



THE
BLOOD
BROTHERHOOD



GUNNER

EVA KENT

GUNNER

A BEAR SHIFTER BIKER ROMANCE

THE BLOOD BROTHERHOOD

BOOK FOUR

EVA KENT

PNK PUBLISHING

CONTENTS

1. [Jade](#)
2. [Gunner](#)
3. [Jade](#)
4. [Gunner](#)
5. [Gunner](#)
6. [Jade](#)
7. [Jade](#)
8. [Gunner](#)
9. [Gunner](#)
10. [Jade](#)
11. [Gunner](#)
12. [Jade](#)
13. [Jade](#)
14. [Gunner](#)
15. [Gunner](#)
16. [Jade](#)
17. [Gunner](#)
18. [Jade](#)
19. [Gunner](#)
20. [Jade](#)
21. [Gunner](#)
22. [Jade](#)
23. [Gunner](#)
24. [Jade](#)
25. [Gunner](#)
26. [Gunner](#)
27. [Jade](#)
28. [Gunner](#)
29. [Jade](#)
30. [Jade](#)
31. [Gunner](#)
32. [Jade](#)

33. Jade


34. Gunner

Epilogue

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CHAPTER I

JADE

I TILT my head back to stare at the fluorescent neon sign as each letter lights up one by one before they pulse in unison: *Paradise, Paradise, Paradise*. From the moment it arrived, I've loved this bright orange and yellow eye-catching beauty—I'm even fond of the constant buzzing that comes from it. My heart still almost leaps out of my chest at the sight of it, and every morning when I drive up, no matter how bad I may have slept, seeing this place always manages to pull a smile from me.

It still feels surreal that I have my own place, my own business; sometimes, I expect to wake up to find out this was all a dream. I spent most of my twenties dancing in a few different establishments, but it never occurred to me that I'd be at the top one day. Of course, I've thought about it—it's impossible not to imagine what it'd be like to be the one in charge, to have my name associated with a thriving business. I never had the means to do so before.

Even if I did, life would have happened, and tragedy would have gotten in my way. The Universe has its timing for everything, I guess.

I look up at this sign with fondness—every day I see it, it reminds me of just how far I've come and all I have now. I have Flint, my girls, and the gang to thank for that. I couldn't be more grateful.

I take in a deep breath, inhaling the cool, crisp morning air and looking up at the clear blue sky. That salty air blowing in from

the ocean fills my nose and lifts my already high spirits. It's beautiful today, just like every day in this small town.

When I'm done admiring the day, I exhale and take hold of the padlock that keeps the chains wrapped around the handles. Next, I insert the key to unlock the door, and when I get inside, I deactivate the silent alarm. Some say my locking up method is excessive, but I tell them you can't ever be too careful. I'm not violent by nature, but life has taught me how to be when the situation calls for it. I would much rather have top-notch security than have to hunt down anyone who decided to steal from me.

Under the alarm control panel, I flip the switches to turn on the overhead lights that illuminate my castle. It takes them a couple minutes to warm up, but when they're finally casting light, my satisfaction grows.

This is all mine.

I take in the empty space, and it's amazing how different one set of lights can make this place look. If the poles at the back of the room were removed, it would be hard to tell this is actually a strip club. Without the multi-colored lights shining on stage and across the room, the colorful stage top isn't noticeable, which gives the focal area a classy, upscale appearance. It's easy to picture someone up there crooning out slow, sultry melodies that would have the entire audience captivated. Maybe I could decorate the poles?

Is this something I could make happen? During lunch hours, it could be a bar and lounge, and then by night, it could transform into the club that it is?

You're getting ahead of yourself, girl, I think, storing that idea with the others I'm already tossing around.

I keep coming up with different things to do with this place. The main goal is to keep it fresh and give everyone a reason to keep coming back while simultaneously avoiding it turning into something that I would be ashamed to dance in. I've been in one too many seedy places in my day, and the last thing I want is for my own business to devolve into somewhere my employees wouldn't feel safe.

Below each of the stages, there are table tops built into the side of the stage with stools for seating. The plush black leather armchairs I decided to go with are set up near the stage, with five chairs around a solid black legless table. Each stage has five of these sections directed at the intended focal point. Since there's so much space between each stage, there's still enough standing room without anyone's view being blocked. The people who aren't lucky enough to secure an up-close spot can leave their table in the cocktail area to get a better look at the show the girls put on. They haven't disappointed yet. However, I know that's only going to last so long.

I'm going to have to hire more dancers, not just so there are more than three faces being seen night after night, but so I can give my current girls a break. They've been working nonstop, and I know they have to be getting tired, but when I ask them, they swear they're fine. They say it's because they're pulling in major bucks for this place to be in such a small town, so they don't mind working every night we're open.

I don't want them to burn out. None of them seem like they're close to it, but I want to prevent exhaustion before they get there. Karmen and Grace are still as energetic as ever, but I'm worried about Terra. She shows up for work and performs, but ever since that night that lion and his pride came looking for her, she's been distant. She says she doesn't want any days off, but I personally feel like she needs some mental health days.

I want to give them all days off so bad. It's crazy; I've had no problem getting applications for cocktail servers and bartenders, but dancers—that ad hasn't even been inquired about. My reasoning behind why I've had nobody even curious about dancing is that people have very strong, very negative opinions about being a dancer or—because nobody has the confidence to get on stage. I need a way to encourage that second group, but how?

I have no clue, but something's gotta give. I've even considered getting on stage to give the girls a break. My dancing days are over; I've discovered I enjoy running the show too much, but I will get up there if I have to.

I really appreciate how hard they work. I'll have to do something for them to show it.

Maybe a catered dinner? I think as I go through the door to the back. *They might like that.*

I unlock my office and open the door to my second home. The delicate scent of rose and jasmine greet me. The fragrant plug-in is proving it was worth trying for the first time. Money trees sit in the back corners of the room against a pastel blue wall. A tan file cabinet is centered on the back wall, right under a picture I took of the front of my building. On the right wall, there's a makeup table for the days when I don't have time to rush home and change, along with a rack where I keep spare outfits. On the left wall, there's an orange couch, for days when I need a nap. I briefly remember the dusty room this now comfy office space once was. I've really made this place into a miniature home away from home.

I plop down into my cushy rolling chair behind my desk and let out a breath before I get started on my morning work. First, I have to find out what we brought in last night. I was too tired to figure it out before I left last night. Looking at the slips from the end-of-shift report from Roxy's register last night, I can already see the bar made some pretty high sales. But I expected that with Roxy—she's a pro at getting people to drink more than they intend to. The cocktail servers made some pretty high sales, also. I'm sure if Roxy was on cocktail, she'd have numbers that match the bar.

So far, it's been successful—between the cover charge, the cost for drinks, and the percentage I get from the girls and cocktail servers, we've been doing pretty well. Each night we bring in more money than the last, and I want that to keep happening. I need to figure out which one of my numerous ideas will be the first project.

The first idea I've been playing with is a theme night. I can see the girls having fun with that, and it will pique the interest of the guests. With my current lack of dancers right now, that's one of the only routes I think of that will mix things up a bit until I can get new faces. I get applications all day long for servers, bartenders, and security. Hell, I'm even starting to get

applications for the kitchen staff I'm trying to build, but not one person wants to dance.

I did not think getting dancers would be this hard. I need to figure it out fast.

A knock at the door makes me jump almost a foot out of my chair, and when I look up, Flint's taking up the doorway. A smile spreads across his face when my startled gaze meets his. I must have been really focused if I didn't smell him approaching. He's the only shifter I've ever been able to sniff out without having to widen my nostrils. His strong woody scent usually gets here before he does. I was in the zone if I didn't pick it up.

"Morning," he greets me, coming into my office.

"A very gorgeous one," I reply as he drops down in one of the armchairs in front of my desk.

He's in a blue plaid shirt today, his sleeves rolled up to his forearms, paired with black jeans and black combat boots. This morning his hair is down, framing his face. Today, he has a five o'clock shadow, something I've rarely seen. It completes his rugged woodsman appearance.

I stroke my face like I have a beard and ask, "You trying something new? I'm not sure I've ever seen you with stubble."

He smiles at my question, and his bright eyes go soft. "You can say that. Layla likes it, so I thought I'd leave it alone for now."

"Awww, your expression always changes when you mention her," I point out, resting my chin in my palm. "It's adorable. So what brings you here this morning? You're a little bit early in the month for collection day, aren't you?" I ask him.

"I'm not here for money just yet," he says, resting his right foot on top of his left knee. "It's barely been a full month since this place has been open. I'll hold off for another month or so." I nod, writing that down on my calendar, and he continues. "I'm here because I'm concerned about Terra."

I knew I couldn't have been the only one that noticed the change in her behavior. Flint's concern for her is clear as day.

“I’ve been worried about her too,” I confess to him. “Her body’s here, but her mind is somewhere far, far away. I think that lion shifter—Tobias—showing up made her unable to ignore her situation.”

Flint nods in agreement.

“Before, she was acting like she was fine, but she wasn’t. She hid it well, though. She was always scared, but I assumed it was because she was starting over in a new place. Even after I pulled the information out of her about her past, she was fine. But ever since the night he came here, her fear has been amplified. It’s going to be difficult to convince her that she’s safe.” He shakes his head and tsks. “This is my fault. I should’ve killed him and his entire gang that night.”

“You did what you told Terra you were going to do and protected her from him. She’s still safe even if she doesn’t feel it.”

“But she wouldn’t be terrified right now if I had just ended him that night,” he states. I can see his jaw flexing from where I sit.

“Why didn’t you?” I question him.

“They retreated too soon,” Flint says. “And Blade was hurt too badly—getting him back to Layla was our main concern after they started riding off.”

“What if he comes back?”

Flint’s eyes go dark at the mere mention of someone hostile stepping foot in his territory again. The intensity in his eyes almost makes me regret asking the question.

“He’d be setting himself up for his own demise,” Flint growls. “I hope he’s not dumb enough to put his life in danger as well as his gangs.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” I warn him. “He’s the leader of his gang *and* a pimp. I don’t think he’s going to give up so easily.”

Flint shakes his head. “Yeah, I don’t either.”

“I’ll keep an eye on Terra,” I reassure him, wanting to stray away from this tense topic.

He gives me an appreciative nod. “Please do. And keep me updated. I don’t want her running off in the dead of night.”

“I’ll make sure she feels like she has reasons to stay here,” I promise him.

“Thanks.” He lets out a sigh, then sits up in his chair and leans forward, placing his elbow on his knees. “How’s Gunner doing? How’s he adapting to a lighter workload?”

I can’t help but smile when Flint brings his name up.

“My disgruntled, frowning buddy? He’s as annoyed as always, but it’s understandable,” I start. My smile fades thinking about him frowning at bouncer applications and at...well, everything really. “He stays occupied whenever he’s here, and he seems to have gotten used to the idea of being confined to a building for work, but I don’t know if he’s totally okay with what he’s doing now. I’m sure he’s only doing it because you asked him to take it easy. I have to get on him about doing the exercises Layla gives him. He will not do them otherwise.”

Flint shakes his head. “I wish he would do them on his own. Getting him to keep up with them is definitely more than a one-person job. I knew this wouldn’t be an easy adjustment for him. He’s not too optimistic about getting better.”

“Can you blame him, though?” I ask him. “He’s feeling discouraged. Layla worked her magic on you, and you healed in no time. The same with Blade. He’s already walking around like nothing happened.”

“Gunner’s wounds were much more serious than what Blade and I suffered,” Flint points out. “He’s lucky to be alive. If Layla wasn’t as skilled as she is, he might not even be in the shape he’s in now.”

“He’s long since realized that,” I agree. “But I can understand where his anger comes from. It’s been months, and he’s only gotten a little better. Being here all day is a distraction, but I’m not sure it’s doing anything for his mental state. He hates being on desk duty—at least, that’s how he refers to what he’s

doing now. I think that not being able to move around as freely as before is starting to get to him.”

Flint lets out a long breath. “I figured that would happen. And it probably doesn’t help that some of the gang tries to stay out of his way since he’s been so testy lately. Only a few can handle him now. I’m glad that you haven’t given up on him.”

“Pssh,” I blow out, waving my hand because it’s no big deal. “I’ve dealt with people who had worse attitudes for no reason. At least Gunner’s sour mood is justified. I don’t mind having him around. He still had his funny moments.

I think I’ve figured out a way to help him stay moving without it seeming so much like therapy. Trying to get him to do the exercises Layla gives him made me realize he completely *hates* them.”

“Yeah, I’ve gathered that much, too,” Flint says. “What do you have in mind?”

“The night of the welcoming party you threw for the girls—he was moving pretty good on stage, right?”

He stares at me a moment, thinking back to that night. “I guess you can say that, yeah.”

“As good as a guy that walks around with a cane can, right?” I put it into perspective. “Actually, he did better than most people ever could have. Seeing him up there, I thought maybe if his therapy was focused on staying active, he might be interested.”

“What were you thinking?”

I’m not going to straight up say strengthening with pole dancing; he might say that’s too extreme for someone in such a weakened state. I don’t think he would, but I don’t want to risk it.

“A bit of yoga,” I start. “Walks through the forest, maybe do some dancing when he’s all stretched out and less stiff.” Everything to get him stretched out and ready to pole dance. “I think it could help him to do activities that aren’t geared towards patients trying to regain mobility. Gunner doesn’t see himself as someone who needs that kind of help. I think it’s

been hard for him to accept he's not as able-bodied as he used to be."

My words hang in the air between us as Flint contemplates what I said for a moment before he starts to nod.

"I can see how your method could work," he finally says. "Do what you can. He could use every method possible to get him better."

I sit back in the chair, the wheels in my head spinning already. "I have some ideas I could try out."

I've been trying to hold off on getting involved in his treatment, but with Flint's go-ahead, I can start helping him like I've been wanting to. Now I just have to convince Gunner. I don't think that should be too hard, though. I'm a pro at persuasion. I'll probably have to try pretty hard with Gunner, but in the end, I know I'll be able to sway him. I'm sure of it.

CHAPTER 2

GUNNER

DRIVING INTO THE PARKING LOT, I already know the day ahead is going to be anything but enjoyable. I woke up more sore than I've been in days, a result of me skipping out on the daily movements Layla gave me to do at home. Working up the motivation to do them daily is difficult when my body goes against me every time I move. It doesn't want to cooperate, and even as I perform those exercises, all I can concentrate on is how it feels like my muscles are going to tear. I gave up early on them last night, which is why I feel how I do now.

I pull up and park in the spot closest to the door, then shut the truck off. Before I get out, I let out a sigh, mentally preparing for the effort it's going to take to get out of this fucking truck. I grab my cane from the passenger seat before shoving the door open and throwing my legs out. I grunt against the tightness in my hips and abdomen as I twist my body and brace myself for the pain that'll flare in my hip when I hit the ground. As soon as I put weight on my left foot, I'm reminded of why I need this damn cane. Dull pain radiates outward from my left hip, and I bite down on my back teeth as it spreads. It takes a moment before it finally subsides.

Each time I step, it flares back up again to the point where pulling my leg forward gets harder and harder until I have to stop for a moment to let it rest. I've done countless external hip rotations, knee lifts, and other exercises to strengthen it. I can walk a bit further now since I haven't been on my ride in weeks. Layla's been taking extra time to work that hip, but any progress is hard to accept when it's happening so fucking slowly.

I shut the door of Flint's red pickup, and the loud slam tells me just how much force I used. Even though I hate this stupid thing, I'm grateful to Flint for lending it to me. I wouldn't be able to get around without it. It pains me to admit that staying off my ride has been better for me—I haven't been in *so* much pain in the weeks I've been off of it. But being confined to the interior of a truck is not it for me. I miss the open road, the powerful engine of my Bobber underneath me, and the wind whipping around me.

Staring at the truck, contempt slightly overrides my gratefulness, and I have to swallow the bitterness that's been trying to consume me.

Tearing my eyes from the cherry red pickup, I slowly turn around, only to stop in my tracks at Flint's blacked-out Rocket sitting pretty a few spaces down. The morning sunlight bounces off of it, stirring up my desire to have the open road laid out in front of me.

I can almost hear it teasing me, *You can't ride me, you can't ride me, you can't ride me*. Fire wells up inside of me as I stare at it, and I have to force myself to go into the building, so this anger doesn't grow like it's trying to.

Inside, the empty club stretches out in front of me, looking like an entirely different place without the crowd the girls attract. I like it when it's empty. I usually enjoy the quiet of the room before we open the door, soaking in the calm before the storm.

I don't have to be here right now—my head of security duties aren't needed until the club opens, the schedule is up, and my bouncers have my number if they have questions. The only time I *need* to be here outside of operating hours is to conduct interviews for bouncers, which I don't have to do since we have enough of them. Hanging around here all day is better than the alternative, which is sitting on my couch watching TV. Desk duty has been less insufferable only because Jade and the girls are good at keeping me occupied.

The door to the back opens, and Jade walks out, followed by Flint. She has her jet-black hair pulled up in a ponytail and parted down the middle. When her hair is pulled back, her

high cheekbones and slender chin are put on display. Her hazel-green eyes stand out against her olive skin and dark hair, and her pouty pink lips are currently smiling as she talks.

“Yeah, I was thinking themed nights would keep things fresh, keep things interesting,” Jade’s saying, clutching a clipboard to her chest.

She’s a few paces in front of Flint, her long legs in leggings today, showing off her round hips, and her long-sleeved crop top revealing her narrow waist. One of my best friends happens to be the most gorgeous woman I’ve laid eyes on. Necks break every time she walks into any room—I’ve seen men on the streets walk into poles because they can’t take their eyes off of her. And the insane thing is she doesn’t seem to notice. If she does pick up on it, she doesn’t make it obvious, or maybe it’s that she doesn’t care. All the compliments she gets are politely acknowledged, and then that’s the end of it. I’ve watched her toss the numbers men slip her at bars or pretty much anywhere she goes into the trash. I’ve never seen her give anyone her attention. As I watch her talking to Flint, I can’t help but wonder why she doesn’t go for any of them. It’s something I’ve always wondered about. When I ask, she gives me the old “Nobody interests me” line, but something in my gut tells me that’s not it.

I don’t push, though. I figure when she wants to tell me, she will.

“I’m thinking one night could be like beach night, then another night could be masquerade night,” Jade says, her excitement evident. “I think the girls would have fun with it too.”

Flint bobs his head, agreeing with her. “Yeah. Sounds like it’ll keep this place packed. You know you don’t have to ask me to mix things up around here. This is your place. You do what you see fit.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jade says. “I just like having input from multiple people.”

“Well, I’m confident you know what you’re doing,” Flint tells her.

She's about to respond, but then she sees me hobbling towards them.

"You're here earlier than I'd thought you'd be today."

"Coming here is the bright spot to my day," I say, lowering down into one of the plush leather armchairs. "I wanted to see if I could lighten some of your load."

She shakes her head, and her hair swishes from side to side behind her. "I don't have much to do this morning. Just the liquor order, and I have to start looking for a crew to work the kitchen. It's just back there going to waste. But for once, I'm not backed up with work. But don't go anywhere," she demands, pointing her pen at me.

She pats Flint on the shoulder before she sashays away, her hair skimming the top of her heart-shaped ass. I have to tear my eyes away from her switching away—I don't think she knows how eye-catching and distracting her walk is, like watching the winding mountain roads snake from side to side—because I can actually feel Flint watching me. It's as if he were touching me with his hand.

Sure enough, when I turn around, he's watching me carefully, something akin to sympathy in his eyes.

And I can't fucking stand it.

I'm already aware of how pitiful I must look; I don't want to see proof of that on everyone's faces when they look at me.

I already know what he's going to say.

"How are you feeling?" he asks as I'm predicting his question in my head.

I refrain from rolling my eyes, but with his otherworldly sense of smell, I know he knows just how badly that question ticks me off. He raises his eyebrow at me, standing there with his arms over his chest, waiting on my answer.

"No better than yesterday, and probably won't feel any different tomorrow," I reply.

My answer doesn't faze him at all, and his lack of reaction tells me he expected that kind of response. Of course, he did—

he picked up on how I was feeling before I even walked into the building.

“You’re going to get better,” Flint tells me. “I know it doesn’t seem like it—”

“—seems unrealistic actually,” I cut in.

“—Because your progress has been slow,” Flint continues. “But any progress is still good.”

“Yeah, I hear ya,” I grumble. “I have a session with Layla later today.”

“As long as you keep working, you’ll be better in no time,” Flint encourages. “Just get that negativity out of your head. You’ll be fine.” He takes a step closer to me and drops a hand on my shoulder. “There’s a club meeting in two days, 9 o’clock.”

I nod, glad to hear there’s one thing I can look forward to this week.

“I’ll be there,” I confirm.

“Glad to hear it,” Flint says. “There are some important matters I’m bringing to the table, and I’m counting on your input.”

I have questions on the tip of my tongue, but he walks away before I can even get them out.

Turning in my seat, I call out, “What ‘matters’ are you talking about?”

“I’ll let you know in the meeting,” he says without looking back.

He tilts his head at Jade, and then he’s out the door.

I straighten up in my seat and shut my eyes, annoyed. I was already going to go to the meeting; he’s just making sure I remain too curious to ditch it even if I feel like shit the day of. But, instead of dwelling on Flint being intentionally vague, I push myself up out of the chair and make my way to Jade.

I don’t see her behind the bar, but I know she’s there—she’s making a lot of noise doing her counts. When I get up to the

bar, I find her crouched down, taking inventory of the wine on the bottom shelf on the side of the bar closest to the door. I wait for her to finish, not wanting to throw her count off.

When she's done, she stands up, reaching her hands above her head and stretching towards the ceiling.

"Gunner?" she says loudly, turning around quickly, and she jumps when she realizes I'm much closer than I was when she turned around.

"I'm right here," I tell her, smirking at her obvious surprise as she lowers her arms. "You don't have to yell."

"You crept over here so quietly," she replies like she's impressed. "Like a cat."

"I'm surprised you didn't hear my foot dragging across the floor." She rolls her eyes, and I lean on the counter as she comes closer to me. "What were you going to ask me?"

"I was going to ask how you're feeling today?"

Her question pulls a heavy sigh out of me. Man, I'm starting to hate those words being together in the same sentence.

"Can you stop asking me that?" I say it, and even I can hear the tone in my voice, but I don't think I'm going to be able to get rid of it. So I add, "Please, do me that favor. I hear that same question at least twelve times a day. The answer's always the same. In fact, if you're ever wondering after today, just know nothing much has changed."

Just like I thought, I couldn't take the tone down, but she doesn't shy away from the sharpness of my response—instead, she nods.

"You know," she says, grabbing the folded step stool from its storage space between the refrigerator and glass shelf. "You can't get mad at your *friends* and *brothers* for wondering about your well-being, especially since I know *someone* doesn't like to keep up with his exercises."

I squint my eyes at her. "Did Flint tell you that?"

She climbs up onto the stool and shoots me a look like 'really?'

“No,” she replies. “You’re here all day, every day, and I’ve not *once* seen you do the stretches you’re supposed to.”

“How do you know I don’t do them when I get home or in the morning before I leave?” I try her.

She glances over at me with an eyebrow raised. “Do you?”

I briefly consider telling the truth but knowing Jade, she’s going to press me about it.

“Yes,” I answer.

She instantly snorts. “That’s a lie,” she says with a small smile.

“The exercises aren’t helping as much as they should,” I sigh. “I haven’t made that much progression since I started working with Layla.”

“What I’m hearing is that you haven’t gotten worse,” she says slowly.

“Same thing Flint *just* said but in different words.” I look off to the side, accepting that maybe that’s the one silver lining I should take hold of. It is true, I haven’t gone downhill, and that is something to be happy about. “I guess you’re right.”

“That doesn’t seem to make you feel any better.”

“It doesn’t,” I confirm.

She stops her counting and pauses for a moment.

“What do you think of doing activities other than physical therapy?” she asks, tapping her pen on her clipboard.

I can’t think of anything that would actually help me.

“Like what?” I question.

“Well,” she starts. “That night you danced on stage, you seemed pretty comfortable. Maybe you need to be introduced to some more fluid movements, something that targets the full body instead of one set of muscles,” she suggests, climbing down off the step stool. “And then, after that, some strengthening exercises.”

“Details, Jade.”

“You know,” she says, walking towards me. “Like yoga, dancing—maybe even pole dancing.”

I know she’s trying to help, so I swallow the scoff that tries to escape me. “I only danced because the money would help the girls get settled in. And yoga? I’m not sure I’m confident about that. If Layla’s stretches don’t help, then why would yoga?”

“Because yoga isn’t only about stretching,” Jade corrects me. “It’s way more than that. It’s about connecting to your personal power, and it’s healing for your mind, body, and spirit. Think about it and reconsider dancing.” She urges me.

“Eh,” I shrug. “I *might*—and that’s a strong might—consider dancing. But pole dancing is off the table, but I’ll happily watch you up there. It’s funny—I know you used to be a stripper, but I’ve never seen any of your moves.” One side of her lips turns up as she sets the clipboard on the counter. “I’ve seen you dance, of course, but I’ve never seen you *dance*.”

Her gaze floats over my shoulder, fixed on the poles at the back of the club. “It’s been a while,” she says. “I’m not even sure I remember how.”

“Pssh—” I wave my hand in the air. “It’s like riding a bike.”

She laughs as she walks out from behind the bar. “Who told you that?”

I follow her towards the stage, watching as she gathers her hair and flips it behind her shoulder, flaring that sensual amber scent of hers. It’s a heavenly scent.

“I just assume it’s like picking up any hobby or skill put on the back burner,” I tell her, dropping down in one of the plush chairs close to the center stage.

She takes out her phone, shaking her head at me as she sets it on the stage before she climbs up. Once she’s up top, she kicks her shoes off, then she goes to the sound booth set up at the back of the platform. She leans over and looks at the computer. It doesn’t take her long to find a song. “River” by Bishop Briggs comes on, and then the rest of the lights dim except for a spotlight right on center stage.

She comes out from behind the booth, and the walk I swore was so captivating before has been turned up a few notches. Walking in time with the music, she slowly glides towards me, her shoulders back, chest pressed out, her bare feet crossing over as she makes her way to the pole. She reaches back to pull her scrunchie out, and the moment her hair's down, she completely transforms in front of me—her eyes turn low and seductive, and the glint in them becomes cat-like. One corner of her lips turns up into a mischievous smile. The way she's looking at me, like she can make all of my wishes come true, like she knows all of my secrets, like she knows exactly what makes me tick, opens my eyes to the side of her that knows exactly how much of a bombshell she is.

Her hand closes around the pole, and she continues her strut around, holding my gaze as she leans away from the pole and towards me. I catch a whiff of that sweet soothing amber, my eyes glued to her. When Bishop Brigg's mystical voice sounds throughout the place, Jade gracefully drops down just above my line of vision, her hands on her knees as she starts moving to the slow tune. She slithers up the pole and does a slow body roll against it before walking around it, only to come to a stop in front of me. She sinks down, both of her knees spread wide, her thick thighs looking juicier in those leggings. She moves her hips from side to side before she climbs back up the pole, giving me a clear view of her perfect ass.

I swallow hard as my cock grows increasingly stiff. Not the first hard-on she's caused. She's breathtaking and has a sultry beauty; the way she says my name is enough sometimes. But this Jade in front of me is dangerous. This Jade could have absolutely anything she wanted. Now that I'm seeing her with my own eyes, we're all lucky she's humble.

Her movements are hypnotizing, but her eyes are captivating. She's in control, telling me so without any words.

When she takes hold of the pole this time, she reaches above her head with both hands and pulls herself up. She wraps her legs around it and climbs higher before she effortlessly leans back, one hand still on the pole, lip-syncing to the chorus. She

starts to twirl down and lands in a split before pulling herself up to stand with the pole.

It's impossible to take my eyes off of her. When she swings back on the pole, she moves up and down it smoothly, never missing a beat, more graceful than anyone I've ever seen. None of the other dancers move like her. It's like she's defying gravity.

I could watch her all day.

CHAPTER 3

JADE

THE SONG ENDS, and I return back to my body. Being on stage is always like my soul leaves my body, and the music replaces it, setting into every fiber of my being to take complete control of me. When I'm done with one song, I always want to continue with another. It's been years since I've actually been on stage, and I'm reminded of just how good I feel when I am. Such a rush.

Now that this out-of-body experience is over, the silence surrounding me reminds me I'm at work, and I open my eyes. There's Gunner to greet me back into the world, staring at me with wide, stunned eyes, his lips slightly parted. I've known him for years, and in all of those, he's never once looked at me like this, like he has no idea what to say. He always has something to say, but he appears to be speechless at the moment. Under Gunner's intense gaze, heat rises up inside of me, and I want to show him what other ways I can move. Being able to capture the attention of an entire room is exhilarating—it has a way of making me feel powerful, like I have all of them in the palm of my hand. The euphoria that swells inside of me is like nothing I've ever felt. It's addictive.

However, the way Gunner stares up at me, like he's in awe of me, sends something else racing through me—a spark of scolding hot desire. His gaze heats me up, something that hasn't happened in a while, but I don't have time to decipher this intense heat scorching my center—one of us needs to say something.

“You were right after all,” I tell him with a smile, sliding my feet back into my sneakers. “It is like riding a bike, but I’m going to be sore in the morning, that’s for sure. I should start doing that on a regular basis again. I feel amazing.” A thought hits me, imagining myself doing this as a workout, and I turn to Gunner, who’s still staring at me wide-eyed. “Maybe I could offer pole dancing classes. Terra could help me with it.”

I wait for him to reply, but he still doesn’t say anything. He’s frozen in place, his eyes glued to me, and I have to push the random butterflies down.

“Gunner!” I say louder this time, and he finally comes out of his daze.

He takes a deep breath and pushes himself up in his seat.

“Yeah—” he blinks rapidly, then clears his throat. “Yeah, that would be a uhm—a good idea. Get Terra involved.” He pauses, and his eyebrows scrunch together. “Get her involved with what?”

It’s surprising seeing him like this. He’s been my dance partner multiple times, so of all people, I didn’t expect Gunner to get so distracted by my dancing, but in his defense, he’s never seen me on stage. The entire time I’ve known him, he’s never once fallen over himself like so many other men do, nor has he subjected me to his advances. I’m used to being approached and looked at as a fantasy or some sexual conquest. I rarely ever entertain any of those advances because all of it is pure lust, and it’s all passionless. With Gunner, there’d be something more. It wouldn’t only be sex with him, and I’m not quite ready to pursue anything deeper than a friendship.

I have to ignore how that look on his face is setting me ablaze.

“Pole dancing classes,” I chuckle at his confusion.

“Oh well then, yeah, definitely,” he nods. “That’s more money for the club, and it could give others the courage to apply. Instill confidence in people that are interested but nervous.”

That’s a good plan. It all plays out in my head—I just need to get a few curious souls in here, then show them they’d have nothing to worry about if they thought about dancing in front

of others. Pole dancing has been criticized so badly and reduced to nothing but showing too much skin and allowing men to reduce you to nothing but a sexual object. Yeah, I can see how it's exactly that from the outside and why some see it as degrading. There's such a stigma and so many negative views that have been placed on this form of dance that it keeps others from exploring it for any reason, even for exercise.

However, some dance because they need quick money—it's easy to walk away with thousands in a single night, depending on where you are. Why not get easy money dancing in something that can be worn at the beach? There are people out there profiting off of much worse.

But there are dancers that do it for the same reason I do. It's like being the queen of the world, having so many people eating out of the palm of your hand. Controlling the crowd, keeping their attention occupied, the lights, the music. In a word, it's euphoric.

That's the side I want interested people to grasp hold of. I want them to gain confidence while learning that pole dancing isn't degrading as society has painted it.

It may take months, but I want anyone that changes their mind to be comfortable.

"That could work," I say to Gunner as the wheels in my head continue to turn. "We just have to paint it in a more positive light than the world sees it."

"I don't think you should advertise it with the end goal of encouraging others to apply here to dance," Gunner suggests. "Sell it as a way to work out."

"That's smart," I instantly agree. "They'll learn as they 'work out,' and if I get Terra, Karmen, and Grace to help out, that's a total of four different experiences they'll be getting."

He gives me a single nod and says, "Glad I could help."

"I'll keep you around a bit longer," I tell him, playfully winking at him, mostly to butter him up for what I'm getting ready to say. It's probably going to annoy him, but I'm not going to let him think I'm giving up on getting him better.

“Are you going to sign up for the one and only one-on-one session I’m offering?” I ask him, and his jaw flexes. “Think about it, please, Gunner. I really think it could help you.”

“I’ll think about it,” he grumbles.

“Actually, think about it,” I plead with him, climbing off the stage. “Don’t just tell me you’ll consider it.” I come to a stop right in front of him, gathering my hair to put it back into a ponytail. “Weigh the pros and cons, watch videos, and make your final decision after you’ve looked deeper into it.”

He lets out a sigh, annoyance creeping onto his face, replacing the dazed look he had before, then he rubs his hands over his face. He’s back.

“You’re not going to let it go, are you?”

I smirk at him and shake my head. “And you know how determined I am when I want something.” Just to drive my point home, I lock eyes with him and lean forward with my hands on the arms of the chair until I’m right in his face. He doesn’t back away from me—instead, he lifts one of his thick eyebrows. “I *always* get what I want, Gunner.”

He takes a deep breath as he searches my face, then I smile at him before ruffling his luscious hair.

Just as I stand back, the door opens, and light floods into the entryway at the front of the building. Grace and Karmen come in, looking as if they just got done running. Karmen has her red hair pulled back into short pigtails, and Grace’s black tresses sit on top of her hair in a messy bun. They’re both sweaty, Karmen in a white long-sleeve top with black shorts, Grace in a yellow crop top hoodie and gray yoga pants. Both of their faces are flushed pink from exertion.

I’m thinking Terra’s not too far behind them—the three of them haven’t gone anywhere separately since they moved here. But the door doesn’t open again.

“Is the schedule up?” Karmen asks, setting her bag down on the bar as she comes this way.

“I haven’t done it yet,” I answer. “I’ll get it put up later today. Hey—where’s Terra.”

“It’s odd not seeing the three of you together,” Gunner adds.

Grace shrugs, and a frown descends on her face. “We stopped by her place this morning, but she told us she wasn’t feeling up for a run. We thought she would have been here already.”

I glance over at Gunner, who’s already looking at me, concerned.

“Did she call you?” I ask him

“I haven’t heard from her.”

Karmen lifts herself up to sit on the stage. “I don’t think she’s sick either. I think she’s deciding whether or not she should go back to that piece of shit lion.”

My heart drops at that. I really hope that’s just speculation on Karmen’s part. “Why do you say that?” I question her.

“Because she’s done it before,” Grace informs me, and alarms start going off in my head. This could be another reason she’s been off the past few weeks. “But last time, she really couldn’t escape him since she didn’t have anywhere to go.”

Karmen says from her spot on the stage, “I tried telling her it’s different now, that she’s safe here, but I don’t think she wants to hear it.”

“I don’t think she can accept it,” Grace states.

I bite down hard on my back teeth, and my heart beats harder in my chest. I’ll be damned if she goes back to fucking Tobias. I’m going to do *everything* I can to prevent that from happening.

I have to go see her. Now.

I link my eyes with Gunner as I walk back toward the office. “Can you finish the liquor order?” I ask him, and he gives me a single nod of his head.

After I grab my purse from the office, I leave the club. I find my car parked on the side of the building and head toward Terra’s apartment.

The town has woken up, there are people walking on the sidewalk, and the roads have gone from clear and empty to

slow-going cars that prevent me from going as fast as I want. I make a stop, pulling over to go into a corner store that serves breakfast to grab two coffees and bacon, egg, and cheese biscuits.

When I get to Terra's, I balance both coffees in my hand and hold the bag with the biscuits between my chest and forearm to knock on the door. I stand here, listening for footsteps, but my knock is only answered with silence. I knock again, and still, nothing happens. I take a step closer to the door listening for any movement, but I don't hear anything except the TV. I tap on the door again, a bit harder and faster this time, and again, I go unanswered.

She must've slipped out after Karmen and Grace checked on her, I think, and my panic spikes, making me knock again. What if she's already left?

Calm down, Jade, I think, pressing my ear to the door. Maybe she went out to get groceries or—

The lock tumbling over stops my thoughts, and I push off the door just in time to pretend like I wasn't listening for signs of life. I put a smile in place as Terra comes into view, but the sight of her almost wipes it away.

"Hey!" My smile remains intact, and I'm hoping my being here doesn't make her feel self-conscious.

She's in navy blue sweatpants and a white tank top, her bangs are clipped on top of her head, and the rest is pulled back into a ponytail. But what really catches my attention is her red-rimmed eyes. I'm so close to asking her what's going on, but I push past my concern and maintain my cheerfulness. It isn't lost on me that she doesn't want company or to be seen like this, so I pretend like I don't notice her appearance and sad eyes.

"Jade..." she has the door open wide enough for me to see her entire body, but it's clear she's reluctant to let me in. "Was there a meeting I missed this morning? I'm sorry. I didn't know—"

Her voice fades off as I start shaking my head. “There wasn’t a meeting. You weren’t with Karmen and Grace, so I thought you might be sick or something. I brought breakfast just in case you aren’t, though,” I announce, holding up the two coffees and the greasy bag. “You hungry?”

She blankly stares at the bag, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Mind if I come in?” I ask when she doesn’t reply, taking a step closer to her, trying to get her to let me come inside instead of her just taking what I brought with me. “Just for a moment, then I’ll be out of your hair.”

She hesitates for a second, and I get the feeling she’s going to say no, but then she steps to the side, allowing space for me to enter.

But as I’m walking, I almost falter in my steps. The mess is immediately noticeable. Terra’s usually pretty tidy; the last few times I’ve been here, the place was immaculate. It’s the complete opposite now.

Making my way over to the table in her kitchen, I try not to make it obvious that I’m assessing the disarray: crumpled tissues litter the coffee table, surrounding empty wine glasses and take-out containers, the unmade bed over in the far corner of the room has laundry piled at the foot of it, the blinds are closed and even with the light on, it’s still hard to tell the day outside is lovely, there are numerous dishes in the sink, and there are three empty wine bottles sitting beside the trash can.

My heart sinks as I set the coffees and biscuits down on the table in the kitchen. I didn’t expect it to be like this.

“Sorry about the mess,” she says as I take in the dirty pots on the stove.

“Please—” I lean on the table and sip from the coffee I got for myself. “This isn’t even half as bad as some other places I’ve seen.”

She sits on the couch with her feet underneath her and then wraps herself in the burgundy throw beside her.

“I’ve been meaning to get around to cleaning,” she tells me. “But I just haven’t had much energy for anything other than

work the past few weeks.”

That’s a good cover to diminish what I know she’s actually going through. I might have believed her if I didn’t already have a clue. My heart aches for her.

“We’ve all been there,” I go along with her for now. “I could give you a hand if you want.”

Her eyes widen slightly, and she shakes her head. “No, I couldn’t ask you to do that. You probably have a lot of work to get back to.”

“Eh, I have a lighter load today,” I say nonchalantly, then turn around to get a biscuit out of the bag. “Besides, Gunner’s there. He knows what needs to be handled. I’m offering to do this for you. I don’t mind—really, I don’t. I read somewhere that a clean space can have positive effects on a person’s mood. Who knows? It might help you.”

I take her coffee and breakfast over to her, and she hesitantly reaches for them.

“Thank you,” she says quietly.

“No problem. Where are your trash bags?”

“Under the sink in the kitchen.”

Instead of retrieving the trash bags, I start doing the dishes that are piled in the sink. Some of them are crusted over with dried food, and others have bits on them starting to mold. I pour bleach into the hot water and pull on gloves before getting to work. As I begin scrubbing plates, I look over my shoulder, and she’s staring at the cooking show that’s playing. I hate that she feels like nobody wants her here. On top of that, she’s paranoid and scared, but she doesn’t have anywhere to go, even if she were to leave. The world must feel like an intimidating place for her right now.

I have to get her to see she’s better off here.

“So I was thinking,” I start loud enough for her to hear me. “Maybe offering a pole dancing class at the club might get people interested in applying. Gunner said it should be advertised as a workout class. I think that’s a smart way to do

it—people are always looking for ways to exercise without having to lift weights or run, and this way, it won't seem like we're trying to recruit dancers, which we are.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Terra replies.

“Right! I'm hoping that will solve the hiring issue,” I continue. “We'd incorporate confidence-building methods and change opinions about pole dancing. I'm not sure what the turnout would be, but all I need is at least three more dancers, so the three of you don't get burned into the ground.”

“Yeah, that could work.”

I look over my shoulder again, and Terra's still staring at the TV, her biscuit in hand, but it remains wrapped in the yellow paper. When I don't say anything more, she turns her head to look at me, and her shoulders rise as she takes a deep breath before she gives a distressed smile.

“I-I think people would have fun trying it,” she adds. “It's something new. No matter how some feel about it, there are always going to be a handful of people curious.”

I nod, agreeing with her. “Exactly. That's what I was thinking. We wouldn't attract a big crowd, but we'd pull in enough.”

“Good idea, Jade.” She brings the cup of coffee to her lips and takes a small sip.

“Is that something you would want to help with?” I ask, wanting to keep her talking. “Of course, you'd get paid for it, and I still have to run the idea past the others before I do anything with it. But I was thinking of getting you to help me put it together. You're the bubbliest of the three, and you're personable. I think you could add a really fun element to the classes.”

“Can I—can I think about it and give you an answer?” she asks.

I nod and turn back around to the dishes. “Yeah, no rush. It's not set in stone yet—I'm just brainstorming ways I can encourage curious onlookers to apply. I'll let you know what I decide.”

Once I finish the dishes, I retrieve a trash bag from under the sink and start putting take-out boxes from the counter into it before wiping away all the sticky spots and crumbs. When I begin clearing the dining room table, I glance up at her sitting quietly on the couch, staring at the TV, chewing on her bottom lip, clearly worried.

“You know,” I start. Her attention snaps to me as if she forgot I was even here. “Flint isn’t mad at you, nor is Blade or anyone else.” I go about putting trash in the bag and talk as I do. “Flint told you you’d have the gang’s protection, and that’s what you got. Now that you’re here, the brotherhood has you covered.”

Her shoulders rise a bit when I bring it up, and she appears surprised, probably wondering how I could possibly know what’s been up with her.

“You’ve been different ever since the night that mane came for you,” I reveal gently. “And I know you’ve been feeling responsible for how badly Blade got hurt.”

She purses her lips together, looking as if she’s fighting back tears.

