened. But he knew Liam, and the reaction simmered down just as quickly as it had popped up. There wasn't any need to get protective of Amelia around him. Besides, I'd been the one to send him over to her. *He's a good kid. Were you able to draw anything?*

There was a small tingle of amusement through our connection, and I wondered if she'd felt the possessive impulse. Mostly, though, there was a minute pulse of anxiety. I knew asking her to remember that awful place had been big. *I did. I think he's running them over to you now. Riley?*

My heart skipped a beat. *Yeah, Sunshine?*

When are you going to come back? Now it wasn't just a sense. Amelia's anxiety was rippling through a connection straight to me. She wasn't panicking, not yet, but her system was stressed. My hands became fists as I fought against the urge to run straight to her. I could practically hear the lecture Tex would give me about pack coming first.

Though, if he was going to keep encouraging me to pretend that I could be Amelia's mate, we were going to have to negotiate pack business and mate obligations.

Soon. We're close to figuring out where the facility and Eli are.

But you won't leave without telling me, right?

A dull ache throbbed in my gut. There was only one thing I wanted more than ripping out Eli's throat, and that was Amelia's trust and love. She wasn't wrong to worry. If we were able to find him, the urge to go finish this with as much violence as possible would be strong. But I could be stronger

for her. *I won't leave without telling you first. I'll come see you soon, promise.*

Okay. Be... safe. I knew she didn't want me to leave. Her fear of Eli was so intense that it was being projected onto me. But I was tough as hell, and I'd do anything to protect her. That kind of motivation made a wolf deadly.

You too, Sunshine. Get some rest.

The connection closed but hearing her had done wonders for me. Tex's eyebrow raised. "You stopped pacing like a trapped dog. Does that mean you were able to talk to her?" He left no room for doubt; my best friend was gloating. Though I still wondered at his end game. How the fuck did he see this turning out for me?

"Screw you."

He smiled, and I punched him in the shoulder. He was being an ass, but it came from a good place. Tex was there for me. Sometimes in the most infuriating ways, but there nonetheless.

"Okay, I've got something." Clay's gravel tone cut through the moment. Tex and I hurried over to his desk to peer over his shoulder. I could see a red cross marking the coordinates we'd yanked from the prisoner. "So, this is where the fucker makes exchanges with Eli."

"Zoom out a bit." Tex looked at the computer screen with concern. There wasn't much. It was within the Lake Shore Reservation. "That's uncomfortably close to Minnesota," he said. "If the facility isn't in our state, we're going to need to see what local packs are near there and get permission."

"Which might tip our hand," Clay added. "We'd lose any element of surprise."

"I'm not sure I give a shit about being polite." I growled low, staring at the screen like if I looked hard enough, I could force it to give up answers. "He's kidnapping from other packs, too. This is the exact kind of situation the Black Pack tries to stop, am I right?"

Tex sighed. “You’re not wrong, but we operate under the rules. Always have and always will. No, Riley, don’t give me that look.”

Anger flared bright and hot in me. “When have laws ever fucking mattered?”

“I didn’t say laws, I said rules. Pack and territory rules are what keep the peace. If we’re going to be peacemakers and defenders, we can’t start bending them just because it suits you.”

Tex wasn’t being harsh. If anything, I felt his sympathy through the pack bond. He knew I didn’t want to fuck things up for the pack. He knew, too, what it was like to want to protect someone you loved.

Love.

Did I love Amelia? I was pretty sure I did. My heart ached for her, my body craved her, my wolf demanded she be near. She was gorgeous and funny and so fucking clever. And *strong*. Amelia was the strongest female I’d ever known. To go through what she had and still come out on the other side fighting was... it was incredible. *She* was incredible.

Yeah. Yeah, I loved her. I loved her so much I would kill the motherfucker who thought he could mark her and make her his. And damn the rules, the laws, anything and anyone who stood in my way.

Liam came into the room holding out some papers. “Amelia did a great job.” He handed them to Clay. “She also mentioned the first town she really passed through was called Peever. Does that ring any bells?”

Keys clicked as Clay’s fingers flew over the keyboard. As deadly as Clay looked in person, he was far more dangerous with a computer. “Fuck yeah, it does. See here?” He pointed to the screen. Peever was close to the Missouri river. It was also near the reservation. But it wasn’t all that far from the Minnesota state line, making Tex’s concern over territories more prescient.

Clay looked up at me. “Liam and I will use satellite imagery to search the area. But it might take a while.”

I bristled at that, but it wasn't Clay or Liam's fault. It felt like Eli was always just out of reach. “And if it's not in our territory?” I asked.

“We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Tex said. His phone rang, and he answered it, which meant it was Jess. She was the only person he'd stop everything for. It might have irritated me more if I didn't understand, finally, exactly how he felt. Just as the earth orbited the sun, we orbited the women we loved.

He walked away, speaking in low tones, and while being a shifter meant I could listen in if I wanted with superior hearing, I didn't. Privacy was a right, and being in a pack where emotions and thoughts could be shared at a whim, it was also a gift.

“Go to Amelia,” Clay said over his shoulder. “We'll let you know the second we figure anything out.”

I wasn't going to fight him to stay. Until we had answers, there wasn't much I could offer. My temper was becoming more volatile as well, and Tex and the others didn't deserve to be my punching bag. The best thing I could do was get to the woman who'd become my heart's song.

Amelia. My sunshine. “Yeah, okay.”

Before I could step out, though, Tex stopped me. He held up his phone. “I've been asking Jess to look into something. Walk with me.”

We left Liam and Clay to do their thing. My heart lodged in my throat as I waited for Tex's news.

“Jess wants to try some magic with Amelia. For the mate mark.”

Hope almost exploded from me. “She can remove it?” I'd never, *never* heard of something like that. But then again, when had wolves and fae ever been connected enough to consider what magic could do for things like mate bonds? The

possibilities of what could be for Amelia and me spun out in front of me, wild and sweet as spun sugar.

Tex grabbed my shoulder, slowing our pace. His brow pressed tight, and he spoke with care. “I don’t know. I don’t want you to get your hopes up. But if Eli has been tracking her through it, Jess thinks she might be able to hide Amelia better at least.”

Crashing back down to earth hurt like a fucking bitch. The hope that maybe, just maybe Amelia could be fully mine had shone hot and bright. Having reality dampen it weighed heavily. Still, I appreciated what they were trying to do. “Yeah, that sounds solid. Tell Jess thanks.”

Because in the end, Amelia’s safety was more important than my ego and desire to make her my mate.

My best friend ruffled my hair. “She’s doing it for you because you’re her friend. And I think Jess really admires Amelia. Hell, we all do.”

Hearing affection from my pack for my love made my wolf swell with pride. The fact was, we hadn’t been sure the pack would embrace Jess, as she was half-fairy and half-gray wolf. But she’d been welcomed with open arms. Amelia was a white wolf, and because of Jess, I didn’t worry that another kind of wolf would be shunned. Still, hearing how much they approved of Amelia went a long way. “Yeah, she’s fucking amazing.”

“Do me a favor and call Kitty before you head up. Let her know Amelia’s okay and what’s going on. I’m going to call on Hunter. The lion territory isn’t too far from where we’re searching. Maybe they can help us out.”

It struck me hard and fast just how far my pack was going for me. For a female they scarcely knew. Clay was taking precious time and resources away from his million-dollar contract to hunt down Eli’s location. Liam had used his gentle nature to persuade Amelia to do something hard, making sure she felt safe while she did it. Tex and Jess were organizing everything and trying to find a way to cut Eli’s hold out of

Amelia. Now my alpha was using outside connections to aid us.

To aid me.

I swallowed down a lump before I could do something like cry. “Yeah, I can do that. I’ll call her right now.”

Tex slapped my back and headed off. I took a moment to get my shit together before calling Kitty.

She picked up on the first ring. “Is she okay?”

“Yeah. She got a little bruised and scared, but—”

“What the hell do you mean *bruised*?” Kitty went from concerned to scary in record time. “Riley, I will fucking kill you if you hurt her—”

I realized that, while all this shit had been playing out, Amelia had missed a shift at Mama Lou’s. The last thing Kitty had heard was that I was taking Amelia out for a romantic weekend. “Kitty! It’s not like that. Her past caught up to her. He’s a real bad son of a bitch.”

There was silence. Then, “I hope you made him pay.” Kitty was scary as hell, and I appreciated it.

“He sent goons. Too chickenshit to come himself. But we took care of them, and we’re working on finding him. In fact, Tex is reaching out to your alpha.”

“Good. Does Amelia need anything?”

Thank God for women like Kitty, there to support anyone who needed it. I was glad Amelia had found her. “If she asks, I’ll let you know. Thanks, Kitty. Sorry I didn’t call you sooner.”

“You’re forgiven this once. But next time, don’t bother coming in for your usual. You won’t be welcome.”

Mama Lou’s breakfast was one of my staples. She knew how to cut to the quick. “You’re ruthless, Kitty.”

“Damned straight.”

Tex must have known talking to Kitty would get me out of my head. Help me focus on the good in the swamp of the shitty. Yes, I was going to protect Amelia. But I didn't have to do it alone.

Jogging, I headed for her, understanding one last step would be crucial for our future.

I had to make sure she *wanted* all the help.

AMELIA

Riley had told me to rest. The irony was I was too restless to stay in bed. After spending time remembering my family and, worse, Eli and the facility, a nervous energy took over my body. I paced back and forth, went through drawers and cabinets. My wolf was just as uneasy, and it was only the scent of Riley on his t-shirt that kept her from losing it completely.

She needed him. Craved his wolf with a feverish intensity.

What truly got under my skin was how much *I* needed him. The pain of his rejection was finally gone, but the memory of it had not. How had this happened? How had I gone from being owned by one male made to feeling, well, possessed by another?

Where was the fairness in that?

When I'd been a child my mom had driven me crazy by reminding me, time and time again, that life wasn't fair. But this seemed next level.

I wanted Riley so bad I burned for him, but I didn't *want* to want him. Not if it left me vulnerable to being hurt like that again. I wouldn't survive it. Riley held all the power in our relationship, and I shook with fury at that. I'd come so far. I deserved some of the power.

Dropping to the floor, I struggled through some pushups. Being a shifter gave me strength, but I hadn't used it. I hadn't been *allowed* to use it for all those years. Riley had

encouraged me to start training, but now I was on a mission. I was going to get stronger, inside and out.

My arms wobbled and shook as I pushed up and dropped back down, mind turning circles. Riley had apologized. He'd explained about his mother, and I got it, I really did. That had screwed him up big, and his reaction stemmed from that hurt.

But *I'd* been hurt. So, so badly. He'd been kind and cautious and gentle every step of the way, protecting me like I was an egg that would crack with one wrong move. So how could he leave so easily? There hadn't been a moment of hesitation when he'd walked away, and despite the sincerity of his apology...

Some part of me couldn't be certain he'd never do it again. Especially as he had me, as much of me as I could give him, at the crook of his finger. There was no doubt about that. I wasn't sure I could run now if I wanted to. My wolf wouldn't let me leave him.

Fuck.