“It feels like I brought trouble to this peaceful little town,” she finally admits. “I appreciate the gang, and I’m grateful beyond words to them for defending me, someone they don’t even know. This is the safest I’ve felt in the last six years—”

Six years. Shit.

“—But I’m responsible for what took place. I can’t get over that.”

“Trust me,” I say, tossing wine bottles into the bag. “You aren’t the first, nor will you be the last person to come through here with baggage. But the gang is more than capable of fighting off any threat that rolls through here.”

She nods, but I’m not convinced she accepted what I just told her. Her guilt is going to overshadow any effort to change her mind. I saw how badly Blade was hurt—Flint said if not for Roxy’s quick thinking, he may have died. If someone almost died fighting for me, I’m sure I wouldn’t be able to let go of it

either, especially if I believed everyone was bitter towards me because of it.

“You have to know the gang wouldn’t offer to protect you, then be angry with you after the fact,” I tell her.

“I know,” she says softly. “I get that, but I feel like I’m a problem.”

As I stand here, I realize my words aren’t going to change her mind; all I can do is offer reassurance, and she’s going to have to see it for herself.

“You’re anything but a problem. I’m having a get-together at my place tomorrow night,” spontaneously rolls out of my mouth. “You should definitely come. It might help to take your mind off of things. Plus, there will be amazing appetizers and wine. Who can say no to that? Please say you’ll come.”

“I’ll come,” she answers hesitantly.

“Great! You don’t have to bring anything,” I say, picking the second biscuit up off the table along with my coffee. “Just bring yourself, and maybe some pajamas? These things go pretty late.” I set the biscuit on the table in front of her as I walk past it. “You can have that. I kind of want a burger now.”

When I get to the door, I turn around and say. “If you need anything, please call me. Even if it’s late at night. I’ll answer and be over here if you want the company.”

She actually gives me a genuine smile this time.

“Thanks, Jade.”

Outside, I dig my phone out of my purse as I move for the stairs, and I find Roxy in my contact list.

She picks up on the first ring.

“What up?” she answers.

“You feel like helping me get ready for an impromptu gathering? Specifically for Terra. She’s not doing too great, and I’m worried for her.”

“Sure, I don’t have anything going on,” she replies.

I get back in my car, quickly hashing out the details of tomorrow's gathering; glad I was able to get Terra to join us. Now I just have to make sure she feels welcomed.

CHAPTER 4

GUNNER

TODAY....WAS never-ending. All I want right now is a stiff drink and some quiet. Since I'm out of everything at home, the Old Storehouse will have to do. There's never much of a crowd on weeknights, so it shouldn't be too rowdy; at least, that's what I'm hoping. I want to relax after the day I had.

After finishing the liquor order, I had to make minor adjustments to the schedule, which still has me annoyed, especially since it would never have happened if a request off form had been filled out. I'm lenient as shit with the schedule. All I ask is for a call to let me know of any lateness, at least five hours before a scheduled shift to call out, and to fill out request-off forms before I do my fucking schedule for the week. I would have just made Ryder come in if he weren't already out of town.

In the middle of fixing the schedule, the guy that applied to be kitchen manager called and kept me on the phone for an hour, fifty-nine minutes longer than I wanted to be. When Jade finally came back, we went through the many applications for kitchen staff and made some callbacks. At the end of all of that, the therapy session with Layla didn't do any good for my mood. A full hour of stretching and bending only has me sore. She said I was ready to take on something more intense, and she didn't hold back. I feel like I was on the verge of being quartered, but the gruesome act was stopped just as my limbs were about to start tearing.

Everyone heals at a different rate, but my process has been discouraging. Watching Flint and Blade both recover without

needing physical therapy makes accepting my state harder. They both took major damage, life-threatening damage, yet they're both walking around brand fucking new.

They keep telling me it's my attitude, but I couldn't disagree more. I was optimistic in the beginning, and I wanted nothing more than to walk without needing to lean on a cane. Still, my body did not want to cooperate.

So tonight, I'm going to hydrate and try to get myself to be okay with the fact that I may very well need to use a cane for the rest of my life. Just the thought of carrying this nuisance around angers me, but there's not much I can do about it.

Pulling up to the Old Storehouse, I find it packed with motorcycles and cars, and my desire for a semi-quiet night is squashed. I let out a deeply irritated sigh as I park in the spot closest to the door. Flint's Rocket is parked to my right, which explains why the entire gang is here. I came here on the one night none of them had anything to do. Of course, this is my luck.

I'd go home, but I'm already this far, and I don't have shit there. I need to go grocery shopping, but that is such an energy-depleting task now. Do I want to deal with this noise right now?

In the quiet of the night, it's easy to hear the heavy metal coming through the walls of the bar, and I almost turn around to go home, but I decide to stay. I'm already here, and I'll leave when it gets to be too much.

The bell rings above my head, and Flint's already looking at me from behind the bar as he pours a drink. There are a few others around the bar top, all of them human. Since the strip club opened, there have been more non-shifters on this side, which is probably why Slash is sitting in the corner brooding. The others sitting with him fucking around take away from his intimidating energy. Talon is telling a story about who knows what while Blaze, Tiberius, and Ax listen. Whatever he's saying must be funny because they all crack up, except for Slash, who's glaring at the group of humans sitting at the bar.

In the back, Roxy and Blade are in their own little world, focused on their pool game. They're having their own little party, not paying attention to anyone else.

Ignoring the eyes that fall on me, I walk over to the bar and lean against it, waiting on Flint to come my way. It doesn't take him long. After serving four more guests, Flint makes his way over to me.

"Glad to see you here tonight," Flint says.

"It's been a while. There's a lot of new faces." I look around, taking in every unfamiliar person or people I've only seen on the human side when I've had to go work something out with the sheriff.

Flint glances around the room and nods. "Excellent for business, especially now that the club opened up. It's good they're starting to come on this side now. The timing is perfect, actually." He sets a bottle of Guinness down in front of me as well as a glass and pours a larger amount of Hennessy than recommended.

"What makes you say that?" I ask him. "Could it have anything to do with what you're going to discuss in the meeting?"

"It's related, yes," he confirms.

I digest that, trying to figure out what this news that involves humans can be. Whatever it is, it's very likely it's going to cause a rift. Slash in the corner is proof of that, and I know he's not the only one that won't like it.

"It doesn't look like everyone is so happy with mingling," I tell him before throwing that shot of Hennessy back in two gulps, then I tap the bar.

"Slash will be fine," Flint says, refilling my glass. "He's going to have to be."

I actually laugh at that. "You're being extremely optimistic. Accepting other shifters into the mix is one thing but humans? I'm surprised he's still here."

"I actually am too," Flint says, looking over at him.

Before I can reply, someone on the other side of the bar grabs Flint's attention, and he turns to go to them. I'd sit at the bar where I am and wait for him to circle back around, but these chairs are way too uncomfortable, leaving one of the open spaces in the corner with the rest of the gang the only place to sit.

There's a space beside Talon on the bench side that I lower down into.

"You've been missing from the scene, Gun," Tiberius says at the top of his voice as I sit down.

"Don't call me that," I demand. "And being around all of your loud mouths isn't how I want to spend every evening."

Talon nudges my arm, shooting a sly grin at Tiberius across the table. "He hates when you call him Tibby," Talon informs me, and Tiberius scowls at him. "See."

Ax laughs loudly. "Tibby. I'ma start calling you that."

"Don't call me that shit, man," Tiberius grunts.

"I'll make sure to drop that name next time I see you talking to a woman," I threaten him.

Slash chimes in, holding his glass to his lips. "You won't ever have to call him that, then."

Tiberius leans forward to get a better look at Slash. "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"He means you don't get women, man," Blaze clarifies. "You're not a ladies' man."

Tiberius sucks his teeth and says, "I pull more women than anyone at this table."

I can't help but scoff at that. "I'm walking with a cane, and I still get more attention than you'd ever get."

Everyone cracks up at that, even Slash chuckles.

"None of you know the kind of women I pull out of town," Tiberius covers. "Ax knows."

“Don’t bring me into this,” Ax laughs. “I only pay attention to who comes my way when we go out. I don’t see who you talk to.”

“Because it’s nobody,” Talon says, cracking up

Talon’s mocking laughter causes Tiberius to glare.

“The fuck are you snickering at?” Tiberius fires back. “It’s fucking rich as shit the two children of the group that makes any woman they talk to dry heave have anything to say.”

Astonishment crosses Blaze’s face, while Talon only finds more humor in being singled out.

“Did that make you feel better?” Blaze ridicules him.

“He’s getting mad,” Talon snickers.

The two of them are very good at pissing people off. They bounce off each other all the time, and most of the time, their minds together end up being their downfall. Currently, however, it’s entertaining as fuck watching them easily rile Tiberius.

“Damn right, I’m getting pissed,” Tiberius growls, red in the face. “You two are good as fuck at talkin’ shit but don’t have the balls to back it.”

Blaze laughs, shaking his head. “My only problem is that I’m too young for the women I’m interested in. Everyone knows I like ‘em older—”

“—they don’t like you,” Ax interjects.

“Shut up,” Blaze snips at Ax, then turns back to Tiberius. “But Talon’s a vulgar idiot, and you’re a hot-headed one. You and Talon are in the same category.”

“Bull fuckin’ shit!” Talon exclaims. “You’re a blundering idiot when you try to talk to anyone. At least I can talk straight.”

“But that doesn’t mean shit when the words that come out of your mouth are nonsense!” Blaze challenges. “That’s probably exactly why you haven’t gone after—”

Talon shoves him in the chest, knocking Blaze into Slash.

“Shut the fuck up, man,” Talon orders.

“You shut the fuck up,” Blaze says, shoving him back.

Slash pushes Talon off of him and scoots a little further away from him.

“And that right there is why neither of you can ‘pull’ anyone,” Slash spits out. “Both of you are childish as shit.”

They’re all quiet for a moment, staring at Slash, the very words I was getting ready to say shutting them all up.

Ax breaks the silence and says, “Not all of us are so lucky to have the sole reason for our relationship be a mate bond.”

Slash’s intense, angry blue eyes cut into Ax, who doesn’t back down.

“That’s not even close to being right—” but his sentence cuts off, and his head snaps towards the door.

Seconds later, it opens, and Marilyn comes in. Her curly hair is down, falling around her face and in front of her shoulders, and she is dressed in a black long-sleeve v-neck shirt, jeans, and boots. She looks tired, but when she finds Slash sitting in the corner, she smiles. He sits up straighter, and the aggravation that was evident before disappears.

She comes over and plops down in his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. Whatever he was about to say is thrown to the wayside as he gets wrapped up in Marilyn.

The guys resume talking, but I tune them out. Seeing Slash’s mood completely change has me wondering just how strong a mate bond has to be to have that kind of effect on someone. They all say the same thing, that it’s like finding the other half of your soul. I want that deeper connection and have been told numerous times what it’s like to bond with your true mate, but that knowledge doesn’t drive me to search her out. Searching is a waste of time.

I glance at Roxy and Blade, still deep in a game of pool, then I look back at Slash and Marilyn. What they have is something that can barely be put into words, and they were sitting on top of it the whole time. Their connections weren’t instant, not

like Flint and Layla's, which I consider lucky. My true mate could be right under my nose, or she could be on the other side of the world, and I'm not up to trying to figure out where she might be. That's a fantastic way to miss out on meaningful friendships. Why pass up memorable experiences brushing people off who have the potential to be lifelong friends? The chances of me finding her in this life aren't very high, and I'm not going to waste time. It's not like I'll ever know exactly what it is I'm missing out on, and I'm okay with that.

The door opens again, and this time Grace and Karmen walk in, and Jade's soft fragrance hits my nose before she comes into view. When she comes in, she immediately glances over to where I'm sitting, and offers a smile and a wave, then continues on to the bar. Even though it hasn't been long since I last saw her, she looks happy to see me. She always does.

So many eyes stick to her as she goes to the bar, but she doesn't even seem to notice. I wonder what that's like, constantly being stared at. It has to be intimidating and uncomfortable. But I guess if you're used to being looked at wearing much less, you grow used to having eyes on you.

If any of these guys saw what Jade's like on stage, they'd be head over heels for her, even more so than they are now. Captivating became hypnotizing, and I can't get it out of my head. I've been able to keep my attraction to her at bay, but the private show I got keeps playing in my head at random times. As far as I know, Roxy's the only one here that's seen her on stage. I want it to stay like that. They would all be in her face if they only knew how electrifying her stage presence is.

She talks to Flint as he makes her drink, and I find it funny that she's paying no mind to the attention she's getting. Everyone wants her, but they'll never get her despite how confident each of them is that they could woo her. Jade's sweet, but she's extremely vocal and honest with her rejections.

Drink in hand, she turns towards where the gang sits and walks over, giving Marilyn a wave as she approaches. She slides between the tables, and Ax scoots over to make space for her.

She sets her lively eyes on Talon, and his entire posture changes under her attention.

“Scoot over,” she orders Talon, and a suave grin spreads across his face.

“Anything for you, milady.” Talon scoots over, forcing Blaze over in the process. “Damn, I love it when you boss me around like that.”

Her face scrunches up in disgust. “Yuck,” she grimaces before sitting down.

I laugh at her unfiltered response, and so does Blaze.

I don't hear whatever Blaze says to Talon—Jade's scent has my bear feeling calm for the first time today since I left the club.

“Don't bite my head off for asking,” she starts, crossing one leg over the other before she leans against me. “How was therapy?”

I figured that was coming from her preface. I want to be annoyed by the question, but two glasses of Hennessy has me feeling just a bit easier.

“It went,” I say simply enough. “Are you asking me to find out how much I struggled so you can try to convince me to let you put me through your torture?”

“I'm genuinely curious about how it went,” she replies. “I want to try helping you, but that doesn't mean I don't have faith in what Layla's doing.”

I let out a sigh.

“Layla's good, and I'm certain if my wounds weren't so deep, I might not be as bad off as I am. I don't know, Jade. I just don't want to try anything else only to get disappointed. I'm convinced I'm going to need this cane for the rest of my life.”

“Well,” she says slowly. “It sounds like you've already accepted a certain outcome for your future. What do you have to lose trying what I have in mind? You sound pessimistic enough. I don't think you could get any more disappointed.”

Her words echo in my head. She's right about my pessimistic view concerning my healing—I'm on the verge of giving up completely. If I agree to work with Jade, the worst that could happen is that I'm right in the end and have to use this cane until I die. I'm already prepared for that anyway.

"Fine," I give in. "But I'm not expecting much."

She puts her hand on her chest and gasps, trying to hold back her excitement.

"Have some faith," she says. "Your doubts are offensive, to say the least."

I chuckle at her dramatics.

"That's not saying I don't believe in you," I shrug. "I'm on empty right now, and I don't think what you have in mind could put me in a worse position."

Her lips press together, and those green eyes of hers dig into me.

"You really don't think you'll get better, huh?"

"I think I'm too wounded to get any better," I say honestly.

"Gunner..." she says, gently touching my leg, but I shake my head.

"Don't feel sorry for me," I cut her off. "It's just reality. I have to accept it at some point, right? So that's why a month is a good amount of time to try it your way. If I don't see results by then, I'm done."

I can see her thoughts falling over each other as her eyes go stern, but then she grins at me and nods.

"That's fair," she says. "But I'm confident I'll be able to help you. And since you gave me such a crunched time frame, we're starting tomorrow. Four days a week, bright and early. You can rest on the weekends."

I nod, agreeing to her terms.

She seems excited about it as she sits back and lets out a content sigh. I'm not too confident this is going to work. I've barely gotten to this point with Layla, as skilled as she is, but

at least there's a bright spot in switching it up for a bit. I'll have more chances to see what other ways Jade moves, which is the silver lining in all of this.

CHAPTER 5

GUNNER

MY ALARM WENT OFF ALL TOO SOON this morning. It was no sooner than I normally wake up; however, on previous mornings, I wasn't faced with early morning yoga and dancing. I wish I were still in bed, and as I turn into the parking lot of Paradise, I'm tempted to turn around and send Jade a message saying I overslept once I get home. The thought remains as I ease into the parking space closest to the door, and I put the truck in reverse, but I keep my foot pressed on the brake.

Jade would never buy that I overslept. I've been here bright and early every day, and there isn't a club meeting. She knows I'm not one to oversleep, so I can't use that as an excuse, especially not on the very first day I granted her permission to help me. She'd see right through that lie, and I'm sure she'd show up to call me on it. I could use the shape I'm in as a reason, that I'm a little worse off than normal, but I'm certain that would only encourage her, give her more of a reason to get me up and moving. The only way I'd be able to skip out on this is if I were physically ill, and it's clear that I'm not sick.

Putting the truck in park, I lean back into the seat and rest against the headrest behind me, taking in a deep breath. My bear, aggravated and short-tempered as usual these days, urges me to turn around and go home, and I almost, *almost*, do it. I almost change my mind, but instead of shifting back into reverse, I turn the truck off. I have to push myself to do this for a month, then I'll start adapting to what the rest of my life will be—a stationary Blood Brother, left in town to take care of whatever paperwork or local matters need to be tended to.

That's usually the responsibility of the younger members, but since I can't even walk four feet without my leg getting weak, it's now my duty.

I wonder who'll take over my diplomatic role. Just the thought of someone else filling my position is a stab in the chest.

After the loud rumble of the truck finally leaves my ears, a steady pulse replaces it, coming to me faintly through the walls of the club.

Wow—she's really serious about this. I didn't know she was going to get started so early. The sun's barely even up. I take a moment longer to collect myself before forcing myself to get out of the truck. May as well get day one over with.

Once inside, Jade's seductive scent hits me, and I come to a stop right at the threshold of the club. Not because my leg gave out or because I can't walk any further, but because Jade decided to get started without me. She's twirling down the pole, one leg wrapped around it, the other sticking straight out as she leans back, one hand gripping the pole, the other stretched in the air.

She doesn't notice me standing in the doorway—I don't think she heard me come in over the music. That's all good because I'm not sure I'd be able to find my words. She's in a lime green sports bra and black boxer shorts that just barely cover that perfect ass of hers. Her olive skin glistens with sweat under the lighting, telling me she's been at this for a while. As she moves around the pole, her long black hair flows behind her.

I thought she was mesmerizing just yesterday, but the moves she broke out before are nothing like the advanced ones she was hiding. I've been to many strip clubs, but I've never seen dancers do what she can do. It's clear she was holding out with her moves yesterday, or maybe she had to warm up first because what she's doing is on another level.

She's definitely magical—nobody can just defy the rules of gravity like that. She moves effortlessly up and down the pole, almost as if she's flying. Her core strength is impressive—her hands are latched around the pole above her head. She slowly

raises her legs to lock one around the pole, holding herself up as she unfolds so she's head first toward the ground. She slides down and comes to a handstand on the floor. When she lowers down, she goes into a split. Only to plant her hands on the ground to lift herself back into a handstand. She wraps both legs back around the pole and lifts herself back up.

I'm not sure how long I'm standing here; I can't take my eyes off of her. Even my bear's interested, looking at her with his head tilted. He's confused about something—what? I don't know. Maybe he's trying to figure out how her movements are like she's moving underwater. She has us both awestruck.

When she slides down to the ground as the song ends, she stands up, and her chest slowly rises and falls as she takes deep, even breaths. She reaches up, and her hands get lost in her hair, pushing it out of her smiling face, her eyes still shut. She looks happy.

She slowly opens her eyes, and for a second, she looks dazed until she sees me standing here. She blinks a few times before a gleeful grin spreads across her face.

“Hey!” she calls from across the club. “You actually showed up on time. I thought you were going to be late or just not show up at all. Honestly, I fully expected you to back out.”

For a moment, I can't talk. It's hard to form words after that show, and now that she's standing still, her curves are on display in what little she's wearing. Her flat stomach is decorated with a belly piercing, and her round hips extend down into her long toned legs, legs that would feel magnificent wrapped around my waist.

I blink, hard, trying to clear my head, thankful as fuck that I chose to pull on compression shorts before I left.

“I gave you a month,” I finally say. “I'm going to let you do what you can with all the time you have. You aren't going to make me do what you were doing, are you?” I ask with a smirk.

She lets out a joyful laugh. “No. Not yet, at least. We have to get you loose first.”

“Those didn’t look like the moves of something out of practice,” I point out. “I’m sure if you let go of the pole, you’d be floating. You make it look so easy.”

“It’s my superpower,” she laughs, then shrugs. “Yesterday was muscle memory, but today, today felt like flying. One time back on the pole, and the dancing bug is back in my system.” When she’s done talking, she claps her hands and then points to the ground to two yoga mats already rolled out. “You ready to get started?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I tell her, eyeing the foam mats on the ground. “I can’t say I’m overly excited to get started, but I’m ready to get it over with.”

She steps on the yoga mat with the different chakras displayed, her red velvet toes standing out against the black of the mat. My eyes climb her legs, roam across her thighs, up her belly, over her breasts, and her slender neck to the smile on her lips to find curiosity in her prying eyes. It’s always like she’s reading me, trying to figure out everything there is to know about me.

I love that look.

“You’ll thank me later.” She gracefully lowers to the floor into a cross-legged position.

“See, I’m not even sure I can sit down on the floor without groaning,” I tell her, setting my cane aside. “I’ll probably be cursing you after this.”

“You’re going to be a slinky after this month is over,” she declares, motioning for me to join her on the ground. “You have to get used to being on the floor. This is going to be a mix of ground sequences and standing sequences.”

Slowly, I lower down to one knee as Jade watches me inquisitively. I usually hate being assessed, but somehow, not when Jade’s the one observing me.

Once I’m finally on the ground, I’m more uncomfortable than I was when I was standing.

“Fuck,” I groan, readjusting myself with my legs straight out in front of me. “Shit. Why the fuck does anyone ever sit on the

floor? I'm not going to be able to sit with my legs crossed like you."

She gives an understanding nod.

"That's okay. We'll work up to that. First, we're going to warm up with some beginner poses, and that should get you loose enough to get through what I have planned for after."

"Sounds like I'm going to be sore."

"You will," she confirms. "Now, just do what I do. You're going to flow with your breathing, long, even breaths. We're going to warm up our shoulders." She starts rotating her shoulders back, and I do the same, mimicking the large circles she's doing. A few rotations backward, and then she switches up directions, going forward. When we're done with that, I can feel the heat those repetitions created.

"Now we're going to wake our side up with a side body stretch," she instructs.

Her left hand goes to the floor, and she leans over to the left, pointing her chest upward, and I do the same. I don't go as low as she can, nor can I twist to point my chest upward; this is a pretty intense stretch for me.

"Breathe," she reminds me as she sinks a little deeper.

"I am breathing," I grunt.

"Deeper. In through your nose and out through your lips. Breathe in until you can't anymore. Copy me."

She takes in a long, audible breath, and I do as she does, filling my lungs up like she said, then blowing it out through my lips.

"Just keep doing that," she says. "Each time you exhale, try to go just a little bit deeper into the stretch." She sits up and puts her right hand on the ground. "Now, the other side. What you do to one side, you do to the other."

She leans to the right, and I hesitate for a moment. This is my much tighter side, and I'm just a bit jealous that she does it so easily, her eyes closed, wearing a smile, like she's enjoying it.

I'm definitely not about to have the same look on my face.

I can't lean over even half as far as I did on the other side, and the tension all throughout my left side makes sure I let out a groan as I try to lean over. She doesn't open her eyes to look at me, she just keeps breathing, and I follow her lead as best as I can.

I don't stay as long as she does. After about ten seconds of trying to hold it, the tightness gets to be too much, and I come out of it.

When she opens her eyes and doesn't even question me.

"Now twist to the right," she continues, putting her left hand on her right knee, then she turns to the side, her right hand propped up behind her.

I do the same, but my right hand doesn't reach behind me. Instead, I squeeze my eyes shut and try to inhale through my obliques protesting. But twisting over to the left is slightly worse than the right.

"Now stretch to the ceiling," she says, eyes closed, her palms pressed together above her head. "Sit up tall with your back straight."

While her chest pushes outward, an arch in her spine, I can only manage a back curved like a 'c,' and my hands don't meet above my head.

"Now lean forward, keep your back as straight as you can, chin pointed forward."

She melts all the way down to the floor without even trying, and I end up like an acute angle.

After leaning forward for a few moments, she flips over onto her hands and knees.

"We're going to get our backs warmed up with a few rounds of cat-cow now," she informs me, looking over at me and nodding. "This will probably feel really good for you. It's such a simple move, but it feels amazing when you're sore."

She waits for me to get into the same position as her, then she pushes her chest forward, her face lifts up to the ceiling, and her stomach presses towards the floor, pushing her ass into the

air. She slowly moves her hips from side to side before her back curves upwards, and her gaze falls to the floor.

I mimic her movement, first arching my back, and I didn't expect the pull in my hips and my obliques, which for the first time, didn't hurt. It feels really fucking amazing, actually. Then I push my back up to the ceiling, and it feels just as good.

I repeat this... cat-cow, reveling in how fantastic it feels. This is the first stretch that doesn't feel like my muscles are going to rip. It's such a gentle, soothing stretch. I could do this all day. However, after a while, I realize I haven't heard Jade, and I look over at her to find her curled into a ball on her knees, her arms stretched out in front of her. I do the same, but I come out of the pose earlier than she does, though.

When she unfolds, she lifts up to her hands and knees and positions her hands a little closer to the front of her mat.

"Alright, now downward dog," she tells me. "Take it slow. It's wild—downward dog is a resting position, but sometimes it feels so demanding. Just take your time to adjust in it."

She lifts off the floor and pushes her ass into the air as her arms and legs straighten out. Her chest presses back towards her thighs, her elbows locked, her back and arms inverted, and her feet flat on the ground.

Shit. It looks easy enough, but I already know this is going to be a challenge.

I copy her, and right from the beginning, the demand she was talking about makes itself known. My hamstrings cry out, the muscles in my shoulders and back scream, and my left leg almost instantly wants me to lower back down, but I'm going to hold this as long as I can.

"Press your fingertips into the mat," she instructs. "It'll take some of the pressure off your wrist."

I do as she says, and it instantly helps.

I'm so busy trying to breathe through this full-body stretch, I don't notice when Jade comes to my side until I feel her warm hands on my shoulders.

“Keep your shoulders away from your ears,” she says, and I rotate them back. Her hand comes to the middle of my back, and the other lands on my stomach. “Press your stomach towards your thighs.” I do it as much as I can, and the pull in my hamstring increases. “It’ll get easier as time goes on.”

I hold this position with her hands supporting me, and some of the soreness is chased away by the warmth radiating from her palms. The one on my stomach slides to my hip, then goes down to the front of my right thigh, taking my mind off the strain in my left hip.

“On your next inhale, lift your right leg as high as you can.”

“Seriously?” I ask her. “I’m not sure if that’s something I can do. This position is hard enough with both hands and feet on the ground.”

“You can,” she encourages, giggling. “I’m right here to help you.”

Her hand slides down to just above my knee, leaving a trail of heat behind it. If attempting this move keeps her hands on me, then I’ll give it my best. When I finally lift my leg, my glutes and hamstrings don’t let me go any higher than straight out, but she supports it so I don’t drop it as soon as I’d like to.

“Good,” she praises as she lowers my leg. “So now you’re going to swing your left foot to the front of the mat and touch your right knee to the floor.”

I do as she says, barely getting my foot to the front, and when I have my foot planted into the ground, she goes back to her mat.

“Modified sun salutations,” she says, lifting her arms to the ceiling.

She places her hands flat on the ground, then pushes back into downward dog, and I follow. Both of her knees come to the ground, and she planks before doing something called the upward dog, which I feel in the front of my hip and abdominal muscles. Then she pushes back up into a downward dog.

She lifts her right leg again and steps all the way to the front of the mat. Copying her is a struggle, but I do the same. I stretch

to the ceiling, standing tall, pulling my abdominal muscles as far as they'll go. Jade's hands land on my back, and she helps me stand straighter.

"That's it," she encourages. "Now fold forward as far as you can go."

"Touch my toes?" I ask her.

"That's the goal," she says.

I don't get close at all.

"Now, when you step back, step back with your left foot," she instructs.

"Can we skip that side?" I ask, mentally preparing for the tightness.

"Nope. Do to one side what you do to the other," she reminds me. "One side is going to naturally feel different than the other, that's for everyone. Not as severely in your case, but one side being tighter than the other is common. When I first started yoga almost ten years ago now, my left side was stubborn, but it takes patience."

I'd reply, but I'm too busy preparing to do this transition. I take a breath before lifting my foot. Jade helps me keep my balance as I inch it backward slowly until I can't anymore.

"That's a lot further than I expected," she states, examining my form. "Now reach up to the ceiling."

It feels like hell—when I reach upwards, my hips sink a bit lower, and I feel every bit of the stretch in my taut left side.

"I know that doesn't feel great but try and breathe through it," she guides me, positioning my right knee correctly. "This is the last stretch I'm going to put you through, today anyway. Make it count."

I make myself hold this excruciating pose for as long as I can. After three deep breaths, I can't do it anymore, and my hands fall to the ground.

"That was good!" She exclaims, sitting back and smiling at me. "Now we just finish this sequence, and we'll be done with

the mats for the day.”

She gets back on her mat, and after guiding me through the rest of this yoga session, she helps me up from the ground and claps her hands.

“How was that?” she eagerly questions me as she backs towards the stage. “You feel good?”

“I’m already sore,” I admit. “That entire thing was absolute torture.”

“But now that you’re done, do you feel amazing?” she asks enthusiastically.

“Maybe not amazing, but I do feel less stiff than I did when I came in.”

“And that’s the goal,” she says. She lifts herself onto the stage and turns around. “Now it’s time to dance!”

She goes to the sound booth at the back of the stage, and the music switches from slow and tranquil to rap music full of bass. Turning away from the computer, happiness takes over her features, and she dances towards me. She hops off the stage once she gets to the end, then bounces my way.

“Alright—” she comes to a stop in front of me. “We’re going to mainly do moves that will focus on your hips and abdominal muscles.”

She doesn’t wait for me to reply. She goes straight into wide hip circles, pressing her pelvis forward, then swinging her ass around, bending forward as she brings her hips around. I fall in rhythm with her, doing my modified equivalent of the same move. I grimace at the resistance that comes with the movement, but I don’t stop. I’m determined to keep up with Jade in this part of our session, at least. We dance together all the time, and I’m not about to let my difficulties get in the way of that.

I do the best I can to follow along with her, not even stopping to determine whether or not I can do the same move as her. She’s not moving fast, her pace is something that I can easily keep up with, but with every new move she throws out, I have to figure out some way I can do it in a way that won’t hurt. I

find that it's impossible. But I push through. None of what she's doing is going easy on my stiff body, and my left side gets tired a lot faster than my right, but watching Jade go is the fuel I need.

However, the way her eyes roam over me as I dance is what really keeps me going.

CHAPTER 6

JADE

HE'S DOING SO GOOD. Much better than I expected him to; I thought he was going to absolutely hate it, but he follows along and does what he can manage. He may have griped a little, but he hasn't been nearly as bitter as I know he could have been. He's been scowling the entire way through, but I can only ask so much from him. It takes time for yoga to feel good while you're actually doing it, and I applaud him for keeping up. He's still in the phase where a new group of muscles is discovered due to soreness.

Beneath all the pain on his face, he did seem like he was determined to get through. Even now, as we dance, he's moving as best as he can. As he follows along with me, he doesn't seem to be focusing on what he's putting his body through. Instead, his eyes are glued to me, watching me closely.

I'm used to people staring at me, especially when I'm dancing. I love it when all eyes are on me while I'm performing—that rush is an addiction. But the look in Gunner's eyes is different from the one I'm used to, even from him. It's as if he's been hypnotized, trance-like. It's clear I've captured his attention, and I plan to maintain it. If this is what it takes to keep him from focusing on his pain, then so be it. I'll figure out new moves to keep him coming back.

He remains robotic as we dance, but as long as he keeps up with these sessions, he'll start moving better until, eventually, he can walk without that cane.

“Move your hips more,” I push him. “Bigger movements. Push that left hip.”

“I’m doing it!” he says back. “I’m not going to look as good as you.”

“You look fine,” I reassure him. “There are worse dancers out there who don’t rely on a cane to walk.”

He scoffs. “I don’t *rely* on it. It’s solely for assistance.”

“You’re moving pretty good without it now,” I point out, circling my hips wide, and he does the same.

“That’s because I’m standing in one spot, not—”

“—dancing in one spot.” I interrupt.

“Dancing in one spot, fine,” he corrects himself. “But I’m not walking right now. My leg doesn’t give out if I’m not pushing myself forward.”

“Look at you go, though!” I exclaim. Then, feeling the music, I spin around.

When I come back around, I don’t expect him to follow that, and he’s already shaking his head.

“Yeah, I’m not doing that,” he says.

“I wasn’t expecting you to. But I do expect you to do this—” I do a body roll, and he easily follows me. “Damn, you did that fluidly.”

He rolls his eyes and smiles at me. “I can still move; it’s just I move like an old man in my eighties.”

“It’s not that bad,” I laugh.

He chuckles with me. “You don’t have to lie to me, Jade. You’re one of the few I can count on to tell me the truth because you aren’t too scared to say anything.”

“Your attitude doesn’t scare me,” I tell him. “But I’m serious. It’s not like you’re completely immobile.”

“Hector could beat me in a foot race, Jade,” he says bluntly.

Now it’s my turn to roll my eyes. “Hector is still very nimble for his age, though. I’m sure he’d beat his peers in a foot

race.”

Gunner chuckles at that. “Yeah, he actually is. I can only hope I’m that fit when I’m his age. I’m pretty sure he can still fight; he just doesn’t.”

“Have you ever fought Hector?” I ask him curiously, clasping my hands together above my head to do chest circles.

“Back in the day,” he answers as he copies me. “I was nothing but eleven, though, and he tossed Flint and me around without breaking a sweat.”

“He could probably still toss you around. He just chooses not to,” I say, thinking about a young Hector.

“And we’re all grateful for it,” Gunner states.

I laugh at his honesty just as the song ends, and I march in place, waiting on the next song to start. He marches with me, pumping his arms and taking pretty big steps, which doesn’t seem to be bothering him at all. The last few minutes, he seemed okay, like he forgot that he’s in a therapy session right now and he was having fun. That’s how he was before he almost died—nothing seemed to get him down, and he always looked like he was enjoying life.

I miss how he used to be. I’m determined to get him back to his old self.

“See, I got you talking, and you didn’t even realize how much you’re moving,” I point out, bringing my knees a bit higher.

“Pointing it out only makes me aware of what you’re putting me through,” he smirks at me.

“I know,” I shrug, then shoot him a devilish grin. “I just wanted to rub it in that you seem to be enjoying yourself despite how much you were against doing this. So I was right,” I brag, winking at him.

“Woah—that is not a good color on you,” he teases me with a small smile, shaking his head.

“But I’m going to wear it with pride,” I grin.

The next song erupts through the speakers, and the beat takes hold of me. It's a faster song, and I have to fight the music for control so I can do moves Gunner can keep up with.

"Ready?" I ask him, moving my ass up as I move from side to side.

"Let's do it."

We dance to a few more songs, taking small breaks in between to get water and to catch our breath. A few of the beats were easy enough to choreograph on the spot—I thought back to the few step aerobics classes I've been in and hijacked a lot of those moves, minus the step.

Other songs were slower, which gave me a good opportunity to incorporate deeper, more yoga-like fluid movements, which I could tell he hated. Leaning backward and reaching toward the ceiling made him grunt, and when I looked over, the frown on his face hinted at how much he despised those deeper movements. Those are the ones I definitely need to keep doing.

As the songs played, I mixed those more intense moves in with easier ones, hoping to help him realize he's able to do more than he probably thought he could. I'm aware he probably won't come to that conclusion today, but I need him to see that he's not as incapable as he thinks he is within this first week.

A new song comes on, and this one is more of a grinder. I'm not sure how that made it into my workout mix, and I briefly think to turn from it, but I quickly change my mind when Gunner starts dancing to it on his own. I've always loved watching him dance. It comes so naturally to him. Every time any music plays, he's either singing along with it or moving to it. At least, he used to, anyway. Not so much these days. He'll dance with me at parties, but it's never for very long anymore.

So when he starts freestyling on his own, no way am I going to stop him.

Instead, I take this opportunity.

I step closer to him and take his hand, raising it above us, and he watches me bend my knees as my hips figure eight downward. He takes a step closer to me, his eyes locked on mine as he tugs on my hand, and I reverse my move until I'm standing at my regular height. He twirls me around so my back faces him, and I'm the one that presses myself flush with his front.

The second I do, how much I've missed dancing with him hits me harder. I don't know what it is—maybe it's how naturally we move together, or perhaps I just love how he feels against me. It could be the overall fact that ever since the first time we danced together, we've had an unspoken connection, and falling into a groove with him happens flawlessly in most things we do together. After Roxy, he was the first person I was truly comfortable with. I haven't encountered many people in my life that make me feel as if I'd known them prior to meeting, but Gunner, it felt like I'd known him my entire life by the time we met.

It's that comfortability that welcomes his hands gliding over my hips. Lifting my arm, I reach up until my hand is on the back of his head, and his large, hot hand leaves my hip to take hold of my arm. His other hand journeys to the front of my right leg and rests inches from my pussy.

All I can think about is his hot breath on my shoulder and his solid heat pressing into my back. I slow down the rolling in my hips, pushing my ass further back into him. He follows my lead, centering his hand just below my belly button, securing me to him.

Five seconds later, I feel his cock nudging into my ass, putting me on to his size. The second I feel it pressing into me, my pussy starts to throb, and I swallow hard. This has never happened before while we were dancing, but then again, we've never gotten quite this raunchy. I've been pressed up against him plenty of times before, but the way his hands are exploring me is new.

I don't want him to stop.

His dick is right on my ass, so I purposefully move against it, and Gunner syncs with me, rolling his body in time to the rhythm of my hips. His breathing becomes heavier behind me as his fingers trace down from my arm all the way to my thigh, and my nipples harden as goosebumps break out over my skin. His lips are inches from my neck, and I tilt my head to the side, giving him to go-ahead to make contact. My entire body pulses with the music, throbbing in anticipation as I wait for his lips to send tingles across my body, but then the song ends.

Both of us freeze, waiting for the next song to come on, but silence surrounds us. The only noise in this place is our heavy breathing. Gunner lets me go all too soon, and the cool air chills my back. I glance at my watch, and I'm shocked to see that it's been two hours since we started this session. I didn't see it ending with my pussy throbbing and the memory of Gunner's cock imprinted into my ass.

Fuck that was hot.

"That should be good for now," I breathe out, fully aware of how he's eating me up with his eyes.

His chest noticeably rises and falls as his deep blue eyes burn into me, like he's the hungriest man on the planet. I can't help but glance down at his cock, which I can make out through his shorts. I swallow hard, taking in what he's packing.

I have to force myself to redirect my gaze back up to his face.

"H-how are you feeling?" I ask, trying to get my head back on straight.

"Different," he answers without breaking eye contact.

That's one way to describe the electricity suddenly surrounding us.

"Is this something you'd do again?" I continue, unsure of whether or not I should bring up what just happened.

He nods. "We can see how this works out," he says, still dazed.

I want to say something, but I have no idea what I should say because whatever comes out of my mouth would undoubtedly

result in us going to bed together, and I'm not sure that's a smart decision.

We end up standing three feet apart, staring at each other for what feels like an eternity before his phone shatters the silence.

It startles us both, but he moves to pick it up out of the armchair.

"Yeah?" he answers, and I turn away from him, running my hands through my hair.

I run over the last few minutes, wondering how we went from exercising to seconds away from fucking. In all the times we've danced together, that's *never* happened before. Yeah, sure, I've imagined what it'd be like to have Gunner rutting into me—on top of him being one of the best people I know, he's the very definition of tall, dark, and handsome. A defined jawline, full of stubble right now, and it looks great on him, strong, pointed nose, and thick black hair that's grown out on the sides now. He usually keeps it cut short, but I'm really diggin' how he's looking with it grown out. He's tall—his chin rests on top of my head when he hugs me. I fit perfectly into him. Before the attack, I rarely ever saw him angry. He's always so even-tempered and nonchalant about everything. His energy is comforting and easy to be around.

If I wanted to lock someone down, it would definitely be Gunner. Everything about him is what every woman has on their perfect man checklist. But I've never felt inclined to follow through on any attraction I've felt towards him because a relationship isn't something I want right now. I wouldn't want to enter into anything sexual with Gunner. He deserves the world, and all I can currently offer is sex, which I'm afraid would ruin our friendship.

He tells whoever he's talking to he'll be there in a minute, and relief engulfs me. This current between us would be impossible to leave unaddressed, and I need to figure this out before I discuss it aloud.

"I need to go meet Blade," he tells me, putting his phone in his pocket.

“Yeah, go do what you need to do,” I say, waving him off.

He stares at me like he wants to say something else, and I silently pray to the universe that he lets it go for now. My prayers get answered—he gives me one last nod, then he turns to head for the doors.

When he’s gone, he takes that electric energy with him, but my entire body continues to pound. I stand here a moment, waiting for it to subside, but it doesn’t.

Damn it. It’s been a while since I’ve felt this kind of desire. I’ve known Gunner all these years, and this attraction to him has never been this strong before. What happened? I’ve missed dancing with him, but there’s no way I’ve missed it that much. I have no idea. What I do know is that I can remedy this situation in one of the showers in the back. I’m on my way to do just that, but then the doors open, and Karmen and Grace walk in.

“Hey, girl!” Karmen calls, waving from the front of the club.

Guess it’s going to have to wait, I think, waving back at them.

CHAPTER 7

JADE

I FINISH SECURING the chains and padlock on the door handles, officially finished with today's work. Now, I get to go home to sip on wine, eat finger foods and listen to endless chatter; it's gonna be great. I've been looking forward to it all day; I'm excited to sit back and relax. The only thing that could be a distraction is this never ceasing throbbing between my legs.

I haven't been able to get dancing with Gunner off my mind all day. I can still feel his girth and length, and my back heats up, almost as if he's standing right behind me. Chills run over my entire body remembering his hot breath on my neck, causing the pulsing between my legs to get stronger. It's still a mystery why he suddenly has my mind occupied. He's one of my closest friends, so I do think about him often, but not every moment of the day. I have a theory that my vibrator can solve this problem. Once I put that to use, Gunner should slip from my mind.

However, I won't be able to put that theory to the test until later tonight. I'd rush home and remedy this situation now, but Layla's probably already there. I should've told her I'd let her know when to come instead of telling her what time I'd be getting out of here. But that was yesterday when she asked, before I knew Gunner could do this to me.

In my car, I put my bags and binder in the passenger seat and take my phone out. As I'm backing out of the spot, I call Roxy.

"Mmmhmm?" she answers on the second ring.

“You already got the stuff?”

“Sounds like you mean drugs when you say it like that,” she says. “So I got red and white wine, more red than white, though.”

“I’ve seen the girls drink both. That should be good enough for everyone. Nobody really drinks hard liquor unless we’re partying.”

“You got your snack sitch together? I can stop by the store on my way if you need me to get something.”

I shake my head even though she can’t see me. “No need. I have plenty of appetizer-like things I can throw together, and Layla’s coming over to help.”

“Alright,” she says. “Then I’ll see you when I get there.”

It doesn’t take long to get home, just fifteen minutes, and I’m pulling into the parking lot of my apartment complex.

Layla’s already there, along with Flint, wrapped in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder. I park beside them, close to the stairs that lead up to my level, trying not to look over at them as Flint kisses her. I know exactly what it is they’re feeling, and every time I see them—Blade and Roxy or Marilyn and Slash—I’m taken back to what feels like a lifetime ago. For a moment, the hollowness in my chest makes itself known before nostalgic sadness takes over.

So I grab my things out of the passenger seat and get out of the car before that crippling emotion has a chance to completely consume me. I can’t let that out.

“Jade,” Flint greets me, walking around my car with Layla’s hand in his. “How’d Gunner do today?”

Heat rushes over my body at his name, and I swallow hard, ignoring when one of Flint’s eyebrows shoots up. I wonder if knowing who’s attracted to who, ever gets old for him?

But I breeze right past that and answer his question as we go up the stairs. “I think he did well even though he protested a little bit. He actually smiled twice today.”

“Oh really?” Layla exclaims behind me. “Getting him to move and stay active has been hard, and he’s definitely never smiling while doing it.”

“It wasn’t that easy for me either. I had to work for that smile. But it was worth it to see him in a good mood.” At the top of the stairs, I look back at Flint helping Layla slowly make her way up. “I know some days I’m going to have to push him to come in. He only gave me a month, so I can’t waste any time going easy on him.”

She doesn’t reply—she’s too focused on climbing up the stairs, taking her time as she ascends. I’m extremely happy for her, but watching Layla climb towards me makes me glad I had my tubes tied. I’ve never really seen a child fitting into my life, even when I was mated, and giving birth is quite possibly one of my greatest fears. To date, getting my tubes tied was the second-best decision of my life, only second to rebuilding my life in Penfell Heights.

“Good,” Flint answers me as I unlock the door. “He needs that. Otherwise, he won’t push himself.”

When I have the door open, Layla follows me inside, but Flint remains beyond the threshold.

“Well, I’m going to leave you to it,” Flint says as I turn the lights on.

I walk away from them as Layla tells him she’ll text when she’s ready to go home, heading to my room to set my stuff down and to get into something more comfortable. After pulling on shorts and a long sleeve shirt, I join Layla in the kitchen.

“Your place always smells so good,” Layla compliments as I open the freezer.

“Does it? Thanks. I’m hardly ever here to enjoy it,” I tell her. “It’s like I’m paying for this place just to sleep in it. That’s why it’s so clean, honestly. The club is like my second home.” I open the refrigerator to get the unopened brie and grapes from the bottom drawer.

“You make it look easy, though, running an entire club.” She examines a package of cheese bites she pulled from the freezer as I wash grapes off.

“Having Gunner there takes a lot of the load off, and the girls help out a good bit, more than they know, I think,” I admit. “I have a ton of help around there. I definitely need it, especially with the number of projects that have been running through my head.”

“Yeah? What’s one of them?”

“Well,” I say slowly, setting my charcuterie board aside to start washing off bell peppers and carrots. “I just got the idea to teach a fitness class there. Pole dancing.”

“Ooooo,” she says, intrigued. “If I weren’t pregnant, I would definitely sign up. If you have it started by the time I give birth, that’s how I’m going to get back in shape. That’s a good idea.”

That makes me feel pretty good about that idea—if Layla can get past her shyness to take a class, maybe the turnout won’t be so low after all.

“Thanks. I was going to get the girls to help me with it.”

Terra’s face pops into my head thinking about them, and I can’t help but think back to Layla when she first got here. Terra has the same look in her eyes that Layla did—fear.

Looking over my shoulder, I find her laying calamari on a baking sheet.

“Can I ask you something, Layla?” I ask her.

“Sure.”

It takes me a moment to get my question out. I want to word it properly, so it doesn’t get taken the wrong way.

“How’d you deal with Gunner getting hurt?” I ask her straight, and her movements stop. “It couldn’t have been easy knowing a few in the gang blamed you for it.”

My question hangs in the air, and she remains motionless for a moment before she resumes putting calamari on the pan.

“You don’t have to answer it if you don’t want to,” I tell her, going back to what I was doing.

“No, it’s fine.” She turns around and wipes her hands on a napkin. “I felt guilty, and I still do just a little. He told me he never blamed me for the attack, but even after he forgave me, I couldn’t shake how bad I felt. They were attacked that day because I was here, and it’s difficult to convince myself otherwise. It’s the reason why I’ve been trying as hard as I can to help Gunner. I owe that to him.”

I nod, realizing my efforts to help Terra may need to be taken up a notch. I figured it was going to be difficult. Guilt isn’t something that instantly goes away.

“Being blamed by some of the others probably didn’t make it any better,” I add.

“No, it did not,” she confirms, letting out a sigh. “But you, Roxy, Callie, and Holly helped a lot, especially you. Seeing how close you are with Gunner, I thought you were going to hate me. But neither of you did. That really helped me.”

I know for a fact Roxy and Blade aren’t angry with her, so it’s just going to take time. But with Tobias still out there, there’s no way she can even begin to feel at ease, especially when there’s a chance he’ll show up again.

“What was it that finally helped you in the end—what helped you feel safe again?” I ask Layla.

She stares at me sternly, then sticks her nose in the air. “Seeing Zagan dead. After all of that, Flint put me back together.”

Her answer hits me straight in the chest. Tobias is still very much alive, and if the same rings true for Terra, then I can do very little to ease her mind except hover over her as much as I can. I have to make sure she doesn’t feel like an outcast here for so much as a second. Even though there are some that blame her for what happened to Blade, the group I’m going to surround her with doesn’t.

“Jade?” I look up at Layla, and she’s watching me, her head tilted slightly to the side, concern on her face. “Is this about Terra?”

With the questions I asked, it wasn't too much of a secret who this could be about.

"Yeah," I confirm.

Layla nods and focuses on the floor for a second before glancing back up at me. "Is she coming tonight?"

"She said she would, and when I texted her earlier, she said she'd be here."

"Good," Layla says. "Being with friends could help her, but that's not a guarantee. She's feeling guilty, and that's not easy to get rid of. On top of what she's been through, it's going to take some time. Everyone heals differently."

Her words ring loud and clear, and I think about everything that she said. What I'm hearing is that there's a chance my efforts could all be in vain. Her worry about causing more trouble on top of Tobias still being out there is going to be hard to get through. Seeing Tobias dead looks to be the only solution to giving her peace of mind. Reassurance alone doesn't sound like it's going to be enough, but I'm definitely going to shower her with it.

A motorcycle screams into the night, and it sounds like Roxy flying up the road.

Layla smiles. "Roxy isn't pissed, and having her here could help."

"Yeah, Roxy's disdain would have been obvious if she was mad," I say, carrying the charcuterie board into the living room.

"Oh," Layla chirps. "Maybe Roxy can talk to her?"

"Roxy? She's not the best with words in situations like these. Her actions definitely speak louder."

The door opens, and Roxy comes in, holding a reusable bag containing wine. However, the rumble of a motorcycle still approaches. It must be Marilyn.

"Look who I found talking outside," Roxy says as she enters.

Holly and Callie walk in behind her, and Callie scowls at Roxy. She thinks I don't know, but I'm aware she waits for a few others to come before she's trapped inside with me. I make her uncomfortable; I've known that since the first day I met her. I'm very open with my sexuality, I'm comfortable with my body, and I have no problem showing a lot of skin. That's unheard of to her. I'm everything she isn't, her exact opposite, and in her mind, everything about me should be changed. She never said those exact words, but hearing her talk and voice her opinions on certain topics told me what I needed to know. She's casually dropped how much I've devalued myself by showing the entire world what's under my clothes. It only takes one time of her voicing her opinion to deduce she thinks I've disgraced and disrespected myself. However, we don't hate each other. We have our heart-to-heart moments, and I have to give it to her, when she's not being judgy, she gives good advice. She just thinks I'm capable of so much more, no matter how much I tell her I'm happy with the life I chose.

I like her, and sometimes I dislike her. I wish she would open up her mind just a bit more. There's so much to the world outside of her bubble, and I want her to get a small taste of it. Life is too short, and I don't want her to waste hers.

She looks at me from behind Roxy, and I smirk at her. It's impossible for me not to poke her just a little bit, though.

"Callie probably didn't know Layla was up here. Holly isn't even a strong enough buffer for her around me," I tease, knowing she's going to get defensive.

Just as I thought, her cheeks and nose flush pink.

"That's not true," Callie rebuts. "We weren't out there for a long time. Roxy literally pulled up thirty seconds after we got here. We weren't *waiting* to come inside."

I shrug nonchalantly. "It's okay if you were. I get it," I say, then turn around to go back into the kitchen.

"There's nothing to get," she reiterates. "I wasn't stalling."

Holly laughs as she pours herself a glass of cabernet. “You know you fall into this trap every time?” She informs Callie. “She’s teasing you.”

Callie’s face turns an even deeper shade of red. “How am I supposed to know? It’s hard to tell when she’s joking since she does it with such a serious tone.”

“Believe me,” Roxy says from her spot on the counter beside the refrigerator, a glass of wine in one hand and a mozzarella stick in the other. “You’d know if she was serious.”

The door opens, and we all turn to Marilyn coming in with Karmen, Grace, and Terra behind her.

“So you never thought he was intimidating?” Karmen’s asking Marilyn as they enter. “Not even for a second?”

Marilyn shakes her head as she removes her jacket. “He’s not a threat to any of *us*. You won’t believe this, but he’s very sweet.”

Roxy cackles—we all know who Marilyn’s talking about, and *sweet* isn’t a word any of us can use to describe him.

“Slash?” Roxy laughs. “I would *love* to see him be sweet.”

“He always looks so angry,” Grace says. “His demeanor is scary.”

“I know,” Marilyn sighs, a small smile on her red lips. “And it’s sexy as hell.”

Holly rubs Layla’s stomach as she chuckles. “Marilyn likes ‘em dark and brooding with a temper.”

“Does it make you weak in the knees knowing he hates everyone else but turns into mush for you?” I join in.

“That’s exactly it,” Marilyn says.

Grace looks up from the bottle of chardonnay she’s opening, nodding. “When you put it like that, I get how it’s hot.”

Roxy nudges me with her foot as Callie asks Layla something about her baby and motions toward the living room with her head. Terra’s sitting on the couch alone, her gaze pointed down as she slowly chews.

No way am I going to let her exclude herself in this tiny apartment that's currently packed with nine women.

"We don't have to stand all night," I tell them, pouring a glass of the chardonnay Grace just opened. "All of this will fit on the coffee table."

I carry three bottles of wine with me, along with a drink for Terra, and the others grab the snacks that have been prepared. I set the bottles on the table as I sit beside Terra; Roxy and Holly take the recliners, and Layla sits on the other side of Terra. That leaves the space on the other side of the coffee table open for Callie, Grace, and Karmen.

I hand the glass of chardonnay to Terra, and she returns a smile.

"I'm glad you came," I tell her.

"Thanks," she says loud enough over the chatter.

"Shit," Roxy says, scanning the packed room. "We can't add anyone else to this group. Or we need to get bigger places."

"What do you mean we?" I ask as I reach into the side pocket of the couch to retrieve playing cards. I know she's going to roll her eyes at what I'm about to say. "You and Layla both have the space now."

"I guess I could host at Flint's," Layla says. "Not sure where he'd go while we were there, probably Blade's. He wouldn't have a problem with it, though."

"Why wasn't I included in that 'we'?" Marilyn asks, then pops a grape in her mouth.

"Would Slash want anyone in his house?" Holly inquires.

"Yeah, you're right," Marilyn replies, then she looks at Roxy. "Roxy?"

She takes a long sip from her glass before she answers.

"I wouldn't feel right hosting there since I don't technically live there yet," she tells us. "And before anyone asks, I'm not nervous about it. Just trying to wrap my mind around it. I'm still getting used to being mated, so I'm taking it slow."

“How can you?” Marilyn asks. “Nothing is slow after that bond kicks in.”

There’s nothing but truth in her statement. The best way I can describe it is like a riptide that pulls you in. There’s no escaping that intense connection, devotion, and passion that crashes into you after the bond activates. It’s better than any high. I haven’t felt anything like it since my late mate.

“Is it hard not being close to him?” Callie asks.

“Not really,” she answers. “I’m there all the time anyway, and if I’m not at his, he’s at my place. And we work together, so we’re around each other twenty-four-seven.”

“Shit, you may as well move in if you’re always together anyway,” Karmen says, munching on raw broccoli.

“Yeah, free up that apartment, so Terra can move out of that studio,” I add.

That gets Terra’s attention. “I actually like my studio. It’s cute.”

“My shit would be falling out the doors and the windows,” Karmen says. “I don’t know how you do it.”

Grace laughs at Karmen’s exaggeration. “That’s because Terra isn’t a hoarder.”

“And neither am I,” Karmen scoffs.

“Right. You just have hoarder tendencies.”

Terra giggles beside me. “You’re never going to need all of those tiny boxes you’re holding onto.”

“I’m prepared just in case,” Karmen defends herself.

The cards I pulled open go untouched; everyone’s too deep in conversation to care about them. Roxy asks Marilyn how her scouting is coming, and it turns out, Marilyn has six more trails she can do guided hikes on. She’s been busy these past few weeks. Karmen, Grace, and Terra each express interest in going on one of her hikes, Terra seeming the most intrigued. Marilyn readily gives her schedule to each of them.

Holly talks about everything she has going on at the library and the activities she has planned for the kids. Speaking of children, Layla reveals her due date is in a few short months. They have no idea what they're having, Layla wants to be surprised.

As we talk, Terra makes a few comments and laughs along with us. I'm glad to see she's actually present. I was a bit nervous she wasn't going to be as involved as the rest of us, but ignoring a room full of eight other women talking at the same time isn't easy. She looks like she's enjoying herself.

Now if only eight women talking about three different things at the same time could take my mind off the steady pounding that is ever present between my legs. I thought I'd be too distracted, but it's impossible to shake Gunner from my head or to forget his heat on my back. Even through his compression shorts, I could feel how big his dick was, and I can imagine how hot it would be watching him sink into me. I can almost feel him slowly going deeper inside of me, every inch of him filling me up as he watches me rub my wet pussy. I can vividly see myself on top of him, riding his cock, his hands palming my ass cheeks, my nipples between his lips.

Mmm, I could really get him moving then!

"What are you smiling at?"

I'm sucked back to the room where I'm now put on the spot. Everyone's looking at me, but there's no way I'm about to tell them I was fantasizing about Gunner.

"Nothing really," I tell them, but Roxy shakes her head.

"There's no fucking way that smile was nothing," she presses.

She's going to keep pushing, but I'm not about to let them in on what's been running through my mind all day. I didn't want to have to do this, but it looks like I'm going to have to put *her* on the spot, so she drops it.

I shoot her a sly grin before saying, "I just noticed that you're glowing," I reply, and her eyes widen just a bit as her smile drops a little. "You and Blade must be fucking often for you to be shining the way you are."

Her entire face goes red, and Callie's gasp is so loud it's like she did it into a microphone.

"Jade!" Callie exclaims.

"What? It's not a secret she's getting dicked down," I say, then sip from my glass.

Callie scoffs, but Holly giggles.

"She's right," Marilyn says. "There's something different about you—a good different. I always knew there was something going on between you two."

"I don't know either of you very well, but you make a cute couple," Grace tells Roxy. "You're so tiny next to him."

"But I can hold my own in a fight," Roxy snaps back instantly, and I laugh. "Can we not talk about my mate? Please? And you have to oblige because I *never* say please."

"I'm jealous," Karmen says. "I wish I was getting dicked down. I don't even want the relationship. I just want sex."

"Yes, talk about how horny Karmen is," Roxy instructs.

"Or we can have a clean conversation," Callie suggests.

But that doesn't happen. Grace and Karmen end up talking about the best sex they've ever had, which influences the rest of us to tell stories of our sexual escapades. The entire time, Terra listens and only says anything when someone asks her a question directly. The rest of the time, she's quiet.

I didn't think this one night was going to immediately help her, but I am glad she's enjoying herself. The girls continuously pull her into the conversation, so in time, I'm hoping she realizes we want her here. I'm fully aware that's going to take some time, but I'll do what I need to for as long as I need to to make sure she doesn't go back to the old life she ran from.

CHAPTER 8

GUNNER

AFTER A LONG ASS DAY, finally lying down in bed feels like floating on air. The fresh sheet on the bed, combined with the cool air blowing on me, should have me knocked out in no time. My body is sore from my session with Jade today but in a good way. I didn't know that was possible in my condition. I'm still stiff as shit, but not like I usually am, and the soreness isn't unbearable in any way.

Working with Layla has helped; she certainly knows what she's talking about, and her treatment might work on others, but I have a feeling I was shredded up too badly to heal as easily as anyone else would. The idea of ever returning to my old self is so far out there, I'm a hair's width away from giving up trying. The only glimmer of hope that's keeping me going is how I'm feeling after a session with Jade.

That isn't to say I'm putting all my faith into this new routine—this switch-up could very well be the universe's cruel way of tricking me into thinking I've found something that could work. When I first started working with Layla, I was confident that I would get better because, for a little while, what we were doing was helping. I don't know what happened, but my progress slowed down for some reason which didn't have a positive impact on my outlook whatsoever.

The session with Jade today was fun and entertaining, minus the yoga portion of it. That's what has my hamstrings and shoulders sore, but conversely, my left side isn't causing me as much pain as usual. Even though I'm skeptical about how this next month is going to go, I feel like it's worth it to keep this

up with Jade. If I have to go through torture, I may as well be laughing through it all. I can do that with Jade. It's easier when I'm not trapped in my head thinking about how much pain I'm in. Jade's a fun, lively distraction, and it helps that she's easy on the eyes.

I also noticed how she never once acted like I was completely incapable. Layla took it slow, so I didn't hurt myself. My guess is she didn't want to cause me any more pain because she still feels guilty even though I'm not angry at her at all. She was tough, but only with what she thought I could handle. Jade, not so much. She showed me something and expected me to follow along as best as I could. Turns out I can do more than even I thought I could.

I'm sure Jade knew that, or she was too determined to care about what I'd complain about. When she started, she kept going, and all I could do was try to keep up. And damn, did she move. My mind's been occupied by her this entire day. I've been replaying every second in my head from the moment I walked into the club, and she was lost in her own world of dancing. I've never seen anyone more graceful than her.

It's odd; I've danced with Jade plenty of times before; I already know how she dances and how sensual her moves can be. However, how we danced today was nothing like what I'm used to with her. It began innocently enough, but the moment she pressed her perfect ass onto my dick, it was different. I've never gotten that from Jade before. I know she finds me attractive—she doesn't hesitate to call me handsome any chance she gets. We are pretty affectionate towards each other, but I can't say her's is designated to only me, though. Jade's sweet towards a couple other people she's close to.

I'm positive how she was when we were dancing, she isn't like that with anyone else, though. I think about that for a second and realize I might just be reading into this too deeply. Jade oozes sex appeal, but I've never seen her direct it at anyone.

The more I replay it in my head, the more it comes into focus. She was telling me to move my hips more—she could have

been guiding me in how she wanted me to move, just as she'd been doing the entire session.

Yeah, that definitely makes more sense. I'm not too sure how interested she'd be in sleeping with a shifter that's unable to shift because my body is so stiff, I might injure myself further. Even if she was interested, she'd probably be too cautious to engage in anything. With the way she moves, she'd probably be scared she'd hurt me. Given the fact that I can hardly walk, she probably doesn't even think of me the same way I'm thinking of her. She could have literally anyone wrapped around her finger, so I doubt she would want to waste time with me. Jade is a vibrant, optimistic free spirit, and I would hold her back with the way I am now. I wouldn't want her to have to limit what she can do on account of me. She's much too busy to have to wait on me.

Getting her out of my head hasn't ever been this hard before. Normally she doesn't even occupy my mind like this—there's usually so much going on in my mind I don't focus on one thing.

Now that I think about it, she was all I thought about today. I don't know how I feel about that. I've never thought *this* hard about anyone before. And my thoughts haven't been wholesome, either. I don't need this unexpected lust charging through me to interfere in my relationship with her.

But seeing her on stage scrambled my image of her. Before, she was just a friend; now, she's a friend I can't stop thinking about sleeping with. As much as I try to push those thoughts clear out of my head, it's impossible.

Every time I shut my eyes, there she is, dressed only in those black shorts and green sports bra. Her long, glossy black hair cascading down her back, and the smirk on her luscious lips turning those gorgeous hooded green eyes of hers seductive. She had me in her grip the first time I saw her on stage, but the second time, I don't know if there's a way out.

My cock hardens under the sheets, and I grit my teeth, trying to avoid taking it in my grip, but it's hard as fuck when all I can think about is how she moved up and down that pole. My

dick tents my sheets, and from the way it's pounding, I know I won't be able to get her out of my head unless I take care of it. That's a lot safer than accidentally doing something stupid that would ultimately be the destruction of a cherished friendship. I would much rather take care of this now and start a new tomorrow than carry this frustration around with me. Fantasizing is a safe alternative.

I stare up at the ceiling in one last effort to try and not let this go any further, eyes locked on the fan above me. With how exhausted my body is, dozing off should have come the second I got in bed. But my mind isn't nearly as still as it needs to be to get to sleep, and that isn't happening tonight unless I see this through.

When I close my eyes, I see her clearly, dancing on stage, her back to me, those black shorts of hers so tight I can see the shape of her pussy lips as she moves her ass. I take hold of my cock at that sweet visual from today. She grabs the pole and slowly walks around it, her long legs crossing over one another as she makes her way around. Curling one of her legs around the pole, she lifts the other, separating her legs and showing me just how flexible she is. Somehow, I swear I catch a whiff of that sensual amber scent of hers, and I take a deep breath as my cock hardens further in my fist.

I stroke myself from the base of my dick all the way to the top, imagining it's Jade on top of me, her tight, hot pussy taking all of my length. I can almost feel her hands pressing into my chest as she lifts her hips and rolls them back down, her sweet pussy squeezing my rock-hard cock. I thrust my hips up in time with my fist pumping up and down the shaft of my cock, tension building faster than it has before.

I see Jade lying on her back, her legs open wide like they were when she was on the pole, spreading her lips for me to have a clear view of her glistening pink pussy. She hooks one leg around my back, pulling me closer to her, eager for me to slide back inside of her, and I imagine how she'd moan as I slowly enter her. I tighten my grip further, the image I cooked up in my head increasing my desire to feel her ass meet my thighs as I push as far as I can into her.

The visual of Jade beneath me, her hair spread out on the pillow, her perfect breast bouncing, full of my cock taking every inch of it, has me coming harder than I have...probably ever.

I lie on my back for a moment before I get up to change my sheets, and as I do, I realize that didn't help at all. Jade's still on my mind, and my cock is still hard. I'm not at all satisfied with imagining what it's like to be deep inside of her.

I need to know what it's like, but that's going to remain something in this life that doesn't happen for me. I can squash this desire so I don't mess up Jade and my friendship.

At least, I hope I can.

CHAPTER 9

GUNNER

I PULL up at the clubhouse just as everyone's walking inside. The last thing I wanted was to sit around making small talk when I really didn't feel like talking this morning. However, I have been eager to see what it is that's so big that Flint made me wait a full two days. I have been known to skip out on club meetings if I'm not feeling it, so I get why he held out on telling me. Flint usually informs Blade and me on what's being discussed in club meetings beforehand, so whatever it is he's filling us in on must be extremely important. I woke up ready for it today.

After I park, I shoot Jade a message, telling her we have to skip our session today. Yesterday, I have to admit, was much easier than I thought it was going to be. I'm sore today but not unbearably so. However, that's one thing I didn't wake up ready for today.

Not even five seconds later, her text tone goes off.

The girls aren't coming in until later. No need to skip a session. See you when your meeting's over :)

I let out a sigh. I guess that's on me—I was a fool for thinking she was going to let me off that easily.

I send a thumbs-up back before getting out of the truck. Everyone's inside the meeting room already, and I slowly make my way down the hall toward where all of their combined scents are coming from.

I push the door open to a packed room, and everyone turns to look at me. Flint and Blade stand in their usual spots behind

Cliff, Hector sits at the head of the table, and Rufus occupies the seat on Hector's left. The other two elders are elsewhere, as usual. The rest of the chairs around the table are taken up by Tiberius, Ax, and Aster, and the rest of the gang is seated on the perimeter of the room. Slash is in his corner, with Talon and Blaze to his right. Ryder sits on Slash's left, and Roxy's the only one seated on the wall, right in Hector's line of sight. The only available chair is the one Roxy has her feet in, but she repositions herself when I walk in. It's the only cushioned chair in the entire room besides the one Hector's sitting in. I take the place she saved for me, lowering down into my padded chair, my hands resting on the cane between my knees.

The chatter carries on, and Roxy leans over to tap me on my arm, a smirk on her face.

"You don't gotta sit like an old man just because you use a cane," she teases me.

"I was going to say thank you for saving this seat for me, but you've earned a harsh fuck you," I reply.

She sits back, chuckling to herself.

"You know I'm just fucking around?" she says.

"Of course," I nod. "I wouldn't have responded so calmly to anyone else."

She scoffs. "That was calm?"

I don't get a chance to tell her I probably would've chewed anyone else's head off because Hector gives Flint the go-ahead to start talking.

Everyone's attention goes to Flint leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest.

"This isn't going to take very long," he starts. "There are only two important matters I'm bringing up, and they coincide."

A breath of air escapes Hector, and the scowl on his face is deeper than usual. I'd assume he's in a mood, but both Cliff and Rufus appear disgruntled, which is out of place for the two of them. Whatever Flint's getting ready to say must be serious.

“As you all know, my main goal these past few months has been to bring more businesses and opportunities to this town,” he starts. “The strip club has been doing amazing, and it’s attracted quite a bit of business from the human side. The Old Storehouse has also seen an increase in business from the humans as well.”

“That’s been hard not to notice,” Tiberius says. “They’re coming over here throwing shit off.”

“It’s not like we’ve kept the peace on their side,” Flint counters. “But that’s a solvable problem. Since this isn’t just *our* town, I felt it would be necessary to inform the Mayor of what we’re trying to do and of the good we’re doing for the town. With all the changes being made, having their support would be beneficial, and once they start coming to this side more frequently, we’ll become used to having them in our space.”

This feels like a build-up to something else. I just know there’s a bigger bomb he’s going to drop.

“The next venture is the bed and breakfast,” Flint reminds us. “I was going to put Jade in charge of its development since she did so well with the strip club, but she’s happy where she is, and I don’t want to take her away from that when it’s still so new.”

“She’s dropped a few hints that she’s not sure she’d know what to do with a B&B, but she was going to figure it out if she had to,” I tell him.

“I’ll let her know she doesn’t have to worry about that anymore because I found someone to put over it, a couple actually,” Flint announces.

“Who?” Slash asks.

Flint’s gaze falls on Slash in the corner. “They aren’t from the town. I met them in Bayton about a month ago now.”

The energy in the room completely shifts at that news. The chances that this couple is something other than a shifter couple are extremely high. Bayton’s gotten highly diverse in the last decade. Before, it was mainly different kinds of

shifters and humans living there, with the occasional witch around. But now the population has skyrocketed with an influx of beings besides shifters. Fairies, elves, minotaurs, sirens, satyrs, I've seen a few centaurs along with some leprechauns and ogres. I think they've even had some mermaid sightings. A few months ago, I started seeing orcs, and just last week, it was brought to my attention that vampires have made it easy to find a party anywhere.

We all go to Bayton Heights when we feel like getting out of town, so we know what it's like. However, if my gut is right about what it is Flint's leading up to, then there's going to be some protest.

"They're a nice couple," Flint continues. "They were in Aiden's warehouse trying to get wine for a dinner party they were hosting when I ran into them. Extremely friendly. They're an elf-orc couple, the orc being half-orc."

How nice Flint says they are won't be enough to win some of this group over. Stunned, everyone remains silent as what Flint just revealed hangs in the air. Outsiders are already shunned here, but a half-orc and an elf? That's switching the game up completely. It was one thing living with humans and welcoming in different shifters, but two completely different species? That's going to take some adjusting. I don't give a shit—the more, the merrier, and meeting someone new is always interesting, but my sentiment is only shared by a few.

When nobody says anything else, Flint goes on.

"They've both been in hospitality for years up until recently. Esta, the elf, managed a fine dining spot near the boardwalk, and Elran was her kitchen manager and head chef. They're looking to get out of Bayton and settle down somewhere less hectic. They'll make a good addition here."

I can already sense that the majority of the bears that sit in this room aren't too happy with this—I don't need a heightened sense of smell to figure that out. The tense energy in this place is enough to pick up on that.

I speak up first.

“An elf and a half-orc, huh?” I say, my voice loud in the silence. “Interesting pairing. This place could use some spicing up. The humans that come over here aren’t too fun to have around.”

Slash scoffs in his corner.

“I don’t care what they are,” he bites out. “The more newcomers that show up, the less this place feels like home. After a while, this won’t even be the same town anymore.”

Flint shakes his head. “It’ll still be the same place, but better. We aren’t losing our home, the population is only growing, and there are going to be many more chances to make an honest living. I want this to be a place where our kids don’t have to sell drugs or take on shady business dealings just to live. They won’t have to worry about constant threats like we do.”

“I’m down for some new faces,” Ax states, sitting back in his chair. “And if anyone doesn’t know how to act right, we can kick them out. That’s simple enough.”

Flint nods. “That’s an option. I’ve already explained to Esta and Elran what they’re walking into, and they’re excited to come to this “quaint” town.”

“Every time someone new comes here, we have to fight, and someone always almost dies,” Aster points out.”

“This couple is very peaceful—they don’t have any trouble following them, nor do they want to cause any,” Flint says. “And anyone else that moves here will undergo a screening process. Not everyone is going to be accepted.”

Tiberius says, “Or we could tell everyone to take a hike and give these new jobs to everyone that’s already here.”

A few agreements ring out around the room, and I shake my head.

“That’s not happening,” Flint declares. “We need to attract tourists and travelers so the town will survive. We’re in a perfect location by the water to get them here, but we need more excitement to make them want to stay and spend money.

We currently don't have the manpower to run the businesses that would keep this place afloat."

"I'm shocked everyone is still having a hard time getting on board with the idea of newcomers," I chime in, needing to redirect the conversation to get an answer for the question that's been ringing in my head. "It's not like this is the first time we're hearing any of this. We've had months to prepare for this, ever since Layla came. This can't be much of a surprise." I point my gaze at Flint now that that's off my chest, needing to address a different matter. "You said Elran and Esta coming here coincides with there being more humans on this side of town. How do they tie together?"

He waits for a beat before he finally says, "With the presence of two creatures who don't resemble humans, I think it's time we make the humans aware of our presence."

Roxy sucks in a breath beside me, the only audible reaction in the entire room. I'm even speechless, and I had a very small inkling that's what this whole meeting was building up to.

"Oh shit," she breathes out. "For real? Won't that cause an uproar?"

"I don't think so," Flint says. "The humans are aware of the diversity in Bayton, and quite a few have even gone to check it out. Some go frequently, the Mayor being one of Bayton's regular visitors. Going to Bayton will have already prepared them for the news that they've been living among shifters."

"Why let them know now?" Blaze asks.

"They'll be over here all the time once they know," Talon says. "Humans love shit like this."

"We want them to be over here," Flint answers. "That way, they spend their money. And it would be better to let them know now before beings that some thought were myths start showing up."

For the first time since we've been discussing this, one of the elders speaks up.

"You never told us when you were planning on making this grand announcement," Rufus says, his disdain for this idea

evident in his clipped tone.

This is why their faces were balled up. They haven't readily accepted many of the changes Flint wants to make, but they can't deny that the direction he's taking the town is a much-needed shift.

"Soon, hopefully," he tells them. "I needed to bring it up here first, then I was going to call and set up a meeting with the Mayor. I planned on getting that situated after we get out of here."

Hector's jaw flexes before he looks at Flint.

"Surely you aren't going alone," Hector says. "Who are you taking to represent us?"

"Of course, I was going to bring Blade." That was a given. Then Flint looks over at me, and I straighten up just a bit in my seat. "And Gunner."

Cliff nods in agreement as aggravation seeps into every corner of my body.

"The most level-headed two out of everyone," Cliff says, glancing over at me as I avoid Flint's eyes. "The three of you should be able to deliver this news in a sensible, clear way."

Flint agrees. "That's what I'm hoping for."

I know he can scent my true feelings about being picked to go soften this news. Normally I'd be raring to go—this is my role in the gang, after all. I'm the voice of reason in matters like this, and I'm damn good at it. But I haven't been outside of town in months. Blade and sometimes Aster has been going to handle delicate matters in my place. I've stayed back because if something goes left and they have to fight their way out of a tight situation, I wouldn't be much help to anyone. I can't help but feel like his decision was made out of pity. Something easy and close by that I can handle. There's no worry about anything popping off since it's just on the other side of town dealing with humans. Sure, let's get Gunner on this one. He should be able to handle it.

But I'm not going to tell Flint I'm not going to go. I might clench my jaw so hard that my teeth crack, but I'll still help

gently ease the humans into a reality they've been blind to.

Flint asks if there are more questions, and of course, there are, but I'm only half listening now. It shouldn't be affecting me this badly; I should be happy I'm going along in the first place. However, I can't shake the feeling that this is a job given to me out of pity. He knows how much I hate being stuck in one place all day, so this must be the solution.

After Flint answers everyone's questions and concludes the meeting, I don't stick around like I usually do. Instead, I hobble for the door, so I can get outside to breathe some fresh fucking air. Then I get in the truck and tear down the road towards Paradise.

CHAPTER 10

JADE

I LIFT my arms above my head, straightening my back and sitting up tall, listening to the deep, slow meditation tones coming from the speakers. As I lean forward and take hold of my feet, I exhale through my nose, pressing my stomach against my thighs as I fold over my legs. I relax into the pose, letting my forehead rest against my knee, effectively stretching my hamstrings. At one point, this position was a goal of mine, and I stayed dedicated to my yoga mat just so I could achieve the position I'm in.

Now I do it without any problem—I created so much space in my body that I could give serious thought to becoming a contortionist with the circus. All it took was years of consistently getting on my mat, and I'm as flexible as a noodle.

However, flexibility isn't the reason I started my yoga journey. I needed something or some way to distract me after losing my mate. I searched for years, trying to find anything that would ease that pain, but it turns out nothing would help it except time, which didn't actually cure me of that debilitating grief—I just got used to missing him. Yoga was something, the only thing really, that I tried and stuck with. It didn't solve all of my problems, but it took my mind somewhere else, which was good enough.

All these years and I've kept up with it to the point where I'm an advanced yogi. I'm sure I could get my license to teach it. I just haven't gotten around to it. I've always been able to concentrate whenever I've practiced yoga—I focus all of my

energy on controlling my breathing as I move in and out of poses. Placement and positioning can make or break a yoga pose, so all I care about while I'm practicing is how I flow. The constant deep breaths and mental focus take care of the rest.

No matter who I've done yoga with, I've always been able to keep myself centered, but Gunner threw me off yesterday. This is new for me—I'm not used to any singular person giving me the same rush an entire room of people can. Still, Gunner's full attention was like standing in front of a stadium full of people. I value Gunner's thoughts and opinions, and that awestruck look in his prying, curious blue eyes made me eager to know what was running through his mind when I danced for him. He's never been one to look at outward beauty alone. He tends to look at most things on a much deeper level, and I'm dying to know what was going through that busy head of his.

I guess that's why I'm so turned on by him. I'm completely fine with being looked at and desired by so many—it'd be ironic if I wasn't. But with Gunner, it's different, more personal. The way he looks at me suggests he wants to go deeper, and although it's a bit intimidating, I can't deny that I like it. It speaks to how genuine he is. I don't like the very real possibility that, at any moment, he'll ask about things I don't want to talk about—he's good at that. But that's more an issue of mine than a problem of his.

The thing is, lately, I can actually see myself allowing something to happen between us—with how I was thinking, I'd probably be the one to initiate it. But I won't act on it; this attraction is probably fleeting anyway.

But I wonder—would I have sex with him knowing it wouldn't mess up our friendship? I most certainly would, especially now that, for some inexplicable reason, he's more attractive than he was before. But I'm well aware meaningless sex often ends up in someone or both developing feelings, and that's what I'm trying to avoid.

Sometimes, I like to think I've healed as much as I possibly can and that maybe my fear of losing another mate or partner

will never go away. Still, I know that's just me refusing to even set myself up for that kind of pain again.

Letting out a sigh, I look up at the ceiling. Yesterday was the only day I'm going to fall for that amazed intrigue in Gunner's expressive blue eyes. I know what to expect now. I will be strong.

There—I made my decision, and I'm going to stick to it.

Just as I'm finishing my warm-up stretches, the front door opens, and I already know it's Gunner. The girls aren't due to arrive for another three hours, and nobody else comes by when we aren't open. The only other person it could be is Flint, but he's probably going to stick around and deal with the after-meeting questions I've heard so much about.

Like I thought, Gunner comes in, a duffle bag hanging from his shoulder, tapping along on his cane. I smile when I see him, but it fades as I take in the scowl on his face. His jaw is flexing, and his thick brow is set in a hard line over his eyes, his lips pressed together. His free hand is balled up at his side, and his steps are much quicker today, but I think it's only because of how obviously aggravated he is.

His gaze lands on me, and they flicker across my face, then he gives me the tiniest of smiles.

"I'm going to change," he tells me.

"Don't take too long," I reply. "We're going to have to work a little quicker today."

"Great," he groans, walking past me to the door leading to the dressing rooms and the office.

He's definitely more disgruntled than usual, that's for sure; I could almost see the air rippling off of him. I wonder what it is that has him in such a sour mood today.

Maybe he's sorer today because of what I put him through yesterday? He's usually a bit more prickly after his more intense sessions with Layla. Yeesh—guess I'm going to find out what it's like to work with him when he's hurting a bit more. Layla has already warned me what that's like, and I'm glad I have time to prepare for it.

It doesn't take him long to change; a few minutes later, he comes back out, wearing gym shorts over compression shorts and a black muscle shirt that shows off his broad shoulders and defined chest. A lock of his usually gelled-back hair has fallen over into his face, which amplifies the aggravated air around him. He hates it when his hair falls into his face.

I'm going to get to the bottom of this mood he's in before our session starts, and hopefully, by the end of this next hour and a half, he will calm down.

He walks across the room to where I stand in front of the stage with the yoga mats laid out, and as he nears me, I can't help but take notice of how sexy he is in black. I've seen him in all black numerous times. However, today, there's something about it that's making his features darker and his eyes bluer, like all he needed was that curl falling over into his face to offset how handsome he is.

Damn, he's gorgeous.

Setting his cane on the stage, he sets his gaze on me as he leans back on the stage and crosses his arms.

"So what torture are you putting me through today?" he asks me.

Immediately, I scowl at him.

"Quit referring to it as torture," I order him. "Start seeing it for what it is—therapy, and it's meant to get you better."

"Right, right," he nods, sarcasm dripping in his tone. "Optimism and positivity will sink down into my muscles, and I'll magically be better," he gripes.

I let his tone roll off me, not taking his words personally, then I cross the floor over to him.

"Have you tried it?" I ask him calmly, coming to a stop in front of him. "Who knows? It could actually help."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Are you feeling okay today?" I question him, looking him up and down.

His words from the other day echo in my head right before he says, “No different than any other day.”

“Okay, so then what’s up with this attitude of yours today? You’re not usually *this* crabby.”

He stares at me for a second, his lips pursed and his jaw flexed before his shoulders drop, and he releases a sigh.

“I can always count on you to call me out,” he says, his tone softening just a bit.

I shrug. “Because I know it’s not intentional, and I have a hunch you don’t realize when you’re doing it.”

His eyes flicker across my face for a moment before he responds.

“Thanks,” he nods. “I tell myself I’ll try to catch it because I’m aware of how impatient I’ve become, but sometimes it’s hard for me to tell when I’m being more aggressive.”

“Given your current state, it’s understandable,” I sympathize. “But this time, something caused it. Did something happen in your meeting?”

He confirms that’s what it is with a simple head nod, but it takes him a moment to answer, and with each second that passes, I grow more anxious.

Having Gunner around has been entertaining in more ways than just one. I’ve always been curious about what the men talk about and what’s going to come of their gatherings. Before, I’d only get bits of information about what goes on in club meetings from Gunner because he used to be so busy. I thought Roxy was going to be my link to the inside, but she remained tight-lipped just in case information got out, and Hector and the elders couldn’t blame ‘women and their loose lips,’ Roxy said. I swore I wouldn’t say anything. I know how to keep a secret, but she didn’t want to risk it.

But Gunner tells me more than any of the elders would want me to know. I didn’t even have to ask—I just asked him how the meeting went one day, and he gave me detailed information. It’s not like I’m going to reveal any of it, and he knows that.

Whatever happened in that meeting to have him like this must be big.

“This doesn’t leave this room,” he starts.

I can’t stop myself from rolling my eyes. “I’ve given you no reason to tell me that.”

“I know,” he says. “Some things just *need* that reminder, though.”

I completely agree with him, but by now, I know better than to spill what he tells me. “I totally get that. What information are you about to give me that needs that prelude?”

“Well,” he says, then takes a deep breath and blows it back out. “Flint’s planning to tell the humans about us.”

My eyebrows shoot up at that; I’m thoroughly shocked. I didn’t expect that to come out of his mouth. Out of everything I was thinking, that wasn’t even on the list of what could have put Gunner in such a bad mood.

“Oh?” The surprise in my voice is evident. “What spurred this decision?”

“That bed and breakfast he wants to get started, well, he found a couple to be in charge of it,” he answers. “A half-orc and an elf.”

Now that’s almost more baffling than letting the humans know they’re living among beings that aren’t human. Most of them don’t even want other shifters moving here, and they only tolerate the humans. A half-orc and an elf? I know Flint got some pushback on that.

“I can’t imagine that went over well.” I can almost hear the specific complaints some of them probably made.

“There was a lot of disagreement with that,” Gunner confirms.