The doorknob twisted, and my wolf leapt to attention, her tongue hanging out and eager. Riley. I knew it was him before he even stepped foot inside.

My instinct was to stand up and rush over, jumping into his arms and wrapping my legs around his waist. Willpower kept me where I was. Riley watched me with caution, moving slowly, picking up on my hesitation. Not for the first time, I wished I could trust in his responsiveness. How he seemed to *get* me in a way no one had before.

"How are you?" he asked, allowing some distance while circling closer. He moved with care, so I didn't feel like prey, but it was a near thing regardless. After all, whether he understood it or not, my heart was between his teeth.

I ripped apart the urge to deflect, to tell him I was fine and try and keep the status quo. That was a leftover product of living with Eli, where all of my effort was spent in not pissing him off. Not that it ever worked. I needed to test Riley. To make sure I truly wasn't replacing one captor with another.

Knowing that didn't make it any less terrifying. *But I'm stronger now*, I thought to myself. *And this is important.*

Exhaling slowly, I said, "I'm pretty fucking pissed off, Riley."

He stopped moving, eyes going slightly wider. I flinched, waiting for the outburst. It didn't come. "Okay. Tell me about it." Then he sat in a chair to make himself smaller and less intimidating. A difficult thing to do, considering his tall and muscular frame. The effort counted, though.

One point for him.

"I know you said you're sorry. And I heard you when you talked about your mother, I promise. But Jesus, Riley... Eli used to say he was sorry, too. He'd swear he'd never do it again. But he did, over and over, until he didn't bother to apologize anymore."

Seething, I waited for an explosion. For Riley to get defensive and push back, denial fueling his indignant response. Only he stayed seated, nodding slowly. "That's not all, is it? Keep going."

Heat built in my face, and my gaze pierced him. "I'm trapped now, and it makes me so goddamn angry."

Riley's brow furrowed. "Trapped how?"

"By you, asshole!" I'd never, *never* dared to speak to Eli like this. He wouldn't have let me get this far. Raising my voice? Calling names? Venting? That wasn't how I communicated because I knew the consequences all too well. "Because my wolf wants you more than anything! Because it hurts so fucking bad to be apart from you!" I was boiling over, furious tears leaking in waterfalls down my cheeks, but I kept going. "Because I love you, and that scares me shitless!"

Oh. Well. I hadn't planned on saying that last bit. I hadn't even known I felt that way for certain. Yet as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I felt the truth of them.

I loved Riley. With all my heart and soul.

The stupid goofball *smiled* at that. I wished my claws could come out but settled for fists at my side. “Don’t grin at me, Riley, or I will punch you in the face.” I would, too. Right in that smug mouth.

“You’re so fucking sexy right now, Amelia.”

What? I was red faced and crying, sweaty, hands ready to fly and my temper rocketing. He stood and walked over, gently putting hands on my shoulders to guide me to a mirror. I saw exactly what I expected, and it didn’t look good. “You’re crazy. I look like a hot mess.”

“No way, Sunshine. You look fierce. Like a damned warrior. I bet it took a lot of courage to get mad at me.” His hands rubbed my shoulders lightly, the touch sending ripples of tenderness through me.

A shudder ran down my spine like the pressure of being angry was threatening to blow me apart at the seams. The steam *had* to come out. Was he trying to stop me? Was this some kind of reverse psychology?

Riley stroked my hair, and I saw it was turning green, the brown washing out but leaving an awful color on my blonde, like a tarnished penny. “Amelia, you’re allowed to be mad. You know that, right? Shit, you’re allowed to be furious. How long have you been bottling yourself up? That stops now. Okay?”

Oh. That wasn’t what I’d expected, and it threw me for a loop. Riley was giving me permission to be angry. And angry at him!

“I don’t know if the world is ready for me to unleash,” I muttered, feeling strange and off-kilter. Like I wasn’t sure who I was anymore.

“I don’t give a shit what the world is ready for. All I know is I’m ready for it. Braced. If you need to yell, you can yell at me. I’ll be here for it. If you need space, I’ll give you space and wait for you as long as it takes. You said I’m trapping you, but you have to know it goes both ways.”

Riley spun me so I was facing him, so I was looking up at the visage I'd long ago decided was the most handsome one I'd ever seen. Just looking at him made me ache in all the right places. I searched his eyes. Within was a vulnerability that stole my breath away. Our wolves were connecting, linked together, and I knew he was right—I had him snared just as much. As much as I worried about him hurting me, I saw that I had the same power. I could destroy Riley, and that made me dizzy and sick to consider.

Because I could never. Which meant, in turn... he would never.

“I want you, Amelia, however you wish. I'll be your best friend, your protector. I'll take the weight of your pain. If you'll let me, I'll love you so hard and fierce you never feel scared again. However you want me, I'm yours.”

The times we'd made love had created a furnace in my chest I'd never understood before. I understood it now. Riley was my mate—my *real* mate. A true mate, through and through. Eli had tried to take me, and it was this fated love that saved me from being owned by a monster.

“You were protecting me before we even knew it,” I whispered, placing the palm of his hand over my heart. “We were made for each other. Don't you feel it?”

“Yes,” he breathed in wonder.

Of course, someone knocked at that exact moment, when emotions had swollen to their apex and were desperate to burst out. Riley and I both laughed, but we never stopped looking at each other as he barked, “Come in.”

Jess walked in, and as soon as she saw us, it was obvious she knew, too. “And now I see this is a bad time,” she said wryly. “But if you're able to share Amelia, I think my grandmother and I might be able to help with—” Jess pointed to her mate mark.

Confused, I stared. What was she talking about?

Her mark was whole, and I could feel the magic coming from it, smell Tex's scent fused with hers. It made me jealous

and hopeful all at once. I wanted that more than anything. Eli's mark was a hideous thing, taking the place of the rightful male.

"How?" I asked, unsure and still trying to comprehend what she was telling me.

"Magic, of course. We want to look at it and see what we can do. But you'll need to come to the fairy realm, where our power is strongest. Interested?"

I could tell Jess was trying to keep it light. And give me a choice. As if there *was* a choice. A chance to see the fae realm? An opportunity to scrub Eli from my body, once and for all?

"I'd like to go," I said, straining to reign in my nerves.

Riley slipped an arm around my shoulder. Our emotions in tune, I knew he was experiencing the same amount of anxious hope I was. It was reassuring to know I wasn't alone. But I also sensed he wanted to be strong for me, something I clung to. "I'll tag along. The trip to the fae realm is... interesting."



THERE WERE elves and fairies waiting outside of the pool. Before I could panic over my nakedness, a cloak was provided and wrapped tight around my shoulders. Jess bumped me gently. "I had the same reaction the first time I came here."

The guards were bowing in deference to Jess, who waved them off. "Don't start that shit again. Princess or not, I'm just a normal woman."

"I'd argue that isn't true." The voice was like bells, and a gorgeous woman stepped out from nowhere. Her dress was so fine I gasped. Elegant and young, she gave me a gentle smile. "Be welcome in my realm, Amelia. I am Queen Fayettea."

Riley bowed his head, so I did the same. Jess, on the other hand, hugged the woman and said, "I missed you, grandmother."

I startled. Grandmother? The woman couldn't be older than late twenties!

Leaning close, Riley whispered, “The fae age differently than we do. And I’ll bet Fayettea uses some magic as well to maintain that appearance.”

This earned him a stormy glance from said queen, a look so terrifying my knees shook. “I’ll thank you not to make rude assumptions young wolf. You may be a great warrior, but I could beat your ass before you got close.”

Her wink was a knife, and Riley apologized quickly.

So, this was part of who Jess was.

We followed the queen and Jess toward a castle. Riley gently nudged me a hundred times due to my slowing or stopping to stare in wonder. How could I not? The forest nearby was rich and vivid. The fae we crossed were stunning, their beauty like crystal glasses—elegant and delicate. Yet I wouldn’t pick a fight with a single one of them as the magic in the air was potent enough my nose tickled with it.

The castle itself was a wonder, managing to be massive yet homey inside, with rugs and cushioned benches on the marble floors and stunning tapestries covering the walls. The queen’s decor managed to be stately and bohemian, a mix I decided I’d incorporate in whatever home I had in the future.

A home I’d share, I hoped, with Riley and our children.

My wolf stirred at that, making sure I knew just how pleased this decision made her. It didn’t intimidate her in the least, and I remembered how Riley had welcomed even the ugliest version of me—red faced and angry.

Yeah. I’d never dreamed of a future that involved anything.

Now I had dreams and hopes and wants, and fuck, I was going to need to learn how to fight for them. Because I knew in my heart that was what I not only wanted but deserved. A chance at happiness with Riley. God, *children*, too. Because he’d be a wonderful father. Liam’s words returned, and I knew it wasn’t exactly what he meant, but Riley and I could make a family.

My family, that he’d make sure no one could take away.

Before I could fall further into those fresh hopes and dreams, the queen beckoned. “Come this way,” Queen Fayette said, turning a corner. Briefly, I wondered what Eli would say if he knew I was in the fae realm receiving assistance from royalty.

I’m a far cry from the worthless piece of shit he always claimed I was.

I was led into a small, cozy room. It was painted in dark blues with silver and gold stars on the walls and ceiling. Jess stopped Riley, and I felt his dislike of being held back instantly. “Sorry, Riley. This is just for Amelia.”

Riley deferred to me, though his voice ground as he asked, “Is this okay?”

I wasn’t sure. All of this was new, and I had no idea what to expect. But my instinct was telling me that Jess and the Queen had only good intentions. More, my wolf was pushing me to be brave. To take a step into the unknown.

She’d been the one to help me jump from that window and run. I wasn’t going to doubt her now.

Nodding, I rubbed his arm. “I’m doing this for me. For us. If I can’t be brave enough now, how will I ever be brave enough to move on from my past?”

He eased up immediately, approval radiating out. I wanted to bask in it. “I love you.”

I chewed my lower lip, but this time I was biting back a goofy grin. I wanted to find time sooner rather than later to show Riley just how much I loved him. In hot, languid, delicious detail. Jess giggled and grabbed my hand, pulling me from images that were spicier than appropriate for where we were. Blushing, I allowed her to tug me into the room. As soon as we were inside, she closed the door on Riley. Being closed into a small room didn’t have the normal chest-clenching effect it used. Instead, the decor and company created a sense of peace in me. Or maybe it was the company, their cheerful and relaxing vibes easing the way for me.

The queen sat in a decadent chair and folded her hands in her lap. Jess gestured to a couch, and I sat next to her on it.

“I hope it is okay that Jess has filled me in a bit on your predicament,” the queen said.

“It is.”

“Good. Wolves and fae usually do not work together quite so often, but Tex’s father was clever enough to make me an ally. I needed aid from them, and therefore sought the partnership. What I hadn’t known then was that my granddaughter would be a bridge between our two worlds. Part fairy and part wolf.”

Her cadence had rhythm to it that lulled me deeper into security. While I knew very little of Jess, I could only imagine how contentious an upbringing she might have experienced being a product of two different worlds.

“We don’t have much experience with the mate bond magic between wolves. But I’ve been studying Jess’s, and I can parse out some of the pieces.”