Grasping this information, I move from my spot in front of Gunner and lean back on the stage next to him, and I prop my elbow up on his shoulder.

“They don’t even want other shifters moving here,” I point out.

“I know. But Flint wants the humans to be aware of our presence and of the businesses he wants to start because it’s very likely all kinds of beings are going to flock to this place once we get further along in this. Flint’s supposed to be setting a meeting up with the Mayor soon.”

As he talks, it seems like Gunner doesn’t really care about anyone coming to live here—he’s always been rather friendly with people passing through, so it seems out of character for this to be the reason he’s annoyed.

“I didn’t think this would bother you,” I tell him, confused.

“I’m fine with the humans knowing about us. In fact, I think this is long overdue,” he explains. “And the half-orc and elf that are supposed to come don’t bother me either.”

“So then, what is it?” I press.

He sighs before he says, “Flint wants to take me along with him and Blade to open up discussions with the humans. I’m supposed to fall back into my duties for this one easy job after months of being left here on desk duty.”

I try as hard as I can to figure out what about that has him so annoyed, but try as I might, I can’t put my thumb on it. I push off of him, unsure of what he’s getting at.

“I’m confused,” I admit, still trying to see this from all angles. “Isn’t this a good thing? You’re doing work for the gang again. That’s what you wanted, right?”

“I want to get back to doing the work I used to do, but I didn’t want it to be out of pity.”

Ohhh, I get it now.

Before I can say anything, he continues.

“I’m sure he knows how much I hate sitting around. Since this is only across town and dealing with fragile humans, there’s no real danger or chance of a fight breaking out,” he continues. “I can’t shift yet, but humans don’t really pose a threat, so it doesn’t matter that I can’t shift—we won’t need to. I’m just as weak as they are.”

My heart sinks hearing him talk like this.

“I’m already on bouncer duty, which isn’t real work,” he goes on. “I just make sure the other bouncers are doing what they’re supposed to do.”

The more he talks, the more I realize he’s less annoyed and just down on himself overall. Not being able to shift is taking a toll on him, and he’s feeling useless because of it.

I’ve never understood anyone more than I do now. He’s talking to the right person about not being able to shift—I could write a book on coping with that depreciating mindset. It’s crushing seeing this on someone else.

“See—” I start, running my fingers through his thick hair and pushing that curl back. “You’re looking at this from the wrong angle.”

“From where I am, that’s the only way to see it.”

“Nope. Wrong,” I tell him. “Because everything you said is coming from your difficulties and insecurities caused only by your injuries.” He opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off. “One, the work you do here is more than just desk duty. Do you know how many shitty people hang out in strip clubs? Since your bouncers are so watchful, the girls and I know we’re safe, which is entirely different from some of the clubs I’ve worked in. Your bouncers are the way they are because of you, and all of us appreciate what you do here. I almost don’t want you to get better so you can stay here with us.

“And as for that theory that Flint only included you because he feels sorry for you—nonsense—where’d you get that from?” I ask him. “Look at his other options: Talon and Blaze are obviously too immature to even be considered, Aster is more of an errand boy, Tiberius and Ax would add an unwanted intimidation factor, Slash couldn’t go for obvious reasons, Roxy isn’t very good with words nor is she very patient, and Ryder isn’t really human friendly. This is an incredibly sensitive matter, one that Flint needs to go well. You and Blade are the only ones he can take to deliver this news in a calm, sensible manner. I’m pretty sure if he had more options,

he'd still choose you two because he knows you'll get the job done."

"After being excluded from everything for months, it's hard to look at this that way," he confesses. "I hadn't even considered any of that. After a while of being inactive in the gang, I assume everyone looks at me as weak."

I hate hearing him talk this way.

"I can understand where you're coming from, but nobody thinks you're weak. Everyone knows you're healing, which doesn't mean you're weak. We all want you to get back to your old self, which you can't do if you keep beating yourself down. If all of your thoughts are negative, then nothing good will happen for you." I finish smoothing his hair back out of his face, then stand up. "We're gonna have to work on how you think because this self-pity isn't helping you."

I lean over and unfold his arms from over his chest before grabbing his hand and turning around, trying to pull him up. "You know what will help with that? Yoga. Let's clear that mind of yours—"

He doesn't get up like I expect him to—instead, he tugs on my arm and pulls me back to him. When I look up at him, his eyes have gone soft.

"How do you do that?" he asks me.

Confused, I ask, "Do what?"

"Be everyone's therapist?"

His question hangs between us for a moment, and I shrug.

"I should be licensed, right?" I laugh humorlessly, then I really give it some thought. "I don't know. I've always had jobs where people load their problems off on me. As a bartender, I've been told some pretty dark secrets, and I've heard some gnarly personal problems. The same goes for when I used to give private dances. Sometimes, people didn't even want a dance. Some just wanted to talk."

"You know what I think? I think you have a power you don't tell anyone about, one where you can easily gauge what's

wrong and then help figure it out,” he says. “I’ve seen you do this with so many of us.”

I shrug. “It’s not really a power so much as me being an intrusive and probably annoying empath.”

He laughs at that, and hearing it, I let out a breath. He seems like his mood has lifted, so exercising should be easy today.

“You know what’s odd though?” He asked me unexpectedly.

“What?”

“I’ve known you for years, but I don’t know that much about you.” I stiffen at his statement. The last thing I want to do is answer questions about myself. “You know so much about everyone here, including me, but I don’t know that much about you.”

I give him a forced polite smile and push against his chest. I have to shut this down before he starts asking actual questions.

“That’s because there’s nothing to know about me,” I tell him, grabbing his hand again. “I’m boring as shit. Now get up—” I grunt, pulling on his hand with all my strength. “—so we can start with your therapy for today. The girls will be here in a little bit.”

I know my pulling isn’t what gets him off the stage, and I’m glad he decided to come on his own instead of asking me more questions. I didn’t want to have to come up with an excuse because I don’t really have one other than there’s nothing to know about me. Thankfully, he lets me dodge it. I’m glad he’s not one to push.

I get us started with his workout for the day, hoping to keep him too busy so he doesn’t have the mental space to think of anything he wants to know. Still, knowing him, he probably has pre-thought-out questions. I’m definitely going to have to avoid anything that may remind him that he doesn’t really know much about me. That shouldn’t be hard. I’m a master at avoiding talking about myself. I’ve done it for this long; I can keep it up.

CHAPTER II

GUNNER

I WATCH her walk to the sound booth at the very back of the stage, my eyes fixated on the motion of her hips swaying from side to side as she moves. She's wearing a pink sports bra and high-waist spandex shorts, and her long, dark hair is in a high ponytail. Even when she walks, it's like she's dancing. It *almost* distracts me from the way she dismissed my curiosity about her life before Penfell Heights. We've been friends for years now, yet the only thing I know about her is that she used to dance in multiple clubs in Vegas. I can see how one would want to get away from a busy, noisy place like that and want to settle down in a smaller, quieter area. However, Jade's reluctance to talk about any part of her life before she came here hints at something deeper than that.

I've always been curious about what her life was like before she came here. The only people who know are Flint and maybe Roxy. I've never bothered to ask either of them what they know about Jade—if she wants me to know, then she'll tell me, and I'd prefer it if she's the one that tells me. I know there's more to her than what she's giving off. I've always known there is, and the way she went rigid in my arms a few moments ago confirms that.

Anytime her past is mentioned, she avoids answering any questions about it. Still, she's open and transparent about almost everything else. Whenever I figure something out about her, no matter how small that something is, it feels like progress. She's so inviting, and she has this air about her that makes her so easy to be around, but there's still so much of her that's unreachable.

In the dark that covers the rear portion of the stage, the computer screen cast light on Jade's gorgeous face. What else is there to her? I want to know. I need to know.

She smiles wide at the screen, then low, slow mystical music comes through the speakers. Grinning, she looks at me and comes out from behind the sound booth.

"I can't think of anything more soothing than this," she says as she comes towards me. "This will relax you for the entire day. We should start working some meditation into our routine."

"Hold up," I say, holding my hands up. "Let's figure out if what we're doing now works."

"I think you'd like meditating, especially now," she tells me, then hops off the stage. "Nobody talks to you. You get to sit in silence, and if you do it with some white noise, it helps clear your mind and center you that much better."

I point my finger in the air to no place in particular and ask, "This is relaxing to you?" I shake my head. "If I were to meditate, I'd go sit on the docks or in the forest. Listening to the ocean or the wind rustling the leaves is where it's at. You want me to meditate, let's do it out there."

The smile on her face stays, but the excitement in her eyes diminishes. Maybe I said something wrong.

"I've never meditated outside, but if that's what it'll take to get you to try it, then so be it," she says, stepping onto the mat laid out on the floor, then she lowers down, sitting cross-legged.

"That's odd," I reply, taking a seat on the floor on my mat in front of her.

She lifts her arms above her head and stretches towards the ceiling, and I copy her.

"What?" she asks.

"You've never meditated outside?"

She stares at me a moment before she shakes her head. "I just don't feel like trying to find somewhere perfect enough."

“What about before you came to Penfell?” I question her. “Not even then?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve never been one to wander out into nature. But enough talking. You need to keep up with your breathing.”

There she goes again, sidestepping the question, but why? I don’t push her for an actual explanation, though. I grin at her to take away some of her obvious unease.

“Sure thing, boss.”

She smiles and rolls her eyes, shaking her head before she changes positions.

Today, she kicks the speed up a notch—her reasoning—because the girls are going to be here any moment, and she wants to get through everything before they do. She’s not going so fast that I can’t keep up, but it’s faster than yesterday. I barely have time to figure out whether or not a movement is going to hurt me as she’s explaining what it’s for. Everything she does pulls at my cold, tight muscles, and sometimes, she’s there to help me through the more challenging movements.

Except today, when she’s helping me into positions, her fingers linger longer than they need to. I’m not complaining about it. In fact, I think I might be enjoying her touch a little too much. The warmth from her hands seeps through my clothes, and her light, gentle touch is enough by itself to help me hold poses longer than I would on my own. In a modified warrior one position, she places her hands on my stomach and lower back and gently presses on my lower abdomen to let me know to take the arch out of my spine. As I hold that position, she’s right beside me, her gaze stuck on my pecs as her hands roam to my sides. They climb upwards, tracing over every muscle along the way before she straightens my arms out above my head. With her being so close to me, her amazing scent surrounds me; a rich, sensual amber scent mixed with vanilla wafts into my nose, and I inhale her warm, comforting aroma.

Even after I’m positioned correctly, her hands linger for a bit longer while she inspects me, and then she pulls away from

me. I immediately miss her fingers tracing over my body, and I'm left with the fiery trails all over my body that her hands left behind.

She returns to her own mat all too soon, but her scent, combined with her graceful, fluid movements, takes my attention away from what we're doing all the same as if she were touching me. I move with her, paying close attention to the way her body moves, how easily she bends, and how flexible she is. She flows like water—each of her movements is unhindered, shifting into and out of various impossible positions. What amazes me is the poses she's doing are modified so I can do them. I have no doubt in my mind that she would be able to do advanced poses with no problem. This is light work for her. She makes yoga look easy, but even at my physical best, I'm sure I wouldn't be able to do what I know she can.

After forty minutes of stretching out every muscle in my body, she ends this yoga block and hops to her feet at the front of her mat, then heads for the stage. She easily lifts herself up onto it and goes to the sound booth to put music on. As she does that, I try to redirect my thoughts while rolling the mats up. I have to control myself better than I did yesterday, but that's awfully fucking hard when she can get me going with a single look. I'm still shocked she hasn't said anything about the fact that I had a raging hard-on while we were dancing, but I'm also glad she hasn't brought it up. Maybe she feels that discussion isn't something that we have to have? Or perhaps she's just used to men being turned on around her, so much so, nothing would be off about me getting hard as she danced on me.

I groan inwardly. If only I hadn't seen her dancing, then I wouldn't be struggling with this attraction to her.

I set the mats aside and then watch her as she walks in time with West Coast by Lana Del Ray. After yesterday, I realized it doesn't matter what song is on—she can dance to it, and she likes to alternate fast and slow, just to keep me on my toes.

She basically glides towards me, each one of her steps fluid and graceful, and she sets those low eyes on me. I have no

time to prepare myself for this side of Jade, and my attempt to control my thoughts goes right out the front door.

She comes to a stop at the edge of the stage, lip-syncing along with the song, those captivating eyes right on me as she rides the beat mouthing the words. She feels everything about the music as it plays, which is probably why she can dance to anything. Seeing it on her face and in her water-like movements is yet another reason I can't quit looking at her. Plenty of people can say they feel the music, but Jade becomes the music.

She hops off the stage, and I'm paralyzed as she comes to me, but my blood is moving as quick as ever—it rushes right to my cock as I stand here, locked into the hypnotic way she's moving.

It's only when she takes my hand and twirls underneath it that I start following her.

Any attempt to keep my thoughts about her decent is forgotten as she presses her back to me, then snakes downward and comes back up. Her ass sits up perfectly where I need it to be—if she bent over, I'd easily be able to ease into what I just know is a tight pussy. Even if she weren't wearing only a sports bra and high-waist spandex, I'd still be hard as a rock. The way she's moving is almost more than I can handle but damnit if I don't try to keep up. I definitely can't just stand here—I'm sure she wouldn't wait on me to start. She'd probably use me as a prop, which I'm not against. Anything to have her just on me.

For the next forty minutes, I make sure we don't separate no matter what song comes on, but I don't try too hard—it seems like she doesn't want to back off me either. Somewhere along the way, therapy turns into dirty dancing. She exaggerates the movements on the left side, and the way she swivels her hips, pushing her ass back into me in this wide-leg stance, keeps me going. If I stop, then so does she, and I don't want that.

She turns around, a smile on her face as she brings her hands up and locks them at the back of my neck, and I place my hands on her hips. She moves in a figure eight, dragging my

hands along for the ride. Her chest is pressed against mine, her head right under my chin. The way she fits so perfectly into me almost makes me wrap my arms around her waist so I can pull her to me. But all too soon, the music cuts off, and it's replaced by the sound of an alarm, signaling the end of this session. But as the alarm chimes, Jade doesn't let me go, and I don't drop my hands. She doesn't make any move to back away from me. Instead, she remains pressed against me, her and my chest rising and falling as we catch our breath.

Up close like this, I can feel her heart beating in her chest, reverberating through me a second after my own pounds against my ribs. I'm surrounded by her sweet scent, her sweat now adding to it, which is enjoyable in a completely different way. Of course, her sweaty scent would be just as alluring as her usual one. I swallow hard as I gaze down into her hooded green eyes, her lips slightly parted as she pants, her warm breath spreading across my face. My cock is throbbing, and I know she can feel my hardness pressing into her. If she does, she doesn't seem to mind.

I have to let her go before I do something wild, like shove my nose into the crook of her neck and inhale her scent deep into my lungs.

I'm just about to release her, but her shining green eyes fall on my lips, and the look that passes over her eyes makes me hold on. Although it feels as if time slows down, I have little time to prepare for when she stands on her toes and her lips smash against mine. The second they make contact, I don't hesitate any longer, and I don't have to hold back anymore. I immediately reciprocate her eager kiss.

And damn, she's delicious.

Her sweet tongue dives into my mouth to find mine, and she leads the dance that takes place. While our tongues tango, she caresses my face and holds me right where she wants me, pulling me to her, so she isn't standing on her toes anymore. She doesn't have to hold on to me—I readily lean down into the sloppy wet kiss she surprises me with.

I press one hand into her lower back, holding her sweaty body to me as the other roams over the globes of her ass. The second my hand finds the back of her thigh, she lifts her leg and hooks it around my waist, smooshing her hot pussy against me. I thought I was hard before, but when she lifts her leg, the thick scent of her arousal hits me, and a growl escapes my chest when it hits the back of my nose. The only thing I can think of now is being buried inside of her. All I can picture is her round ass in the air, her face on the floor, and those heated green eyes on me as she looks back, waiting on me to fill her pussy up.

I take one step over to the stage, but the second I move, the front door opens, and Jade pushes off of me. Like being at the top of a roller coaster, and before the drop, the damn thing just stops. The space between us now feels like a canyon, and my desire flares as I stand here desperately wanting to continue what just started.

Shit—my entire body is throbbing, and I'm on fire; Jade's cheeks are flushed, she's still breathing as hard as I am, and our eyes are locked on each other. That kiss alone was more passionate than most of the sex I've had, and she must feel something similar. The way she's staring at me, baffled, confirms it.

Her eyes flicker behind me, and she comes out of her trance, reaching up to push loose strands of hair from her face.

"We should definitely do this again," Jade says as Karmen, Terra, and Grace walk into the building. "This seems like it's working for you."

The fog in my head starts to clear as the girls chatter behind me, but all of my focus is still locked on Jade.

"We'll pick this up later, yeah?" she says again, waiting for me to respond.

I nod, and she throws a smile my way, then winks before she walks past me. I can't help it; I turn to watch her as she walks away from me, heading for Terra, who's on her way to the back.

“Did you give what I asked you any thought?” I hear Jade ask her. “I’d love to have your help.”

“Gunner...”

She played that off good as fuck. Meanwhile, I’m still standing here, unable to get my bearings straight. How can I? I can still feel her leg wrapped around my waist, and I can taste her in every corner of my mouth. I’m going to be thinking about that for the rest of the day—for the rest of the week, possibly.

“Gunner!”

I’m jolted from my thoughts, and I tear my eyes away from Jade to Karmen grinning beside me, then she starts nodding.

“Caught ya,” she teases, laughing before she looks at where Jade and Terra quietly talk. “It’s hard not to look at her when she’s fully clothed. The woman is a dime piece. I’m sure she’s a goddess that came down to have a human experience. I’m just glad she’s done dancing because none of us would make any money. I’m sure everyone would demand she dance if they saw the wild shit she does on stage.”

I couldn’t agree with that statement more.

Finally, I rip my gaze away from Jade across the room and turn my attention to Karmen looking up at me.

“Did you need something?”

She shakes her head, a tiny knowing smirk still playing on her lips.

“No,” she says. “I was going to ask how you’re feeling today. I haven’t asked you in a while.”

I’m prepared to give my usual answer, but for the first time in a while, it isn’t holding true to my current state. After an hour and a half of Jade’s non-stop yoga and dancing, I feel... energetic.

“I feel good,” I tell her honestly. “Better than I have in a while.”

“That’s good to hear,” she says. “Whatever Jade is doing must be working. I know I haven’t known you long, but it’s nice to see something other than a frown on your face. Keep doing what you’re doing.”

“I don’t really have a choice,” I reply. “Jade wouldn’t ever let me skip a session, and I don’t think she plans on letting me get slack.”

“You’ll be better in no time if that’s the case,” Karmen encourages me.

Just then, Grace peaks her head out from behind the door leading to the back and finds Karmen.

“Come here,” she says, waving her over. “It’s your turn to go get breakfast.”

Karmen throws her head back and groans. “I’ll pay you if you make this run. I really don’t feel like going anywhere,” she says, walking off from me.

I don’t follow her—I’m still trying to collect myself. My body is still charged, and I don’t see that going away any time soon. Now that I know my condition isn’t a turn-off for Jade, I’m not going to have a solid enough reason to convince myself to stay away from her. I don’t want to mess our friendship up, and that should persuade me to keep my hands off her, but somehow I know it won’t. The second Jade’s lips touched mine, all of my reservations flew out the window, and it’s only a matter of time before something happens between us.

CHAPTER 12

JADE

AFTER A LONG COLD SHOWER, I get into bed. I was hoping drenching myself in icy cool water would calm me down, but I had no such luck. My entire body is still buzzing from this morning. All day, I had to wrangle my thoughts—they kept straying to the hardness in Gunner’s pants and the way his hands felt on every part of me. I have no idea what came over me or why I went in for that kiss. I couldn’t help myself. I was so lost in the moment, I didn’t think about what I was doing. I just went for it. When we started the session, I was set on keeping myself in line but being so close to him and inhaling his spicy scent made me forget I was trying to behave. And how he reciprocated did nothing to deter me from my split-second decision. I didn’t know he was going to come back at me the way he did.

Turns out he’s more into it than I thought he was. That’s not something I needed to know. That was one of the things holding me back. As long as I felt like he wasn’t looking to go past anything friendly, I wouldn’t have to worry about making things awkward between us. I didn’t stop to think about what I was doing before I kissed him, and I’m glad he ended up reciprocating. I’m certain we’d be able to put that behind us with no problem had it been one-sided, but I’d rather not deal with any weirdness between us. At least, as it stands, we can sit down and put this mutual attraction behind us. Neither of us has to feel like our dynamic has been drastically thrown off. We can put this to bed and continue on like we have been.

But I wonder if one good fuck would get it out of my system?

What the hell, Jade? I think. That never solves anything.

If anything, that one time might open something up that we might not be able to seal off. I turn over on my side, trying to get him off my mind, but that's impossible when I can still feel his heat on my back and his hands on my hips and stomach holding me against him.

I shut my eyes and go back to that moment, trying to remember how good he felt behind me, and my senses take over. I can almost smell him here with me, his presence is heavy in the room, and my pussy starts throbbing at the heat that consumes me.

I'm not going to be able to sleep if I let this tension in my lower belly persist. If anything, it will only grow stronger. I won't be able to ignore it, and the chance of having sex with him in my office tomorrow is a high possibility. So I reach over and pull my vibrator from my nightstand drawer. Tonight, my purple rabbit will be reimagined as Gunner's cock, which I'm hoping will get rid of the tight ball that's nestled at my center.

First, I turn the heating feature on, and as it warms up, I spread my pussy lips. Rubbing my middle finger up and down my slippery pussy, I think about exploring every curve and dip of Gunner's chest and abs as he lies underneath me. In the darkness behind my eyes, his blue eyes shine as he looks right into my soul, then a tingling sensation races down from my neck to my clit as I imagine what it'd be like for him to kiss my neck.

I press the power button on my rabbit, kicking it up to the third level, a strong constant vibration that only stands up to half the intensity of my arousal, but it'll do. The second the shaft of my vibrator touches my clit, I lift my hip as hot white electricity rolls through me. Gripping the bed sheets, I move my hips but hold the vibrator still. The bulbous end of the shaft remains pressed between my pussy lips as I move up and down the length of the vibrator.

The moment Gunner tightened his grip on me and held me against the strong, solid heat of his body was when I knew I

wouldn't be able to keep up with this plan of mine to toss my attraction to him to the side. I liked how my body felt against him way too much for me to ever forget about how he would feel under me. And on top of me. And inside of me. From how thick his cock felt from the outside of his pants, I can already feel him filling me up, his heavy girth spreading me open as he eases inside of me. Craving that thickness, I guide my toy inside of me.

I go as far as I can with my vibrator until the clitoral stimulator makes contact with my pulsating clit. The powerful vibrations hit right where I need it to, right up against my g-spot, and I fuck my pussy, in and out, my slick draining out of me, wetting my sheets. Behind my eyelids, I watch as Gunner sinks deep inside of me, my legs thrown over his shoulder as he pushes further and further inside of me while I massage my clit.

As the sensation builds, I plunge the vibrator in and out faster, trying to get over this ledge so I can fall into that sweet, sweet climax. Each time the vibration hits that magical place, I lift off the bed just a little bit until I hold it against that sensitive spot. I tip over the edge, and a wave of tingling electricity consumes me, sharp and intense, washing over me until stars burst behind my eyelids. I hold my vibrator in place, mostly because my pussy has clenched so tight around it I don't want to move it. I gush around the shaft as the vibration continues. When the waves stop crashing down, I remove the vibrator and relax into my pillows.

I take in deep breaths and squeeze my legs together before stretching my arms and legs after that intense orgasm that, which, surprisingly, was not enough. I only primed the pump. If anything, now I really want the real thing. My sacral chakra region is throbbing, and I swallow hard, annoyed I only managed to make myself hornier. My vibrator wasn't enough to satisfy me this time. It normally works so well, and then afterward, I fall asleep, but not this time. After the phantom buzz left behind by the vibrator fizzles out, my eyes are stuck to the ceiling fan spinning above me, and I'm left with that tension in my lower belly I was really hoping to get rid of.

It's been so long since I've been turned on like this, and the only thing that solved it was getting fucked. This isn't nearly as intense as it was with my late mate, but still, it's strong enough to make me insatiable until I get what I'm craving. And at the moment, I want to be on Gunner's cock.

Since I can't do that, I try to clear my mind, and I attempt to meditate myself to sleep. It's so much harder than I thought it would be—I keep seeing him behind my eyelids and imagining all the ways he'd make me moan his name. I have to force my thoughts back to a place that doesn't make my clit pulse over and over again until, finally, I fall asleep.

The lights shine bright in my eyes from the ceiling as I move towards the front of the stage where the pole stands, shining in the spotlight. Everything else around me is completely dark, but that doesn't bother me. I know there are eyes watching me—I can feel them. I move for the pole, intent on putting on a show. I grab hold of the pole and strut around it as muffled music plays from somewhere, but as long as I can feel the beat, I can dance to it. It's loud enough for the bass to take hold of me, and I swing myself around, wrapping my legs around the pole, holding myself up. Everything moves in slow motion as I dance, the colors all blurring together as I twirl up and down the pole as the music consumes me. That intoxicating sensation of liberation takes hold of me, and the darkness of the room is tuned out as I lose myself in the music.

I'm not sure how long I'm dancing before I hear applause from the void. I open my eyes, and there's Gunner, sitting in a tall back leather armchair, his blue eyes glowing as he watches me. He's completely naked, his entire body on display as he calmly sits there clapping, his eyes never leaving me. I take in his defined chest muscles, his tight abdomen, and lastly, my attention falls on his humongous cock, standing straight up and resting on his stomach.

With his eyes locked on mine, I take hold of the pole behind me, and the cool metal sends goosebumps racing across my body. I look down at myself to find I'm bare ass naked, and there's a puddle below me where slick has drained down my

leg onto the floor. Looking back at Gunner, I find him watching me closely, his hand wrapped around his cock, and he's stroking himself as he stares at my naked body. Soaking wet and incredibly turned on, I raise my arms above my head and grab onto the pole, holding myself up, then I lift my legs and open them wide into a 'v.'

A low growl comes from him as he watches a river of slick run out of me and drip onto the floor. He rises out of his seat and comes towards the stage, and easily lifts himself up, and I lower myself back down to the stage just as he's coming to a stop right in front of me.

He reaches for me, takes my hand in his, and yanks me towards him. Turning me around, he pulls me to him, and his erect cock rests right between my ass cheeks, hot and throbbing, adding to the heat between my legs. His huge hand rests on my stomach, his fingers spread out, then he pushes on my shoulder, bending me over. He places one of my hands on the pole, and I bring my other one up so I can hold on with both hands.

The second I feel his cock pressing into me, trying to gain entrance, I help him by pushing back into him. When his head slips through the ocean of slick leaking from me, the rest of his girth easily slides into me. My moan echoes in the darkness as he continues to give me exactly what I want, pushing so far inside of me his hips collide with my ass, and he holds himself there. Pleasure ripples through me, and more wetness slips out around his cock. When he pulls out, more slick drains out of me, but that only gives him what he needs to plunge right back inside.

Every inch of his cock drives me insane as the tension inside of me transforms into a loose bundle of white sensations that spreads to every part of my tingling body. He keeps going, pounding into me, and I bite my lip feeling my climax get closer and closer until it.....

...rips through me. I sit up, gasping as the sensation from the dream immediately ceases, but the fucking throbbing remains.

The only other thing that actually did carry over from that dream is the wetness that streamed out of me. I turn the lamp on, then toss the sheets to the side even though I don't need the lights to tell me just how soaked through my sheets are. I'm practically swimming in my own wetness.

"Shit," I breathe out, taking in my damp sheets.

I'm going to need to let my mattress air dry after this.

I move to the other side of the bed, then I remember something else pulled me from my sleep. A strange noise interrupted the music in my dream, and I piece it together that it was my phone.

I grab my phone off my nightstand, and my heart flutters in my chest. He must have known I was dreaming about him. I stare at a "you up" text from Gunner sitting here as my pussy pounds because of a dream I had about him.

It's almost two in the morning, and Gunner's up. I wonder why he's up.

I am, I send back. Why are you? Couldn't sleep?

I sit here staring at my phone, waiting for him to message me back, but it doesn't take him long.

I've been staring into the darkness for hours now. How come you're up?

I pause for a moment, curious about what he'd say if I told him about my dream, but he doesn't need to know all the details of why I'm awake.

Had a wild dream that woke me up, I write back.

You dreaming of me? ;D

I can't help but laugh at his message—I can hear exactly how he'd say it, and I can picture the sly grin that would spread across his face.

Hush, I send back. Then, after that, I text him again, You want to come over? May as well have company. I don't think I'm going to get back to sleep.

He quickly sends back, *Maybe we can help each other fall asleep.*

I send him back a laughing face, but in reality, I'm thinking about how I could actually exert myself fucking him. I'd definitely knock out after that.

But I shake my head. If I knew it would stay just about sex, I might consider it, but I don't know where Gunner stands on something like this. He might want more, and I'm not sure I can give him that. I don't want to form any kind of attachment that goes deeper than anything on a friendship level. I'm actively avoiding anything that will dig up old emotions that I've been able to stifle. I can't offer Gunner anything more than sex, and I don't want to string him along if he's after something more.

I realize inviting him over may not have been the best idea, but it's not like this is our first time showing up at each other's places in the dead of night. We've never had a problem before, so I'm sure things will go as they usually do. I just have to maintain control of myself.

So far, I'm not doing a great job, though; my damp sheets are proof that I have some strong desires I need to get under wraps before he gets here. From how hard my clit is pulsing, I won't be calming down anytime soon.

Maybe inviting him was a terrible idea but it's too late to tell him not to come. He's probably on the way now, and I don't want to have him running back and forth. I guess I should have thought about this before asking if he wanted to come here.

Letting out a sigh, I get up to go into the bathroom and hop in the shower turning the cold water on full blast as I wash my slick off of me. I don't have nearly enough time to get rid of this thick scent of mine.

After I turn the water off, I hear a truck rumbling outside. I take a deep breath hoping the perfumey scent of my soap will cover up the smell of my slick. It's not as strong as before, but I can still smell it, and it doesn't help me that I'm still aroused from that dream. This was not the best time to invite him over; I'm really seeing that now.

I get dressed, then I shut my room door to trap the majority of the scent in there. We usually sit up watching something on TV until we both fall asleep, so keeping him away from my room won't be hard.

Before I open the door for him, I stop and take a quick breather.

"You're going to hold it together," I order myself, then unlock the door.

I expect him to be coming up the stairs still, but when I pull the door back, there he is, dressed in black sweatpants and a hoodie to match, his hair falling over onto his forehead and my porch light shining down on him, making his eyes glow.

I'm instantly reminded of my dream, watching him stroke his cock while he ate me up with his eyes. I swallow the saliva that's pooled in my mouth as he waits on me to let him in, but somehow time has frozen, and I can't move under the intense weight of his gaze. What gets me out of this state is the slow trickle that starts back up again. I can smell it as it soaks through my shorts, so I know he can. That's only confirmed as I watch his nostrils flare before he takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. His face relaxes as he inhales my arousal, which only gets my pussy throbbing harder. When he opens his eyes, his pupils have grown, and he licks his lips, which is the last straw for me. Seeing him enjoying my scent pushes me over the edge, and I grab him by his hand, pulling him inside. As soon as the door closes, we're on each other. His cane clatters to the floor as he grabs me around the waist, and I stand on my toes to get to his lips.

Yeah, this is about to happen.

CHAPTER 13

JADE

I TAKE hold of the side of his face, devouring his mouth as he backs me into my apartment. He leans forward so he can reach my lips, and I plunge my tongue into his mouth, immediately getting blasted with the icy, minty taste on his tongue. His arms circle around my lower back, holding me to him as he kisses me just as ferociously as I'm going at him. I barely had any time to calm myself down after that dream. From the way my frustration has been building up, this explosion that bursts out of me is uncontainable. Now that he's here, I realize there's no way I ever would have been able to hold back, especially not after that dream. As I pull his tongue between my lips into my own mouth, I see that this was inevitable. Inviting him over was anything but a mistake—it was more like a necessary step to keep myself from jumping him at the club tomorrow.

He groans as I suckle on his tongue, then he stands straight up, lifting me off my feet as he continues to walk with me into my apartment. I lift my legs and wrap them around his waist, and his hand takes hold of my ass.

I pull away from him for just a second, and he opens his eyes to see why I stopped, but his wet lips find my throat.

“See, I told you you aren't weak,” I point out, letting my head fall back and giving him better access to pepper warm kisses down my throat.

He snickers, and the vibration in his chest rumbles against mine.

“It helps that you’re incredibly light,” he replies.

My bedroom door opens, and the scent I trapped inside floods out. Gunner’s expression relaxes, and his eyes flutter shut as he inhales the scent deep into his lungs. When he reopens them, his lids are heavy, and there’s now a smirk on his face.

Before I can ask him what he’s smiling about, he drops me on my back on the bed, then climbs on top of me. He caresses one side of my face in his hand and points my gaze up toward him, holding me in place before he comes in and covers my mouth with his. He keeps me still as his tongue takes a dive into my mouth, his lips moving over mine like he’s trying to get my soul to come out through my mouth. He’s in complete control right now, which I’m fine with. His kiss has actually made me physically weak to the point where I would need him to hold me up if we were still standing.

I didn’t think I’d ever be kissed like this again after my mate, but here I am, unable to even combat the hunger Gunner’s pouring out on me.

When he pulls up and his lips leave mine, my head comes off the bed, trying to keep that contact, not wanting him to rob me of that soul-snatching kiss. But his head falls to the crook of my neck, and his hand tilts my head to the left, opening up the right side to him.

His tongue glides up from the bottom of my neck to my earlobe, and a string of electric pulses fire down from my neck to my pussy.

“What was that dream about, Jade?” he asks me, his lips lightly grazing the tingling skin of my neck.

Given that we walked in here and it already smelled like I’d been having sex, he was bound to ask that question. But I don’t have the mental clarity to come up with something that won’t make it seem like I’ve been pining after him, not when he’s gently sucking on the side of my neck. That’s an easy way to get information out of me.

“About you,” I admit.

He pulls the straps of my tank top off my shoulders, and I lift my arms so he can pull it down past my breast.

“What about me?” he questions me as he takes one of my breasts in his hands.

He pinches my nipple between his fingers, and I wiggle beneath him as that sensation drops down to the pulsing that’s been constant for what feels like months now. But it only grows when he sucks my other nipple between his lips. I gasp as his tongue flicks across it and slick seeps out of me.

“We were at the club—” I pant, and my words momentarily get caught in my throat when he moves over to my neglected nipple, leaving the other one cold and left at the mercy of the cool air blowing down from the ceiling fan. “—I was naked dancing on stage, and you were watching me.”

“Mmmm,” he hums as he moves down my abdomen. “Did I fuck you in that dream?”

I nod as his fingers slip under the waistband of my shorts, but then I answer out loud.

“You did,” I breathe out as he pulls at my shorts. “It was so good too.”

I lift my hips so he can get my shorts off then I lift my legs in the air for him to pull them off. I’m lying on my back, and I watch as he tosses my shorts and panties to the side. Then he grabs at the tank top, and I push myself up so he can tug it off.

I sit up as he stands back, his eyes roam over my naked body before him, and I bite my lip when I notice his cock making a pretty large tent of his sweatpants.

“Fuck you’re gorgeous,” he growls. Then he leans over and takes my chin in his hand. “I’m getting ready to make that dream come true.

He plants another greedy kiss on me, one that I’m prepared for this time. I’m actually more than ready. I remain sitting up right, moving my lips with his as his hand goes to the back of my head. The way he holds me, how his caress is strong yet gentle, lets me know he likes to be in control in the bedroom. I

could have guessed that but not without any hints. But it's always the easy-going ones that have surprised me.

But the thing is, my passion can come across as dominance when really I just want to feel good, making him feel good.

I reach for the waistband of his sweats to free his straining cock. When he feels me tugging at his pants, he lets go of me, shoves them down, then steps out of them. He stands straight up, and as he pulls his hoodie over his head, my abdomen clenches at the sight of his hard, swollen cock. I knew he was packing, but he was hiding some of it somewhere.

I can almost feel him at my core already.

My eyes climb up his torso, and I find the scars, three thick lines going at a diagonal, starting just below his diaphragm and stopping at his left hip. I look up at him to find him already gauging my reaction. I reach out and place my right hand on his side, taking his heavy cock in my hands. I kiss up his stomach as I start to slowly stroke his girth, and he sucks in a breath of air as my grip tightens around his shaft. He smells amazing, like bergamot touched with just a dash of cinnamon. It's driving me absolutely insane. My clit has its own heartbeat at this point.

Just when I'm about to suck the head of his cock between my lips, he puts his hands on my shoulders and gently pushes me back onto the bed. I had my mouth ready to taste that salty precum at the tip, but when he parts my legs, it's pushed to the back of my head for now. He lowers down to his knees between my legs and slides one of his hands underneath my thighs only to wrap it around so he can hold me open for him.

"Perfect," he says, looking down at my pussy spread open in front of him.

He places his hand at the center of my pelvis, and his thumb presses against my very swollen, very sensitive clit.

I gasp the second he adds pressure, and involuntarily, my legs try to close, but one's held open, and his arm is preventing the other one from shutting all the way, so I twist to the side as that white hot heat blooms up from my clit.

“You’re dripping wet for me,” he says as he massages my clit. “And your scent is so fucking sweet. Mmm, I’ve wanted to taste you for so long,” he admits. “I’m going to make sure I savor this.”

His finger disappears, but I’m not left wanting for long. His hot mouth covers my throbbing pussy, and he immediately starts sucking on my clit. I curl upwards as my moan gets stuck in my throat, and my hands get lost in his thick hair. My legs clamp around his head as intense waves of tingling pleasure ripple through every part of me.

He brings his hand up on the outside of my knees, pries my legs back open, and holds them there so I can’t shut them again. Like this, he has nothing stopping him from completely feasting on my sopping wet pussy.

His tongue licks up and down my slit, dipping in and out of me, teasing me, and making me want so much more of him inside of me. He circles my clit, pressing his tongue flat against it, and the heat of his mouth seems like it’s warming my entire body. He develops a rhythm, one I easily catch onto and ride. I circle my hips in the opposite direction his tongue is moving, but he doesn’t want me to follow along—he wants me to be still. He brings his hands down to my abdomen and holds me in one spot as he continues to devour me.

From the moment he stilled me, that heat at my core only grew, and I steadily climb towards an orgasm. He doesn’t let up, so I creep towards the top at a steady pace—when I fall, I crash down into water. I can’t even warn him that I’m about to cum.

I gush out into his mouth, but he continues to lap at my pussy, his thumb working at my clit again, making sure my climax is seen through to the end.

When I’ve come down from that orgasm, my hands are gripping my hair, and I’m staring up at the ceiling.

“Fuck,” I say, arching my back.

I sit up and pull Gunner onto the bed with me. He climbs on top, and I wrap my arms around his neck so I can kiss him. I

taste myself on his tongue—his face is still wet with my juice. Something about that transfer amps my arousal up to where it was moments ago.

“I need your cock inside me, Gunner,” I pant in between kisses. “Now.”

“I’ll give you exactly what you want,” he replies. He reaches over to my nightstand, and I follow his motion to where he set his wallet.

“You don’t need a condom,” I tell him, rubbing my hands up and down the sides of his chest. “I had my tubes tied.”

He doesn’t ask questions, but I can tell he wants to. Thank fuck he doesn’t. Instead, he sits back and positions himself at my entrance. I bite my lip in anticipation, but rather, he teases me and slides his fat, hot cock between my pussy lips, up and down, rubbing my clit in the process.

“Gunner,” I say, and my voice is husky in my own ears. “Put it in me, please,” I practically beg. “I’ve been wanting this so bad I’ve been dreaming about it.”

“I fucking love how you say my name,” he growls.

I’m about to say something else, but the second he lines his cock up with my entrance, my mind goes black as I begin to stretch around him. I’m already wet enough, so his head slips inside of me with no problem, and I let out a long, breathy moan as he plunges further into me. Just like in my dream, with every inch he sinks inside of me, tension dissolves until he hits that troublemaker at my core. When he hits that, it’s like he’s pressing a button that sends an electric wave of hot pleasure to every corner of my body.

As my body begins to relax around his girth, stretching me out, I arch my back and stretch my arms above my head.

“Fuuuck,” I groan as he pulls out and slowly thrusts back into me. “You’re so big.”

“And you’re taking every single inch of me,” he hisses as his thighs meet that back of mine. “You’re so tight,” he growls, picking up his pace.

For someone who has issues with his left side, he has no problem doing a body roll with his lower half every time he dives into me. I'm definitely not complaining. His strokes get longer and deeper, each time seeming like he's going deeper than the last. I watch as his cock slides in and out of me for a moment, his dick glistening and dripping with my essence each time he pulls out.

I can feel my orgasm building, and a surge of arousal takes over me, which causes me to throw my leg around his hip, and he understands that I want to take over. He slides his hand underneath my back and flips us. The second I'm on top, I plant my hands on his chest to give myself the leverage I need to lift my hips and lower them back down. As I ride him, slick drains out of me and onto him, making his thighs just as slippery as mine.

He reaches around to take hold of my ass, and as I ride him, he assists me, lifting me even further up his cock and thrusting his hips to meet me as I slide back down it. I can feel my abdomen tighten as his thrust becomes faster—not too much longer after, I sit up as my climax nears.

"I'm about to come," I tell him.

He keeps going, pounding into me, and I clench around him as my orgasm takes over my entire body. My head falls back as he continues to thrust upwards, then he sits up and easily flips us again. He doesn't relent.

He pumps his hips into me, and I haven't even come down from this orgasm before another one starts building.

He's so hard inside of me, and his thrust becomes more powerful the closer he gets to his own release. He takes hold of my hips, and as my walls constrict around him again, I moan, and he grunts with me. I feel him let loose inside of me, and his thrusts slow down, but he continues to push his throbbing cock in and out of me until he's empty.

I'm a sweaty, panting mess, but that doesn't stop him from leaning over me and planting a soft kiss on my lips. Then he slowly pulls out of me and collapses on his back beside me.

We lie here for a moment, catching our breath. For that to have been sex without a mate bond, that was pretty intense. I didn't know that was possible.

I look over at Gunner, and he's already looking back at me, his chest rising and falling as he catches his breath. I, for one, don't have the energy to speak, which doesn't seem to be a problem for him. He lifts his arm above my head, and I scoot closer to him. I rest my head on his shoulder, and he brings his hand up to rest on my hip. His body heat is enough to where I don't even need to pull my quilt up; he's like a furnace. After I snuggle up to him, it doesn't take long for my eyes to get heavy, and between Gunner's heart beat and his steady breathing, I'm out in no time.

CHAPTER 14

GUNNER

I WAKE up a few hours later with Jade snuggled into my side. We're lying uncovered, our naked bodies intertwined. Her breasts are pressed into my side, and one of her legs is thrown over mine, which puts her bare pussy right on my hip. She fell asleep with her head on my shoulder and her arm across my chest. She didn't stir—not once—after we both collapsed in her pillows, and she passed out before I did. She hasn't woken up yet. I lie here staring up at the ceiling with one hand behind my head and the other gently rubbing her thigh, her skin velvety soft under my fingers, making it hard for me to stop dragging my fingers over the curves of her hips and thighs.

She was incredible, but that's absolutely no surprise. I never expected her to be shy at all, and she was definitely the exact opposite of that. I'm not sure what I expected her to be like, but I didn't think she'd have me wanting more of her already. I could get lost in her for hours at a time. Her husky moans and seductive purrs echo in my head as I think back to the moment I entered her. The way she sighed when I was all in is something I'm going to think about for years to come. I'm already thinking about how I'm going to get her to moan like that again.

Her passion is all-consuming, and it definitely swallowed me whole. It felt so...natural. I usually have to learn a partner's body, and the first time is never as seamless as this time. There's some level of awkwardness that accompanies first-time sex but not with Jade. It was like we'd fucked numerous times before—the way she knew what I liked and vice versa was uncanny. I've never had sex like that before, and I'm not

sure there's anyone that can show me a better time than I had last night. Even my bear has found some energy because of her. He's actually sitting up, perched up on his back legs, his full attention on Jade. He's been hibernating for a while now, but she has him stirring and moving around again.

She's different, he tells me as he takes her in, shocking the shit out of me.

For months, he hasn't said shit, and those are his first words in forever. I knew she was unlike anyone else, and she managed to get him talking, so that confirms it. A smile spreads across my lips as I watch her sleep like some kind of creep. She really is amazing.

As I think about last night, I don't recall her stopping for even a moment to ask me if I was feeling fit enough for sex. Now that, I appreciate. She's one of the very few people that doesn't treat me like I'm fragile. She never has. This entire time, she's treated me no differently than she did before, which is probably why being around her doesn't annoy the absolute shit out of me.

I hope this wasn't a bad idea. I had the best sex of my life last night with someone I consider one of my best friends, and I don't want it to change anything.

Maybe that's the reason—maybe we're already so close we're just that comfortable with one another that the first-time awkwardness just skipped us. However, the situation still has a chance to take a turn, like when she wakes up and comes back to her senses. I don't see Jade regretting this, but anything is possible.

Briefly, I consider what if this situation goes the other way—what if she wants something more? I don't see Jade turning sour if I were to shoot down the possibility of us pairing. Come to think of it, I've never heard Jade express any desire to be in a relationship. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever even heard her mention being interested in anyone. Who knows how this is going to turn out when she wakes up.

Looking over her head, I find a clock on the nightstand that reads thirty minutes to eight. As much as I don't want to, I

have to leave her. Flint got that meeting with the Mayor scheduled quicker than I thought possible. I didn't expect to go talk to them for at least another week, so what a surprise it was when Flint messaged me last night, telling me the Mayor wanted to meet with us as soon as possible. If I'm going to get there on time, I have to leave now. It takes me a little longer to get ready these days, and I don't want to be late for such an important meeting.

Gently, I lift Jade's arm and place her hand at her side, then I ease her head off my chest, trying as hard as I can not to wake her. But as I start sliding off the bed, she stirs anyway. Her sleepy eyes open, and she focuses on me, yawning as she rolls off of me.

"Morning," she says, pulling her quilt up to cover her as I sit up. She turns on her side and props her head up in her hand. "Leaving already?"

"Yeah," I answer as I stand. I'm sore, but not as sore as I thought I might be after sex. I feel pretty great, actually. "I have to go get ready for this meeting with the Mayor."

Her eyebrows shoot up, surprised. "That's happening already?" She asks, to which I nod.

"Flint messaged me last night a second after I got home."

"Damn, he got that set up fast. You ready? How are you feeling about it?" she questions.

"Better, thanks to you," I admit. "I guess it was hard for me to see that I wasn't picked for this out of pity. I haven't really done much gang work since the attack, and this one time just felt like I was going for the hell of it."

She nods and pulls the covers up more. "Don't let that overactive head of yours think up scenarios like that. How do you think the humans are going to take the news?"

I shrug. "No telling, but my guess is there's going to be a mix of curious acceptance and ignorant rejection. Humans aren't really known for being open-minded, so we'll see."

"We'll push your session back to later this afternoon, then," she tells me. "The girls are going to leave the club early today,

so we'll have the place to ourselves."

I laugh at her persistence. "I thought I had a pretty solid excuse to get out of that today."

"Pssh—there's not a chance in hell I'd let you skip a session," she rebuts. "You only gave me a month."

"What happened to rest days?" I playfully push back.

"You can take it easy on the weekends," she says. "Monday through Friday, you're mine."

That's the first time I'm hearing of that schedule.

"Fridays too?" I repeat.

"Just some light work. No dancing—just stretching out the soreness from the week," she clarifies, then gives me a seductive smile. "I know you're probably it feeling our last workout. I certainly am."

Chuckling, I ask her, "That was counted as a session?"

"Well, not literally, but I know you got a good workout in."

"That's a different kind of exertion I definitely won't ever argue with, you know, if you ever want to revisit that method," I tell her.

"I'm already planning our next more private session," she says salaciously.

The idea of having her all over me the way she was last night is almost enough to get me to get right back in her bed. Her pussy clenching around my cock comes back to me, and I want to lie her on her back to ease back inside her tight warmth. I'm going to be thinking about her moans and her long legs wrapping around my waist all day.

"You won't get any complaints out of me," I tell her, pulling my shirt on. "But should we talk about what happened between us? The—"

"The complications of two close friends sleeping together?" she cuts in.

Oh—she must've been thinking about that too.

“Yes, actually,” I say.

She gives an understanding nod and sits up against the headboard.

“I don’t want things to get messy,” I tell her. “Maybe we should have talked about this before we jumped in bed, huh?”

She smiles softly at me. “Yeah, we should have. I’m not looking for anything serious,” she tells me.

“Neither am I,” I reply as soon as she’s done talking.

She seems both relieved and surprised by that.

“Okay,” she nods, then continues cautiously. “Would you want to keep this going?”

“Only if you want to,” I tell her.

A smile spreads across her face, and she fully relaxes. “I do.”

“That works for me,” I grin, then squat down to pick my cane up.

She laughs and tosses a pillow at me, which I snatch out of the air. “What—were you expecting me to go crazy after this one time?”

I snicker and toss the pillow back on her bed. “I just wasn’t sure where you stood on relationships. I’ve never heard you talk about one.”

At that, she scrunches her nose up. “I’m good on that, I promise.”

I’d ask her why she seems so against it, but I know she probably won’t answer for one and two, I really need to get going. Maybe I’ll slip it into a question later, on the off chance she decides to answer.

“I’ll see you at the club later, then?” I ask her, pulling the door open.

“Yep,” she says, snuggling into her pillow. “Make sure you lock the door on your way out,” she reminds me. “I’m not getting up until I absolutely have to.”

“You don’t seem to mind too much about what’s getting ready to happen,” I point out, my hand on the door knob.”

She shakes her head into the pillow. “I don’t really care if they know or not. If it will get more money into my club, then I don’t have a problem with it. Plus, they’re only human. It’s not like I care what they think of us, and I’m definitely not worried about them running us out of town.”

“Let’s hope they’re as nonchalant about all of this as you are,” I say.

“Who knows?” she replies. “Get out of here, so you aren’t late. I expect to see you later. You’d better not try to flake on me.”

“I won’t,” I laugh. “I promise.”

With that, I’m out the door, locking her apartment behind me before I head back to my place. When I get there, I take a nice hot shower, and the heat relaxes my tight muscles. I stay under the spray for as long as possible. I need to get Jade’s scent off of me. As much as I love having her lingering all over me, I don’t want anyone finding out about any of this. Everyone already suspects we’re sleeping together even though last night was the first time we’ve done anything. News gets twisted and bent as people gossip, and the last thing I want is for Jade and me to become this big thing like it does anytime the world knows anyone is sleeping together.

Once I feel like I’ve successfully scrubbed any trace of Jade off of me, I get out of the showers, confident even Flint’s impressive sense of smell won’t pick it up.

I pull on black jeans and a burgundy button-up, my boots, and then my leather coat. I figure I shouldn’t dress in my usual biker clothes for a meeting like this. Our trouble with the human side in the past has given off the wrong impression of us, and I don’t want to come off as the ruffians we probably look like to them.

When I’m dressed, I slick my hair back, then I’m out the door, heading to the clubhouse to meet Flint and Blade. Since the town is still waking up, there are not too many slow cars hogging the road, and I get to the club in no time.

Flint and Blade are already there, Flint still straddling his Rocket and Blade standing beside him. They're both dressed differently than normal, also. Looks like all three of us were on the same page, wearing button-ups and jeans that probably have never had blood on them.

I don't get out of the truck when I get there; instead, I pull up right in front of them and roll the window down.

"Morning," I greet them as they get close to the truck. "I'd get out, but I don't want to go through that trouble."

"No need," Flint says. "We're leaving in a few minutes."

"How'd you manage to set this up so quick?" I ask him, curious. "You just told us about it yesterday."

"The Mayor was eager to know what the urgent news was that I had to relay to him," Flint says. "Given the problems we've given them in the past, I'm sure he's assuming what we have to say is going to be bad. I can't really blame him, though; the trouble with Talon and Blaze, the amount of drugs that have made their way over there, and the noise from our parties are just a few of the things that might have the Mayor hostile toward us."

"I'm sure he's going to be peeved off," Blade adds. "He seems to be naturally agitated all the time. Even if we didn't have the reputation that we do, he'd still find some reason to be disgruntled."

"Well," Flint says. "We've given him no reason as of late. It's been months since anything has happened on his side of town because of us, and that can be used for our leverage." He glances at his watch, then taps the side of the truck. "Let's get going. Don't want to be late."

They go back to their rides and crank up. Flint takes off first, and Blade turns out behind him, then I put the truck in drive to follow. This would be the time when I would be mentally preparing for this discussion, but Jade's taking up quite a bit of space in my head, distracting my bear and me. That could be either a good thing or a bad thing, but I'm not going to dwell

on it too much to figure out. For now, I'm just going to go with it.

CHAPTER 15

GUNNER

WE GET to the court house on the human side fifteen minutes before the meeting is supposed to get started. Optimistically, I'm hoping this goes off without a hitch, and we'll be out of here in no time. I want this to hurry up and be over with; for the first time, I'm actually looking forward to a therapy session.

Realistically though, I'm fully aware that this is going to take some time. There's much to discuss, and not all of it can be brushed over.

I climb out of the truck and join Flint and Blade on the sidewalk.

"Alright," Flint says, looking up at the building. "Let's get this over with."

Blade and I follow him inside, where the scent of humans is more pungent than it was outside. Such a weak, diluted scent which we follow up the stairs to the conference room on the second floor, where all the scents are concentrated together. Light chatter filters through the door, but when Flint opens it, the talking ceases as all eyes fall on us.

There are three empty seats left open on one side of the table while the others are all taken up by city officials and Mayor McMichaels' assistant, who I've only encountered one time before.

I recognize a few faces, the sheriffs especially. Plenty of times, I've had to smooth out a situation to get someone from our side out of his holding cell. Dan has been lenient on more than

one occasion, has issued many warnings, and has taken back numerous speeding tickets, all because I established a friendly relationship with him years before he started having issues with us.

He gives me a single nod as we approach the table. A few other members of the town committee smile and greet us with hellos as we enter. Most of them do, in fact. We don't know each other, but of course, we've seen each other around town. I know faces, not names, and that's probably how it is for them. Mayor McMichaels and Judge Deen, I know by name, but I don't know them on the same level I know the sheriff; there's definitely some hostility that rolls off of them no matter what the circumstance is.

The Mayor sits at the head of the table and glares at Flint as he pulls the seat closest to the Mayor out, like he's the biggest nuisance on the planet. Beside him, Judge Deen gives us the same look of disdain. The last I've heard of him, we owed him ten thousand dollars because Talon and Blaze broke into an empty house. That's been a while now, but that was the last incident of many that the judge had to fine us for. Up until a few months ago, we probably were his biggest issue and biggest source to squeeze money from. Since we stopped with all the dangerous shit, he's probably had nothing to do.

"Good morning, gentlemen," the Mayor greets us finally, but it's anything but warm. He looks at us as if we're taking time away from his busy day running this small town.

"Thanks for having us," Flint replies politely.

"You're familiar with the town council, right?" McMichaels asks, looking around. "At the end, there's Clarence, beside him are Judy, Thomas, Cassandra, and Roy. I'm sure you're all well acquainted with Sheriff Dan."

"I just recently made Flint and Blade's acquaintance," Cassandra says. "They came to speak with me about building some apartments. How's that club doing? I hear it's doing well."

I don't recognize her, but based on what she just said, I'm guessing she's some kind of city planner.

“Ah yes,” the judge says, annoyance heavy in his voice. “My sons have been raving about that place since it opened. One of them has even expressed interest in becoming a bouncer in that place.”

It takes everything in me not to encourage him to pass along my information to him. It’s obvious this is neither the time nor the place to joke, while Deen is obviously hating the idea of either of his sons being associated with the club.

“For the few weeks it’s been open, it’s been doing well,” Flint tells them. “Each night brings in more than the night before, and with the brilliance of the manager, that’s going to persist.”

“We’ll see,” Judge Deen grumbles.

McMichaels leans forward on the table and clasps his hands together.

“There are a few present who aren’t familiar with you all,” he tells us.

Flint nods. “Well, most of you know Blade and me,” he says, then motions around Blade to me. “This is Gunner, my third in command.”

“I know Dan pretty well,” I tell the table, then look at McMichaels’ assistant. “And I’m sure I helped you change a tire a few months ago.”

She gives a bright smile at that. “I wasn’t sure if you remembered that. I’m Alexis.”

“I don’t forget a face,” I reply. “And after a second time, I’ll remember the name.”

The Mayor sets his stern gaze on Flint.

“When you contacted me, you said there’s an urgent matter that needs to be discussed,” he states. “Shall we get to it? What other troubles are you about to lay on us?”

Flint nods and sits back in his chair, his arms over his chest as usual. The Mayor takes in his posture, and Deen scowls at him. Right in front of me, I’m witnessing two men feeling threatened by Flint’s presence and Flint not giving a fuck. They glare at him, trying to maintain blank faces, but it isn’t as

much of a poker face as they think it is, especially when their eyes give away what's going on in their heads.

It's clear they do not like him. No matter how well-dressed he is or if his gang hasn't caused problems for them in months, there's no getting past the fact that Flint is a threat to them. I'm sure Flint knows this already—he can smell it wafting off of them.

“First, I want to point out that my gang hasn't caused any trouble for this side of town in months,” Flint starts, and the judge's jaw flexes at that. “We've cut out the older, more detrimental modes of operating. We've started a new chapter, and what we're getting involved with is more positive and beneficial for everyone in this town.

“But before I go further with that, I want to digress for a second and get something out in the open. This isn't going to be the easiest news to grasp, but we felt this is long overdue, and with the plans we've been making, it's about time this comes out,” Flint warns them. “Before we can move forward, I'm going to rip the bandage right off and come out with the most surprising news. Let me preface this by saying—we've lived among you for years, so the truth of the matter shouldn't and won't change how we operate or interact.”

“You're in the presence of shifters,” Flint tells them, and I watch a few of their eyes grow while a few others frown, but the room is reading shocked all around. “We've been here for years, and besides issues here and there with a few of the younger gang members, we've lived here with you humans in peace, and we're hoping that continues.”

When Flint stops talking, nobody says anything—even Mayor McMichaels and Deen are frozen, their eyes stuck to Flint, waiting on him to say anything else.

“That's right,” I fill in the silence. “We don't just exist in books and in movies. We're very real and have been for centuries now. Our existence isn't anything new, just new to you all. Have any of you been to Bayton Heights recently?” It takes a second for them to answer—I think they're still taking this news in, but eventually, they all nod. “Like I thought.

Bayton's nothing but thirty minutes away if the roads are clear, so it's easy for us all to get there. I'm sure each of you heard from a friend that's been there, and curiosity led you to check it out. Well, turns out, you didn't have to go very far out of the way after all."

Flint says, "I know Deen and McMichaels are frequent visitors." Both of them look at him, surprised that he knows that. "The liquor warehouse you two frequent—the owner is who I do business with for both my bar and the club. I've seen you on multiple occasions."

Mayor McMichaels and Deen both stare at Flint as if he had just revealed some secret about them they didn't want anyone to know. Honestly, that is kind of a sizable secret—I had no idea they went to Bayton so regularly. They've never given me a reason to believe they'd be okay with the concept of coexistence. They've each given me the impression they wouldn't be, just from some of the outdated stuff they've said. So, good for them.

"So then that should make all of this easier," I say. "Since all of you are familiar with the diverse population in Bayton, knowing about us shouldn't change anything."

"This entire time, we've been living among...*shifters*?" The Mayor says shifters like it's a new word he's trying out for the first time, and he shakes his head. "That's not possible. There's no way you've all managed to keep something of this magnitude a secret from us."

Flint shakes his head. "It's not impossible because that's exactly what we did. From the time my grandfather came here, actually."

"Hector?" The Sheriff asks, and Flint confirms with a nod. Now it seems like something clicks in his head. "He's the same age as my grandmother, but he doesn't look any older than his late fifties. Is that why—because he's a shifter?"

Flint nods. "We don't age like humans do," he confirms.

"Wait," the Mayor's assistant Alexis says. "How come we don't hear wolves howling at the moon or see any on nights

with full moons?”

A few of the council members agree and nod at Alexis' question, then look to Flint for an answer.

He smiles at their genuine curiosity.

“Good,” Flint says, giving Alexis a look of approval, and her cheeks flush. “The more questions you ask, the more confusion we can clear up. So that’s a common misconception—wolf shifters don’t lose control on the night of a full moon, but it does make them stronger, which is the case with every kind of shifter.”

The city planner shakes her head. “What do you mean every kind of shifter? There are more than just wolves?”

“Plenty,” Blade answers this one. “There are various types of shifter groups—reptile, avian, and wolf are just a few examples. We three are bears, as are the majority of us, but there are a few others. We have two feline shifters and two wolf shifters.”

“So then,” Judy speaks up. “Then those bear prints we’ve been finding in the forest, those are you guys and not actual bears?”

“Some of them are probably wild bears,” I tell them. “But the majority of them have been made by us.”

At that, a few of the members frown.

“You are aware any of our hunters could have shot one of you, right?” Thomas points out. “Most of them go out there with the intention of trying to bag a bear.”

“No need to worry about that,” Flint tells them. “We can pick up scents from miles away, so we know where your hunters are before they even know we’re around. But we’re all aware of what your hunting schedules are, and we avoid shifting when we know you’re out there.”

Now the Mayor speaks, and he’s a lot less intrigued than his council members.

“Why have you waited until now to tell us this news?” The Mayor asks. “Information like this shouldn’t have been kept from us for so many years.”

“Humans need time to process certain things,” I say. “Bayton wasn’t always as diverse as it is now. At one point, the humans there had to wrap their minds around shifters being there. It wasn’t something they were ready for, but they got used to it. Over the last few years, it’s gone beyond only shifters and humans to more beings you all once thought were mythical. But now that you’ve seen it happen someplace else and have even indulged in the culture yourselves, we figured now is a good time to let you know we’ve been here the entire time.”

“And on top of that, some of those beings are going to be coming into this town,” Flint announces. “We need everyone to be aware of us before they start popping up around town soon.”

The Mayor frowns at that, and Deen shakes his head.

Clarence asks, “How soon?”

“Within the next few months,” Flint reveals.

A few of them gasp, not expecting that answer, but the others look fully on board with this information.

“What makes you say that?” Deen asks.

“Well, this takes me back to what I was saying earlier,” Flint says. “About the direction we’re moving in being beneficial for everyone who lives here. I’m looking to start adding more businesses to this place to bring in more money to restore the town.”

The Mayor squints his eyes at Flint.

“Are they going to be anything like your last business venture, Ursyn?”

Flint denies it. “The strip club was first because that would start bringing in enough money so I wouldn’t have to take out huge loans to fund other endeavors.”

The sheriff curiously asks, “What else do you have in mind?”

“Well, I’m currently in the process of starting a bed and breakfast,” Flint tells them, and a few of them give an approving nod. “As it stands right now, we get enough traffic through here to where we’ll have the business for it, and where

I want to put it overlooks the ocean, so the view it gets will be one of the reasons it will stay booked for months in advance.”

“As it stands right now?” Roy repeats. “You say that like you expect many people to stop by here in the near future.”

“If we make the right business choices, they will,” Flint says. “To keep people coming here, spending their money, we need businesses and attractions that will make people want to come back. A casino would be a good addition; I was thinking of a seaside restaurant—something exciting that people will talk about. I was tossing around the idea of putting a few rides on the pier along with some carnival food stands on your side of town. That would make for a fun day trip for those living in nearby towns and cities. For the thrill seekers, I was recently proposed an idea for a cliff jump. I’ve seen the spot—it’s big enough to design as a hang-out area, and a slide can be built. There’s already a path from the water back up to the top, and we can add stairs to make it easily accessible.”

“And what about the nature walks that young lady has been mapping out,” Judy asks. “Her name is escaping me at the moment, but I’ve run into her a few times out on the trails.”

“I was just getting to that one,” Flint says. “That’s Marilyn’s domain. She’s been plotting out hiking routes these past few months for guided tours and searching out camping spots for wilderness survival classes.”

“That’s so exciting!” Cassandra exclaims, and the Mayor glares at her. “I know plenty of people who would *love* that kind of experience.”

“And there’s nobody better than Marilyn to lead that,” Blade says. “She grew up roaming the forest. She knows it like the back of her hand. All of us do.”

Judge Deen clears his throat and leans forward. “These are some good ideas—” by the tone of his voice, I can tell he hated all of them.—“but this information you’ve presented us with, these ideas, they’re going to cause some drastic changes to this town. I’m not sure if everyone’s ready for it.”

Flint nods. “I’m aware of that. Everyone on my side is still wrapping their minds around all of this, and they’ve known of my plans for months now. I didn’t expect anyone to immediately be on board. However, I feel like once the ball starts rolling, more people will favor the changes.”

“What makes you so sure about that, Mr. Ursyn?” Judge Deen asks.

“Well, this town isn’t exactly thriving,” Flint says slowly, and I can tell that isn’t what he actually wanted to say. He had to tone it down from, “this place is going to shit,” like I’ve heard him say so many times before. None of them can disagree with him, though, because he’s absolutely right.

“The club we just built was an old grocery store, and there are numerous buildings in this town like that,” he informs them. “There aren’t many jobs here. Mostly everyone is driving out of the town to cities that have better job opportunities. Bayton was once a small town too, but with the right additions, it’s thriving now.” He lets that sink in for a second, then he goes on. “My goal isn’t to turn Penfell into another Bayton, but I do want to make sure this is a place our kids won’t have to abandon because we let it die. If we put in new businesses along with some advertisements on the interstate, we bring more jobs and money to *our* home. People won’t have to drive so far out of the way for work. And seeing as how Bayton is one of the only other places around here that has a diverse population, we’ll be able to reap the benefits of curiosity. Just like you all have gone to Bayton out of curiosity and spent your money, the same will happen here.”

“So then your plan to make this town better is to profit off of diversity?” The Mayor questions.

Flint frowns at that. “Not directly. That’s just one thing that’s going to get people rolling through here to check this place out.”

“So what—are you going to advertise the fact that shifters live here on a billboard?” Judge Deen retorts.

Flint shakes his head. “No to that too. The bed and breakfast I spoke of—once that’s close to being finished, I’ll put up an

advertisement somewhere on the interstate. The couple I have running it will have people booking rooms once word of mouth spreads.”

Alexis’s face lights up, and she almost bounces out of her seat.

“Who...or what is the couple that’s going to run it?” she asks.

“A half-orc and an elf,” Flint reveals, and all of them gasp.

“What?” Judy says. “Those are real too?!”

I nod, saying, “Even those. If you’ve read about it or seen it on tv, chances are they walk this Earth.”

Nobody says anything as this news sinks in. I think the entire council is waiting on the Mayor to speak, but he remains tight-lipped, holding Flint’s gaze, but Flint doesn’t look away. So the sheriff talks.

“This is going to have to be a slow process,” Dan says. “People are going to need time to grasp something like this. It’s not exactly easy news to digest.”

Flint looks away from McMichaels and nods. “We didn’t come here with the expectation that everyone would immediately be on board. The most important information I needed to get out is the fact that you’re living among shifters. That’s the part that will allow the rest to fall in place.”

Alexis says, “Of course, you and your crew are going to have to be the ones to deliver this news to the townspeople. It would be better coming from...you shifters. That way, it’s taken seriously.”

“Of course,” Flint says. “Whenever you want to gather the townspeople, we’ll be here to clear the air.”

The Mayor clears his throat and sits up in his seat, and finally, he says something. “I admire your vision and the good you’re trying to do for this town, Ursyn,” he begins, a small smile on his face. But something about it is odd. “However, I’m not sure you’ve factored in how difficult it’s going to be to get all of your ideas off the ground.”

“No worries, Mayor,” Flint smirks back at him. “You don’t have to stress about any of this. My gang and I will handle all

of the hard work. We'll be able to get it done. The club has been nothing but a success so far, and building it went flawlessly. Even you have to admit the club is doing well for it to be in a small town."

The Mayor's jaw flexes, and Flint's polite smile turns smug. It's obvious the Mayor isn't too happy with what Flint wants to do, and neither is the judge. The rest have mixed opinions but seem to be leaning towards this betterment for the town.

"Considering we all live here, it would be better if everyone were on the same page with this," Flint says. "It would make this transition so much easier if we were all in this together. The outcome would benefit all of us and our families. I can't imagine someone would want to get in the way of that." He pointedly looks at the Mayor before he looks at the council members. "Does anyone have any more questions?"

They all look back and forth at each other, but nobody talks. Finally, Alexis says, "I think all of us are still digesting the fact that we've had storybook creatures living among us this whole time—oh, sorry. Is that offensive?"

"Nothing that tiny is going to offend us," Blade says. "We've been called much worse."

"Alexis is right," the sheriff says. "We have to process what we learned today."

Flint pushes back from the table, which is a queue for Blade and me that Flint's done here.

"Well—" Flint looks down at the Mayor and holds his hand out. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us. If you have any more questions, you know where to find us. Otherwise, we'll be in touch."

For a brief moment, the Mayor glares at Flint's hands before he tilts his head back to look up at Flint, who's patiently waiting for the Mayor to shake his hand. When he finally does, I think it's only because everyone else is watching. His flexing jaw is giving him away.

The council members hand us business cards, telling us we should call if we have anything else to discuss. A few of them

express how much of a delight it was to sit and talk with us. All the while, McMichaels and Judge Deen stand off to the side, clearly displeased.

This meeting was not as delightful for them, obviously.

We leave the conference room, and once we're outside, the rest of my day starts playing in my head. It's been about an hour and a half, and I'm so glad that's done with. Now there are other events to wait for, like announcing to the town what we are, but I'll think about that when the time comes.

"We're going to have to keep an eye on McMichaels," Flint says. "His scent went rancid halfway through the meeting. I think he's planning on getting in our way, but I can't be too sure. He could be plotting anything."

"You had to expect that, though," I say. "You're doing everything he's supposed to be doing. I don't need a good nose to tell he's clearly threatened by you."

Blade agrees. "He doesn't like us, but he hates you, Flint. The power play between the two of you was intense. Chances are he's definitely going to stand in the way. The way he said, 'it might not be as easy as you think,' felt like a threat to me."

"It smelled like one, too," Flint says. "But he's not going to get in our way. The others were more on board than he was, and as long as the majority is on my side, I don't think he'll be much of a problem. And if he is, I'll just figure out a way around him. Come on. Let's get going."

They hop on their bikes, and in no time, they are speeding down the road. As soon as I pull out of the parking lot, I push that meeting to the back of my mind, and Jade comes to the front. I wonder what she has in store for me today.

CHAPTER 16

JADE

SITTING IN MY CAR, I stare at Gunner's front door, trying to prepare myself to go inside. Once I call him and tell him what I have planned, then there's no going back. I've had days to prepare myself, but in the end, that wasn't nearly enough time. I could have years to prep myself, but I would never be ready. The only reason I'm here now is because this isn't about me; my conflict with being out in the forest shouldn't get in the way of Gunner's therapy. After the week and a half of work that we've done, a light walk into the forest would do him some good.

I know he's been missing it. Most of his days are spent in the club, so I know he hasn't been out there in a while. I'm not sure if it's because he doesn't want to go out there and be tempted to shift or if it's because he doesn't want to go through the hassle once he gets out there. With his weak left leg going for a walk would be a lot of trouble. But after some time doing yoga and strengthening his left side, I feel like he can handle it now. Lately, he's been showing up more energetic, and he seems to be walking easier. His left foot is still dragging a bit, but he has some pep in his step. His posture has improved also—he's standing taller now, and he doesn't grunt when he rises up from a chair anymore. My method of keeping him moving and active seems to be working. After a deep stretch yoga practice on Friday and two back-to-back rest days, he came back on Monday ready for what I had in store for him. He was thinking I would start working in pole workouts this week, but he's not quite there yet.

After working with him for a few days, it became clear that he thinks he's worse off than he actually is, which isn't the case. I kicked yoga up a notch and had him do some deeper stretches. He didn't even protest. Whatever I did, he tried his best and did pretty well. I think he's so down on himself because he's unable to shift at the moment. He beat himself up quite a bit over that, and I feel like he just needs to be reminded that he's still able to shift even though he shouldn't right now. The only reason he can't at the moment is because his body is too stiff, and he might end up doing more serious damage to himself if he were to put himself through that transformation. Reconnecting with nature might help him remember how powerful he is and help him find his way back to his old self. I'm hoping it will help him see that shifting isn't something that's impossible for him, and if he keeps working, he'll be back running through those trees as his bear in no time.

This will be good for him, I tell myself again as my heart sinks in my chest. This isn't about me. This is for him.

I'd do anything to get him back to his old self again, including being in an environment that tugs at my soul to do something I can't. I'll go through that torment for Gunner.

It's now or never. If I don't call him now, I'm going to bail and go through with our regular routine. I reach for my phone, but as I'm getting ready to call, a light shines through the second-floor window, then the blind opens. I'm not sure if he can see me through my windshield, but I smile at the confusion that settles on his face. He stands in the window looking down at my car, his broad chest bare, his hair frazzled. When it's not laid back with gel, his curly dark hair falls over into his face.

I bite my lip as he looks down at me, and my stomach flutters. Nothing between us has changed since we slept together that first night. However, I do like to think his improved mood is a result of me not being able to keep off of him. Since that first night, I have not been able to stop thinking about how good sex is with him and how natural it felt. I can't say that I'm surprised; at least, I shouldn't be. Being with him feels like something I've done plenty of times before, which holds true to our entire friendship. His presence brings me a sense of

comfort that's just a little hard to explain, but I don't ever dwell on it too much. I'm happy we can be open with one another. It's rare finding others like that.

That simple fact of our relationship is why I sometimes feel guilty I've never revealed more of myself to him. I've seen him exposed and vulnerable, but I can't bring myself to bring up my issue. It's not like I can be helped. I'm unfixable. I'm a bear shifter that can't shift and who's afraid to love again. I've tried all the therapy I can take, and I've tried everything to shift, but in all of my years, I've learned that there's nothing that can be done for either. When I think about it like that, that takes some of the weight of secrecy off my shoulders.

I take in a slow breath—I'll tell him one of these days.

He disappears from the window, and I get out of the car. The early morning air makes its way through my long-sleeved shirt, making me wish I'd put on a hoodie like I thought to. But I won't need it once we start what I have in mind. The sky is only beginning to lighten up, but once the sun gets a little higher, the chill from the night will be gone, and I'll probably roll my sleeves up.

I make my way to the porch, and before I get there, the door opens to Gunner in the doorway in just his boxers. His eyes roam down my body, and I smile, knowing he's taking note of what I'm wearing and how it fits, and also why I'm wearing it.

"You're one of very few men that looks this handsome when you wake up," I tell him, reaching up to run my fingers through his soft curls.

"A spell was put on me when I was a baby," he replies, a tiny smile on his lips.

"That's a perfect explanation," I giggle. "This could only be magic."

He steps aside and lets me into his dark living room, then the lights come on as I walk inside.

"You're not dressed for yoga," he points out, shutting the door. I turn around to find him leaning on the door, examining me.

“And I don’t think this is a booty call. What do you have planned today?”

I let out a laugh. “You know me so well,” I say. “We’re going for a walk today. In the forest.”

He raises one eyebrow at me, taken off guard by my plans for the morning.

“What happened to dancing and yoga?”

“We’re still going to do yoga,” I tell him. “I have the mats in my car. But we can save dancing for another day. I thought you’d like a change of scenery and some fresh air.”

Still, he looks at me suspiciously.

“This wouldn’t be an attempt to get me to meditate, would it?”

For a moment, I just stare at him. I don’t know why I’m always shocked when he proves how easily he can see through me, but it never lasts.

Instead of accepting that I’ve been figured out, I shrug.

“If that’s what happens while we’re out there, then so be it,” I tell him, going into his kitchen. “While we’re out there, may as well try it. You made doing yoga in nature sound so peaceful the other day. Thought we could give that a try.”

“Do I have a choice in this?” he asks me as I pull a cabinet open.

I glance over at him and shake my head before grabbing two water bottles from the top shelf of the cabinet.

I hear him let out a sigh, then the stairs begin to creak under his weight as he climbs them. I assume he went to get ready, so while he does that, I fill the bottles with water and then search his refrigerator and cabinets for snacks. I end up with two bananas, some beef jerky, and some granola. He doesn’t have much else in his refrigerator. He mentioned one day last week that he had to go shopping. I figured he did that between then and now, but I see that he hasn’t. Maybe I’ll go shopping with him this evening.

The stairs by the door squeal, and I look behind me to find him coming down in a long-sleeve muscle shirt and jogging pants. His hair is pushed back, but it's missing the gel allowing his short waves and curls to fall around his face. He brings the cool, sharp scent of mint down with him. He sits down in the recliner and sets his sneakers between his feet, then peers up at me. It's hard for me not to admire him. He really is a handsome bear.

"You can put that in the backpack by hanging by the door," he tells me, pointing to where a black JanSport backpack hangs on the coat rack.

"You know," I say, crossing the room over to the backpack hanging on the wall. "I can go shopping for you this evening if you want me to. I don't mind."

"I appreciate it." He pulls one of his shoes on and then picks the other one up. "But I can do it. I planned on finally doing it today."

"Let me know if you change your mind." I stuff everything in the backpack, and by the time he has his other sneaker laced up, I'm throwing the backpack over my shoulder.

"Ready to go?" I ask him, walking into the living room.

"Let's go."



I follow him to the edge of town in my own car, figuring I'll cut out some time for when we get back, and I need to go home to take a shower before going to the club. I park beside him and grab the mats from the backseat before getting out of the car.

As Gunner gets out of the truck, I turn around, intending to stretch, but the forest being just feet away, stops me. My heart picks up its pace, and I swallow hard as my gut sinks. I've not even stepped one foot in there, but the energy of the forest is already wrapping itself around me. I can already hear birds singing, twigs breaking, the wind blowing, and leaves

rustling—I dread going in there. I take a deep breath, inhaling the sharp scent of pine needles and clean air. That one inhalation charges through me and fills every inch of my body with an intense desire to become one with it. I want to go inside and never come back out, spend my days roaming freely. The energy entices me forward, but all I can do is let it pull me into the forest—I can’t appease this urge by shifting. This vibrant, pulsing sensation surges through me in a never-ending circuit. Still, I can do nothing with it but hold it captive and stagnant.

I can do the most complicated poses that require the utmost balance, strength, and focus. I can do just about anything on a pole, perform any dance move, I can run, walk, skip, basically do anything but fly. I can do so many things with this body of mine, but the one thing that would set me apart from being a human, I can’t do. I can feel the energy swirling inside of me, but I can’t tap into it for the life of me.

It’s like the forest knows, and it’s taunting me.

“You ready?”

Gunner’s voice breaks through my hyperfocus, and the sounds of the forest diminish as I tear my eyes away from it. He’s looking at me curiously, but I force a smile.

“Yeah,” I answer. “But first, we have to stretch.”

I raise my left arm in the air and lean over to the right, and he follows my lead.

“Oh, and I’m going to take your cane,” I tell him as we stretch over to the other side. “Your left foot isn’t dragging as bad, so I think you can walk for just a bit without the cane. When you need it, I’ll give it back to you.”

“You really are going to make me work today, huh?”

“That’s nothing new, right?” I smirk.

After stretching out the rest of our upper body and legs, I pick the mats back up and throw the strap over my shoulder and walk alongside Gunner into the forest.

It doesn't take long for our surroundings to touch my soul. Five minutes into our walk and the sweet scent of the air combined with the leaves rustling and air vibrating grips at my core. My chest swells with each breath I take, and the further we go, the more I want to get lost amongst the trees and never come out. The leaves and twigs snapping under our feet are loud in my ears, and I long to feel them breaking beneath my paws. Goosebumps rise on my skin as the wind blows around us, and my heart sinks, thinking about how badly I want to feel it blowing in my fur.

I don't remember the urge to shift being this strong before. It's been a while since I've actually been out here, so this could just be a build-up. Roxy tries to get me to come with her sometimes, and so far, I've been pretty good at coming up with reasons why I can't. A few times, I've had to actually pick up shifts at the Old Storehouse just so I'd have a legit reason as to why I can't go with her.

Being out here is like shaking up a carbonated drink but never twisting the cap off. This pressure inside of me is going to remain bottled up until the day that I die. It really is a shame—I'll never be a *true* shifter. Some shifters think being unable to find their mate is the greatest disappointment they'll face in this life, but I know for a fact that it's not. I would have been okay if I had never found Michael. I would never have known what life was like without a true mate if I hadn't experienced it. But not being able to shift is different. They'll never know what it's like to feel this energy swelling inside, almost to the brink of explosion, but you're left right there, on the edge of transforming but never being able to initiate it.

I've heard everyone else talking about their inner bears and how their consciousness and thoughts are like having a second voice in their head that reacts to the world around them as they see it. I don't have that. I don't have an inner bear, and I'm sure that's why I can't shift. There isn't an animal inside of me to let out.

I look ahead at Gunner to see how he's doing, to give myself something to focus on—he hasn't said a word since we've been out here, probably focused on putting one foot in front of the

other. He's walking all right without his cane, but he has slowed down just a little bit. We've been walking for a little while now, and any distance without his cane is good.

We walk for a little while longer before I start hearing the steady trickling of a river. Gunner hears it, too, and ends up changing direction toward it. Before long, we end up standing on the edge of a slow-moving river that seems like a great place to stop. Gunner said he'd meditate if he was in the forest or by the ocean. This isn't the ocean, but the light trickle is still soothing enough. Maybe I can convince him to give it a try. I glance over at Gunner, and he has his eyes closed. His breathing is deep and even as he takes in the quiet. There's a slight hint of a smile in the corner of his lips as he stands there, absorbing the serenity around us. Seeing him like this makes coming out here well worth it.

Gently, I place my hand on his shoulder, which brings his focus down to me.

"What do you say about stopping to rest right here?" I suggest. "Maybe do some yoga?"

"Sounds good to me," he says, taking off the backpack full of snacks and water.

As he drinks water, I roll out the mats I've been carrying.

"How are you feeling?" I ask him.

"Pretty good," he says as he lowers down to the ground.

"Great," I reply. "I hope you're ready for this flow I have prepared.

"You know, no matter how many times we do it, I don't think I'll ever get used to doing yoga," he says.

I smirk at him. "You will," I tell him. "Nobody thinks they'll get used to it until they realize it's easy one day." I turn over onto my hands and knees, and he follows me.

"We're going to start off strong today," I inform him, pushing my ass into the air, positioning myself into downward dog.

Starting off, I get his legs and obliques going with a combination of sun salutations and modified extended side

angles made easier so he can do them. He grunts when I have him step his left leg back, but he manages to hold his own.

Today, I decide to introduce him to warrior two. He seems to be stretched out enough where leaning back into an exalted warrior will feel good despite the tightness. First, we do it on the right side, and I help him position his body into the correct stance. I push his chest and abdomen back and straighten his arms out, and when he has the stance down, I support him as I guide him into leaning backward just a bit. Then I get back on my own mat to go through a vinyasa, lowering down into chaturanga and pushing up into an upward-facing dog, before going into a downward dog.

“Now, the fun side,” I tell him, lifting my left leg.

I watch him as he lifts his. His face scrunches up as he tries to get it higher, and I come out of mine to help him hold it.

“Let me know when you’re ready to step your foot through to the front of the mat,” I ask him, gently pushing his leg up a little higher.

“I’m ready,” he announces, and I let his leg go.

His foot doesn’t go all the way to the front. Instead, it stops halfway, and he uses his hand to assist his leg. When he has his feet positioned, he rises up, and he’s a little more wobbly on this side, but I hover around him to catch him if he falls. I straighten his upper body so his center is stacked and balanced, but when he leans backward, he loses his balance and falls into me. I try to save him, but my efforts are of no use. I fall to the ground with him, half of his body on top of mine.

I giggle as he rolls off of me.

“You make that look so easy,” he laughs beside me.

I push myself up on one elbow so I can look at him. “That pose can get the best of anyone,” I tell him. “Trying to find balance while doing that one can be tough. You did good, though.”

He doesn’t respond to my praise; instead, he gazes up at me, his blue eyes slowly roaming over my features. When he looks

at me like this, his eyes low and full of heat, I instantly turn to jelly. Even out here where I'm off my game and in uncomfortable territory, he can still melt me with a single look. But we still have work left to do.

“We need to get back to doing yoga,” I say softly as his eyes move down to my lips.

He shakes his head and rises up off the forest floor. “I need something else right now.”

His hand caresses the back of my head as he sits up to meet my lips, and yoga be damned. We did some already, and we hiked—that seems like enough work for the day.

His fingers get lost in my hair, and I straddle his body to get a better angle on this kiss. His tongue finds its way between my lips, tasting like he's been sucking on a mint this whole time. I love kissing Gunner—our mouths dance in perfect unison every time, and the intensity only increases. Our breathing becomes heavier, and our need becomes more urgent with each passing second.