My belly fluttered. Jess reached over to grab my hand and give it a quick squeeze.

“Yours is different,” the queen mused. “I can’t see or smell it the way I can Jess’s. The only evidence you even have one is the scars, yes?”

“I’m not sure it completed,” I said. “I get... flashes of Eli. But no direct connection. If he can speak in my head, he hasn’t yet, but he may have used it to help find me.”

The two women nodded. Jess spoke. “With a true connection, you’d always know how he was feeling and vice versa. You’d always know where the other was and be able to speak freely, no matter the distance. And, as you know, we’d all see and smell the mark and know you belonged to another.”

“But you don’t?” I’d heard them say it before, but I needed to hear confirmation. Hope was such a dangerous thing.

“Would you let me see it more closely?” the queen asked.

I pulled off the robe without hesitation, sitting next to Jess with a straight back. I wanted for them to be able to do something so badly, modesty didn't factor in. Besides, when I'd been younger and living with my family, nudity was common enough amongst wolves, seeing as we didn't want to have to replace clothing every time we shifted. Eli was the one who'd drilled shame for my body into me. *Fuck him.*

The queen stood and came over to me. Her presence left a chill of power in the air, yet I didn't flinch. "May I touch it?" She gestured to the mate mark that I had worked so hard to hide.

Her quiet kindness moved me deeply. "Yes."

Feather-light fingertips traced the scar Eli's teeth had left. Being reminded of the mark in such an intimate way was revolting. Yet the queen and Jess were slow and careful, paying attention to my cues. I felt safe, something I'd only ever experienced with Riley. It was a sensation I wanted to cherish.

The queen murmured words I didn't understand but I smelled a minty sort of magic in the air around me. My skin tingled then burned slightly. Clenching my teeth, I didn't move away from the pain. I'd go through a lot worse than that if it meant removing Eli's hold on me.

The hurt lingered for what felt like forever, but finally, she stopped. I looked down and bit back a cry of despair at seeing the scars still there. Nothing had changed.

Jess patted my shoulder. She was looking at her grandmother, and I realized they were silently communicating. I yearned to know what they were saying while desperately afraid of their answers. Queen Fayette tipped her head at me. "Thank you for your bravery, Amelia. Facing wounds that deep, the ones that are etched in our core, is never easy. I admire you."

Lips pressed tight, I struggled not to break down in tears. I knew she was honoring me, but my heart was so low it was difficult to keep it together.

Her face was etched with sympathy. “One more question, and then I’ll let my granddaughter tell you what I’ve discovered. She’s well acquainted, I think, with what you might be experiencing.”

“Okay.”

The queen reached out and held a lock of my hair between her fingers. “You dyed this to hide, yes?”

I nodded.

“Now that hiding hasn’t worked, would you like me to take it out? If you are to face this, I imagine it would be nice to face it as yourself. Besides, there’s so much beauty in embracing who you are.”

My hair hadn’t crossed my mind. Keeping it brown had been a hassle. The natural paleness of my hair had never taken the dark brown well, but I wasn’t in a position to be picky when choosing dyes. I’d assumed that eventually I’d have to cut the color treated strands out. “That would be... lovely.” She was right—it didn’t feel like me, and I wasn’t hiding anymore. I wanted to feel as much like myself as I could.

With a wave of her hand over my head and some more minty scent swirling around, she held a lock out for me to see. My eyes burned with tears at the white strands. It had gotten even lighter since I’d left the facility. My parent’s hair had been snow-like, and seeing them in myself lifted my spirits. I ran my hand over it time and time again, relishing each silky-smooth pass.

“Thank you,” I breathed.

“That’s gorgeous,” Jess said, admiring my hair. Hers was golden and warm, while mine was ice in the sunlight. I preened a bit under her appreciative gaze. Flutters danced in my stomach as I thought about Riley’s reaction to it.

Once we were alone, she took my hand. “I won’t burden you with too much of my story. But I grew up in a pack that was cruel and tyrannical. The alpha of it wanted me and did all he could to make me his. Ultimately, he tried to force his mate mark on me.”

I leaned into her. There weren't words, but God, to know someone else had been through something similar? Not feeling alone was powerful magic.

"I'd fallen for Tex by that point. We were true mates. Destined for each other. When my alpha tried to force me, it burned his mouth."

"That happened to Riley," I admitted, despair trying to overcome me. "He tried to cover Eli's mark with his own. It didn't work." Despondent, I sank further into myself.

"Hmm." Jess pursed her mouth as she thought. "But do you think you and Riley might be true mates? Not just in love, but made for each other?"

Once, I wouldn't have thought such a thing was possible. Eli had done an excellent job of beating any self-esteem or hope out of me. But time, distance, and Riley's constant care and kindness had lifted me from those dark waters. We'd reached a point where I didn't want to live without him. Hell, I wasn't sure I *could* live without him. "I do. Absolutely."

Jess smiled. "My grandmother thinks that's why the mate bond didn't complete. A part of your soul was made for someone already. Your wolf knew and probably protected you in some way."

Was this good news? I couldn't tell. Not being completely bonded was certainly better than belonging, body and soul, to Eli. But what good did my wolf's protection do when I was still scarred? When there was still *a* bond, small as it might be?

"I still bear his mark," I moaned. The scars were beginning to ache and burn, and it was like Eli was standing right behind me, his hand on my shoulder. As long as the marks remained, so did the stain of him. It would always, *always* feel as if he were next to me, leering and ready to make my life miserable.

"You have a scar, not a mate mark. It isn't the same. Fairy magic can't take it away, necessarily, but we think any power Eli has... is power you're giving him."

For a moment, I saw crimson. How dare she make it sound like I was permitting this to happen! Jess should know better than anyone how untrue that was. Her words circled, though, and I saw kernels of truth there. How I allowed the shadow of Eli to follow me. I'd tattooed the fear of him into my bones.

I'd come so far, but ultimately, had I allowed myself to believe it would work out? Or had I been playing pretend, thinking deep inside that it would end in disaster? The truth of it was I'd been waiting for the tables to turn and for Eli to drag me right back to where he wanted. All of it; my freedom, Riley, Mama Lou's... I'd assumed it was temporary.

Because I let Eli keep a leash around my neck. One I maintained.

"So... what do I do?"

Jess hugged me then, her strong arms gentle. "I wish it was as easy as making a decision. But I think you'll have to learn to fight for it. You're going to have to figure out how to carve him out of you, and it's going to hurt and be scary. But you'll have Riley, and me, and Tex, and all of the Black Pack behind you. You don't have to do it alone."

Pressing my forehead into her shoulder, I let myself be held by someone new. Jess was there for me. Everyone she said was, too. And Riley. God, Riley would move mountains for me.

"I might need some help learning how to fight and be strong," I admitted.

Jess laughed, pulling away. "Shit, girl, you're already strong as hell. But I can help you with the fighting part."

I might still have Eli's mark on my body, but for the first time since escaping, I experienced real hope that it didn't have to be there forever.

RILEY

Jess wasn't the woman I wanted to see, and I bit back disappointment when it was her, not Amelia, who stepped from the room. Waiting was hard as fuck, especially when it was Amelia and concerning the mate mark. Was she okay?

Was it removed? I didn't allow myself to hope, but it was a near thing.

"Amelia?" I couldn't distinguish the emotions I sensed from Amelia.

Jess's smile was bright. "She's good. Tough as nails, too. But she needs some space, Riley."

My stomach plummeted. "What do you mean?" Space from me? From the pack? I wasn't sure I was strong enough for that. We'd finally understood what we were to each other. The urge to be with her, to comfort her, was overwhelming.

"We couldn't get rid of the mate mark." Jess grew solemn. "My grandmother tried, but it's going to take more than magic to disappear. It's going to be up to Amelia."

Despite not being surprised, disappointment still settled on my shoulders. My wolf was desperate to mark what was ours, to forge the bond that would unite our souls forever. That need, primitive and biological, would be brutal to ignore. It sounded as if Jess were saying there was still a chance, though.

"What does that mean? How can I help?" My heart raced along with my mind, seeking answers I knew I wouldn't find. I was way out of my depth.

“Oh, Riley.” Jess patted my shoulder. “Just keep being here for her. She needs support and for us to believe in her more than anything else.”

Yeah, I could do that, but it didn't feel like enough. Still, what was I going to say or do in the face of fae magic? I didn't know shit about Amelia's mate bond, other than that Eli was a monster who forced himself on to her.

“Tex is going to want us back soon,” Jess added. “It sounds like Liam and Clay may have found something.”

That was good news, at least. The noose was closing in on Eli and he didn't have a fucking clue. But all I had room for was Amelia.

Jess patted my shoulder once more before going to find her grandmother. At the same time, Tex sent me a text letting me know what Jess had just said—there was to be a pack meeting to figure out what to do next.

Limbo was hell as I waited for Amelia and thought about how, finally, I could take care of the asshole who hurt her.

The door finally opened, and my wolf was scratching desperately, trying to get to Amelia. To our love. Not being able to call her mate was torture, but in the end, as long as I had her, it didn't matter.

Her eyes lit up as she took me in, her smile wide. And her hair—Jesus Christ, it was lovely. The light caught in the pale blonde strands and created a halo, bright and beautiful. Her icy blue eyes stood out more, the azure reminding me of glaciers. Only Amelia's warmth shone through, and my heart skipped a beat at her radiance.

She caught me staring and fingered some of the white-blond locks. “The queen was able to remove the dye, at least. Bad news is the mark is still there.”

Amelia's voice caught, and I wondered once more what Jess meant about it being up to Amelia whether the mark remained. Her disappointment flowed to me through the bond we shared. One that could never be whole so long as Eli held some claim over her.

“Sunshine, I just want you to be okay.” It was true, too. I wanted nothing more than for her to feel, finally and assuredly, safe. Not knowing if I could provide that was a burden I wrestled with.

That smile flickered, a dimness passing over her gorgeous features. “I know. I want to be okay, too. I just... need to figure out what that means for me.”

I wanted to fix it for her. I wanted to kill Eli, to erase her past, to make her better. Only one of those things was actually possible. The rest of it, I knew, wasn’t up to me, no matter how badly I wished it were.

“Are you up to riding back? It sounds like we might have some information on where Eli’s been hiding away.”

Amelia’s fear slammed into me with startling strength. Our bond *was* strengthening. “Hey,” I whispered, pulling her close and tucking her against my chest. “It’s going to be okay. I’m going to protect you. I promised.”

The closeness helped both of us, our wolves connecting and seeking comfort. “I know,” she mumbled against my kutte. “I just... I think I hoped that running away meant never seeing him again. Even if I knew, on some level, that was naivety.”

“It wasn’t. It was brave, babe, and I won’t let you forget that.”

Her shoulder shook as she chuckled. “Good. I’ll need the reminder a lot.”

We found Jess and said thank you’s to the queen and the fae before rushing back to the bikes. Jess hopped on hers and Amelia climbed on behind me, her arms wrapped firmly around my waist. “You promised to teach me how to ride,” she whispered in my ear before I turned the engine. “Let’s do that after.”