His strong hands roam my body, and as they do, I feel his cock hardening and poking into my ass. I reach down between us and stroke him over his pants, and the second my fingers find his erection, I'm overwhelmed with the urge to feel him on my tongue.

Breaking our kiss and slinking down his body, I hook my fingers into the waistband of his shorts and reach inside to take hold of his thick cock. I bite my lip as I free him, anticipating how his heavy cock is going to feel when I have him deep in my throat.

I lower my lips to the head of his cock, and before I pull him into my mouth, I peek up at him to find his gaze eager and hungry. The moment I suck his throbbing head between my lips, he lets out a long sigh.

I swirl my tongue around his swollen, bulbous head, adding pressure as my tongue glides across the tip before I take him further into my mouth, only going down halfway. As I pull back up, I take the shaft of his cock in a firm grip and use the

wetness left behind by my tongue to stroke him as my mouth climbs back up toward the head.

When I go back down, I take a little more of him this time, the thick veins of his cocks making the ride down less smooth for my tongue. I bend my wrist as I move up and down his length, causing him to let out a groan that only encourages me to take him all the way back into my throat.

“Ah fuck,” he moans, his hand coming to the back of my head. “Dammit, Jade.” He says, thrusting himself into my mouth. “That’s so fucking good.”

As I move up his shaft, I increase the suction of my mouth, only to take him as far as I can into my throat without gagging. It has never come up that I don’t have a gag reflex, so I can do this all day. With how delicious his pre-cum is, I actually could. Every time he enters my throat, I can feel his legs tense up, and he growls, which only makes me want to suck him dry.

But he stops me. He pushes back on my shoulder and lifts me to my knees.

“If you keep doing that, I’ll cum way too soon,” he admits as he raises up to his knees.

He pulls my shorts down and helps me out of them before he says, “Turn around for me; let me see that perfect ass.”

My entire body’s throbbing in anticipation as I turn around, and when my back is to him, he gently nudges me down on to all fours. I look over my shoulder at him, and he’s admiring my ass which only turns me on more. His hand rubs my butt cheeks, and when I feel the hot head of his cock pushing against my entrance, I lower down to my forearms, opening myself up more to him.

“Fuck that’s pretty,” he says as he slowly pushes inside of me.

“Are you teasing me?” I ask him as he enters into me—torturously slow.

“I’m savoring every inch that goes in,” he says.

I can hardly take this slow insertion, so I push back so I can be full of him sooner. I never get used to his girth, and he fills me

up so deliciously that I crave feeling him inside me at random times during the day.

With him all the way inside of me, filling me to the brink and pressing at my core, I know it's only a matter of time before I'm clenching around his cock, especially in this position. Every single last inch of him is inside of me—all the way to the hilt, and it's magnificent.

When he pulls out, I barely have time to miss his girth before he thrusts back into me again, and I dig my nails into my yoga mat as pleasure plums up from that tight ball at my core. A deep, husky moan escapes my chest, and it's almost too much as he pulls out and fills me up again. He fucks me with long, slow, powerful strokes, his cock rock hard inside of me, and every time his hips connect with my ass, a whimper escapes me from how good he feels ramming into me.

It doesn't take long for that sweet, sweet heat to start to unravel in my core, and when I press my finger to my clit, that pleasure only intensifies.

"Faster, Gunner," I plead, looking back at him. "Fuck me faster."

He does as I ask, and the moment he speeds up, the tingling inside me intensifies. I rub my clit faster, needing this release to consume me now, and as it starts to crash over me, I grip a handful of my mat, certain there are going to be nail marks left over.

I explode around Gunner's cock, and he keeps pumping into me, drawing my orgasm out. I arch my back towards the sky as my entire body tenses up from sweet ecstasy. Gunner's fingers dig into my hips as he grips me tighter, holding me in place until he finds his own release, holding his thrust and emptying his load into me. Warm jets of his thick seed shoot into me, and I gladly accept it, knowing it's not going to result in anything.

When he's done, he leans over and pulls my back flush to him as he kisses my neck before he wraps his arm around my waist and guides us down to the ground.

We lie on our backs, looking up through the treetops at the bright morning sky. My head rests on Gunner's shoulder as I stare at the thick clouds moving above us. The light breeze hardens my nipples, and a slight shiver runs through me. Gunner's arm tightens around me and pulls me closer to his heat, and I snuggle against him, placing my leg over his. He rubs his hand up and down my arm, the friction effectively chasing the cold away.

My body is buzzing—I think being out here put some more fire in him because that was absolutely amazing. I'm tempted to come out here again just so we can do that again.

"I'm glad you brought me out here," Gunner says, and I turn my head to look at him. "I haven't been out here because I felt like I wouldn't be able to resist the urge to shift, but that turned out to be easier to fight than I thought. But being out here supplied me with the energy I've been lacking. I'm hoping it stays when we leave. I'm honestly feeling so good that I feel like shifting won't be a problem."

I swat his arm and shake my head.

"Please don't try that just yet," I plead. "I want you to get back to at least ninety-five percent before you shift again."

"I didn't say I was going to," he laughs. "I just feel so good that it feels like I can do anything. I haven't felt this in a while. I have you to thank for that. I thought I'd be bitter, but my bear has relaxed quite a bit since we entered the forest. This was a good idea."

I smile fondly at him. "Before you know it, you'll be back out here shifting and hunting with the gang again."

We're quiet for a moment, staring up at the sky, listening to the river and the treetops as the leaves brush against each other, and I swallow hard. I want to know what it's like so bad, to hear all of these same sounds, pick up all of these same scents, but as a bear. I want to hunt, take down animals with my own teeth and claws, and strike fear in the hearts of any creature that sees me. I want that more than I've ever wanted anything else in my life. But that part of me is inaccessible.

“Jade?”

My eyes fly open—I didn’t even realize I had them shut, and my attention snaps over to Gunner already watching me.

“What’s up?” I ask him.

“How come I’ve never seen you shift before?” he asks me, as if the thought is just coming to him.

Dread consumes me as the words leave his mouth. I knew it was only a matter of time before he asked me. Still, I hoped he never would.

“I’ve seen everyone else shift, including Terra, Karmen, and Grace already, but I’ve never seen what your bear looks like,” he goes on. “I’ve been curious about it for so long.”

“What’s making you finally ask me about it?”

“I was just thinking how this is the first time I’ve been out here with you,” he answers. “Considering how much we’re around each other, it’s strange that I’ve never seen you shift before. I guess seeing Terra, Karmen, and Grace shift in the little time that they’ve been in Penfell Heights has me wondering why I’ve never seen your bear.”

This is a conversation I hoped to never have, but it’s inevitable when living with shifters for so long. It’s bound to come up at some point. I’ve avoided it for as long as I can. I could keep avoiding it, but considering how vulnerable Gunner has been with me in the past few months—well, since I’ve known him—we’re on that level with each other. We’ve always been. Other than my mate, Gunner’s someone else I’d feel comfortable telling my shortcomings to. I know this probably won’t happen, but I don’t want him to think differently of me since I’m incapable of shifting.

I tear my eyes away from Gunner’s and look at the running water in front of us. Being a shifter that can’t shift, I’ve always feared I’d be regarded poorly, basically nothing more than just a human. But as I watch the water running and the trickle fills my ears, I realize Gunner’s probably one of few whose opinion wouldn’t change. And given he’s shared so much of his own insecurities with me, I can let him in on mine.

I let out a sigh preparing to reveal a secret that only my late mate knew that he took with him to the grave.

“You haven’t seen my bear because I can’t shift,” I tell him. I expected him to gasp, but he maintains his composure. “I’ve never been able to.”

“But you have the shifter scent of a bear,” he says, confusion in his voice.

“I’m only half,” I explain. “My father was a bear shifter—my mother was a human. I have the instinct and scent of a bear, but I’m too human to change into one.”

“Hmm—” he says finally. I gather the courage to look at him, but his face is pointed toward the sky. “I’ve never encountered a half-shifter before,” he tells me. “Is it common for half-shifters to have trouble shifting?”

“So I’ve been told,” I reply. “My father did all he could to guide me, but there’s no point. I feel everything wanting me to give up my human form and shift into this powerful, majestic beast of nature, but I just can’t.”

“How long has it been since you tried?” he wonders.

I think back to the last time I attempted, only to fail and disappoint myself. That time, Michael was with me, and it was long after we bonded. That was supposed to help connect me with my primal side, but I guess a mate bond isn’t even enough to help every half-shifter because it certainly didn’t work for me. We tried and tried, but nothing worked. My final try was years before he died.

I shrug. “Maybe seven years ago?”

“Have you given up trying?”

“Yeah,” I confirm. “From age thirteen to twenty-two, I tried. I think nine years is long enough to subject myself to that kind of disappointment.”

“Do you know of any other half-shifters that shifted?” he asks me.

“A few, actually. It’s a bit easier for some half-shifters, but not by much.”

“So what I’m hearing is it’s not completely impossible for a half-shifter to shift,” Gunner says.

“No, it’s not, but I think it is for me. Nine years got me nowhere, so I’m convinced I’m just a human with the scent of a bear.”

He turns over onto his side to face me, eagerness in his eyes. I’m not sure I like that look.

“But the call to shift is there, right?” He questions me. “You can feel that part?”

“Yeah, I can. I always have.”

He smiles and nods. “I can work with that.”

The frown that takes over my face is too involuntary to try and stop it.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask him.

“Let me help you,” he says. “I know you said you’ve tried for nine years, but maybe I can figure out something that will help you shift. I want to try.”

“Gunner,” I say softly, pushing against his chest.

He doesn’t let me go, though. Instead, he wraps his arms around my waist and holds me against him, leaving me to look right into his eyes.

“Because of you, I walked up here with less pain,” he says. “You didn’t let me give up on myself, and I’m not going to let you give up on yourself. I don’t know if I’ll be able to help you, but I want to try at least.”

His sincerity softens me a bit, and the anxiety that creeps up at the idea of shifting is lessened because of it, but I’m still reluctant.

“I don’t want you to waste your time,” I tell him. “There’s nothing you can do for me that I haven’t already tried for myself.”

His eyebrows furrow at me before he says, “It won’t be a waste of time. It’s not completely impossible for you to shift,

and even if the chances are slim, I'll do everything I can to see to it that something comes of your attempts this time."

I bite down hard on my back teeth. The last thing I want to do is go through all of that again. I've buried the frustration and disappointment that comes from my failures, and I don't want them to claw their way back to the surface.

"Please, Jade," he goes on when I don't reply. "Let me do this for you."

"I don't know," I say. "I don't want you to be disappointed when it doesn't work."

He scoffs at me, then offers a small playful smile. "Nothing about you could ever disappoint me. I've known you all this time without seeing your bear, and finding out that you have trouble shifting hasn't made me see you any differently. Who knows—I might end up surprising you."

I don't want to hurt his feelings by saying he probably won't surprise me only because this is something I've consistently failed at, no matter the amount of help I've had. But dammit, that hopeful look in his eyes makes me nod my head. The worst that could happen is that my expectations hold up. It's not like I'm going to lose anything by giving this another try. And I can fend off whatever emotion that resurfaces. At least, I think I can.

"Okay," I say out loud. "But don't get your hopes up, Gunner."

He gives me a wide, bright smile and pushes himself up onto one elbow. "You won't regret this."

Unbeknownst to him, I always do when I start trying to shift again.

I sit up on the mat and grab my clothes balled up beside me.

"We should start heading back," I say as I pull my panties back on.

He follows my lead and starts dressing. As we do, I begin to regret agreeing to let him try to help me shift. When we started this hike, this wasn't how I envisioned it ending. Maybe this time, it won't be as soul-crushing since I'm well aware of

what I'm walking into. I tell myself that, but I don't really believe it.

CHAPTER 17

GUNNER

I TAP my thumbs on the steering wheel to the beat of *Running from the Devil* by Van Halen playing on the radio as I ride down the road to the clubhouse. The world seems brighter today. The past few days, the blue of the sky has been sharper, the green of the leaves has been more vibrant, and the air smells so much sweeter. My good mood came just in time for this spontaneous meeting with the couple that was going to be running the bed and breakfast. I'm actually eager to meet them. A half-orc and an elf. I've seen plenty of both in Bayton, but I don't have the pleasure of personally knowing anyone from either race. I couldn't pass up this opportunity to chat with them. This should be interesting, another unexpected twist to my day.

As I move along with the slow-moving afternoon traffic, images of the forest keep popping up in my mind. That hike this morning with Jade was something I didn't know I needed. In fact, I thought being in an environment where I could shift—but couldn't—would agitate me, but instead, it refreshed me. My bear has been stagnant for months now, but he was more than alive out there. We felt normal for the first time in months. The energy that buzzed within me while we were out there left when we started to drive back to town, but my mood remained elevated.

Today I found myself eager to get work done, and conducting interviews to fill kitchen positions wasn't as bad as I previously thought it was going to be. As I was scheduling them, all I could think about was getting them over and done with, but with each interviewee that came in, I found that I

was more patient than I have been in recent days. Even for the ones that were late, I wasn't as annoyed. I should really consider going out to the forest more often. Clearly, it's something I need to do on a regular basis.

As I pull up to the clubhouse, I'm surprised to see they opted to talk outside rather than inside in the meeting room. Cars slow down as they pass, and the few curious souls walking down the sidewalk stare as Flint, Blade, and Roxy talk with Esta and Elran. What a sight they are even from behind—a tall, slender woman with ears sticking out of her long black hair that shines in the sunlight, her hand is tucked into the ripped orc's beside her.

I park the truck on the other side of the street beside the custom blood-red Trike Harley with the high handlebars sparkling in the sunlight. Shit—that thing's a beauty. My eyes remain stuck to it as I get out of the truck, cane in hand.

Flint waves as I approach, then everyone else turns their attention to me. The elf's dark eyes are touched by the sweet smile on her lips as she watches me make my way toward them. Her ivory skin, pointed nose and chin, and soft eyes give her an ethereal presence, and it's almost as if she has some kind of hazy aura around her. Her beauty seems unnatural, especially with the way she glows. A turquoise necklace adorns her long slender neck and matches the one of the half-orc beside her.

He stands a little taller than Blade, but he's just as buff. His features are a lot softer than the majority of the orcs I've seen around Bayton, but they aren't soft enough to be completely human. His reddish brown hair is cut short and comes down to a widow's peak, almost like it's pointing to his thick, frowning eyebrows. A thick beard covers his square jaw, his lips turn downward, and two sharp canines rise up over his top lip, adding to his vicious appearance. He's a mean-looking son of a bitch, but it doesn't extend further than his appearance. The energy he radiates is peaceful.

“Gunner,” Flint says as I near them. “I hope I didn't pull you away from anything important.”

“I just had a few interviews left, but Jade said she’d handle the rest,” I tell him, turning my attention to the couple. “I couldn’t miss out on welcoming our guests. Everyone knows what they say about first impressions. Have you been here long?”

She shakes her head. “We parked just a few moments before you got here,” the elf says, then holds her hand out to me. “Esta. This is Elran.”

“It’s good to meet you both.” I shake her hand first, then Elran’s hand takes mine in a tight, firm hold, and he gives mine one single shake before letting go.

“What’d you think of the town riding through?” Blade asks them.

“Oh, it’s a cute little place,” Esta exclaims. “I can see where it can use some sprucing up, but that isn’t going to deter us from coming here. There’s potential here. I really believe this place could end up being great, like you were saying, Flint. No offense to how things are now, though.”

Flint nods. “None taken,” he says. “We’re aware the town isn’t exactly the most inviting and that a good bit needs to be done. Between the unfriendly locals and the abandoned buildings, we have a lot of work to do making this town into a place people want to visit.”

“We *almost* turned around,” Esta jokingly says. “I’ve never been anywhere where everyone collectively automatically despises you for just being there. But I told Elran the second they taste his food, they’ll be begging us to stay.”

Chuckling, I say, “That’s very likely—we don’t have many places to eat around here. There are a few restaurants and fast food joints, but they’re all old news now.”

“If that’s the case, they’re going to love what Elran can do in the kitchen,” Esta beams up at the half-orc.

Roxy says, “I bet you make a mean steak, cooking in so many high-end restaurants.”

To that, Elran shrugs. “It’s okay,” he grumbles his first words, his voice deeper than any other I’ve heard before.

“Damn, deep voice,” Roxy says, voicing all of our surprise.

Even though it’s kind of a given he’d have a voice that low, actually hearing it still takes us off guard.

Esta lets out a smooth melodic laugh. “It shocks everyone all the time,” she tells us. “And since he only says about ten words a day, some have never even heard him speak. Also, he’s being modest about his cooking. His spices and seasonings are just as strong as he is. He puts them all together himself, you know.”

“She gives me more credit than I deserve,” Elran says.

She smiles up at him, her free hand going to his chest. “I only speak the truth. The Oceanside did not start thriving until he brought his expertise, and he left them with recipes that will keep them successful.”

“We’re not here to brag,” he says calmly. “We came to see the town.”

“It doesn’t hurt to talk you up, too,” Esta replies, then looks back at us. “I feel a bit guilty for pulling him away from Oceanside. Although he left them with tasty recipes for numerous kinds of cuisines, it won’t taste the same being made by so many different hands.”

“She fails to give credit to herself while giving me all the praise,” Elran interjects, gazing down at Esta. The sternness on his face disappears when he looks at her, and a twinkle replaces it. “Anyone that dined at Oceanside was only there to see the beautiful, friendly elf that pranced around the dining room.”

The entire time I’ve been standing here, Elran has felt familiar, and as he looks at Esta, I finally realize why; he’s a gentle giant like Blade.

Esta laughs at him. “I never pranced, El. I danced. Some like to be entertained as they eat.”

“Why’d you leave?” Roxy asks. “Sounds like the two of you had it made.”

“Not enough freedom,” Esta says. “I don’t like to feel like I’m confined to a box. I wanted to make changes that would bring more money into the restaurant, but the owners are stuck in their ways and wouldn’t let me. I was going to suck it up and play by the rules, but then this offer fell into my lap. How could I resist? I’ve been in hospitality for years now, and I never thought I would have an opportunity like this one.”

“You have full control over the bed and breakfast,” Flint tells them. “As co-owner, I’ll, of course, be helping with the construction and planning, and whatever vision you have for it, I’ll help bring to life.”

“And I already have so many ideas for it,” Esta says, clasping her hands together. “I was thinking of an open cafe where guests don’t necessarily have to stay there to eat there. It’ll be all-day breakfast or brunch with different cuisines that cater to every species.”

“As you can see, she’s eager,” Elran chuckles.

“And I’m here for it,” Flint says. “If you’d like, we can show you the spot we’re thinking about putting it. Get your thoughts on it.”

“It has an ocean view, right?” Esta says. “It has to be beautiful.” She turns to Elran and clasps his arm tighter. “Think of the sunsets,” she says, her eyes sparkling.

“You’ll have a good view of that,” Blade tells her.

Flint looks at me.

“Are you coming with us?”

I shake my head. “I have to go help Jade back at the club,” I tell him. “I left her with quite a few interviews to do. I’ll catch up to you later.”

“We passed a bar coming in,” Esta says. “The Old StoreHouse, I think it was called? It looked interesting. Elran and I were going to check it out later this evening.”

I have to fight back a laugh. I can’t let them go in there without giving them a warning of the energy they’re going to be greeted with.

“Fair warning before you go in there,” I say. “Everyone’s still getting used to the idea of the population growing. Some of them will be welcoming, others won’t be. But they’ll be alright.”

“I’ll be in then,” Flint tells them. “You won’t have much to worry about.”

Esta waves her hand in the air. “We’re an elf-orc pairing. This is the kindest welcoming we have had since we’ve been open about our relationship. We can handle a few sour looks.”

Flint says, “Most of the gang is going to be there. It’s a split divide on welcoming newcomers. The rest of them will get on board eventually.”

“We’ll see you later tonight, then,” Esta says, and I nod in response.

They turn and walk away, and I expect Roxy to go with them, but she pushes up on her toes to peck Blade on the lips, and he gets on his ride and cranks up.

“You’re not going with them?” I ask her as we watch them pull off.

“Nah,” she answers. “Flint wants me to open up the bar. Even if he didn’t, I don’t think I’d go. I don’t feel like riding anywhere right now.”

“I would’ve gone if I hadn’t left Jade back at the club with six interviews to do,” I reply, looking at my watch. “She’s probably on the third one right now.”

She doesn’t reply, and I look up at her standing there with her head slightly tilted to the side.

“What?” I ask, wondering why she’s looking at me like that.

“You seem...happier today,” Roxy says, and her eyes roam down my body. “And you’re standing up a lot straighter. Whatever you’ve been doing with Jade must be helping.”

I look down at myself as if I can see that I’m standing taller, but my mood has improved by a lot, that I can gauge. Thanks to Jade, I’m doing better.

I'm confident I can help her shift. It's in her; she explained the exact energy we all feel out in the forest. She just needs help accessing her bear. That's not so easy the first time. It takes a few tries, and doing it on the night of a full moon is best. But the time leading up to that will be good practice. Maybe together, Roxy and I can help her. I'm sure she knows of Jade's struggles.

"Yeah, she's really been breaking her back to help me," I say. "I want to repay her."

"How? Jade's not going to accept a repayment for something like this."

"I know," I nod. "I had to convince her to let me, and I'm going to need your help."

Curiosity takes over her soft features.

"With what?" she asks.

"I need help getting her out into the forest."

Roxy scoffs at that. "Good luck. She hates being out there."

"Yeah, but if we help her shift, she won't."

My words cause Roxy to freeze, then her eyes grow wide as she gasps, and I automatically know I messed up.

"That's why she never wants to go out there with me," she states, like so many missing pieces are coming together now. "I've never seen her shift, and that's why. Because she can't!" She looks back at me. "How do you know this?"

"You have to be playing with me right now," I say, hoping this is her attempt to act like this is her first time hearing it. "You had to have known already."

"No, I didn't know!" she exclaims, frowning. "And I'm kind of pissed she didn't tell me. I thought we were closer, but we aren't close enough for her to tell me that."

Wow—I really messed up by letting this slip.

"You can't mention this to her," I emphasize. "The last thing I want is for her to be pissed at me for letting her secret slip."

“I’m not going to say anything,” Roxy reassures me. “I’m just shocked; she never told me that, nor has she ever hinted at it. Do you know why she can’t shift?”

I’m not sure I should keep revealing Jade’s secrets, but the biggest cat is already out of the bag, and maybe, just maybe, Roxy might be able to help me after all.

“She’s a half-shifter,” I disclose. “The other half is human. She said she doesn’t have an inner bear. She can pick up on the call to shift, but she can’t follow through with it because her bear isn’t there.”

Roxy’s quiet for a moment, then she says, “The only way that I can think to help her is risky, and it’d have to be kept away from Flint at all cost.”

“Ah,” I say immediately, knowing what she means. “You must be talking about getting mixed up with a witch, then?”

She rolls her eyes and lets out an annoyed breath.

“There *are* some good witches out there,” Roxy says harshly. “Not all of them are heinous, black magic users. Those are the ones that give the rest of them a bad rep.”

“That’s a passionate defense,” I point out. “Do you know a witch?”

“I mean...not personally—well, not—not,” she stops, stares at me a moment, then drops her act. “Fine. Yeah, I know a witch.” She takes a step closer to me and glares up at me menacingly. Despite being an entire foot shorter than me, Roxy still possesses an intimidation factor that some taller than me don’t have. In the state I’m currently in, she could definitely mess me up if I crossed her. “You’d better not say shit about it either. I don’t need anything messing me up. If Hector finds out, he’ll try to get me suspended, probably indefinitely. I’m on thin ice all the time, and I don’t need this to break it.”

“No worries,” I reassure her, holding my hands up. “I’m not going to say anything, just as long as you don’t mention to Jade what I accidentally told you.”

I'm not sure she expected my answer. She frowns at me, then backs down. "You don't seem to care that I'm involved with witches."

I shrug. "Can't dislike them all because of a few bad ones. I know they aren't all evil. I'm sure you wouldn't be fucking around with witches if they were bad anyway. Witches and shifters did use to be friendly with each other after all."

"Hmm. Most don't have that attitude towards witches," she says.

"Well, I've known a few myself, and they've all been friendly," I tell her. "A witch has never done anything to me. What can you tell me that might be able to help Jade?"

"I don't have any information as of now," she says. "But I can get some information for you. I know they're capable, but I don't know what the process is."

"Will you find out and let me know?"

She nods. "I'll see what I can do. Now—" She mounts her Brat, then straps her helmet on. "I have to go open the bar. I'll text you when I get some information."

She rides off, and I get back in the truck, but I don't go anywhere for a moment. If there's a chance witches can help Jade, I'll need to think of some way to convince her to accept that help. It's risky business dealing with witches, but I've heard of more good ones than bad, and Roxy can vouch for her. Now I just have to figure out a way to bring it up to Jade *and* reveal to her that I let her secret slip. I've never seen Jade mad before, but breaking her trust might do it.

CHAPTER 18

JADE

THIS MORNING when we were getting ready to open the club for the night, Gunner said word probably spread about shifters living in town and that we were probably going to be busy. Sometimes, his foresight shocks the hell out of me because, yet again, he was right. This place is more packed than it was on opening night. I'm glad I listened to him and called in more cocktail servers. We would have been drowning with the amount of people currently at the tables in front of the bar. And thank fuck for Roxy—she does the work of three bartenders combined. I happily pushed the two girls I had back here onto the floor, opting to run it with Roxy. My half of the tips will be split up between the servers, while Roxy gets to keep hers.

Even as I work, I can't help but dance to the throbbing base that's shaking the walls. Tonight, Aster's in the sound booth, and I have to give it to him—his playlist is top-tier. I've even caught Roxy moving her little ass as we spin around each other. Gunner sits at the far end of the bar next to where the servers pick up their drinks, his back to the wall so he can keep his eyes on the entire room, but I've caught him not doing his job a few times. However, I don't mind since it was me that had him distracted from searching out anything that looks shady. I love it when he watches me. Like he's doing now. His head bobs to the music, his smiling eyes glued to me as I bounce to the beat and make a sex on the beach for a tipsy blonde human woman.

Roxy reaches around me to grab a bottle of Jack Daniels below me, and as she does, she gets close to my ear.

“Gunner’s undressing you with his eyes!” she says loud enough for me to hear, but it gets lost in the music to anyone else around.

I play it off, shaking my head as I laugh.

“You’re seeing things!”

“What I’m seeing is him eye fucking you!” She gives me a sly smile as she pours three shots of Jack and slides them across the counter, then waits for payment.

Looking back at Gunner, his blue eyes are almost glowing in the dim lighting, and my skin heats up as they crawl down my body. How am I supposed to deny that he’s not doing all kinds of things to me in his head? It’s all over his face. I can’t wait until this night is over so I can find out exactly what he’s thinking.

Leaning over, I get close to Roxy’s ear. “He’s not the only one! There are dudes looking at us both like that!”

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “True! But Gunner isn’t just random dudes. Don’t act like this is normal for him!”

It’s not like I don’t want to confirm what she’s saying. I just like what Gunner and I have in private. There aren’t any expectations, and it’s easier to be with one another without everyone else sticking their nose in our business.

“Scuse me miss!” A lady right in front of me calls, holding her hand up, interrupting the denial I’m getting ready to give.

I wipe out a glass meant for beer as I go over to her where she stands near the Sam Adams tap. Her boyfriend’s hands roam over her body as she leans on the bar top.

“Can I getta vodka cran?” She slurs.

I nod, yanking the handle of the Sam Adams tap to fill the glass up, then I take it to the brunette that ordered it. After taking the crumpled ten-dollar bill and stashing the change in the tip jar, I make the lady’s drink and take it back over to her.

“Thanks!” she says, sliding her card to me, and as I reach for it, her hand comes down on mine. “So, are you a bear too?”

She says loud enough for the people around her to hear. All of their attention turns to me, waiting on me to confirm that I am.

“Lucy!” Her man says behind her.

“What?! Don’t act like you don’t want to know too.”

“You didn’t have to ask like that, though!” he replies.

I mean, I have the DNA makeup of a shifter, down to the scent, but changing into a bear isn’t possible for me. I’m not sure what I should tell them, but in the end, it comes down to what will probably get me tipped more.

“Yeah!” I tell them, then I point at Roxy. “So is she. That man at the end of the bar sitting against the wall—he’s one too.”

A wide smile takes over the tipsy woman’s face, and she turns around to the man behind her.

“Told you!” she says.

“What about the dancers!?” Someone else asks. “Are they?”

“Only one’s a bear!” I tell him. “One is a lion, and the other is a wolf.”

The ticket printer fires off beside me, and I grab the paper, quickly reading what needs to be made, and give them a smile before turning away from them so I can make the margarita and bloody maria on the ticket.

At the other end of the bar, Gunner sits in his designated comfortable high-back stool chair. My heart flutters when our eyes meet, something that hasn’t happened before. Maybe it’s the intensity in his gaze, or it could be because I feel like he’s contemplating my condition. Gunner’s mind is always going, running with endless thoughts and speculations, so it wouldn’t surprise me if he was trying to figure out how to help me shift. He might not even be thinking about that at all, but I can’t get it off my mind. It’s been a constant fuel for my anxiety the past day or so, and thinking about trying to open that channel again just reminds me of how I couldn’t succeed with my late mate despite the effort we put into it. I don’t want to tell Gunner that whatever he tries isn’t going to work. Still, I have to tell him something if I don’t want this entire attempt to end

with both of us being disappointed. I've already made peace with my reality—I can't shift. I don't want to open old wounds I've managed to stitch up.

Sadness washes over me as I think about it, but I swallow it down when Gunner smiles at me.

“You haven't had the chance to slow down since we opened!” he says.

I pour tequila into two glasses, grinning coyly at him. “You miss me?”

I grab his cup and refill it with water. “Yes!” he confirms. “Everyone's getting in the way.”

“I'm all yours tonight!” I tell him, pouring sour mix into one of the glasses.

“I have something to look forward to!”

I set the drink up on the ticket, then wink at him before turning to a woman waving me down.

She requests an Old Fashioned, and as I'm making it, Terra catches my eyes as she moves around the pole. She seems relaxed up there tonight, like nothing's troubling her. I know it's a mask. The music and cheering crowd make it easy to push any thought to the back of your head. I'm glad she has something to distract her, but that's not going to last. Once the night is over with, then it's all going to come flooding back. I don't want to let her go home alone tonight. Thoughts fester, and I don't want her to do something irrational that she might regret. I don't know what that something would be, but I'm trying to prevent anything. I just worry for her.

Just as I finish making the Old Fashioned, Terra blows a kiss to the crowd, then she exits towards the dressing rooms leaving Karmen and Grace dancing, keeping the crowd busy and entertained. Moments later, I turn around, and there she is, beside Gunner, covered in a robe with Blaze behind her, his back to her, making sure nobody bothers her. She smiles cutely at some of the people around the bar before turning to me. She leans on the counter beside Gunner, her sweet candy scent taking over the area.

She holds her water bottle out to me, and I take it and fill it with water, then slide it back to her along with a shot of vodka. She doesn't ask any questions about it—she just picks it up and downs it.

“Thanks!” she says.

“No problem!” She's getting ready to leave, but I motion for her to come closer. “You should come to the old storehouse after this!”

Confusion dawns on her face. “Won't it be closed?”

“Flint keeps it open a bit later for us to wind down after we close up here,” I tell her. “The bouncers don't drink while they're working, and neither does anyone else. We have our own little thing there. You should come this time.”

I can feel Gunner's eyes on me, and I just know what he's thinking. He's convinced I focus on others to avoid my own issues, which isn't true. I've given it some thought myself, and although I can see where he'd get that idea, that isn't the case. I simply help my friends when they're going through a hard time, and there's nothing more to it. I'm not sure he'll see it that way, though.

I ignore the look he's giving me, and I smile at Terra.

“Beats sitting at home! It's usually a good time!” I add, trying to get her to agree to come.

She nods. “I might take you up on that offer!”

“Please do!”

Behind her, Blaze talks to a man, and when Terra turns around, Blaze steps to the side, allowing the man to approach her. He leans forward into her ear, and she listens to what he has to say before she pulls back and nods. Then she motions for him to follow her and leads him to the left side of the stage, which goes back to the private rooms.

When she's gone, I look back to Gunner, who's staring at me over the rim of his glass, reading me. I don't dwell on what that look could mean. Instead, I get back to work.

I turn my attention away from him to tend to a group that just showed up. Nothing but shots of vodka and beers—easy enough. I get those drinks poured, and the bill paid out, then I move around Roxy to load glasses into the dishwasher before we end up running out. Once I have that going, I fill the orders coming in on the ticket printer.

As I'm setting two bottles of Bud Lite on the corresponding ticket, the door to the back flings open, and Talon comes out, a deep frown on his face as he motions for Gunner to come to the back. He gets up from his spot and moves with a quickness towards Talon. Terra's back there, and something had to have happened for Talon to be motioning that frantically. I go, too, telling Roxy to hold it down before I follow Gunner.

Gunner makes his way through the crowd, and I take advantage of the path he's creating, following behind him. I shut the door behind us once we get back there, shutting out most of the noise. The music pulses through the walls but not so much that we have to yell to talk.

"What's going on?" Gunner asks Talon as he leads us to the last room at the end of the hall.

"Terra decked the shit out of some guy," Talon explains as he takes hold of the doorknob. "She screamed, and we walked in on him getting punched in the face."

Talon opens the door up, and there's Blaze, sitting on the struggling man's back, pressing his head into the ground, his arm wrenched up between his shoulder blades. Terra stands in the corner, shaking her hand out, frowning down at the man on the floor. I cross the room over to her and wrap my arms around her trembling body.

"You're okay," I soothe her, pushing strands of hair out of her face. I already felt like maybe having her dance wouldn't help her after everything she's been through. This only confirms my reservations more. "Tell me what happened."

"I had to hit him," Terra says. Even though her body's shaking, her voice comes out strong. "He wanted more than just a dance. I told him this isn't that kind of place, but he

insisted, then he got aggressive. He grabbed me, and I punched him, then Blaze came in.”

“She’s a lying bitch!” The man pressed into the ground snarls. “Get the fuck off me!”

“You don’t get to say shit,” Gunner says, his voice calm but bone-chillingly threatening.

My attention leaves the gross human being on the ground and goes to Gunner, who’s staring down at the guy like the scum of the Earth that he is. Gone is the easy-going bear that I know. I’ve never seen Gunner’s eyes shine with this amount of anger before. His chest is noticeably rising and falling as he takes deep, even breaths, and his jaw is clenched. His knuckles have turned white from how hard he’s gripping his cane, and his other hand is balled up into a tight fist at his side.

In such a serious situation, I’m ashamed and surprised that I’m turned on right now. This is completely out of character for Gunner, but it’s sexy as fuck. Possibly one of the worst instances to have walked in on, but something about Gunner being pissed off and protective is hot. I could never have expected that.

“Get off him,” Gunner orders Blaze.

“He’s gonna fight,” Blaze warns.

“He won’t make it far,” Gunner says. “If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll stay on the ground.”

Blaze hesitates for only a moment before rising up off the man. It looks like he’s about to start getting up, but before he can, Gunner adjusts his grip on his cane, wielding it like a weapon as he brings it up across his body before bringing it down across the man’s back. Terra jerks in my arms as the dull whack rings loud around the room, and the man falls back to the floor. Gunner lifts his cane again and again without uttering a single word or noise, his eyes pinning the man down with nothing but hatred pouring out of them. I’ve never seen Gunner be violent, and I had no idea it was going to be so fucking arousing. It’s driving me wild.

When he's done, he calmly takes a step back and sits down in one of the chairs along the wall as the man lies on the floor deathly still, but the constant groan coming from him lets us know he's still conscious and in pain.

Good.

"Get him up and get me his wallet," Gunner orders Talon and Blaze.

They grab the man by his arms and ignore his groans of protest. Blaze holds the man up as Talon digs through his jacket and pants pocket until he pulls out a black leather wallet, which he hands to Gunner.

Gunner opens it up and extracts the bills inside, all twenties from what I can see, then hands the entire wad to Terra.

"This money doesn't even begin to undo the shit you've caused," Gunner says, digging through the man's wallet, then he frowns. He pulls out a picture and studies it for a moment, then turns it around to him. "Un-fucking-believable. You have daughters and a wife? It's already extremely fucked up that you do shit like this, but knowing you have three women in your house just makes it worse."

"There are women in here flaunting what they have," the man wheezes. "If they're going to strut around half naked, they'd better be ready to deal with the expectations of the men they attract. They're asking for it."

The scowl that takes over Gunner's face completely transforms him, and he doesn't even look like the same person. He may as well have shifted—he's so unrecognizable. Gunner squints his eyes at the man, then nods at Talon. Blaze's arms loop under the man's armpits, and he locks his hands behind the man's head, holding him wide open for Talon to punch him in the gut. Terra jerks at the noise Talon's fist makes in the man's belly, but I'm glad to see the piece of shit in pain.

"Again," Gunner says, studying the man's license.

"No, no," he pleads weakly. "Not again."

Gunner looks up from the man's license, a deep scowl on his face, then he looks at Terra. "Did he stop when you told him no?" He asks her.

"No," Terra answers, and that's all Gunner needs to hear.

"Again," he repeats to Talon. "In the face this time."

Without hesitating, Talon's fist connects with the man's face, dead in his left eye, which starts to bruise almost instantly.

"Now, Joseph Snider," Gunner says, reading from his license. "We can help you learn consent better if you still don't have a grasp on what it is."

"No," he begs. "Please..."

"I'll let her be the judge of that," Gunner states, then looks over at Terra again. "What do you say? You think he's learned his lesson?"

Terra stares at Gunner, stunned, before she looks at me. I give her an encouraging nod, then she turns back to Gunner.

"One more time, just in case," she answers.

"No, please," the man begs desperately.

But it's no use. Gunner gives Talon the signal, and he sinks his fist into Joseph's stomach, and this time, he vomits.

"Fuck, man!" Talon says, stepping out of the way as Joseph empties his stomach.

When he's done, he hangs his head, groaning.

Gunner rises from where he's sitting and steps over the chunky red mess on the floor to get in Joseph's space.

"Joseph, I think you've learned your lesson on how shitty it is when someone keeps going against your wishes. At least, I hope you have. I won't go by 21 Cypress road to let your wife know what a piece of shit she married," Gunner says. "Instead, I'm going to give you a second chance, and I hope you know how rare that is for shitty men like you." He uses the handle of his cane to lift Joseph's bowed head so he can look him straight in the eyes. "What's going to happen now is you're going to change your ways. You're going to go home and be a

perfect husband and father to your wife and kids. If I *ever* hear about you doing anything like this or anything even remotely similar, I'll find you and rip your cock off myself, and the story behind your black eye and swollen jaw will be revealed to your lovely wife." He raises his phone up and snaps a picture. "The entire town will know exactly what a piece of trash human you are if I hear anything else like this about you. And don't think moving will help you escape me. I have reach further than you know. Welcome to my shit list, Joseph." Gunner steps back, and Joseph's head drops without the support of Gunner's cane. "Toss him out of here."

Talon and Blaze drag the man out of the room, and Terra and I stand frozen as we watch them tug his limp body through the door.

"Are you okay, Terra?" Gunner's soothing, relaxed tone breaks me out of my frozen daze, and just like that, he's back to himself. "If you want to, you can go home. You don't have to stay."

She shakes her head and takes a deep breath.

"I want to stay, make some more money," she says. "Thank you. I-I just need to pull myself together really quick."

"You sure?" I ask her. "You can get out of here for the night. Don't feel like you have to stay. All of us would understand if you went home."

"I'll be okay," she nods. "I've been through worse than that."

"That doesn't lessen what just happened," Gunner says gently.

It makes my chest ache more for her.

"If you want to leave at any time, just say the word, okay?" I tell her.

She gives me a soft, reassuring smile. "If I change my mind, I'll let you know."

"Alright," I say, hesitantly letting her go. "Do you want me to come with you? I can sit with you if you want."

She shakes her head. "I'm good. Besides, Roxy's probably drowning at the bar. She might need you. I'll be back on stage

in a few minutes.”

With that, she’s out the door, and I yell after her, “Take as long as you need.”

When she’s gone out of the room, all my attention and every cell in my body is focused on Gunner. We stand here staring at each other for a moment. The last ten minutes have shown me a new side of him, and I won’t be able to wait until this shift is over. I want him now.

I finally break away from the spot I’ve been stuck to, and as I walk past him, I say, “Come to my office.”

He follows without a single word.

CHAPTER 19

GUNNER

AS I FOLLOW her back to the front of the hall to the first door on the left that leads into the dressing rooms, my anger at that waste of a human life has begun to simmer down—he's not going to be trying anything like that anytime soon. I really hope he heeded my threat because I was more serious than I've ever been. If I catch wind of him doing anything else like that, I'll make sure he suffers. I'm sure he knows I'm serious. The fear in his eyes told me he understood loud and clear.

Now I'm more concerned with Jade calling me back to her office. I don't think what I did was too extreme, but now that I think about it, maybe I should have told Jade and Terra to leave the room so they didn't have to witness that. Poor Terra—she shouldn't have had to see that after being assaulted. She had enough for one night, and I probably just gave her something else to think about. I don't regret having Talon beat the shit out of Joseph—he deserved worse than what he got. But perhaps I should have shielded Terra from it, at least. Knowing how concerned Jade is about her well-being, I'm sure I'm about to be instructed on how to go about that a little more gently next time, for the girl's sake. I can agree with that, but I'm not going to promise I'm going to change how I am if more moments like that one arise. I'm not going to have humans or anyone else coming in here thinking they can do whatever they want. The most I'll be able to do is make sure the employees don't witness any of it.

But as I trail behind her, a familiar sweetness fills the air, and instantly, my cock swells. Suddenly, I'm less worried about the way I handled the situation back there, and I'm more

focused on the way her ass sways in that little black dress she's wearing. Her arousal grows stronger as we cross through the empty dressing room to the other hall where the office is. I almost reach out and take hold of her hips as we enter into the other hallway, but I don't want to risk anyone seeing us. When she unlocks the door, however, I still don't reach out for her. I do still feel the need to apologize for subjecting them to that violence. He deserved it, but watching someone get beat up isn't exactly easy.

"Look, Jade," I start. "I'm sorry you and Terra had to see—"

"Hey, hey, shhhh," she says, shaking her head. "You don't have to apologize. He deserved worse if you ask me. And besides," she takes a step towards me, her fingers gathering the hem of her dress. "Seeing you like that, defensive, protective, and ruthless, got me hot."