“Absofuckinglutely.”

The clubhouse was busier than usual, and we found Tex, Jack, Liam, and Clay all waiting in the main sitting room. As she wasn’t formally a member of our pack yet, Amelia wasn’t

allowed in church, so our discussion would happen in the open so we could get her input.

Jess curled up next to Tex, who nodded at me before asking Amelia, “Is it okay if I ask you for some personal details?”

Her wolf went on alert, shimmers of wariness pinging me. “I can try to answer any questions,” she managed. I threw a protective arm over her shoulder, feeling ready to tell Tex to fuck off if he pushed her too hard. Which was ridiculous—my best friend and alpha had been working tirelessly for her. But Amelia had been through so much, and my wolf was not willing to tolerate anything hurting her more.

“Did you know that Eli was keeping other kidnapped wolves at the facility?”

The blood drained from Amelia’s face. “I... suspected. But I never saw any of them. Sometimes, when I was being moved around from experiments, I could hear screams and howls that sounded like someone was in distress. But I didn’t know for certain.”

She moved in closer to me.

“Could you tell me about the experiments?”

Amelia was shaking next to me. *You can do this. I’m here for you.* I thought at her. Immediately she met my gaze and offered a timid smile.

I know. It’s just scary.

Scary. An absolute understatement. *How can I help?*

Her shoulders trembled. *I don’t know.* “It was ten years,” she said out loud. “Ten years of being trapped. Tormented. Abused. And I know I’m not there anymore, I do. But it’s like—” she drew a shuddering breath. “It’s like as soon as I think about it, I’m right back there. Trying to remember I’m free doesn’t come easy, and it can be overwhelming.”

Tex nodded. “I hear you. I know I’m asking a lot.”

My brave girl, though, faced her fear. “Eli made it clear he wanted me because I was a white wolf. While there were

never a lot of us, as a pack, white wolves were formidable. My pack tended to be physically larger and faster than many wolves, which was partially why we were hunted down. Eli's experiments ran the gamut. He'd cut me or break bones to see how quickly I healed. How much pain I could tolerate and how quickly I could shift. There were blood tests and... physical tests I'd rather not—"

"You don't have to," I asserted. Her alarm was shrieking at me through our bond, and I rubbed her back, hoping the gentle touch would keep her grounded in the present.

Tex nodded once. He wasn't going to ask for more than she could give. I knew he could feel how on edge I already was next to her. "You don't, but every bit of information we have helps. Did Eli ever tell you what he hoped to find?"

"Not much. He would rant about being a brown wolf. About how unfair it was that their packs were the smallest in stature and held the least power. He wanted to know what made the 'great' packs superior. I imagine it was so he could find a way to gain power."

Every Black pack member in the room probably wanted to roll their eyes as much as I did. Power was a constant goal for these pathetic fuckwads, and they didn't care who got hurt along the way as they sought it. Eli was just another abusive chump who apparently had small dick syndrome.

"Sounds about right." Tex was focused on Jess, and I knew they were having a conversation in their heads. Next to me, Amelia shifted, rubbing at the scars at her neck and shoulder. I knew talking about Eli often triggered the reaction.

I'm here for you, I reminded her.

I know. It hurts, though. I wasn't sure if she meant the scar or talking about Eli, but it didn't matter. I hated it for her.

Clay spoke up. "Well, that helps. As do your drawings, Amelia. We were able to track down the place where you would have been handed off to Eli. From there, we started expanding the search, and we've narrowed it down to about

fifty different sites. It'll take getting close to see which one it is, but don't worry—we'll find it."

Amelia said, "I'm not worried about you finding it. But I should have been passed off to Eli by now. He must know something has happened, and I'm not sure how long we have before he retaliates."

"He's been a coward so far," Tex said. "After all, how long has he known you were here, and he's only just now made a move?"

"He might not be scared so much as cautious," I warned. "Yeah, he'll want Amelia back, and it's probably burning him up that she's eluded him so far. But this fucker has been kidnapping and killing wolves for who knows how long, and we're only just now hearing about it. I wouldn't discount him."

Amelia was rubbing her shoulder even harder. "Are you okay?" I asked.

Her frown said more than enough. "It's burning. Do you think he could be near?"

My wolf's instinct was something along the line of *I fucking hope so*. If he could tear into Eli now, it would solve everything. I was hung up on the realization that the pain might be real. Not in her head, but a warning. That the fucker had some legit hold over her, over *my mate*, still.

"Fucking hell," I snarled. "He's here."

At that, every wolf in the room went on high alert. Liam, closest to the front, peered out the window, only to shout "down!" and drop to the floor. All of us moved on instinct, flattening against the clubhouse floor. Just in time, too, as the rat-tat-tat of automatic weapons filled the air. Windows shattered, concrete blocks chipped and spit, and the metal door rang loud with the storm of bullets.

Moving carefully, I grabbed Amelia and covered her with my body, army crawling toward the bar. Our bar was made from reinforced steel—it was supposed to look cool and industrial, but it was also for situations just like this.

Some of our pack members were firing back, tucked behind furniture as they shot at our attackers.

I felt a sharp punch in my lower back then another in my leg, followed by blinding agony. I'd been shot, but all I could think about was getting Amelia behind the bar. Tex and Jess were moving as well.

Just as we neared, I heard someone shout "grenade!"

The tell-tale plink and roll of the deadly weapon came a second later. It spun out on the concrete near me. It was too close. Rolling off Amelia, I managed to grab it and throw it hard toward the front. There was only time to curl into a ball before it exploded.

The force of it struck my back like a train, sending me sailing into the steel bar. I slammed hard, feeling my nose break. I doubted it was all that broke.

Time slowed, my senses fighting to understand what was happening. My body came to rest on the floor like a crumpled-up beer can. Pain blazed along my back, every inch of the skin there feeling like an open wound.

Ringling pierced my ears, muffling the shouts and staccato clips of gunfire. The whine of it cut into my brain, the high-pitched shriek agony.

I was hurt. Hurt *bad*. But all my focus stayed on Amelia. Had I managed to shield her from the blast? Had she been shot as well? My inhalations were struggled wheezes, but I kept my tenuous grip on consciousness.

Are you safe? I asked Amelia, straining to move, to see her, smell her, fucking *anything*. I needed to know she was okay. Where was she? What was happening?

Riley! Her voice came through, loud and clear. *I'm behind the bar!* It was all my brain needed to feel secure, and I promptly passed out before I could hear her panic as she realized I, on the other hand, was not okay.

AMELIA

Riley was hurt. I could *feel* his pain, and it jumbled my senses. My scar had been burning, and then it had grown worse, and then...

Gunfire.

A grenade.

And Riley, trying to protect me.

His eyes were rolling, and he groaned, but I mentally couldn't get through to him. It was like shouting into a void, something that had my wolf fully afraid. How hurt was he? My ears were ringing from the blast, and while I could see Tex and Jess up and yelling, I couldn't hear a damned thing.

Men swarmed through the busted windows and doors, dressed from head to toe in black. Their black SWAT gear was reminiscent of the gear the men had worn the night my family had been murdered. Eli's soldiers from the facility were here, attacking.

Riley rolled onto his back, blood oozing onto the floor.

The facility was hurting these people because of me.

Jess stood, glowing bright enough my eyes burned. Light flared from her palms, sending a fire-like beam into the men closest. Their gear didn't protect against her magic, and they dropped, screaming and smoking.

The distraction allowed Clay, Liam, and the others to find weapons of their own. The space was soon filled with the loud,

punctuating bursts of shouts and gunfire.

Riley scooted back, and I grabbed at him, pulling him behind the bar's countertop. Thank goodness they had it near the middle of the club's general area. If it had been against the back wall, every Black Pack member present would have been sitting ducks with no cover. My hands were red and slick with Riley's warm blood, but as a shifter, he was already healing. It would take longer than a few minutes—much longer—for him to fully heal, and we'd need to make sure there weren't bullets left inside his flesh, but he was conscious and able to move.

"They're here for me," I said, voice strained.

"They picked the wrong pack to fuck with." Riley smiled at me, his teeth glistening red, and I wanted to laugh. Or cry. Or scream.

"Are you okay?" he asked, leaning against the counter. Having a conversation as if he hadn't just been shot and hit by a grenade blast, like there wasn't a gunfight happening all around us.

"You're an idiot," I said, pointing to the leaking wounds. "I'm supposed to be asking you that."

Warmth filled me, my wolf gathering strength, and I realized what Riley was doing. He was distracting me so I wouldn't shut down in the face of the facility's attack. It was clever, but God, I hated that he was hurt because of me.

I moved, daring to peek around the corner and see what was happening. Eli's forces were diminished, but there were still so many of them. Tex had shifted and was moving like lightning through their ranks, tearing out knee-caps and slashing bellies. As the men fell, wounded, Clay and Jack would pick them off with guns.

Poor Liam had a weapon in hand but was white as a sheet, his finger nowhere near the trigger. Maybe he could help me with Riley, then. I needed help because I needed him to be okay. I waved, trying to get Liam's attention.

Unfortunately, I got the attention of one of the attackers as well. "There's the bitch!" he yelled, pointing at me.

Someone reached over the counter and hauled me up. I kicked and screamed, pulling at the iron-hard arm barred around my chest. “Jess!” I was afraid if I called for Riley, he’d be stupid enough to try and come help.

He roared behind us, and sure as shit, there he was, teeth bared and fur sprouting from his face. “Don’t shift!” I cried out. If he did, his skin could heal over any lingering bullets. They could puncture something vital, and he’d bleed out internally.

My attacker swung me toward Riley, using my body as a shield. The bar was between my love and myself. Without thinking, I lifted my legs and kicked off the bar as hard as I could, setting my attacker off balance.

We fell to the floor, and his hold on me loosened. My elbows flew then, crashing into his sides and chest. I felt bones crack at the impact and realized with startled pride that it wasn’t *me* that had been hurt.

I’d hurt *him*.

A distinct *pop* came from my left, and I saw Liam, trembling, the gun pointed at my attacker. The man screamed and pulled his knee—now a bleeding wreck—to his chest. Liam had done that, and while I didn’t know the young wolf, I suspected his help was a very big deal.

“Amelia, move!” It was Jess, and I responded instantly, rolling away from the wounded hired gun and toward Liam.

Her magic burned my attacker seconds later, the reek of cooking flesh filling the air.

The men covered their retreat, leaving the fallen and getting away. The peel of tires pierced the air. All that remained after were the frustrated growls and commands of the Black Pack. Tex was ordering everyone around, and Jess was tending to the wounded.

Wounded.

Scrabbling around, I found some clean dish cloths and pressed them to the wound of Riley’s I could see. His back was a shredded mess, the cotton there burnt and crisped from

the grenade blast. Blood was seeping too quickly through the front of his t-shirt—one of the bullets, at least, had pierced straight through. I pushed hard there, adding as much pressure as I dared.

“Riley, don’t leave me,” I whispered.

His eyelids fluttered, and he offered a lazy, tired smile. “Not planning on it.”

But he was pale, too pale, and heart in throat, I yelled for Tex.

The large male was beside me in a heartbeat. “Shit,” he cursed as he took in Riley. I could tell by the alpha’s face that my concerns were warranted—Riley wasn’t in good shape. “I’m going to pick him up,” he warned me.

Stepping back to make room, I pressed blood-covered knuckles to my mouth as Tex stooped to heft up Riley’s massive bulk. When Riley howled with pain, I pressed clenched fists to my mouth, horror coating me through and through. It was a testament to shifter strength that Tex made carrying Riley look easy. “Jess, get Noah!”

I followed Tex until he headed into the church. Anxiety filled my chest, and I chewed my lip. I needed to be beside him, but this room was forbidden to outsiders. Noah brushed past me, as did Jack and Clay and Liam. I tried to peek inside.

Tex had placed Riley on the table and ripped off the stained and smeared t-shirt. Blood was still pumping from several wounds, and Riley was deathly pale. Within me, my wolf keened and swayed, worried sick about him.

A warm hand fell on my shoulder. Jess. I fell into her, needing the comfort, unwilling to voice my fears.

“Come on,” she said gently. “Go hold his hand.”

“I’m not Black Pack,” I argued. “I’m not allowed in there.” Their church was a sacred place. I’d brought Eli’s men down on the clubhouse; the destruction behind me was my fault. Stepping into the room that held so much import felt wrong. Guilt held me firmly in place.

“I’m married to the alpha and am an alpha myself. Anyone who has a problem can come to me.” There was a menacing gleam in her blue eyes that made me sure no one would contradict her. Her tenacity was moving... but why was she willing to go out on a limb when people of her pack were hurt because of me?

“I’m really sorry,” I started, feeling my throat squeeze shut as I tried to apologize.

“Hush. You’re not the first person to have a shitstorm follow them here. Tex fought a damn war for me.”

My eyes widened, but then I heard a deep, pained moan from Riley. My focus honed in on him, worry crackling like static through me.

Jess led me into the club’s meeting room, escorting me to Riley’s side. Avoiding everyone’s gazes, I grabbed his hand, unsettled by how damp and cool it was. Then Noah was there, gently ushering me out of the way. His touch was gentle but firm, and when I risked looking at him, there was no anger directed at me. Just cool, detached focus.

Noah’s mouth was a knife slash as he worked quickly, probing the bullet wound at the front. “He got hit from behind,” I said softly.

Tex cursed again, and he and Noah worked to flip Riley over as gently as they could. Still, Riley’s pained cry made me wince.

And his back was far worse than the front. I couldn’t even see where the bullet had struck because the grenade blast had burned large swaths of skin. Raw flesh glistened under the lights.

“Oh God,” I said weakly. But Noah continued to work, undaunted. He found the second bullet hole in the back and, using a scalpel, quickly cut out the bullet lodged within. He followed with the leg. A thorough check revealed no other hidden wounds.

But I was in anguish as I looked on. If I lost Riley now, I wouldn’t survive it. There was no doubt in my mind that he

was the one for me. I knew in my heart he'd never leave me or hurt me again like he had before. We were meant for each other, bound together on a level Eli would never be able to touch.

Noah pulled out a syringe and filled it. "Riley, are you able to shift? You'll heal quicker in your other form now."

My love whimpered. "Tex, help me onto my side."

I watched on, and Jess wrapped a comforting arm around my shoulder. Riley's shift was excruciating to witness. Instead of the seamless transition of man to wolf, he had to fight for every change, his mouth in a grimace the entire time.

But finally, a large, black wolf lay panting on the blood-smeared table. Riley's chest rose and fell rapidly until Noah injected his back leg. The drugs worked quickly, and the pain and tension released from Riley's body.

I'll be... right here. His voice came through in my head, thick with pain and the drugs.

You better be. But my worry came through anyway, and the bond between us, ever growing stronger, telegraphed just how anxious I was.

Then Riley was out, his shifter body helping speed the healing he so desperately needed. Meanwhile, Tex crossed his arms. His face was a mutiny of rage. "They attacked our *home*. The fucking bastards."

I winced. They'd attacked because of me. If I hadn't been here, no one would have been hurt. But I stayed silent, not sure of how to help. If I could even help at all.

"Liam. Clay. Pin down those motherfuckers. I want them tracked. Hunted down. I want to know where the fuck they are."

"On it, boss." Clay nodded to Liam, and they exited.

"Jack, Noah, I want you rounding up all our closest Black Packs. Anyone who can be here within three hours. I also want any extra medics we can get, and field kits prepared."

The two men glanced once at each other before bowing and leaving. It was just Jess, me, and Tex.

“I’m going to go call Hunter,” Tex said, his tone sharp. “We’re getting all the help we can.”

“Do you want me to call Dave?” Jess was still holding me, perhaps aware that I felt as if I could fall apart at any moment.

“No. Gray Pack is still too volatile to trust in a matter like this. Red, too. Brown is too far away and may be compromised—they might be working with Eli. It’ll have to be us and the lions.”

“Will that be enough?”

I chewed my lip before daring to contribute. “It... should be. I don’t think Eli’s pack is so large that it would pose a threat by numbers. He’ll pose a threat by weaponry. Why else experiment like he has? I’d be more concerned he’s either enhanced his pack somehow or has chemicals or compounds or something that could hurt you.”

Tex stared at me a beat before tipping his head. “That’s helpful. Thanks, Amelia.” My chest bloomed with warmth. “But I don’t know what we can do about that without knowing what we’re going into.”

Jess gave me one more squeeze. “Then I’ll contact my grandmother. We may be able to create some potions to counter things or offset negative reactions. That sort of stuff.”

“Can it be ready to go in three hours?”

“It’ll have to,” Jess said. She left, and I missed her comfort.

“What should I do?”

Tex’s anger didn’t dampen, but his face softened as he took me in. “Stay with Riley. Your presence will help him heal faster. Make him feel safer and more secure.”

“I can do that,” I managed. “Tex, I’m sorry I brought this down on you.” My voice cracked, and I swallowed. “Your people got hurt because of me.”

“No, they didn’t.” He stepped close to me and pointed to Riley’s sleeping body. “Amelia, you’ve made Riley happy in ways I haven’t ever seen. Even with the hardship and trials, that’s my best friend, and seeing him in love has been an absolute fucking blessing.

“What’s more, it’s Eli’s fault people got hurt. He’s been hurting our species, our communities, for years it sounds like. And he’s done a fucking excellent job of covering his tracks. If you hadn’t been who you are, as strong as you are, and resilient, and brave? We’d never have known. Your choices will *save* wolves, Amelia. So don’t apologize and don’t you dare carry this weight. Just be there for my friend. Help him and love him, and we’re good, okay?”

“I think I can handle that.” In truth, I wanted to fall apart and cry all over again at his kindness and sweet words. But I’d be strong because Tex wanted me to. More importantly, because Riley needed me to. “Is it okay for me to be in here?”

“It is, but I’ll have Riley moved up to his room so it’s more comfortable for both of you.”

It didn’t take long to find myself following two young, strong men carrying Riley up to his loft. They supported the limp, lupine form, setting him gently on his bed. Riley’s huge mouth had yawned wide, his pink tongue lolling out. Gingerly, I tucked it back in and shut his mouth.

Then I pulled a blanket over both of us and spooned him, burying my nose in his warm, black fur. The musk of him lulled my wolf to sleep, and soon I was on the precipice myself.

Riley, I love you. I forgive you, and I trust you, and most of all I need you. So, heal fast, my love. Heal fast.

RILEY

Healing was a painful business made quicker with sleep. I knew Noah had shot me up with something because when I'd finished shifting the agony had been too great to even consider rest... sleep hit me with all the subtlety of a semi-truck.

Warmth was what I felt now, along with the godawful itching of skin knitting itself back together. I gathered my wits and courage. Stretching, I shifted, feeling every excruciating tug and pull of a healing body. Only to discover Amelia, her arm and leg draped over me.

"Hey," I said, with more than a little question in my voice.

"Are you feeling better?" She ran her hand down my bare chest to where one of the shots had exited my body and traced a finger around the closed flesh. It was tender still, but her touch sent ripples of pleasure straight to my cock.

"I'm pitching a tent, so I must be."

Amelia's cheeks grew pink, but she didn't move her hand or leg. "Jokes are good. Jokes mean you're not mortally wounded."

"Not today, Sunshine." I tucked some of her white-blond hair back behind an ear. "Fill me in on what's happening?"

"Noah gave you something to sleep. Tex gave everyone jobs—find the facility, rally the forces, and maybe get some magic? I'm not sure what Jess is doing, really. She's the first fairy I've known."

I nodded thoughtfully. “And the timeline?”

“Tex said three hours.”

My stomach clenched. “How long have I been asleep?”

Amelia looked guilty then. “Over four.”

“Fuck!” I launched out of bed, only to press at my chest and stiffen, my back a riot of pain. I looked over one shoulder; the skin was healed but still pink and raw. My leg hurt like a bitch, too. But I wasn’t missing out on this. When I could move again, I grabbed a shirt.

Tex, I swear to God, if you left without me—

We’re still here. It ended up being prudent to wait for a few more of our neighboring Black Pack clubs to show up. I hate that we lost any element of surprise, though.

I slowed down as soon as I understood nothing had happened yet. *They attacked us. Pretty sure surprise was out the window a long time ago.*

You gonna be good for this?

Tex knew what it meant to protect your loved one. He knew how crucial it would be for me to be there. *A bit stiff still but I’ll manage.*

Good. We ride in half an hour.

Having a plan helped center me. “They haven’t left yet,” I informed Amelia. “Tex wanted more men before we attacked.”

She pulled the blanket to her chest. “Does that mean you’re going? You’re still hurt!”

I felt the tug of her worry then and, strangely, it delighted me. We were becoming more and more in tune with each other. Fuck Eli. He had nothing on her. I just wished she could see it. But maybe the best way to show her would be to kill Eli.

I sat back down next to her, taking her hands in mine. “Yeah. I hurt, but it’s going to keep getting better. There’s still some time. And I need to do this. He hurt you, and he’s hurt so many others. I can’t sit on the sidelines.”

Amelia's eyes dropped. "I know. I wish I could do something, too."

"You've done so much, Sunshine. And you're here. With me. If you knew what you've done for me, you'd understand. I think you may have saved my life, Amelia. Because I was losing my joy and hope at ever having love. Now that I have it, have *you*? I'm not letting that go."

"Good." Her nose wrinkled. "But where should I be? I don't feel safe staying here without everyone. Eli knows where this place is."

"I'll ask Jess if you can stay in the fae realm. Fayette would keep you safe for sure there. No one gets in without her permission, and shifters pose no threat in her realm. It's where their magic is strongest. If not there, then with Kitty and the lions."

I could see that appealed to her. "Okay."

I pulled her close then, inhaling deeply. The heated thrum that always accompanied being close to her grew, the connection between us becoming bolder. Stronger.

It gave me strength and, I thought as my back continued to itch and heal, I was fairly certain her presence was boosting my recovery. "But if we're going to do that, I need to drop you off now so I can meet up with the pack in time."

"You really should teach me how to ride. Or drive. Or both."