She pulls her dress over her head and then tosses it onto the couch, leaving her standing before me in black lacy panties and thigh-high boots. Fuck—every single thought in my mind goes blank, and the only thing I can focus on is her beauty. Her shoulders are back, pushing her perfect breast out to me. She licks her lips, then walks towards me, her breasts bouncing as she comes my way. My cane clatters to the floor, and I meet her halfway. Her arms circle around my neck as she climbs my body, wrapping her thick legs around my waist as her lips crash against mine. I hold her up, my hands on her juicy ass as her tongue spreads my lips and finds its way inside my mouth.

I moan at the sweetness on her tongue, enjoying her delicious, addictive taste. My cock starts throbbing against the zipper of my jeans as her scent wafts up into my nose as her warm pussy presses against my stomach. Her bare breasts are flat against my chest, but I need to feel the silky softness of them against my lips. I carry her over to her desk and set her right on the edge of it. Her soft hands leave my face and neck and start working to unbuckle my pants as I dive deeper into her sweet mouth. When she gets my pants unbuckled, I break our kiss and pepper kisses down her neck and chest, then lick her soft skin down to her nipple. I rub up and down her pussy over her panties, and I find them soaking wet.

My cock throbs, finding her this eager for me, and as her delicious scent fills the room, I slowly but surely lose control of myself. This time there is no taking it slow. I want her right now.

I take one of her hands in mine to help her off the desk, so I can turn her around and bend her over the desk. In those heels, her perfect ass is at the perfect height, and when I slide her panties over the globes of her ass, her glistening pussy lips draw me in. I can't resist sliding my fingers between her folds, and the warm wetness I'm met with only makes my cock grow stiffer. She sighs as I rub my middle and ring finger up her slit, and I enjoy the feel of her pussy lips around my fingers. I lean over her, concentrating my middle finger on her hard clit as I kiss the back of her neck. She pushes back into my hand, moving her hips as I massage her clit, squeezing my fingers between her lips as she does.

"Mmmm," she gives a sultry hum, looking back over her shoulder. "I want your cock in me now, Gunner." She reaches back and removes my hand, only to bring my fingers to her mouth. She eyes my shining fingers before her tongue comes out of her mouth, and she licks her juices off my middle finger. When her warm mouth surrounds my fingers, I suck in a breath of air, but then she pushes her tongue between my fingers, and I almost lose it. I can't take it anymore—she's driving me insane.

I line myself up with her tight entrance and slide between her wet folds with ease, a hot knife through butter. She moans the further into her I sink, and my fingers still in her mouth catch the resulting vibration. I'm sheathed inside of her hot pussy, the head of my cock throbbing at her core as her walls squeeze my shaft, and the second she starts moving on it, I almost bust inside of her. She lets out a husky sigh of pleasure as her ass meets my thighs, and I have grit my teeth against how tight and hot she is around me.

She pulls my fingers from her mouth, and her head tilts back as she moans, "Fuck yes," into the air.

Gathering her hair in my hands, I gently tug on it, and she comes up with a surprised squeak, and the only reason I don't

let go is because of the smile on her lips. She moves backward, easing back onto my cock, and my legs go weak as she presses back into me. Seeing my thick cock spreading her open, glistening with her sweet nectar, causes my hips to thrust forward as she's coming back. We pick up our pace, and my dick grows harder as I slide in and out of her pussy. I let go of her hair and sneak my hand down her body to her clit, fucking her from behind as I massage her pussy.

My other hand cups one of her breasts, and I pull her off the desk, flush against me, holding her to me as I continue to thrust my cock into her. I bury my face in the crook of her neck and inhale her intoxicating scent.

"You feel so good around me, baby," I growl against her soft skin. "You're a fucking goddess."

"Fuck yes," she breathes out as she reaches back to take hold of the back of my head. "Keep going just like that, Gunner."

Fuck—every time she breathes my name, it drives me absolutely insane. My dick gets harder inside of her, and I drill into her with long hard strokes. She takes a fistful of my hair in a tight grip, a sign her climax isn't far away. Sure enough, she constricts around me, and her body goes rigid as her walls squeeze around my cock. She writhes against me as I continue to thrust into her, stretching out her orgasm, and as she gushes around me, her pleasure fuels my own release. I come deep inside of her, holding my thrust as I spurt my load. When I'm done, I remain inside of her, catching my breath as she finds hers.

"Fuck," she laughs, leaning back down on the desk. I pull out of her, and she stands up, turning around to me.

Placing one of her hands on my chest, she plants another kiss on my lips before she pulls away. "Let's pick this up later tonight, after we leave the Old Storehouse."

I lock my hands around her back, preventing her from stepping away from me. "Let's just continue right now," I suggest.

"We have to get back to work," she mumbles against my lips.

"Do we *have* to?" I ask her, taking hold of her waist.

“Yes,” she giggles. “I’m sure Roxy needs me.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “Okay. I’ll hold you to that. Later then,” I tell her, then I let her go to get dressed again.

As I get myself together, I watch her, already thinking about the many different ways I’m going to bend her supple body tonight.



The rest of the night goes by smoothly—the drama from the back room didn’t make its way to the front, and the rest of the night moves on without incident. Jade tells me to leave and get off my feet while she and the others clean, and I don’t argue. After the busy night we had, I want nothing more than to have a drink. What would make it even better is having that drink in my own home with Jade there to finish what we started in her office. But since I have to wait on her, I drive over to the bar to have a few before going home.

When I get there, I’m surprised to find Esta and Elran here. I thought they left earlier this morning, but I see I was wrong. What’s even more of a shocker is the fact that there’s a little crowd near them. Callie, Holly, and Marilyn, along with a few other women and men, sit close to Esta, listening to whatever it is she’s saying, while Flint, Ax, Aster, and Ryder talk to Elran. Well... chat around him. From what I gathered from meeting him yesterday, he does not say much. But Esta—it’s easy to see where she could make a room full of people easily love her.

In the usual corner of the room, Blade sits with his arm around Roxy with Slash next to them, and Tiberius is sitting at the end of the table in a chair next to Slash. Turning back to the bar, I head into the crowd so I can get a few drinks before joining them in the corner.

“There’s a familiar face,” Esta says when I lean on the bar next to Elran. “Nice to see you again.”

“Likewise,” I say, leaning on the bar beside Elran, who’s eating an elk burger. “I thought the two of you went back to

Bayton this morning.”

“We were going to, but I didn’t really feel like making the ride, and Elran wanted another one of these burgers,” she tells me.

“It’s good, right?” I ask Elran.

“Delicious, actually,” he tells me. “Probably one of the best burgers I’ve eaten in a while. Little dive bars have some of the best food.”

“Simplicity is best sometimes,” I tell him.

Flint sets Hennessy and a Guinness down in front of me. I take them to where the others sit in the corner, leaving Elran to finish his food and Esta to charm the pants off everyone. She’s the center of attention right now, telling a story about how she ended up in Bayton. She ran from some village on the other side of the world, trying to escape being married off to the son of one of their ally clans, whom she hated. Being the daughter of the elven clan’s leader, she was promised to the eldest son before she was even born. But, she didn’t want that, and now she’s here.

“Oof,” Roxy says. Her short hair has been let down from the pigtails it was in earlier, and she changed into a hoodie and leggings. From the size of the hoodie, I’m sure it’s Blade’s. “I’m glad she got away from that.” Roxy expresses before she sips her whiskey.

“They seem to be fitting in pretty well,” I point out.

“They’re extremely likable,” Blade states.

“Speak for yourself,” Slash says.

“I like her,” Roxy says. “She seems easygoing enough, and Elran seems like he minds his business. If newcomers are going to settle down here, I’d prefer them to be like that.”

The door opens, and Jade walks in, followed by Terra, Karmen, and Grace, with Talon and Blaze trailing them. Jade looks over at me as she comes inside and offers a smile. This smoke-filled dingy room brightens with her presence, and her scent chases the other lingering smells away. She changed out

of the dress she had on earlier, and she's now in a baggy sweater that falls off her shoulder, leggings, and the boots she was in when I fucked her in the office hours before. My cock twitches as I stare at her legs while she introduces herself to Esta and Elran.

"Well, aren't you beautiful!" Esta exclaims to Jade, holding her at arm's length.

Jade laughs, and her rosy cheeks push up into her happy eyes. "I was going to say the same to you."

"Stop it," Esta says, a bright smile on her face. "All you shifter women are just gorgeous."

Most of the conversations around me get lost because of the vivid images of Jade that have been burned into my head these past few weeks. From the time she showed me what she can do on the pole to hiking in the forest to just hours ago in the office. Never has a woman occupied my thoughts like this. But I'm almost certain Jade is magic.

"You haven't taken your eyes off her since she came in." I jump at Blade's voice in my ear, and when I look over, he's leaning in close to me.

I almost let out an annoyed groan. It's hard as fuck keeping anything a secret when Flint can scent just about any and everything, and Blade notices every single little thing. Between the two of them, privacy is damn near impossible. What's even crazier is the fact Blade's never said anything like that to me before. Everyone else, excluding Flint, has made some baseless accusations. So Blade must have noticed *something* that would make him think otherwise.

Annoying. Still, I lie.

"Nothing's going on," I tell him, not ready to give anything up. "Nothing's ever happened between us."

With bad timing, Jade turns around and smiles at me before making her way over.

"That's hard to believe," Blade comments before sitting back in his seat.

She's holding two drinks, and when she sits beside me, she sets one down in front of me.

"What's this for?" I ask as she leans on me, nestling her head into my shoulder, something she does quite often, but this time, it feels different. I have to refrain from deeply inhaling the scent of her. I want her scent as a candle.

"After the night we had, you deserve more than this," she says.

I smirk at her before getting closer to her ear so nobody else can hear, and I say, "I've already been promised something that's going to suffice."

She blushes and giggles before she replies with, "Well, this is in addition to."

My bear, bitter as he's been, softens as her giggle flows through my body. Her laughter is music to my ears, and for a moment, it's only us in this little bar. She cancels out everything. That is until Terra comes over and sets another drink down in front of me.

"Flint said you like Hennessy and Guinness," Terra explains, motioning to the two new drinks in front of me now. "As a thank you for defending me tonight. I can't put into words how much I appreciate what you did for me. I felt safe going back on stage because of you—" she turns to Talon and Blaze. "—and you two," she says as she gives them drinks. "I was told you're both fine with anything."

"You don't need to thank us, Terra," Blaze says. "That guy was a piece of shit."

"I'm half tempted to find him and teach him a lesson myself," Talon huffs, sitting up in his chair. "It's not like it'll be hard to find him. We know where he lives."

"Do not do that," Blade orders. "Get that idea out of your head right now. We don't need to cause any trouble that would mess up everything Flint's been planning."

"I didn't say I was gonna do it," Talon says. "I just said I'm tempted to."

“Yeah, that doesn’t give me any kind of reassurance that you won’t,” Blade answers. “I’m serious, Talon. Don’t do anything that’ll get you in trouble. You just barely got your ride back.”

“I’m not gonna do anything,” Talon repeats, then looks up at Terra. “Thanks for the drinks, though.”

“How about I get your next round?” Blaze offers and goes with her to the bar.

Jade watches them as they walk away, then she cranes her head back to look at me.

“See, what you do is important,” she says. “Even if you don’t think so, we all feel safer knowing you’re the one in charge of protecting us. We need you more than you know. Even after you get better, I hope you’ll stay with us.”

She pats my chest before she gets up and goes where Terra sits with Karmen, Grace, Holly, and Blaze.

Blade, the son of a bitch, leans back over and says, “Yeah, you don’t have me too convinced that nothing is going on.”

The thing is, I’m not so sure anymore, either.

CHAPTER 20

JADE

I TURN over in my warm pillows, startled from my slumber all too soon by my phone going off, and it's not my alarm that's screeching into the quiet of the early morning. I grab my phone off the nightstand and look at the screen to find that one, it's 5:30 in the morning, and two, Gunner's the one responsible for waking me up at this unforgiving hour. I have no idea why he's calling me so early. We had the same exact night last night—how is he up already? I wasn't even planning on getting out of bed until ten. It must be important. I rub my hand over my eyes before I swipe up on the phone icon.

“Good morning.” I turn back onto my side, nestling back into the warm spot I inched away from, and I let the phone rest on my face, closing my eyes again. “Are you, or is someone else dying?”

His deep rich laughter comes through the phone, and I smile with him.

“It's early, I know,” he confirms. “But I'm calling you for a very good reason.”

“You must want to do more than just stretch today, huh?” I guess. “That's the only thing I can think of that would be considered good enough to call me this early.”

His hesitation makes me open my eyes.

“Sort of,” he finally says, and now my curiosity is through the roof.

“What are you thinking, Gunner?”

“How about another hike today?” he asks.

His wanting to go hiking again is a plus because he could use the practice without his cane, but at the same time, the idea of being out there again squashes some of my excitement. But for him, I’ll suck it up and go as many times as he wants to.

“Sure,” I reply, wanting to stay in the warmth and comfort of my bed more than ever now. “Let’s do it. When were you thinking?”

“Well,” he says, and then I hear a knocking at my door, causing my eyes to fly open.

“You’re already here?” I ask him, sitting up. “You were really eager to go on this hike, huh?”

“Yeah, I am, actually. I thought we could kill two birds with one stone.”

I squint into the darkness, already kind of guessing what he’s getting at, but I don’t want to say anything and give him ideas he didn’t have.

“What other bird are we killing, Gunner?” I ask him.

“The walk would be for me, the destination for you,” he tells me. “We’re going to try to get in contact with your bear.”

Great, because that’s exactly what I need this morning.

“I was really hoping you weren’t serious about that,” I sigh into the phone.

“Of course I was,” he replies. “I made a promise, and I intend to follow through on it.”

My chest starts to get tight, and a very familiar coolness starts to creep into me, thinking about going out into that forest to search my bear out.

“Can we do this another time?” I ask him. “I wasn’t really prepared for this.”

He’s quiet for a moment before he says, “Will you ever be ready to try?”

“I don’t know... probably not. It’s never worked for me before, so I’m not expecting anything to be different. Feels like I’m walking into failure.”

“How about this,” he says. “Let me help you out until the next full moon, which is about three weeks away. We do everything we can to get you in touch with your bear, and on the night of the full moon, if we’re unsuccessful, I’ll hang it up.”

I want to say no to his proposal, but if I don’t accept it, I have a feeling he’s not going to drop it until he learns for himself that there’s no hope of me shifting. I can put up with this for three weeks if it means I never have to try it again.

I let out a sigh, dreading what I’m about to say.

“You’re killing me, Gunner,” I tell him.

“So, is that a yes?”

“Yeah,” I confirm. “It’s a yes.”

I can almost hear him smiling through the phone. “I already have a bag packed. You just need to get dressed.”

“I also have to mentally prepare myself,” I tell him. “I’ll be ready in a minute.”

“Alright. I’ll be out here waiting for you.”

I hang up with him, then take a second to collect myself. This is not how I saw my morning going, and I wish I had more time to prepare. I get off the bed and suck it up, gathering my clothes so that I can get ready. The sooner we get out there, the sooner this will be over with.

I pull on a long sleeve shirt with some spandex shorts, then brush my teeth and wash my face before pulling on socks and sneakers. I brush my hair and pull it up into a bun at the top of my head. Just like that, I’m ready.

When I step outside, Gunner’s sitting on the top step waiting for me. He looks over his shoulder at the sounds of the door opening and smiles at me.

“Ready?” he asks me as he rises to his feet.

“As ready as I’m gonna get,” I reply, and he chuckles.

“Isn’t that the same thing I said the first day you started helping me?”

I think back to that day and nod. “I think you said something like that, yeah.”

We get into the truck, figuring it’ll be easier to take one vehicle since we don’t need to be at the club until later this evening. I’m certain that if I drive myself, I might end up driving out of town just so I can avoid this for at least another day.

I lean my head on the window as we head to the other side of town, not really in the mood to talk. Facing something I know is going to end in failure doesn’t exactly prompt conversation. I’m more focused on trying to get myself to refrain from beating myself down because that’s easy to do after failing at something I should be able to do. I’ve known all these years that I can’t shift—I’ve accepted it, but now as I face it again, I realize that I may have just told myself I’ve accepted it. That old, overwhelming sense of uselessness has crept up again, and I have to try as hard as I can not to think about it.

Michael, rest his soul, tried everything he could to help me shift. No matter what he did, nothing helped. Even after I accepted the bond between us, I never found that part of me that would allow us both to be with each other on every level. My inability to shift is one of the main reasons I pushed him away in the beginning, along with wanting to maintain my freedom. I wondered how I could make him happy if I couldn’t give that part of myself to him? How am I supposed to make someone else whole when I’m not even complete myself? But he still wanted me despite my shortcomings and reassured me that all that I am was enough for him.

It was easy to believe him when he loved me the way that he did, but now that he’s gone, it’s difficult to fend off those intrusive thoughts that tell me I’ll never be good enough. I’m not human, but I can’t claim that I’m a shifter. I’m stuck in a world all by myself, and there’s nothing I can do to escape this desolate little island I’m on.

“Jade?”

Gunner's soft tone pulls me out of my head, and I look over at him in the dark cabin of the truck, which isn't moving anymore.

"We're here," he announces.

I look out the windshield, and the forest lies just in front of us. I swallow hard, then let out a deep breath.

"You're nervous," Gunner states.

I nod. "Yeah. Just a little."

"Understandable," he replies with a reassuring smile. "If it doesn't work, we'll figure something else out."

I don't want to crush his spirits and tell him there isn't anything that'll help me, but I don't want his expectations to get too high.

"I appreciate your confidence and what you're doing for me," I tell him. "But I don't want you to get too hopeful or think there's something wrong with your methods. I've tried everything, but nothing has worked for me."

"Have you tried magic?" he asks me unexpectedly.

"Magic?" I ask, scrunching my face up at him. "You mean witches?"

He nods.

"I've never tried them, but they don't have the best reviews. A lot of them don't have the best intentions. I know that there are some good witches, but I don't want to risk anything."

"Well," he says slowly. "What if I told you I might know of someone who could connect you to witches that will actually help you?"

"I'm not sure Flint would be so happy with that," I reply. "He'd end up saying the same thing, that their work isn't to be trusted."

"But what if you knew they could be?" he asks me. "If you had someone to vouch for their ability, would you give it a try?"

I stare at him for a moment, comprehending the underlying message he's trying to get across.

"Do you know a witch or something?"

He shakes his head. "Not me. Roxy does."

Surprise takes over my anxiety at that news.

"Roxy knows witches?" I ask him. "What does she need a witch for?"

"You know, I probably should have asked but figured it's none of my business," he admits. "I honestly didn't even think to. But she said they'd be able to help you connect with your—"

"Hold up," I interrupt him, taken aback. "You told Roxy I can't shift?"

"Only because I thought she knew already," he defends himself. "You and her are pretty close. I thought this was something you would have told her. But it was done with the best intentions," he says, but that doesn't take the sting out of having my business told. "She told me she's certain they'd be able to help you shift."

"Yeah? While we're at it, maybe Roxy's witch friend can tell us why magic wasn't able to help heal you," I snap back.

Instantly, I wish I hadn't said that, and I feel like shit for throwing that in his face. But he only nods at my rebuttal.

"I'd be open to that," he says, making me feel even worse. "It wouldn't hurt to ask."

"I'm sorry, Gunner," I apologize. "I shouldn't have said that."

He nods, understanding.

"I used to get mad hearing everyone else discuss the progress I wasn't making," he tells me. "I get why you're upset, and I would never have brought it up to her had I known she wasn't aware. And I think after all the times I've snapped at you over the past few months, you're entitled to a few freebies."

"In your defense, Roxy would be one of the only other people I would have told. Not even Flint knows," I tell him, accepting his apology.

“Roxy seemed confident when she spoke of her friend. Maybe you should talk to her about setting up a meeting.”

“I don’t know,” I tell him. A different kind of anxiety creeps up, thinking about putting my trust in witches. I’ve always heard that getting involved with some of them is riskier than gambling. But if Roxy knows one and trusts her, then maybe I can trust her too.

“I’m going to have to think on that,” I say, my head spinning.

“That’s expected,” he understands. “For now, before we get magic involved, let’s try to connect you to your bear naturally.”

He reaches into the backseat to grab the backpack, then we get out of the truck. I lead our stretches, making sure to warm up our legs and backs really well before we get lost in the trees. I take his cane, but today I don’t really pay attention to how he does without it; my mind is preoccupied.

“While we’re walking, concentrate on everything around you,” Gunner instructs. “Feel the wind around you and let it flow through you. Listen to every noise, absorb the environment, take a deep breath, open your nose to every scent around us. Feel the ground beneath your feet as we walk. This is your territory.”

Everything he tells me to do as we walk, I do, trying my best not to let my own thoughts get in the way of what we’re trying to do. I try not to think about how everything he’s saying is exactly what I’ve always done when I’m in this kind of environment. Still, maybe I’ve missed something, or I’ve been doing it wrong.

“You know the way you easily move and flow in and out of complicated yoga poses?” he asks me.

“Yeah.”

“The same ease you do that with, is how easy it’s going to be for you to shift once you do it for the first time. We just have to get you over this hump.”

He’s making it sound a lot easier than it’s going to be.

We walk for a while, trekking up the mountains, not really saying much, and I'm glad for that. I'm not really feeling up to conversation right now, but that leaves me to focus as Gunner instructed. I can understand why the forest is a destination for peace and why so many come out here to get some quiet or clear their head. I've heard numerous people say nature is healing. The tranquility found out here is enough to mend the most wounded souls. I just wish I could find that same kind of healing. This energy that swirls inside of me out here is like a tornado, and I can't do anything about it.

After another thirty minutes of walking, we come to a clear spot, and Gunner stops to look around.

"This is a good spot," he states, then he pulls his shirt over his head. My eyes linger on the scratches across his abdomen, a forever reminder of the time he almost died and why he's in the condition he's in. He looks up at me as he's taking his pants off, and he says, "Take yours off too. It helps when connecting to the environment. Most people think we take our clothes off so we don't rip them, but it's only half true. Being as naked as nature intended helps connect us better to our surroundings."

That's actually something I didn't know. I just assumed it was because they wanted to avoid the naked walk once they shifted back to their human forms.

I do as he says, and I strip down to nothing, folding my clothes and setting them to the side.

"You're not about to shift, are you?" I ask him cautiously.

"No, no," he says. "I only got naked so you wouldn't feel uncomfortable."

Now that draws a laugh out of me.

"I thought you knew me better," I say, sitting down cross-legged. "I don't care about being naked."

He sits down in front of me and places his hands on his knees.

"Just like Adam and Eve," he comments as he gets situated.

I watch as he gets comfortable, as I patiently wait for what comes next.

“Okay, first,” Gunner says. “Clear your mind and focus only on our surroundings.”

“That shouldn’t be hard,” I tell him, closing my eyes. “My mind goes blank every time I dance or do yoga.”

“But this isn’t that, though,” he states. “This takes another level of focus, especially for the first time. What goes on in your mind when you’ve tried to shift before?”

The only thing that’s filling my head now is how this isn’t going to work, no matter how hard we try.

“Eh,” I shrug. “I’m sure I’ll be able to clear my mind. I do it on a regular basis.”

“That’s not what I asked you,” he says gently.

And since I don’t want to answer that, I answer harshly before I can stop myself.

“I don’t really see what it matters what I’m thinking if my mind is going to be cleared in the end anyway,” I fire back, instantly annoyed with myself. “Sorry,” I apologize, taking a deep inhale and letting it out through my nose. “This is just frustrating for me.”

“For the future, your mindset going into this is extremely important,” he says. “Your own thoughts can hinder you.”

That’s comically ironic coming from him, but I hold that comment back.

“Now close your eyes and try to envision the forest around you.” I do as he instructs. “Let yourself become one with it.”

I try to push everything out of my mind like he said so I can focus on my surroundings, taking deep breath after deep breath, trying to decipher the scents that flow into my nostrils. I listen to the wind blowing through the treetops and let it soak into me as it blows against me. I feel the Earth beneath my buttocks as I sit, rooting myself into the ground. I absorb everything else around me, but Michael’s handsome face pops up, and I have to shove it back down to the depths of my mind

where it came from. Every so often, I have to battle with images of him and how I'm going to feel when this doesn't work. Two thoughts that invade my mind and are difficult to get rid of, but eventually, I expel them.

The cool breeze raises goosebumps on my skin, and it blows through my hair and hardens my nipples. After a while, the leaves rustling in the trees come through loud and clear and climb into my ears like the sweetest music. The longer I sit here, the more I start to see the forest behind my eyelids, shapes defined by crisp white lines. I know this is where my bear should reside, but she's nowhere to be found. I can sit here and connect to the fabric that is the primal world, but it lies beyond my reach. It never allows me to actually touch it, taunting me just as it always has.

Defeated, I open my eyes to find Gunner still has his closed. It looks as if he's meditating, and I don't want to disturb him, but I also don't want to stay out here any longer. I want to run far from this place and never look back. A good amount of time has passed since we sat down; the sun is starting to brighten the sky.

Gunner opens his eyes, and I force a smile, but it's only so I don't burst out in tears. I need to leave now before I do.

"I think that's enough for me for the day," I tell him. "We need to start working on you now. I think today we can introduce you to some basic pole moves and start building your abdominal strength back up. Since it's Friday, we can stretch out, and then I can show you some basic moves."

He doesn't protest—instead, he nods and starts putting his clothes on.

"Are you okay?" he asks me as we begin our hike back.

I ignore the pain in my chest when he asks me. Even though I knew we weren't going to get anywhere, my failure still hits me hard. Any time after I tried, Michael was there to pick me back up, but I don't have him anymore. I have to cope with this by myself now.

“Yeah,” I lie to him, handing him his cane. “I’m fine. Well, I will be anyway.”

His expression remains unreadable, but he reaches out and wraps his arm around my shoulder, pulling me into his warm body.

Trying to connect with my bear has never gone well before, but this time, somehow, my failed attempt hits me harder than it has in the past. Maybe because it’s been so long since I’ve tried, and I’m not used to what it feels like anymore. Before, I never felt like crawling into bed and lying under the covers in the dark for hours, but this time, that’s where I want to stay until this crater in my chest goes away.

CHAPTER 21

GUNNER

I SIT in my cushioned chair, listening to everyone chatter around me, my mind still at the club with Jade. Today is the first time in a while I've been early for a meeting—it's the first time in a while I've felt good enough to be on time. My earliness probably has something to do with the fact that this meeting was just called about an hour ago. Jade and I had just finished working out when I got the group message from Flint, which gave me just enough time to shower and get ready for it. I needed that shower badly today. After that hike and the workout Jade put me through on stage, I worked up a sweat, and I haven't done that in a while. Jade made it all look so easy. She showed me the simplest moves but even those felt like the hardest things I've ever done. A few months back, I probably would have been able to do those basic moves with no problem. But I've become weak in this sedentary life I've been forced to live the past few months. It's going to take some time to get back to where I was strength-wise.

However, after doing all of that this morning, I feel absolutely amazing. My core strength isn't nearly as good as it used to be, and every muscle in my upper body is on fire and sore, but it's a pleasant soreness. Now I'm sitting in this meeting room, my entire body humming with energy left over from this morning as we wait on the elders to come in so this meeting can get started. I'm eager to see what this last-minute meeting is about. My guess is it has something to do with the human side of town, but I'm not sure of that.

Aside from wanting to know what's going on, I got here so early because I wanted to talk to Roxy before the meeting. I

didn't want to have to sit through this anxiously wanting to know if she spoke to her witch friend, but for once, she isn't early. She's usually here before everyone, but she has yet to walk in. Blade's here, standing in his usual spot beside Flint on the wall. Everyone's here right now, even Talon and Blaze, who usually show up late. Today was a wonderful day for Roxy to be uncharacteristically tardy.

I'm intent on finding a solution for Jade. Right now, all I want to do is get back to her at the club, so much so, my leg is bouncing up and down. She said she was alright this morning, but I don't believe her. I didn't want to force her to talk about what was on her mind—she'd already snapped at me a few times, and I didn't want to agitate her more. After she showed me basic upper body exercises on the pole, she went to her office, and I didn't see her before I left. I figured she had to collect herself after doing something that causes her so much grief, and I wasn't going to interrupt her. She needs her space which I completely understand.

She says she accepted the fact that she can't shift, but the way her green eyes glistened with tears when she looked at me back in the forest said it all. A heartbreaking sight. I've never seen her down like that before. This is still something that affects her, and now that it's more out in the open, she can't hide it as well. I think there's still some small spark of hope alive inside of her that she'll be able to shift one day, and every time she tries and fails, it squashes her a little more each time. I instantly recognized the pain on her face when it didn't work out for her, but I can't let what little hope she has left die. If that spark goes, then it really will be damn near impossible to help her shift.

I was hoping I'd have some good news before the meeting, but Roxy has yet to walk in. I need to hear some information about what her witch friend can do. Hearing Jade speak of her attempts over the course of nine years has me convinced it's really going to take more than natural means. I've never heard of anyone struggling to shift, but as long as it's not impossible, there's hope.

The door to my left opens, and finally, Roxy enters. But, just my luck, the door across from Flint and Blade opens, and the elders come in. Fuck. I'll just have to wait until after the meeting is over.

As soon as the elders have taken their seats, Flint looks around the rooms to make sure we're all here before he clears his throat, and the room falls silent as all attention goes to him.

"This is going to be extremely quick," he starts. "Mayor McMichaels has gotten back to me regarding the announcement that needs to be made. He set it for a week from today. I just got word from him about three hours ago and wanted to inform everyone, so you all have time to prepare."

"Do we really need to address the humans?" Ax asks. "They all know already. The club was packed last night with humans wanting to find out more."

"The bar has been crowded too," Ryder adds. "It seems like word of mouth made the announcement for us."

"Yeah, and it seems we've already started making enemies," Flint says, looking at me. "That man you had thrown out of the club, we're going to have to keep a close eye on him."

"I don't think he's going to be stepping out of line in the future," I tell him. "I'm sure he learned not to come over here expecting to get away with shit, and I doubt he'll be a problem for anyone on the human side either."

"Find out what you can about him," Flint tells me. "Make sure every aspect of his life is brought to light, so he doesn't get any ideas to try something."

"Got it," I say.

"And we are still going to make the announcement," Flint says. "The Mayor said he didn't think it'd be necessary since word has already spread, but I want to go through with it. Have them hear it directly from us. I want to make sure they have the correct information, and I don't want anything to be misconstrued. If the Mayor hadn't said he didn't think it was necessary to make the announcement, I might not have. But I don't trust him not to start spreading rumors or lies himself."

He wasn't too excited about the changes we're trying to make, and I have reason to believe he's going to try and get in our way."

"You're right to have your doubts about him, son," Cliff says. "He's been around this town a long time, and he's not a very understanding man from what I know."

"So you said when I first proposed the idea of bringing more business here," Flint reminds him. "However, that's not going to stop me from doing what needs to be done for this place."

"You're going to have to keep a close eye on McMichaels," Hector says. "He'll lash out if he's feeling threatened."

"Which he is," Rufus chimes in. "What you're doing for this town is what he should be doing. It's not even his second year, and he's already lost some of the favor he had when he got elected."

Flint nods.

"It was pretty easy to tell he wasn't on board with all I had in mind when we went to speak with him," Flint says. "I think my best bet is to gain some human allies within his council. I don't think that will be too hard, considering how excited most of them were when we went to speak to them."

"So what?" Tiberius speaks from his corner of the room. "You plan on allowing humans in here?"

"Not at all," Flint answers without hesitating. "But they don't have to be a part of this group to be spies. Getting information out of one of them won't be too hard. His assistant seemed rather eager to make our acquaintance, and the town planner seemed excited about everything we presented. Those two, along with Sheriff Dan, would be good to have on our side."

"He's a friendly guy," I tell him. "He'll probably tell you whatever you want to know."

"He's been in the bar a few times this week," Flint says. "With him interacting with us more, it shouldn't be hard to get him to open up. So chat him up and make him want to keep coming inside," Flint orders the room. "Don't be dicks to him. If

there's one human, you're nice to let it be him. We need him in our corner."

"You said this announcement is set to be made this time next week?" Rufus asks.

"At one o'clock sharp," Flint replies.

"Who's going with you to make this announcement?" Rufus wonders.

"Well," Flint says. "I was thinking it would be better if the five of you would make that appearance on stage with me. You're the ones that settled down here—I think it would be best if you five were with me when I speak."

"We can show up," Cliff confirms. "I'll make sure Jarvis and Gavin are there that day."

"What do you plan on saying?" Hector asks.

Flint shakes his head and says, "Not sure yet, but I know it's mainly going to be me explaining what we are. I still have to figure the rest out, but I have time for that. I'm sure most of it will be questions from the crowd, though."

"So far, there hasn't been any issue with word being spread around town," Cliff states. "Personally addressing the humans of the town might end up working better in your favor in the long run. I wasn't sure how they'd respond since humans aren't used to this kind of thing, but the overall response has been positive curiosity. You've been trying to get their business over here. Hearing this kind of information will clear up any doubts and get more of them over here."

"That's a good point," Flint says. "That's the silver lining to having them know about us. Our businesses can thrive. I know it's been an adjustment, but in a few years, it'll be well worth it. Does anyone have any questions?"

The room remains quiet as Flint waits for someone to speak up, but nobody does.

"Alright," Flint says. "I expect all of you to be out there with me when we make the announcement. Just the elders and I will be on stage, but I still expect everyone to dress nicely."

Blaze and Talon, refrain from beating each other up—at least for one week. Tiberius and Ax stay away from those back alley fight clubs. I don't need any of you looking like all we do over here is fist fight.”

After that, he tells us to go about our day, and we all clear out of the meeting room. Blade stays behind to talk to Flint, and Roxy motions with her head for me to follow her. We walk down the hall with the rest of the crew, and I listen to Ax and Tiberius talk about one really good fighting match they'd be missing out on.

Outside, Roxy crosses the street and gets in the truck, and I follow her lead.

“Feels like we're about to do something shady,” I tell her. “You must have information for me.”

“Yeah, we are basically doing something that may as well be illegal in Flint's eyes,” Roxy says, digging into her leather jacket pocket. “I did what you asked.”

She pulls out a little white card with gold lettering on it.

Aspen Raize, Natural Healer and Earth Witch

Below her name and occupation, she has her email and phone number, along with a website listed.

“She said she'd be able to help Jade,” Roxy explains. “She explained the process to me, but I couldn't repeat any of it back to you even if my life depended on it. The only thing I remember clearly is that this process works better on a full moon, so she has a few weeks to decide what she wants to do. But she can always do it any other full moon. It's on her time, really.”

I stare down at the card wanting to let the smile spread across my face at the solution I have in my hands, but I hear Jade's doubts in the back of my head about working with witches, and I have to voice them.

“And you trust Aspen Raize one hundred percent?” I ask her. “She knows you, but how do you know she won't hurt Jade?”

“Aspen’s not like that,” Roxy says. “I’ve known her for years now. She’s harmless. In fact, she’d probably cry if she knew you thought of her like that, then go pick flowers for a happiness spell or some shit. You can call her if you have any questions or give it to Jade and let her speak. I actually thought Aspen was human before I figured out she was a witch. She was scared I’d stop hanging out with her if I knew she was a witch. She’s cool.”

That seems like high enough praise, especially coming from Roxy. It’s safe to say I can trust her, but will Jade?

“I have to figure out how to tell Jade first,” I tell her, looking up from the card. “You’re intel that she might have witch friends was false because she seemed hesitant to seek one out for help. Even with this, I’m not so sure she’s going to want to try it. She’s convinced shifting for her is impossible. She shuts down when shifting comes up.”

“Understandable,” Roxy says. “Just as you didn’t like people to ask you how you were, I guess it’s the same with Jade in that she doesn’t want to be reminded that she can’t shift.” She looks out the windshield and takes a deep breath. “I want to be there for her,” Roxy says. “When she goes to see Aspen, I want to go. She’s going to need all the support she can get, and I’m sure it’ll help to have someone there that knows Aspen.”

I nod. “That would probably take some of her worries away to have you there with her. Why don’t you talk to her about it?”

“Hmmm, I was going to ask you to slide the idea past her first before I speak with her,” Roxy says. “That way, she comes to me when she’s comfortable enough to do so. I wasn’t supposed to know about any of this, remember, but thanks to your loose lips, here I am.”

“Fair point,” I tell her. “Alright, I’ll talk with her. It won’t be today, but soon enough. I have to figure out when’s the best time to do it. She’s not in the best mood at the moment.”

Roxy lifts an eyebrow at me. “Why’s that?” she asks.

“I prefer not to say,” I tell her. “I’ve already told enough of her business.”

Roxy scoffs. “Seriously? Come on. After I got you the information you asked me for?”

“You want to know, you ask her,” I reply. “I’m not saying anything else. I don’t want her to be mad at me for talking about something else I’m not supposed to.”

She sucks her teeth and sits back in the seat. “That’s not fair.”

“You’ll be alright,” I laugh.

The door to the clubhouse opens, and Blade and Flint walk out. A smile spreads across Roxy’s face, and she takes hold of the door handle.

“Well, I’m gonna go,” she says.

“Hold on,” I stop her before she opens the door.

She looks over her shoulder at me eagerly. “You decided to tell me?”

“No, not at all,” I say. “But I do have a question.”

“Yeah?” she asks suspiciously.

“What do you see a witch for?” I question her.

She stares at me a moment before she says, “You have your secrets; I have mine.”

Then she hops out of the truck, leaving me to drown in my curiosity.

Flint gets on his ride and takes off down the road, and I watch as Roxy hops on Blade’s back, then they disappear around the side of the clubhouse.

I look at the white card in my hand and read the gold letters again—Aspen Raize, Natural Healer and Earth Witch. I hope this is the answer to Jade’s problem. Seeking the help of a witch is the only method she hasn’t tried, so there’s a very good chance this may be the one and only way she can be helped. I just hope she’s willing to try it.

CHAPTER 22

JADE

THE COOL SEA breeze chills me as I sit, staring out at the dark horizon, nothing but the moon lighting the expanse of water stretching for miles and miles in front of me. I pull my blanket tighter around me, then bury my hands deeper into my hoodie pocket as goosebumps race across my skin. It's a bit chilly, but the gently crashing waves and the hush that follows soothe the ache in my chest. I take the salty air deep into my lungs, breathing in the serenity around me, and pull my blanket tighter around me.

It's been a while since I've come out here. I've almost forgotten how much I love listening to the ocean. I could never meditate here, though. I'd end up getting lost in the waves falling over each other, and the calm that washes over me erases the desire to meditate. I've been too busy lately to even think about coming to sit on the docks, but after the day I had, this was the only place I thought to come. I didn't think trying to shift again would be so bad if I was prepared for what came after, but that didn't help anything. All day I've been forcing back memories I buried, like how Michael used to comfort me after I failed again. How he'd tell me nothing was wrong with me just because I can't shift. He'd distract me by taking me dancing or out to do something fun. It never fully took the sting away, but it helped.

Sitting here on the dock is helping some, but once I leave, I'm going to be left with a hole in my chest.

My phone chimes, and before I even look at it, I know it's either Gunner or Roxy. They're the only ones that message me

this early, but out of the two, it's probably Gunner. He messages me more frequently than she does. When I look at my phone—sure enough— I find a text from Gunner asking me where I am. If I would have known he was going to stop by my place, I would have stayed. He definitely would have been a great distraction.

Anyone else, I probably wouldn't have told them where I am—I'm not really in the mood for company. However, this is Gunner. The thought of having him around doesn't seem so tedious and exhausting right now, so I tell him where I am, then set my phone aside.

I could be mad at Gunner for insisting he help me shift even though I said it wouldn't work at all. This is new to him, and he's in that hopeful stage still. I have enough experience with this to know that everything he could possibly try is never going to work. If not for his persistence, these feelings would never have resurfaced, and I wouldn't be sitting here right now. But he means well, and what I'm dealing with right now doesn't have anything to do with him. I obviously still have more to work through than I thought I did. I can't be angry at him for trying to help me; it speaks to how much he cares. Besides, it isn't his fault the things I've buried have predictably resurfaced.

I thought I accepted not being able to shift a long time ago—I found that out when I was a kid—so I had time to prepare. By the time I was supposed to shift for the first time, I knew it was going to be difficult for me, but everything up to that point was as it should've been. I could connect with nature's energy, I could tap into that primal vibration that calls me to shift, and the full moon energizes me. I used to love being in the forest, so I started connecting with nature sooner than most. I have everything I need to get a shift started, but I just can't cross over the threshold into it.

It's always been like that, and I don't expect for it to change. I appreciate Gunner for trying to help me, but I'm going to have to tell him this isn't going to work for me. To avoid more disappointment, I need to put an end to these attempts as soon

as possible. They aren't going to end how he's thinking, and I don't want both of us to end up frustrated.

Behind me, I hear footsteps and the tap of a cane, but I don't turn around. I keep my gaze pointed out to the horizon as Gunner makes his way toward me. I have to admit, now that he's here, I am a bit glad that I'm not alone.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" Gunner says as he sits down beside me. "Little cold though, don't you think?"

I close the slit in the front of my blanket and hold it shut. "This is doing a pretty good job of keeping me warm. I have a hoodie on too."

"You came prepared." He sticks his hands in his pockets and looks out over the water with me. "What brings you out here?" he asks me.

Do I want to talk about why I'm out here? It wouldn't be too believable if I told him I'm out here just because. It's about one in the morning. Nobody who's okay is going to be out here right now. Besides, I don't feel the avoidance I usually do. Maybe it's because I'm fine talking with Gunner, or it's the ocean; something's taking the anxiety away from talking about what's on my mind.

"I just come out here to clear my head sometimes," I tell him. "It's been a while since I've been out here."

"Is it helping you any?" he asks me.

"Eh," I say. "Kind of. It's a beautiful night, so it beats sitting alone in my apartment."

"Does what's on your mind have anything to do with trying to shift today?"

He hit it spot on. In the silence that follows, I focus on the waves crashing against the wooden legs below us as I think about his question. I wish it was that easy.

"Yeah, but there's more to it than that," I tell him.

"Like what? Maybe I can help."

I shake my head. “Nah. I’m beyond helping. Therapists can’t do anything for me. If they can’t, then I doubt anyone else can. I’ve been dealing with this for years anyway. I’ll be fine—don’t let me worry you.”

“Have you been dealing with it, though?” he asks me.

I turn my head, looking over at him, wondering what he means.

“What are you talking about?” I question him.