"After this, I'll give you all the lessons you want, Sunshine."

The ride to the portal wasn't as fun as our rides usually were. I was speeding, trying to make up as much time as I could. Amelia wasn't holding on tightly enough, though, because she didn't want to hurt my still-tender back. In the end, we didn't make better time for all my speeding.

I walked her to the edge of the pond that served as a portal. "Jess will meet you in there," I said. My nerves were crackling in anticipation, but Amelia's concern had ballooned since we left the clubhouse.

“I didn’t like seeing you hurt,” Amelia blurted out. “I felt your pain, and I just... I don’t want to lose you, Riley. I love you so much.”

Taking her face between my hands, I pressed a soft kiss to her lips. It was a slow, sensuous kiss, all whispered breaths and gentle tastings. My skin tightened, feeling too small for all the love I had for this small, brave woman.

“I love you. When this is over, we’ll do something you want. Travel to a place you’ve never been, or stay in bed for a week, or buy you an entire art store.”

Amelia’s eyes widened. “Do I have to choose? Can’t we do all of that?”

My laugh boomed from me, echoing in the surrounding mountains. “Yeah. Fuck it. We’ll do it all, and we’ll do it together.”

Her body was a spool of wire wound tight, but Amelia put on a smile and stepped toward the portal. “Then finish this, Riley. For me. For us.”

“You fucking got it.”



JESS and I rode with our saddle bags stuffed with vials of potions. Most were anti-magic in the hopes they might block anything Eli had managed to create with his fucked up experimentations. But there were also some invisibility potions. The facility had to know we were coming, but that didn’t mean they had to *see* us coming.

Clay had scouted a small area out of eyesight and downwind from the facility. Liam had poured over satellite images to find the fucking place.

My heart thumped steady and strong as I helped unload Jess’s haul and bring it over to the area where Tex and the others had set up. They’d brought two vans loaded with weapons. Ten minutes out were more Black Pack members—about fifty in all, along with just over thirty lions. Our

numbers weren't massive, but they were enough to annihilate the facility, I was sure of it.

My wolf was eager to taste blood.

Tex nodded as I walked up. "Show the doc your back," he ordered. Because of course he'd be a shitface alpha trying to make sure I could actually fight. Sighing, I turned and lifted my shirt. The muscles were sore and the skin sensitive, but I was moving with ease, and my leg only caused a slight limp.

"He's good," Noah pronounced. As if I'd let them tell me otherwise.

Tex explained to us that some of the lions had scouted the place a bit closer. There were, he said, at least a hundred guards. The facility, it turned out, was closer to a fortress.

"We're going to shift and use the invisibility potions to get close," Tex explained. "Before we attack, I'll signal the others. They'll come charging in with weapons. The guards at the facility won't know they've been flanked."

At that, everyone started shifting. Tex stopped me. "You sure you're okay to fight?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Tex, if you think for a second that I'm willing to—"

But my best friend only shrugged. "Hell, Riley, I know you'd be running in there to fight even if that grenade had blasted your legs off. I don't want you to fight if you're injured, but I know what you're feeling. About Eli and Amelia. Don't forget, Theo had his eye on Jess."

"I know." I cleared my throat, emotions getting the best of me. "I can't bear knowing she's been hurt, and he's out there, still hurting others."

"Exactly. So, we'll make sure it ends today. Forever."

My blood sang with the need for vengeance. I flashed a wicked smile at Tex before stripping to shift.

He had my back and understood.

We were going to finish this.

AMELIA

To my delight, I found Kitty waiting for me in the fae realm. For once, the talkative, big-spirited woman was silent, her eyes huge. As soon as I was covered in the robe the guards offered, she moved close to me and whispered, “I’m the first lion they’ve ever let in here!”

“I imagine I’m the first white wolf,” I agreed. “It’s incredible, isn’t it?”

“Oh my gosh, yes!”

We had permission to wander the gardens of the castle or, should we wish, to spend time in a room inside. Kitty wanted to explore and moving would keep my mind off Riley. Okay, no, that was wishful thinking. I’d be worried about Riley no matter where I was but viewing the fae realm was appealing.

“I just can’t get over the colors!” Kitty pointed to some strange, pointy-petaled flowers. They were like a sunset, the oranges and reds and pinks so vibrant and blended they became achingly beautiful.

“I’ve never seen anything like this place,” I agreed. “Maybe the queen will allow me to visit and paint some.”

“Well, you do have an in with her granddaughter. Jess will give you all the access you want.”

There were fairies working in the garden. Everything they did, down to deadheading plants, they did with grace. The air was fresh and sweet, and the magic all around us seemed to dance along my skin.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call to tell you about the attack,” I told Kitty as we marveled.

“That’s okay.” She slipped an arm around my waist. How strange, to have spent ten years where my only physical contact was either being beaten, poked at, or forced to have sex, and I was now finding the constant affection of others... calming.

The affection wasn’t a source of anxiety, but of joy.

“No, it’s not. You’ve been so kind to me, and the least I could do was tell you what was going on.”

Kitty tilted her head. “Well, you warned me from the start that you weren’t sure how long you’d be around. I was worried, but Riley called for you and filled us in. What’s important is you’re safe.”

“I just want Riley to be safe, too.”

Kitty gave me a conspiratorial wink. “I told him to stay away from you. I didn’t want you hurt.”

“He definitely did not follow your directions,” I said with a giggle. “But I’m glad he didn’t.”

“You love him,” she said, eyes full of knowing.

“I really do.” Sighing, I sat on a bench in the garden. “At first, I didn’t think I could love anyone. The only love I’d had until then was my family, and they were all murdered.” The sky was clear and blue, and I wondered how this realm was able to exist. How many realms there might be that we didn’t even know about. “Then I started having feelings for Riley, and I shoved them away because Eli had marked me. I didn’t think I deserved love.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Kitty put her arm over my shoulder.

“Then, I guess I was scared to love him because I didn’t know how to trust men. Even Riley. It was terrifying to think someone could have the power to destroy me simply by rejecting me.”

The pain of that time in the woods lingered, but it was healing. “Now, though... I love him. And I know he loves

me.”

“Oh Jesus,” Kitty said, tone wry, “he’s absolutely stupid for you. The big lug loves you something fierce, Amelia.”

I smiled. “I know. It’s... nice. But also, so scary. What if he doesn’t win? What if Eli hurts him?”

Kitty stretched and let her head fall back, staring at the sky. “I worry about my pack like that. Lions don’t fight the way you wolves do. We’re solitary stalkers, and we don’t take on more prey than we can handle.”

“Smart.”

Kitty shrugged. “Sometimes. We’re weaker because of it, though. That’s why we’re tied so loyally to the Black Pack. When we need numbers, they always have our backs. So instead of worrying, I like to make plans.”

I chewed my lip. “Like what?”

“Like I know Hunter loves a big, rare steak after a fight. Hell, most of the men do. So, after this is over, I’ll have Gus stay open late one night. We’ll just keep churning out beer and ribeyes, with mashed potatoes and greens. I’ll bake as many pies as I can and watch the pack I care about nourish themselves with food I provided.”

“That sounds... nice.” It did. I could see how it would take planning, too. Getting all the ingredients, having enough time to cook, working with Gus for a special event.

“So, what about you?”

“What about me?”

Kitty shot me a wry look. “What are you going to do after this?”

I thought of Riley’s offer. “Well, I missed all of high school and college. So maybe I’ll get a GED. But I don’t think I want to go to school beyond that.”

“Then what?”

“Then I’d like to take some art classes instead. Just to play around with new mediums and learn some techniques. And

travel. I spent ten years inside the same building. Rapid City is the furthest I've ever been from home. I want to see the world with Riley.”

Kitty made a happy sound at that. “Sounds nice. I've always wanted to go to Paris. I would put on fifty pounds in croissants alone.”

We chuckled and let the fae sunlight warm our skin. It was peaceful in the garden, and Kitty was the perfect company. If she hadn't been allowed to come, I imagined I'd be climbing up the walls with worry.

“Do you think Gus would let me come back to the diner? As a real waitress instead of under the table?”

“Hell yes he would. We've been missing you, and customers have, too. They love you there, and we'd be honored to have you working with us. You know the Black Pack would take care of you, though, right? You don't need to return to work if you don't want to.”

I turned toward her. “But I do want to! I know Riley would take care of me. You have to understand, though, Kitty... Eli tried to make me dependent on him. Locked away with no friends or family. No money. No education. No support at all. I can't ever be like that again.” I took a deep breath. “Riley is my partner. My mate, at least in my heart. But I want to be worthy of him, and for that to happen, I have to find myself worthy first.”

Kitty grinned before tackling me with a hug. “Damn girl,” she said, chuckling, “I'm proud to know you. And I'll be glad for the help at the diner.”

We chatted some more, mostly her telling me disaster dating stories, attempting to not think about the fight that was happening soon. My mind kept drifting to it, though. To Riley and Eli, the that damned facility, and all the holes it and Eli tried to carve into me.

I didn't feel empty anymore, though. I felt eager and whole, with Riley to thank. And I was eager to see him again so our life—*my* life built on *my* choices—could get started.

RILEY

The invisibility potion would only work for half an hour. That wasn't much time, but if we could overwhelm the pack guarding the facility, we wouldn't need much time.

As we crept closer, I could smell humans in the mix. They were the front lines, walking the perimeter with heavy duty weapons. Eli was using humans as a shield, a fodder-filled front line I doubted he gave two shits about.

Riley, I know you'll be searching for Eli. Remember, you're injured, and he's most likely an alpha. He'll know you're there even if he can't see you.

I know. But I'm not planning on giving him much of a chance to fight back.

The lions were going to surround the building, hiding in trees and making sure no one escaped. It brought me joy to imagine some motherfucker thinking he'd get away, only to have a mountain lion drop down on him from above.

Soundlessly, I approached the facility. It was large and cement, looking more like a fortress than a "business" building—that's how it was registered. The fence that went around the perimeter was too tall to scale. I'd have to dig.

I waited for the signal. It soon came—the roaring of a horde of motorcycles and some gunfire coming down the road. The guards within the compound scabbled into action, yelling and moving into position. They'd been expecting the attack.

But they didn't expect the wolves. Those of us who were shifted and invisible began to furiously dig under the fence, using the distraction and noise to cover the sounds we made. It took longer than I would have liked to get a hole deep enough the bulk of my lupine body could fit underneath. Open metal mesh scraped at my still-tender flesh as I crawled under, and I was grateful for my thick fur protecting me.

My hunt began as soon as I was on the other side. Scenting the air, I marked where the guards were. Slinking around, I began to look for back doors into the complex. Eli didn't seem like the type to fight at the front.

I found a door. In wolf form, I couldn't test the knob, but I felt confident it was locked. Instead, I charged it, launching my body near the knob and weak points. The door shuddered as I struck it, and pain sliced through my shoulder and hip, but I heard the snap and break of the lock. Shaking myself, I pushed the fractured door open with my nose.

There was no one on the inside. Tex would want me to be cautious, to wait and see if someone came running at the noise. But I didn't want to wait. The time limit on my potion was burning and, if I were honest, I didn't want someone else to get to Eli first.

His death was mine to give.

I padded down the hallway. The air stank like a hospital gone wrong. The smell of copper, bleach, and pain saturated the space. I passed by open doors, seeing what looked like offices within. Most were empty. When they weren't, I stalked inside and quickly tore out their throats. They never saw me coming.

Screams and shouts and gunfire masked my hunt. What I needed was luck, and luck found me.

Amelia's scent. It was faint, so faint I shouldn't have been able to pick it up. But our bond had strengthened despite Eli's mark, and I'd know her scent anywhere.

Nose to ground, I followed it. Soon, I found myself in a lab. A lab and a torture room combined, I realized, taking in

the array of tools and equipment. Cold steel tables with thick silver chains. Blood in the grout of the tiled floor. Notes were written in scrawl on wall-sized whiteboards.

Eli's experimentation room.

Anger flared hot and sharp in me. Amelia had suffered in this room. Over and over again. Hurt and mutilated. Seething, I searched through the scents, trying to find something to help me.

There was nothing.

Frustrated, I slinked from lab to lab, scenting my way until I identified one fresh scent that was in each and every room. A male.

Eli.

His smell was on everything, and I changed course, following the freshest trail I could find. It led me up the stairs, past the second floor, and on to the third. The third floor held a miasma of pain and sadness.

I passed a door that smelled so strongly of Amelia, I ached. It was locked, though, and I couldn't hear anything behind.

As I walked, I sensed the other wolves. Most were docile and weak. But one stood out, my senses tingling at the challenge in the presence. An alpha.

On alert, I crept along, the pressing sensation growing stronger.

At the end of the hall was a large room. The walls were lined with shackles. Some of those had manacles attached to people. They were quaking and balled up on the floor, their hair matted and their skin filthy. *The other test subjects.*

Next to a window, a duffel bag at his feet, stood a man. Perhaps it was instinct to imagine all bad men looking like monsters. But this one didn't. He was tall and strong, though it was a runner's strength rather than bulk. His jaw and nose were sharp, and his hair was combed back into place.

The man had a lab coat on, like he was some real doctor or scientist instead of a cruel psychopath.

Eli.

Eli's nostrils widened, and I knew he smelled and felt me. "So... Amelia has been a bad girl," he said, eyes darting as he tried to scout me out. "I can smell her on you." Rage coated his words, so they dripped with vitriol. "She's not yours to have, mongrel. Or did you miss my mark on her?"

I wanted to lash out, but Eli was baiting me. He wanted me to slip up, to reveal my location.

"Have no fear. I know exactly where she is. When we've finished off your little attack party, I'll go collect my bitch."

There was a slight waver in his tone that had me grinning. He didn't know where she was at the moment. He couldn't track her, and it was probably making Eli crazy.

"You're going to strike at me this way, then? Like a coward? Hidden?"

I should. I was injured, and he wasn't shifted. It was the perfect time to take him down. But I wanted—no, needed—for him to know who had brought his death. I growled, low and warning.

Eli moved faster than I anticipated, pointing a small gun in my direction and firing. His aim was true, and a small dart struck my left flank. It felt like a bee sting, and I went to shake it off, but my body seized. Muscles spasmed and contorted and, to my horror, I was forced into my human body.

My wolf had been taken from me, and with him, the invisibility.

Naked and angry, I ducked and rolled, not letting Eli fire off another shot. His smirk faded as I didn't run from him, but charged *at* him, fury pushing me into him like a cannonball. Our bodies collided, and the gun went flying. The prisoners howled and whimpered in fear.

I couldn't pay attention to any of that. All my focus was on not letting Eli get another chance to use a weapon. He snarled and tried to gain the upper hand, attempting to roll me over. We struggled, each trying to top the other.

I reared back and smashed my forehead into Eli's nose. A satisfying crunch was followed by his gurgling howl of pain. Before I could stop him, though, one of Eli's thumbs pressed at my left eye. We struggled, my eye watering as I tried to shake off his grip. Finally, I managed to knife my hand into his throat. The angle was off, and it didn't do the kind of damage I hoped for, but it was enough for me to shake him off. I blinked back the pain and streaming tears flooding my hurt eye.

Eli gained enough space to plant a solid kick to my waist, sending me sprawling. My ribs screamed in pain where I'd struck the floor. Grunting, I stumbled back to my feet. Eli and I circled each other.

"I'm going to make Amelia scream my name over and over," he growled, taunting me. "And then I'm just going to make her scream."

"You won't get the fucking chance," I roared, launching at him again. We traded punches and grunts; he was a strong bastard, I had to give him that. Weakened by my previous injuries, I struggled for any advantage.

His fist cracked across my jaw before he sent several fast jabs to my already sore ribs. Something snapped within my body, and searing pain lit up my side. When I inhaled, it came as a gasp. The broken rib had punctured my lung.

I was losing the fight. Eli reached into his coat and pulled out a short but wicked serrated knife.

Fear sparked in my belly. I was not at full strength and had lost the element of surprise. My back was screaming in pain, and each breath I tried to take was strained. Eli sneered, waving the knife in front of me, making quick stabbing motions. "Come on," he goaded. "Come try and save that pathetic bitch."

Amelia.

The reminder of who I was doing this for was all it took to help me ignore the pain. It didn't matter if I reopened the gunshot wounds or ripped a gaping hole in my lung. It didn't matter if I couldn't recover from this fight.

What mattered was putting Eli in his place. Six feet in the ground.

It only took a second to decide on a plan. Once decided, warmth flooded through me, wrapping my sore, weak, tired limbs in strength. It was love. It was Amelia. For her, I'd move mountains. I'd do whatever I needed to in order to make her safe.

I rushed forward. Eli grinned, slashing at me. He expected I'd swerve or dodge, but instead, I accepted the slash. The knife sliced deep into the meat of my chest, sawing apart the muscle and sinew and scratching along the bone. A blinding burn followed in the blade's wake.

But I caught it at my armpit, grabbing the wrist of Eli's knife hand hard and jerking him toward me. Off balance, Eli stumbled as I brutally twisted his arm, the elbow snapping. The knife angled up.

I plunged it through the bottom of his jaw, into his throat. Eli's eyes were wide with disbelief as blood bubbled out of his lips. The bastard looked surprised, like he couldn't believe he'd actually lost. The fight bled right out of him along with the crimson liquid. Vindictive, I let him struggle in defeat and pain before ending it.

"This is for Amelia, you son of a bitch."

I twisted the blade, driving it further up and into his brain.

Eli's carcass dropped to the floor. I kicked it away.

Tex, I managed, knowing my grip on consciousness was failing. *Eli's dead. I'm with some prisoners.*

Are you okay?

Dots played in my vision. My mouth was dry and my limbs quaking with energy. Was I physically okay? Hell no. But Eli was dead, and Amelia, my beloved Amelia, would be safe from that motherfucker forever. *I will be*, I answered. *But I'll need help here.*

Though I knew she might not be able to hear me, I tried anyway. *Amelia. My Sunshine. It's finished, and you're safe. I*

wobbled, swaying back and forth, blood loss and lack of oxygen quickly catching up with me. I wanted to shift, but whatever Eli had shot me with had put my wolf in a cage. I could feel him there but couldn't quite connect. *I love you so much.*

I fell to my knees, barely feeling the crack of bone caps on the hard surface. *I want you to know I don't think I could have done this myself. It was you that gave me strength. You made it happen. And I can't wait to start our life together.*

There was no telling if she heard me, but that was the last I had. There was nothing left in the tank. My eyes rolled up in my head, and I sprawled, no longer conscious.

AMELIA

“Sunshine...”

“I know! I’m hurrying!” I scrambled to throw some last-minute supplies in my purse. The small apartment had become much smaller with Riley and a lot of his stuff there. It was a temporary solution while the clubhouse was being repaired.

After that, I’d move into his loft with him.

I’d be in the clubhouse, with Black Pack members all around me. But I wouldn’t be locked in. I wouldn’t be hurt or berated or used.

I’d belong, one of the pack.

My soul thrilled at the thought of it. Instead of being a lone wolf, I’d belong to a strong pack. One that cared for its members, one where I’d find kindness and generosity, humor and compassion.

Riley leaned on the doorframe. “We’re going to be late.”

“It’s our party,” I grumbled. “Doesn’t that mean it doesn’t start until we get there?”

His laugh warmed me to my toes.

Slinging my backpack on, I pranced over and stood on my tiptoes, brushing a kiss on his cheek. “Okay, ready.”

We stepped out and locked the door, he stopped me from going down the stairs. “I thought we were in a rush?” I teased.

Riley's hands went to my hips, and he tugged me close, kissing me long and deep and hard. My heart ticked up and heat pooled between my legs. Flushed, I pulled back, grinning like a fool. "If you keep this up, we won't make it to the party."

"Someone told me it doesn't start until we get there."

I rolled my eyes. "This is supposed to help some of your more distant pack members get to know me. Should this be my first impression?"

"Fine," he huffed, a twinkle in his eye. "But we're making time for me to give you a present."

My eyebrow lifted. "Okay?"

"Follow me."

Riley held my hand and led me down the stairs and to the side of the shop, the garage where they stored bikes ready to be delivered. The padlock rattled as he unlocked it. But he stopped and turned to me.

"Riley," I complained, eager to know what he had.

My love winked. "Three months ago, everything changed."

Three months ago, Riley had killed Eli, but had almost been killed in the process. There was a giant scar running through his chest tattoos from the knife Eli had cut him with. I'd overheard Noah tell Tex we were lucky Eli was a dumbass when it came to knife fighting—that if he'd stabbed instead of swiped, Riley wouldn't have been so lucky.

I chewed on my lip. "I know."

Somehow, even sitting with Kitty in the fae realm, I'd known when he'd triumphed. And I'd felt when Riley fell. It had been the worst moment of my life, not knowing if he'd survive.

"We needed time to recover," he went on. "Time to start healing."

True, too. Eli had never been my true mate, but it had taken my wolf time to recover from his death. Once she did, though, her energy for Riley had intensified. Riley had needed time for his body to really heal. Weeks of sleeping and running around in his wolf form, trying to repair all the places he'd been wounded.

“But we did it together,” I said softly.

We'd cuddled and read and watched movies. I'd drawn in the sketchbook, adding my own trauma and inspiration beside all those other brave women's designs. Eventually, Riley taught me how to ride a motorcycle, and I got my license.

“We'll always be together, Sunshine,” he said. “But being your other half means understanding you have needs of your own. You need to work and have your own money. You need to have a space to create. And.” He blushed and cleared his throat before bending down and opening the garage door. It rattled as it rose. “You need your own ride. A bike means freedom, and no bars to hold you in.”

In the center of the garage was a bike. Sleek and sexy, it had designs that were familiar... because they were lifted from some of my sketchbooks. Namely my study in wings and fire.

The bike was painted to look like a phoenix's feathers right at the moment of flame.

“That's...” I breathed, struggling to find the word.

Riley panicked, hands up. “Totally cheesy. Sorry. We can change it if you want! Or get you another bike, or—”

I wasn't listening. I was tracking my hands along the curved metal, the leather seat. The bike was light and small. It looked *fast*. “This is perfect.” It was smooth and sleek, yet there seemed something a little dangerous about the bike. My wolf yipped in appreciation. “Riley, I don't know what to say.”

“You don't have to say anything, Sunshine. It was a joy to design. Liam helped with the paint. Do you want to ride it to the party?”

Biting my lip, I nodded, eager to be on my new ride and see how she flew. Riley grinned at me. “Meet you out front.”

He left to grab his own ride, and I sat on the bike, the seat cradling my ass comfortably. The handles felt so fucking good in my hands. Then, chest fluttering, I started it up and pulled out of the garage, leaving Riley to lock up.

I wanted at the front of his business until he pulled up next to me.

Let's go, he thought, flashing me a wink and a smirk.

The ride was everything I'd hoped for and more. As much as I loved riding behind Riley, feeling his warmth and pressing my nose into his neck just so I could smell him, having my own ride was rapturous.

It was freedom and choice and speed.

And I knew I'd choose Riley every single time.

The party was in Clay's backyard. The security expert had a large property near the Black Hills, complete with a pool, a basketball court, and guest cabins dotting the lot for those who were too drunk to drive home.

Hundreds of bikes and a smattering of cars were parked in front of the massive log cabin. I waited for the fear and anxiety to kick in. All those people...

But it didn't.

Instead of fear, I felt like I was going to be with family. A new, found family.

"You okay?" Riley put his hand on my back.

"I really am."

We walked down to where, despite my jokes about things not starting until we arrived, the party was in full swing. People were splashing in the pool. Several grills were all going at once, the scrumptious smell of charring meat in the air. Pups and kids ran around, laughter at their heels.

Tex and Jess walked up. Tex held out a beer for Riley while Jess had one for me. We went to clink bottles when I realized Jess didn't have one. "I can go grab you a beer," I offered.

Her hand went to her belly, and she and Tex shared a warm smile.

“Oh shit!” Riley thumped Tex hard on the back. “That’s amazing! I’m so happy for you!”

My brain finally clicked with understanding, and I threw my arms around Jess. “This is amazing!”

She hugged me tight and whispered in my hair, “It is, but I may need your help in the near future. Tex is already overprotective as hell. He’s treating me like a priceless vase, and I am over it.”

But Jess winked when she released me, and there was no doubting her complete adoration when it came to Tex.

Liam came over, laughing with Jack at his side. Jack, grizzled and easy going, said, “Dave’s a lucky fucking bastard.”

“That lucky fucking bastard is like a dad to me,” Jess faux-warned, delight in her blue eyes. “And he better be taking it easy now.”

“He’ll be drinking beers and living the sweet life, thanks to Brandon.”

Riley nodded enthusiastically. “Brandon’s the one who is lucky as hell.”

Brandon had been the alpha of a chapter of the Black Pack. One Riley had vouched for, championing the wolf’s clear-headed nature. Only, while we’d all been recovering from the attack on the facility, word came of trouble brewing in Brandon’s chapter.

It turned out Brandon hadn’t been open about his heritage, and he was a half-breed like Jess. His mother had been a Black wolf, but his father had been a Gray.

The chapter wanted him out for lying, Riley had wanted him promoted to shame the chapter for caring about ancestry, and Tex had been ready to pull his hair out. That is, until Dave said if Brandon had Gray, he could challenge for alpha.

The fight had been short and sweet, with Brandon doing his best not to wound the old wolf too badly. Now he was getting used to being in charge of a monstrously large pack with a lot of issues, but Tex found him to be well suited to the task.

“Hopefully we get a damn break,” Liam added. He turned to me. “Hey, Amelia.”

“That’s my mate, pup,” Riley joked, ruffling Liam’s hair.

“Go and get something to eat,” the alpha encouraged, nodding to a food-laden table. “We’ve got some time until later.”

So, Riley and I did. We ate far too much, and drank, and laughed. An impromptu dance floor was set up, and music kicked into high gear. I danced with Riley, with Liam and Noah, and with Jack. The older wolf was a gentleman, his blush the most adorable thing I’d witnessed.

I always turned back for Riley, though. My wolf didn’t want to be far from him. Hell, *I* didn’t want to be. His arms were home, and his kisses nourished my heart.

I had so much fun, I missed the sun setting and the moon rising. Soon, though, the partygoers were stripping down and shifting. Riley combed his fingers through my hair. “It looks like moonlight,” he said, admiring the white strands. “Want to go for a run?”

Oh, I did.

We shed our clothes and shifted like all the others. Tex howled, and we all joined in, the loud chorus of it blood-stirring. It was rapturous, the call of instinct, the bone-rattling ferocity of a hundred voices melding into one. I shook with the pleasure of it, the fulfillment, a sense of family and belonging tattooing itself into my bones. Then we were off, more than a hundred wolves running and darting through the trees. Smells and sights that were new filled my head as I playfully raced Riley.

It was exhilarating, running in a pack. The strength in numbers, the surge of warm, furry bodies... the world felt

open to me. Waiting.

Riley peeled off from the pack, and I followed him. We bolted up and down hills, crossing streams and fallen logs. The distance between us and the pack grew. The party was for me, for my freedom and Riley's triumph, but I think they just loved an excuse to revel.

No, they're happy you're here, Riley said.

Sure, I teased.

They remember your anxiety. No one wants to make you uncomfortable as the center of attention. We're letting you lead, Amelia.

My chest ached, and I barked lovingly at him, surging to nip at Riley's flank. *I appreciate it. But I also am feeling more whole than I ever have. I feel safe and strong.*

His pride in me shone through our bond.

You're the strongest wolf I know, he said. *And I'm lucky to have you.* There was a lingering sense of sadness, though, that Riley was feeling. I knew he wanted me to be his mate. His true mate, fated and forever. The mark Eli had forced on me had faded, but there remained a small hint of its presence.

Jess had told me I had the power to remove him from me.

I had an idea.

Come to me, Riley.

I shifted then, standing naked and pale in the moonlight. Riley's large, black wolf came over, allowing me to scratch behind his ears before he shifted as well.

I loved his body, scars and all. The tattoos were beautiful, and his smile honey sweet. Well-shaped muscles showcased his strength and skill. He was gorgeous, but more important, he was kind. Sweet. Generous. Loyal.

Riley kissed me then, and I let the moon in my blood and the heat in my body take over. The kiss deepened quickly, our tongues dancing. Liquid desire rushed between my legs, a sweet ache.

“I love you,” he whispered, kissing along my jaw and neck. A shiver rippled through me, pleasurable and swift. My nipples hardened.

“I love you, too.”

Riley lowered his mouth to my breasts, one strong arm cradling my back. He sucked a nipple deep in his mouth, the hot, wet tug sending shocks of want through me. I wove my fingers into his hair, encouraging more. Not that he needed encouragement.

Riley alternated breasts, sucking and licking and biting until my nipples were tender buds, sensitive enough that a breeze was pleasurable. Hands on my hips, he started to turn me around, preparing to mount me.

“No, baby,” I said. “I want to look at you.”

I jumped up, and he caught me, face wide with surprise. Wrapping my legs around him, I reached between us and guided his hard cock into me.

“Fuck,” he hissed. “You’re so wet.”

“Go slow,” I encouraged. Riley carried me until my back was pressed to a tree, allowing him to thrust long, slow, and deep inside of me. I stretched around his girth, so full I thought I could die of pleasure.

I looked up at the moon above and let the night wash over me while Riley moved within. A safe home. A found family. A bike. A job. Eli was dead. He was *dead*. My mark no longer ached. It hadn’t hurt once since Eli’s fall.

Riley thrust deep enough I gasped, legs changing around his waist.

Jess said the mate mark remained because I gave Eli power over me. But I didn’t have to, did I? I was stronger now. I’d *survived*.

And I had Riley.

Riley, who filled my heart with joy.

Riley, who took care of me with gentle understanding.

Riley, who was confident, and strong, and creative.

He was *mine*.

“I want to bite you,” I moaned as he continued his relentless, slow movements. “I want to mark you as mine.”

“Do it,” he hissed, rocking up into me.

Canines descended in my mouth, my jaw morphing just enough for what I wanted. I opened wide and bit down hard, right where his shoulder and neck met. The taste of his blood was salty. Something deep and molten began to pulse in my core. It grew, moving through my stomach, my chest, stretching until it met my fingers and my toes. It ached so sweetly, and I leaned into it, letting it move and cleanse.

As the red bliss of it faded, I could sense Riley’s heartbeat. Feel it in my own pulse, matching his.

“Amelia.” Riley was staring in wonder at the place on my shoulder where the hideous reminder of Eli remained. Except... “Your mark is gone.”

He’d stopped moving, holding me there, still inside me. “What do you mean?” I asked, feeling hope surge.

“I mean Eli’s mark is gone, Sunshine.”

I shut my eyes and absorbed this. My body felt different. The bond I’d had with Riley felt surer now. More defined and unbreakable. I’d chosen him. I’d chosen to leave Eli behind.

And now?

“Mark me,” I begged. “Make me yours, Riley.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” Riley bit down, and the pain was brief. The pleasure, though? Oh, it was going to take its time.

I mewled as he picked up his pace, heat twining through us. Tattooing our hearts and souls with the other’s. My wolf was in ecstasy, her relief so immense I cried. We’d found *love*. True, authentic love.

Riley and I licked at each other’s wounds, tasting ourselves on our tongues when we kissed. Sex had always

been good with Riley, but something had shifted after we'd marked each other. Like a feedback loop of pleasure, I sensed his, and it fueled mine. He picked up on mine, and it increased his.

The effect was dizzying, and I clung to him as Riley began to pound into me. Such was our connection that I didn't notice the rough bark of the tree or the chill night breeze. All I felt was him. All I ever wanted to feel was him.

The joy of us began to burn in my core, a tightening that warned my climax would be enormous.

"Riley—"

"I know." He sounded just as overwhelmed as I was, caught up in a current we'd never want to leave.

My legs squeezed tight as I came, my head thrown back and my cry of pleasure loud. Riley tumbled after me, cursing and laughing as he thrust deep, deep, *deep* within and came. My body seized, and his did as well, an electric shock of ecstasy.

I wasn't not sure how we made it to the ground, but I found myself lying on top of him. Riley had his arms wrapped around. My face pressed to his chest and the thick, heavy pulse of his heart beat against my cheek.

"Sunshine," he managed. "I'm not going to be able to walk after that."

We chuckled, basking in an undulating afterglow that made my body feel like melted butter. "Good thing we're not going anywhere for a while," I said. "I've got plans for you."

"Fuck yeah, baby. Bring it on. We've got all the time for every single plan you can come up with."

I knew what he was talking about. Trips abroad. Art. Discovery. Food. Exploration. Whatever I wanted.

"I've got some ideas," I purred, slipping my hands between us to his cock. I stroked it, and his hips bucked. Riley began to grow hard again at my touch.

"But let's start with this."

After all... now we shared a lifetime.

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FORBIDDEN BIKER WOLF

Roxie Ray

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