“You say you’re dealing with everything, but are you?” he asks again. “I see how you are with Terra and how you are with me—it doesn’t really seem like you focus on yourself much. When I think back over the years, that’s how you’ve always been. You’re always helping everyone else with their issues, but it seems like you’ve been ignoring your own stuff being everyone else’s therapist.”

I hear him, but I’m afraid I have to disagree. I mean...I can see why he would think that. I do always learn about everyone’s problems, but that’s mainly because, the majority of the time, they’re comfortable telling me. And since I care and want them to be okay, I willingly offer whatever help I can. Gunner and Terra didn’t ask for my help, but what kind of a friend would I be if I just let them suffer, knowing I could be of some kind of assistance to them.

I shake my head, protesting. “That isn’t all the way true. I don’t help anyone with the intention of putting my own shit on the back burner. I just don’t like seeing my friends hurting or struggling.”

Gunner nods. “I get that. But with everything you have going on, when do you think about yourself? You’re going to have to face it all one day. You can’t run from it forever.”

“I’m not running,” I say, pulling my knees up to my chest. “It’s more about time passing and growing numb to it. Nothing else can be done for me.”

“What do you mean?”

I don’t answer right away; I stare out over the dark waters thinking about how I’ve given up trying to cope.

“Well,” I start. “I can’t talk myself into forgetting about losing a mate.”

His eyes widen slightly, and the news catches him off guard.

“Oh, Jade, I’m sorry,” Gunner sympathizes, wrapping his arm around my shoulders, and he pulls me into his warmth.

“You don’t have to feel sorry for me,” I tell him, accepting his comforting gesture. “It’s been years since he died. I’ve seen therapist after therapist, but no amount of talking or coping techniques are going to solve my problems. Time is the only thing that’s going to help me.”

“You’re hoping to get used to not having him?” Gunner asks me.

“Isn’t that all I can do?” If he has another way, I’d love to hear it.

He doesn’t say anything for a second, and we continue to stare out over the water. The waves crash below us, and I take a deep breath of the salty ocean air, waiting for him to reply.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how’d he die?”

Now it’s my turn to take a deep inhale. “He was killed. My entire clan was. It was a random attack by a clan we thought we made peace with, but they attacked randomly one night. I narrowly escaped with my life. The only reason I got out alive is because Michael made me leave. He told me to go to the cabin his parents had in the mountains, and he’d meet me, but he never came. I waited for him, and when he didn’t come, I went back and found them all dead. Everyone, including him. I haven’t been back to Washington since that happened.”

“I had no idea you went through that,” he says. “I can only imagine what that must be like. I don’t think anyone truly recovers from that kind of trauma. Talking through that doesn’t seem like an adequate enough treatment method.”

“The method consists mainly of coping mechanisms, but it’s not something that I’m quick to talk about,” I tell him. “But I have come to terms with this being something that time can only heal. I just take it one day until I don’t notice it anymore.” I look up at the moon and focus on that instead of

Gunner's sympathy-filled eyes. "He used to try and help me shift. With him, I didn't feel like there was something wrong with me. Everyone else thought I was broken—they'd never encountered a shifter who couldn't shift before. I think the only reason Michael accepted it was because we were mates, but he insisted that wasn't true."

I smile, thinking about how he used to encourage me and how he never gave up. In the end, I was the one that quit trying. I couldn't take it anymore, constantly failing at something I should've been able to do.

"He never gave up on me and tried as hard as he could to help me. For years we tried. I wanted to be able to share that side of our lives together, but I never could get how to shift. I thought I was fine with that, but trying has brought my many failures and disappointment back again. It's the one thing that sets me apart from every other shifter. I'm basically just a human."

"You know what that sounds like?" Gunner says, but he doesn't wait for me to answer. "That sounds like your insecurities talking."

I cut my eyes at him as those very familiar words fall from his mouth.

"Nobody thinks of you as 'just a human,'" he continues. "You're definitely one of us, no questions about it. Just because you can't shift doesn't set you apart from us."

"I know, I really do, but it's difficult not to feel like I'm different. I mean, I am different."

"So then, is that why you compensate?" he asks me. "Is that why you try to connect with everyone?"

"Hmm," I ponder what he just said. "Maybe? Seems like a good explanation, right?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. Doesn't seem too far off base. But just because you can't shift doesn't mean it's absolutely impossible."

"Looking like it," I reply. "I've tried every method out there."

He opens his mouth just as a violent shiver shakes my entire body. Despite being wrapped in a blanket, wearing a hoodie, and absorbing Gunner's heat, the bite in the night air has successfully gotten through my barriers.

"Come on," he says. "Let's get somewhere warm."

"Your place."

He helps me up off the ground and drapes his arm around my shoulders, continuing to lend me his warmth as we make our way back to his truck. I'm glad he messaged me. Tonight was much easier than plenty of other sleepless nights I've had. All thanks to him.

CHAPTER 23

GUNNER

SHE SHIVERS the entire way back to my place, even though I have the heat cranked up. I fully intend to get her under the comforter once we get back to my house. Initially, I messaged her because I couldn't sleep. I wasn't looking to have sex when I texted; I only wanted her company. Sleep would have found me eventually. I figured she had to be up, but I didn't expect her to be at the docks. I'm glad I decided to call her—she would never have filled me in on what's going through her mind otherwise.

I had no idea that's what happened to her before she came here. I can see why she doesn't talk about it at all. Recounting something like that wouldn't get easier. I'm glad she finally told me. I can't do much for her; things of that nature don't have a guide for quick and easy healing. The only thing I can do is be there for her when she needs someone. I know it's much worse for her when she's alone. It's understandable why she went to the docks.

I can't help but feel a little guilty about being the reason for her distress. If I hadn't been so persistent about her shifting, she never would have been taken back to that dark emotional place. However, it's easy to see that she wants to shift. If she hadn't shivered so violently, I would have told her there's definitely a way, but as we ride down the road, I can't help but wonder if I should hold off for a bit. She might be too discouraged to consider taking her chances with a witch. I'll present the idea to her once she's in a better spot.

Once we're back at my place, we get out of the truck, and she stands close to me, huddled in her blanket as I unlock the door. Her teeth chatter, and I wonder how long she was out there before I joined her. The cold must have set into her bones for her to be shivering this hard. Good thing I left the heat going when I left. My living room is toasty as we enter through the front door.

After she kicks her shoes off, I usher her up the stairs to the left of the door, but she stops when we pass the bathroom.

"I want to take a shower," she announces.

"Okay," I nod. The hot water and steam will do her some good. "You know where to find the towels, right?"

"Yeah," she answers. I wait for her to turn to go into the bathroom, but she doesn't move. She seems hesitant, then says, "Can you stay with me?"

She doesn't want to be alone, and it's written on her face. Even if it weren't for that look in her eyes, I would have still said yes. I'm glad I've been craving her presence. My bear wouldn't shut up about going to her, but in all fairness, I didn't fight too hard against him. I was missing her warm scent and wanted to be near her. If not for that, she would have been dealing with all of this alone.

I oblige her request and follow her into the bathroom.

As she starts getting undressed, I ready the shower for her, making it scorching hot—how I know she likes it. She drops her blanket to the floor, then pulls her hoodie over her head and slides her shorts and panties off. Then she comes to me, and her cold fingers make their way underneath my shirt.

"Take your clothes off and get in with me," she says softly before turning around to the shower and sliding the glass door back.

I do what she asks and get undressed before following her inside.

She's standing directly under the spray, letting the water rain down on her and soaking her long black hair. When she hears the door slide back, she pushes her wet hair out of her face and

steps out from under the water. She looks up at me with those wide green eyes of hers and surrounded by the steam and with her hair drenched, her vulnerability shows itself. I've never seen her like this before, looking so sad and so small. I swallow hard as the urge to take all of her sorrows away overwhelms me.

My bear reaches out to her, and I step closer, taking her in my arms and pulling her against me. There's not much else that I can do, but this seems to be enough. She rests her forehead against my chest before taking a deep breath, then she settles into me. Her body trembles against mine as the water beats down on her back.

After a while, her shoulders relax, and she lets out a heavy breath. Feeling her further relax into me makes me want to hold on to her forever until she's happy again.

We stand under the water like this for a while until it runs cold. She's reluctant to let go, but she does eventually, and I can turn the lukewarm water off. Once the water is shut off, I grab the fluffy towel I put on the bar outside of the shower door and dry her off from head to toe before wrapping her in a dry towel. Then I dry myself and wrap the towel around my waist before leading her out of the bathroom to my room.

I give her a pair of my boxers and a t-shirt, and she pulls them on and then climbs underneath the covers, where she snuggles against me, her back flush with my front. No matter the circumstance, I can't think of a single place I'd rather be than right here with her. My bear certainly is glad to have her here with us, and a protectiveness I've never felt before washes over me.

I don't feel any jealousy toward her connection with her late mate, nor do I resent not being able to give her the same kind of comfort or sense of security that he could. There's nothing I can do about that. I'm not going to try to be greater than a force that's beyond all of us—I'll only drive myself mad trying to achieve that. However, the bond that we do have, this friendship of ours, is beyond any that I've ever had in my life. I'd even dare say it's stronger than the loyalty I have to the Brotherhood, which says a lot. It's not on the same level as a

mate bond, but I can still be here to help her through all of this as her friend. Now that I know what she's going through, there is no way I am about to leave her to deal with this alone.

We lie here for a while with my arm tucked around her waist and her fingers interlocked with mine. I'm enjoying the fragrant scent of her damp hair, each lungful as intoxicating as the first. I could do this all day. It almost puts me to sleep.

After some time, she turns over in my arms, and there's a sad smile on her face.

"I'm glad you texted me," she tells me, bringing her hands to my cheeks. "Having you with me made all of this easier this time around. Everything is so much easier with you. Effortless actually. I'm glad I have you. There's something about you, Gunner, that sets you apart from anyone else I know."

"You don't have to thank me," I say, trying not to think of how close her lips are to mine. "I'd do anything for you."

She nods. "I'm a lucky girl."

Her lips come to mine, soft and sweet. I instantly want to bury myself inside of her, but I hold back because this moment is different from any of the numerous times we've been together. Jade's still mourning her mate. She's not going to simply be over that kind of grief, and not dealing with it is getting her nowhere. I want to help her, but I don't want her only method of healing to be void filling.

Reluctantly, I pull away from her, running my fingers through her wet hair, and confusion dawns on her face.

"I can help you," I answer her confusion. "But I don't want you to ignore what's hurting you. You can't heal by distracting yourself from what's going on. Let me be there for you. I may not know what it's like to lose a mate, but I can still be an empathetic ear for you. I can be more than just a tight, hot body for you." I add to lighten the mood, and it works. The smile she gives me warms me more.

"You're more than just a warm body, Gunner, you know that," she tells me. "I'm sorry if I've made you think otherwise. I love this relationship I have with you. I can honestly say you

make me feel more alive than I have in a long time. Smiling is easier when I'm with you. I promise I'm not using you to fill any kind of void or to distract myself. I'd never do that to you, or anyone. Being with you like this feels good. It feels right, but that's not a surprise. Everything with you feels so natural."

That, I couldn't agree with more. Nothing with her feels forced. The ease that comes with being in her presence is one that I've begun to crave in recent days. No other relationship I've been in has ever been this effortless, and the two of us are only friends.

"So then come to me when you need someone," I say. "Let me be there for you, not just physically."

She nods without hesitation. "Okay," she agrees. "I will, from now on."

Oh. I'm shocked she agreed so easily, but I smile at her, relieved.

"Good."

This time when she kisses me, I give her what she wants. We're in sync, our lips moving in perfect unison. Her sweet tongue ventures into my mouth, only making me hungrier for her. My bear quickly becomes more eager and ready to please her, so I ease her onto her back. From there, the intensity only picks up faster than either of us expects.

One of her long legs hooks around my lower back, and I trail my hand down her thigh to her ass as her breathing gets heavier. She pants into my mouth as I kiss her, and I savor how delicious she is. I work her shirt up so I can get to her pert breast. My cock is already rock hard, but when the first whiff of her slick hits my nose, I'm not sure what comes over me. She smells different this time, like there's been something added to her wetness. Instead of the sweet aroma I've become used to, it's thicker this time, heavier. The scent alone is enough to get all cylinders firing.

Because of it, neither my bear nor I want to waste any time, nor does she. Her shining green eyes are locked on mine as she reaches between us and frees my cock, licking her hand before

taking hold of me. She strokes my dick for a moment, biting her lip as she eyes it. Her legs are spread, showing off her glistening pussy, and I can't hold back anymore, not like I was anyway. I easily give into this desire that's crashed into me.

Pressing my thumb against her clit, I add pressure as I begin to rub it while I circle the head of my cock at her entrance, soaking it in her slippery juices before easing every inch of myself inside of her. Each time I'm in her, it feels better than the last, and I almost instantly cum inside of her tight warmth. She moans as I massage her hard, throbbing clit and arches her back while I plunge in and out of her. It's only been five minutes, and I've never been this hard in my life.

This time around, her pussy is so wet, and her slick is flowing out of her as I pump into her, coating my cock and drenching the sheets beneath her. The wetter she becomes, the easier it gets to slide back inside of her, which is much needed considering just how tightly her walls have grown around my girth. I watch myself disappear in her, taking pleasure from how she so easily takes every inch I have to give her. She's so wet for me, and it's driving me wild.

She's mine! The thought is loud in my head, and I'm not sure if it came from my bear or me. I've never thought anything like that about any woman before, never laid claim to anyone, so that one thought should be of some concern to me.

But it isn't.

Instead, it drives me to lean over her with my elbows on either side of her head, and I claim her lips, kissing her with an intensity that has surpassed being hungry for her. It's like I've been famished for years, and Jade is the first meal I've had.

She moans into my mouth as I fuck her, and it's ultimately what makes me cum inside of her. I cum hard this time, my lower abdomen tensing up as a stream erupts out of me. I pull out slightly, only to have more come out when I dive back into her. Normally that would be the end of it but not this time. As I'm coming, a new wave hits me, and as I empty the last of it into her, I start up again, pumping my hips into her, watching as my sperm mixes with her slick.

Even after the way I came so powerfully inside of her, I can't stop. I don't want to stop. The magnificent scent of her slick is almost like gasoline for fire, keeping me going, rutting into her. I'm as far as I can be inside of her, my thick cock filling her tight pussy and squeezing around me. I plunge into her with long powerful strokes, unable to get enough of her, fucking her deep, trying to cover every inch inside of her with my cum. My hand goes down to her belly, and the image of her carrying my cub fills my head, and my cock hardens even further.

Somewhere in my haze, I put it together why I'm still going, but not even the shock is enough to make me stop.

CHAPTER 24

JADE

EVEN AFTER HE CUMS, he doesn't stop—I don't want him to—I'm nowhere near sated yet. My body feels like liquid fire, and electricity is s

urging through me, powering this desire to stay connected to him. I need more of him. Out of all the times we've been together so far, this has never come over me before. He arouses me more than anyone I've been with since my mate, and he's even outdone himself this time. I'm so wet I'm practically swimming in my own juices.

He pushes my legs up into my chest, plunging deeper into me, and no matter how deep he goes, I still need so much more. None of this is enough.

He grunts as he explodes inside of me again. I reach down and spread my pussy lips watching as he empties another load into me.

“Give it all to me,” I moan as his thick, veiny cock drills into me.

When he's done, he doesn't stop thrusting. He fucks his cum deeper inside of me, and for a moment, I can feel that growing into something more. I want his seed to develop into life, and that one simple thought of carrying his child consumes me.

His deep blue gaze is fixed on mine, and in the midst of his thrusting, my desire to remain here underneath him, being filled with his cum, finally hits as he stares at me with wide eyes. The shock in them is palpable, and my heart starts racing, but this realization doesn't stop us. He pulls out of me,

flips me over onto my hands and knees, and enters me from behind, going so much deeper than before. I feel him in my lower belly, deliciously heavy, hot, and throbbing filling me up so good, I orgasm around his cock again. My entire body quivers as pleasure surges to every corner of my body. Slick and sperm drain down my legs, soaking the bed sheets, and I push back onto his dick needing every part of me to be touched by him.

He leans over me, and his hand ventures between my breast before he pulls me up into his chest, his other hand on my lower belly, holding me still as he continues to rut into me.

Held against his chest with his heat on my back and his cock deep inside of me, the urge to take control leaves me as his hold turns possessive. He doesn't need to use words to relay that I'm his, and I don't fight against it. Naturally, I give in to him.

I haven't felt anything like this in years, and it's more overwhelming than I remember. However, despite how much I yearn for him, no matter how much I want to stay connected to him, I battle with wanting to push him away and run from him; I wasn't expecting any of this.

I'm distracted from my budding anxiety when he turns my head, slightly tilting my face up so he can kiss me. It takes my breath away, and I'm overwhelmed with a force that terrifies me. It's so strong, so all-consuming, and I can't do anything with it but melt into him as shock and fear collide with pleasure and passion.

I don't know how long we're at it, but it lasts much longer than it has before. When Gunner stills above me, I'm finally satisfied, and as the heat running through me subsides, I'm left with the shock of what this all means.

Lying on my back, I stare up at the ceiling, trying to catch my breath, listening to Gunner panting beside me as my mind races. How is this possible? How do I have two mates? I didn't know that could happen. I've never heard of anyone talking about a second mate before. Some people go their entire lives without finding their first one. I should consider myself lucky

that I managed to find both of mine, but I don't feel that way, but all I can think about is how painful it is to lose a mate. Gunner has already almost died once, and I was a wreck for days waiting for him to wake up. I don't think I could live if I lost another one. The closer I get, the deeper this bond digs its claws into me, and I won't be able to get out of it.

I don't know what to do.

I look over at Gunner and he's focused on the ceiling but when he senses me turning his way, his head falls towards me. I swallow hard when I meet his confused eyes, then I sit up, running my fingers through my damp hair.

I have to go. There's no way I can stay here tonight.

"I'm going to go," I tell him, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Let me give you a ride," he offers, but I shake my head.

"That's okay. I want to walk. It's not that far from here to my apartment."

He pauses before he asks, "Are you sure? It's no big deal."

Looking over my shoulder, I try to muster up a smile that doesn't hold any of the confusion that's pushing me out of here.

"I'll be fine," I put my damp hoodie on and then pull the hood over my head. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

I barely hear his 'yeah' before I get out of there.

Once I get outside, I shut the door and lean against it taking in a deep breath of the cool night air. I thought I'd find relief once I got away from him, but I instantly want to go back inside.

Fuck—this isn't supposed to be happening.

I force myself to leave, reluctantly pushing off the door and walking down the steps, heading home. Each step I take away from him, I regret. My entire being aches to be lying with him and basking in the joy of this bond, but I can't do that. Not because I don't want to; I'm just not ready for it. I can't deal

with losing him. Images of him lying on those tables in the bar flash in my mind, and my heart feels like it's bleeding.

The gang doesn't get involved in most of their dangerous activities anymore. However, there's still always the possibility of losing him that hangs over me. It's terrifying. I'm suddenly thrust into this situation and have no idea how to handle it. What we had was so damn perfect—a solid friendship with amazing sex. There wasn't a lot of work that went into our connection. We just vibed, and that was better than anything I could have asked for. Losing him, in general, would have been hard enough, but now this bond tacked on to us makes the thought of that possibility that much more gut-wrenching. The thought of reliving that soul-crushing, debilitating pain that had me unable to do anything for months is already filling my body with a familiar sorrow.

My chest grows tight, and I have to stop walking, fighting against the fear trying to take hold of me. I take deep breath after deep breath, leaning over with my hands on my knees, trying to get myself to calm down.

There's only a matter of time before I give in. Nothing kept me away from Michael, so I know not even my fear of losing him is going to keep me from going to Gunner. I have no clue why I'm even trying to fight it. Eventually, I'm going to give in, but as of right now, getting that close to anyone again terrifies me. I shouldn't let my fears stop me, but I don't want to fall into that black hole of grief again. The chances of losing another mate aren't zero, and I don't want to take that risk.

What the hell am I going to do?



The question remains in my head all night long. I slept for a total of two nonconsecutive hours, so I should be tired, but I'm not. Even as I get ready to go meet Terra for breakfast, last night with Gunner is the only thing I can think about. If it was anyone else, I would cancel, but I don't want to do that to Terra. It took some convincing to get her to meet me

somewhere outside of her apartment, so I'm not about to break our breakfast date.

It doesn't take me long to get ready; I throw on a pair of leggings and a long-sleeve crop top before slipping my feet into sneakers then I'm out the door.

On the short drive to the little breakfast diner on the human side, I try as hard as I can to get a grip on myself. I don't want to give Terra something else to think about, and I'd hate to give her the impression that I don't want to be there. If not for this little hiccup, I'd be ready to sit down and eat with her.

When I get there, I easily spot her in this empty place, sitting at a table in the back with a cup of coffee in front of her. There are only three tables that have people at them, and go join her. She doesn't notice as I walk up to her—she's too busy staring at her phone.

“Hey,” I greet her as I slide into the torn booth. She jumps at the sound of my voice. “Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.”

“No, you're fine,” she says, shaking her head. “It's me. I'm just jumpy today.”

“You sleep okay?” I ask.

“I slept fine,” she confirms. “I just don't know what's going on with me today. I was going to order a cup of coffee for you, but I didn't know how long you were going to be.”

“No, that's fine,” I reply, picking the menu up. “Cold coffee is only good when it's intentional.”

I look at the menu, but I'm not sure why. I'm going to get the same thing I always do when I eat from here.

I peek over my menu at her to find her texting, nervously chewing on her lip. As I'm watching her, I notice her red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes and overall fretful demeanor. When she's done sending the text, she sets her phone down, but she stares at it.

“You know what you're getting?” Again she jumps, almost like she forgot I'm here.

She looks up at me with wide eyes, then picks up her single-sheet menu.

“It all sounds pretty good,” she says, her voice soft but shaking as she glances over the menu.

What’s going on with her?

“I normally get the french toast,” I suggest. “You can never go wrong with that.”

She nods but doesn’t say anything back.

I was hoping that she’d be a little more talkative, but she’s quieter than ever today.

When the waitress comes, I give her my order along with a request for coffee, and Terra takes my french toast recommendation. After she leaves, we’re left in awkward silence. Terra’s eyes are stuck on her hands in her lap. She’s somewhere else completely.

“Have you given any more thought to my proposal?” I ask her, stirring sugar into my coffee, trying to pull her back to the present.

Her attention snaps up to me, worry wrinkling her eyebrows. “The proposal?” she wonders, then she remembers. “Oh, right. The fitness class.” She swallows hard, and she reaches for her phone on the table. “Uhm....can I have some more time to think?”

She fidgets in her seat. Somehow, she’s tenser than I’m used to seeing her, and I didn’t think that was possible.

“Yeah,” I nod. “No pressure. Just let me know when you’ve reached a decision.”

“I will,” is all she says in response.

Her attention goes to her lap, where her phone is now. She’s not going to contribute much to the conversation; I can already tell that much. I knew that coming into this, but I was hoping she was up for talking. I think we could both use the distraction. Mine is stuck on this nagging swell in my chest while hers is on whatever’s on her phone.

I sip my coffee, trying to decipher this strained expression on Terra's face, but that's hard when she's looking down. At the moment, I am actually trying to get wrapped up in someone else's issues. That way, I won't have to think about how I happened to run into a second mate I wasn't even aware was a thing before.

Terra doesn't notice that I'm watching her; that's how focused she is on her phone.

"You expecting to hear from someone?" I ask her, and she finally looks up from her nervous hands.

"Just a friend," she says vaguely.

"Yeah? Tell me about them."

She shakes her head. "It's nobody, really. Just someone I knew from before. Nothing too special."

But nothing in her demeanor makes me believe that. I'll leave it at what it is, though. I can't force her to tell me what's going on. I have a nagging feeling in my gut that maybe I should dig into this, but I don't want to pressure her into talking about something she doesn't want to. I definitely know what that feels like. So I drop it. Maybe Gunner's been right all along—maybe I need to figure my own shit out instead of worrying about someone else. Terra's safe here, and eventually, she'll be comfortable enough to fully live her life even if it's hard for her right now. I can help her get there, but I can only do so much. I can't focus on just her anymore.

I have to figure myself out now.

CHAPTER 25

GUNNER

IN ALL MY YEARS, I've never had any vices—I've never been hooked on drugs, sex, or alcohol. Nothing has ever had me in any kind of chokehold. I don't ever *need* anything to get me through the day; I don't even have to have a drink to have a good time at a party. I've always been able to get high off of life alone. So fighting this unfamiliar desire to be near Jade is practically unmanageable. I have no idea how to deal with a hunger I can't control, which has made the past four days a battle I'm losing.

It's been a week, and I have not been able to get her off my mind. I thought I was thinking about her constantly before. Nope. My thoughts for the past one hundred and forty-four hours have been images of Jade laughing, Jade dancing, Jade's scent floating into my nostrils when I'm nowhere near her, Jade sleeping, nothing but Jade, Jade, Jade, even in my dreams. I get random images of her on her back, full of my cock, her hair fanned out under her head, her perfect breast bouncing as I rut into her. I feel her gentle touch, the heat of her gaze, the comfort of her caress. This week has been torture, and every second, this desire in me grows.

This is the morning of day seven, and I almost caved. Instead of driving to the clubhouse to meet up with everyone before we came over to the human side of town, I was heading towards her. My bear, being so uncharacteristically impatient, took more control than he ever has and had me driving towards Jade's. I got all the way there before I u-turned to go back to the clubhouse, effectively pissing my bear all the way off. He's huffing, stomping back and forth, demanding I go

claim what's ours, but I can't get in the way of her timing. Besides that, I'm not confident that I'm ready for that. I'm more confused than I've ever been.

So do I want to be standing outside in this crowd surrounded by humans when I could be somewhere quiet trying to figure this thing out with Jade? Of course not. I tap my fingers along the handle of my cane, and I hate that I can't just walk away from this and go to her. One of the main things keeping me here is the importance of my presence. We represent the shifters on our side of town, and being here puts a face to the motorcycles that have been speeding through town for years. I wouldn't be here right now if this weren't so important to Flint.

The crowd murmurs as we all wait for the Mayor to come out of the courthouse and approach the podium set up at the top of the courthouse steps. There's a camera crew, along with numerous reporters waiting right at the front of the chattering crowd. I don't know how, but I keep scenting Jade in this group of humans and bears, which is making it harder to focus. Even among all these different smells, hers is the one stuck in my nose.

I want to go to her so bad.

Although we haven't been spending as much time with each other as usual, we haven't let recent discoveries mess with work. We're still in the same vicinity as one another, showing up every day on time at the club, but we haven't been interacting nearly as much. Instead of sitting inside her office to get work done, I've opted to set up a workspace on the main floor in the comfortable armchairs in front of the stage. Working somewhere else entirely would be the smart choice, but I can't bring myself to stay away from her completely. I tried that the first day and almost paced a ditch in front of my TV. I'm not so antsy when I'm near her. Being teased by her fragrance is preferred to being driven to anger by her absence. She's only a few footsteps away at any given moment of the day, but my bear acts like it's an ocean of space between us. The past four days, he's been stomping around in a circle, angry at me for making us stay away from her, but I can't

bring myself to invade her space if she doesn't want me around. She gave off some pretty strong signals that she's not too enthused about discovering the nature of our relationship. It's understandable—she has so much to work through, so her reluctance is expected.

I want to be there for her through all of that, but I can only do so much for her. She only just agreed to talk to me when she's not having the best of days, and trying to convince her to take another mate after losing one isn't going to be easy. The fact that she even has a second mate is something that I can't even begin to understand, something I haven't even begun to contemplate. No point in pondering the whys or hows now. Clearly, it's possible, and we have to deal with it. Now I just have to figure out what it is that needs to be done. I'm not sure what I want from this. Naturally, I want her, but there are too many other factors at play here.

Aside from the loss she's still dealing with, I still can't even walk without a cane. Sure, I've gotten better even within these past seven days. I've still been working hard to get back to being one hundred with her guidance. She sends me yoga videos and a few beginner moves meant to strengthen my core. I've been doing the workouts she sends me, but I'm still barely over fifty percent. I can fight, but not for long, and the jury's still out on whether or not I can shift.

I won't be able to be with her like she knows a mate should be. She's a strong, capable woman, one that I'm sure would rather be with someone she doesn't have to worry about. Before, none of this was of any concern since we weren't planning on going any further with what we had. But now, everything is different. I have no idea how I'm supposed to deliver all the things a mate should be able to when I can't even shift without possibly hurting myself further. I'm not exactly mate material at the moment, and I don't want her to have to wait for me to be fit.

It dawns on me that this must be something she feels, and it does not feel good.

“Hey.” I look over at Flint, watching me curiously, and the murmur of the crowd floods my ears. “Why are you so

anxious? I can't imagine this has anything to do with it."

I nod. "I'm fine," I answer. "Just a bit on my mind, is all."

Over the years, I've learned how to answer his questions, so whatever chemical shift he can pick up doesn't contradict my answer; I just have to be vague and cut my answers short. I don't feel like explaining what's going on with Jade and me at the moment, but it's not going to be much longer before he figures it out anyway.

But for now, as far as he knows, I'm good.

I can tell he doesn't believe me, but I'm not saying anything else if he doesn't. I'm relieved when he nods.

Finally, the Mayor comes up to the podium. Now that this thing is about to get started, I'm closer to getting out of here. I'm just hoping the humans don't have an adverse reaction to this announcement.

McMichaels adjusts the microphones, and as he does that, the few people with cameras and the news reporters ready their equipment. The crowd quiets, but there are still noticeable whispers rising up.

"Good morning, people of Penfell Heights," he says into the mic. He looks more inviting today than he did when we met with him not too long ago. "This is a much bigger turnout than I expected, but considering the information being shared with us today, I imagine everyone is eager to hear for themselves what's going to be said. I'm not going to waste any more time. I'm going to give it over to our speaker."

McMichaels looks over at us, then gives Flint a single nod of his head before he steps away.

Flint leaves his spot beside me, and all five elders follow him up the steps to the podium. As with everything he does, he oozes confidence, and he doesn't seem even slightly phased that he's about to address the entire town. Now, a hush falls over the crowd. Without saying a word, Flint gets all of their attention, something McMichaels didn't have. It could be because he's about to confirm what some have probably

thought were rumors, but I'm sure it's because of the seriousness in his demeanor that pulls them all in.

"Morning, everyone," Flint starts, and the crowd greets him in return. "I want to start by saying thank you all for coming. I'm aware that this isn't exactly the most ordinary circumstance, and I want to shed some light on a few things that you may have heard. That's why I asked Mayor McMichaels to set this up, so I could personally make the announcement. I owe you all some transparency since this is your home as well."

"By now, word has spread that, like Bayton Heights, there are beings living in this town that aren't human. What you heard is correct. Some of the citizens of Penfell are shifters. A little less than half, as a matter of fact. We can change from our human forms into bears."

The crowd mumbles as they take in the news, and they look back and forth to each other, some of them surprised, others curious, and some seeming like they're skeptical.

"We've been here for years now, and we aren't dangerous," Flint continues. "Our presence dates back to the seventies when my grandparents settled down here. Since then, the two sides haven't mingled very much, and it's almost like two different places in the same area. I can understand. We may not be dangerous, but we aren't exactly the calmest bunch," Flint smirks at the crowd, then glances over at the gang standing off to the side. "Kind of rough looking too," Flint says, and a few in the crowd chuckle, which is enough to take some of the tension away.

"In the past, our side of town hasn't exactly been inviting, but we're trying to change that. Lately, we've been working towards a vision for a better future, which is why I wanted to come forward with this announcement. We may not be human, but we have families and children we want to make a better life for, just like all of you. Penfell Heights is just as much your home as it is ours, and I want our children to be able to reap the benefits of what we do today."

He has the crowd's attention; all of them are focused on what he's saying, not one person looking away.

“As many of you are aware, this town is overdue for some renovations and improvements. If we keep going the way we are, none of us will be able to call this place home anymore. Show of hands, how many of you have gone to Bayton Heights?”

More than half of the crowd raises their hands.

“So then all of you are aware of the diversity there. It wasn’t always like that—in fact, it was a town dying, but now it’s flourishing. The same can happen to Penfell. With the proper planning, this town could thrive.

Now the crowd starts to murmur, but Flint talks over everyone, and they quiet down again.

“It’ll be a gradual process, of course, but to ensure Penfell survives, we need to introduce businesses that will entice people to come here and spend their money on what we have to offer and not just humans. I wanted to come forward with this announcement before non-humans more than likely start showing up. Bringing more businesses here means more jobs for everyone. I’ve already informed Mayor McMichaels of what I’m trying to do. We’re supposed to be discussing it all in more detail at some point in the future. Before we made any moves, it was important that I fill the people of the town in on what’s going on since this is all of our home as well.

Now, I want to open the floor up for questions because I know there are plenty. Who would like to go first?”

For a moment, the crowd remains quiet and motionless, digesting the information that was just dropped on them. Then one person says, “I have a question,” which starts a ripple effect.

“Is there a mic that can be passed around?” Flint asks, looking at the sound guy, who nods.

As he gets that set up, I look at everyone lining up behind the microphone and decide this is where I can depart. I came, showed my face during his announcement, and now I have to go. I don’t want to stand around listening to the mixed emotions from the crowd and hearing their questions.

I want to be near Jade.

I tell Blade I'm leaving, using needing to sit down as an excuse. Sometimes, it can be used to my advantage. It's not a total lie, but it's nowhere near the truth. I'll do or say whatever as long as I can't get back to Jade.

CHAPTER 26

GUNNER

MY PLANS when I got back to the club were to just hang back. Being close to her was supposed to calm my bear down after being away from her for so long. I thought being near her would be good enough, but the eagerness running through my veins only flows stronger now.

The second I open the door, she looks over her shoulder, and I expect her to disappear to the back like she's been doing. To my surprise, she stays right where she is and continues talking with the girls sitting on the stage, her back to the door. My first time seeing her today, and like the last few days, my first instinct is to go to her and pull her close to me, but I have to fight against that. She has on a tight red long-sleeve crop top that stops just above her belly button and leggings tucked into combat boots, showing off her perfect figure.

Instead of going to her like I want to, I go to the stack of papers waiting for me at the bar and take my seat. I'd go into her office, but shutting myself up in a room full of her scent wouldn't be the best idea. I'd only pull her in there with me and make her moan my name in that husky way that drives me crazy.

Right now, her sultry voice dances into my ears, making me nearly lose what little control I've managed to hold on to.

"I was thinking that our first themed night could be a masquerade," she tells Karmen, Terra, and Grace. "We can decorate this place to look like a ball, and your costumes for the night could be customized. We can make a special playlist to go along with the decorations."

I'd give anything to see Jade on stage that night.

"That sounds fun," Karmen enthuses. "We could go all out. I'm thinking we'd even start off in dresses, but skimpy."

"That's an idea," Jade nods. "I like that."

"That would be fun!" Grace agrees. "I think I'd want to design my own costumes for that night. Oh, and I'll probably make my own masks."

Karmen looks at her, humored. "Costumes? You plan on doing multiple outfit changes?"

"Uh, yeah," Grace replies. "If I went to a strip club that was doing a themed night like this, I'd want to see more than one costume on the girl I'm watching."

Jade approves, slowly nodding.

"That's a good idea," she agrees. "Keep them excited for what's coming next."

"How often would we be doing these themed nights anyway?" Terra asks. She's been so quiet the entire time, I forgot she was here.

"Maybe once a month?" Jade suggests. "That way, the staff doesn't get annoyed with constantly having to put decorations up and then take them down. It would give our customers something to look forward to. Twice a month might be too frequent. We'll see how this one goes and what the feedback is like."

My attention gets split between their conversation and the powerful engine of a motorcycle pulling into the parking lot. I already know who it is. It's been almost an hour since I left the human side, and I'm certain he noticed as soon as I left. I knew he was coming; I've been waiting for the deep rumble of his Rocket.

Once he's finally in the parking lot, the engine shuts off, and seconds later, he pulls the door open. Each of the girls waves at him as he makes his way over to me. Jade starts their meeting back up again, and Flint leans on the bar top beside me.

“You got out of there fairly quick,” Flint states. “You sure you’re feeling okay?”

“I’m positive,” I reply, tearing my eyes from Jade to look at him. “I’ve been feeling pretty good these last couple of days.”

Flint nods. “I didn’t think you left because you’re in pain,” he says. “Blade said you wanted to get off your feet, but I didn’t believe it. Just so you know, he didn’t either.”

I let out a short, humorless laugh. “I wasn’t too convincing, huh?”

“Not at all. You’ve been getting along better these past few weeks.” Then he motions his head towards Jade. “She’s been working a miracle.”

“She really has been,” I reply, following his gaze to her.

“Your leaving had something to do with Jade, didn’t it?”

I knew it was coming. I’ve been preparing myself for this since the first time we slept together. However, my answer has changed now that we’ve discovered that we’re mates.

“Yeah, and I’m confused,” I tell him honestly. “I thought Jade had already found her mate. Neither one of us saw this coming when we first started sleeping together.”

“It shocked me a few days ago when I picked up that she’s in heat. I met with her and thought my nose was playing tricks on me. I didn’t know it was possible for someone to have two mates.”

“Neither did I.”

He pulls out the chair beside me and sits down in it, getting comfortable with his arms on the surface of the bar top.

“I knew Jade lost her mate, so it was a shock when I caught the scent,” he says quietly but loud enough for me to hear him over Jade talking behind us. “But none of us knew a wolf and a bear could be mates either, so nothing’s impossible.”

“I feel like being mated to a wolf is more likely than having two mates.”

“Yeah, but is it, though?” Flint asks. “Even though we don’t fully understand how these things happen or have never experienced them for ourselves doesn’t automatically make the likelihood of it happening impossible. There’s a chance that absolutely anything can happen, things that nobody else has ever experienced, like a wolf and a bear being true mates. We don’t know how the Universe decides to pair two souls, but it’s apparent we’ve had this true mate thing wrong, and it’s not *so* shocking. Over our many different lifetimes, it’s quite possible for us to have had more than one soul we’ve bonded with on a different level. There are many different types of relationships, after all.”

I’m usually good with taking surprises in stride, but this one has me vexed. The only thing I can tell myself is exactly what Flint just said, that anything is possible.

“You’re right—I can accept that anything is possible, but what’s getting me is how come it chose now to happen?” I voice, confused. “Jade and I have been close for all these years, so what made this bond pick now to make itself known?”

“That, I don’t have an answer for, but it’s not so surprising that there’s a deeper connection between you two.”

I raise my eyebrow at his statement.

“How so?”

“Well,” Flint starts. “You and Jade have been close since Roxy brought her here. Other than myself, Blade, and Roxy, you were the only one she comfortably spoke with when she met you. She was instantly comfortable with you.” Well, that’s news to me. “I was shocked that she has another true mate, but that instantly went away when I put it together that it’s you. The deeper connection makes sense considering there already seems to be something between you. I was wondering how long it was going to take for one of you to realize it.”

I shake my head. “It’s never been like that with Jade and me,” I clarify. “Up until recently, nothing’s been going on between us.”

“So you say,” he replies.

“You obviously know something that I don’t,” I say. “Tell me what you know.”

He looks at me, truly shocked, as if what he’s getting ready to tell me should be obvious, but in reality, I really don’t know what he’s getting at.

“Neither of you realizes what you do to each other?” he asks like I have the answer, so I shrug and shake my head. “Your connection goes further than that. When we’re in large groups, the two of you are always together. For you to not be a couple, you do a lot with each other. You come into the bar, and she gets significantly happier, and vice versa. Both of you drastically change each other’s moods for the better. She was the only one you were happy to see these past few months, which makes it more surprising that you’re avoiding each other when you’ve been stuck at the hip lately.”

He pauses for a moment, waiting for me to say something, but I’m too busy digesting what he just told me, so he keeps going.

“Jade came here not long after her mate was killed,” Flint continues. “She was trying to put on a happy face, and she was good at it. Fooled everyone around here with how naturally outgoing and friendly she is. The only other person besides Esta that everyone didn’t instantly hate. Even Slash didn’t have a problem with her. She talked and laughed with everyone, but *you* were different. She was actually comfortable with you. I don’t think you realize how important that is. After I saw how much she relaxed when you were around, I figured the two of you would end up good friends.”

His words put everything in perspective now. I thought Jade and I were just close friends, but that’s nowhere near the case. I had no idea I, of all people, made her happy when she got here. After finding out what she went through, that little tidbit holds more weight than anything.

“I had no idea,” I admit. “I honestly didn’t know she lost her mate until a week ago. I wasn’t trying to be anything more than just a friend, especially not now. I don’t want to push her. She’s still going through some things that she hasn’t really

dealt with, and I'd be nothing but a burden to her. I still can only do so much. Who knows when I'll be better. I have nothing to offer her at this point."

Flint's face scrunches into a hard scowl at my words.

"That's not even close to being true," he says sternly. "She has some things to work through, yes, but you're her mate." Hearing that is so odd. "You can offer her emotional support, which is exactly what she needs and what you've been doing this entire time unknowingly. Hearing you talk like this about yourself is hard, Gunner. Even when you're making progress, you're still beating yourself down."

A heavy sigh escapes me, and I focus my eyes on the countertop.

"I just want to give her everything," I tell her. "She deserves the world, and I don't want her to resent me in the future when she realizes I'm holding her back."

Flint grunts, shaking his head.

"You have to know she's not like that," Flint says. "She's one of few that could handle how testy you've been these past few months. And she stuck by you. Sounds like 'in sickness and in health' to me."

I realized that, but only figured it was because she's not one to take anything personally. Now her support means so much more than before.

Just then, his cell rings, and he answers it without checking who it is.

"Yeah?" he says.

He gets up out of his seat and drops a hand down on my shoulder before he walks away.

With Flint gone, I'm left without a distraction, and all my attention returns to Jade. Flint wouldn't tell me that for the hell of it. Over the years, I've never felt anything from Jade that would indicate I'm any different from anyone else. Still, according to Flint, there's been something here all along.

I didn't know that I had that kind of effect on Jade before, but hearing it changes things, and as Flint said, she's unique. Perhaps my current condition won't have any influence on her opinion of whether or not I make a suitable mate. Maybe instead of avoiding this, we need to embrace it so we can start working through the rough shit together. May as well. We're going to end up together anyway, but I don't want to push her if she's not ready. I'm going to have to convince her. She'll probably need a little more time. I think two days is all I'm going to be able to wait without going insane. For her sake, I can hold off.

CHAPTER 27

JADE

I POUR MORE merlot into my glass before pulling the blanket tighter around me. Nights are starting to get a lot chillier. Before long, I won't be able to be out here without thicker clothes on. Good thing I like the cold, though.

Leaning on the wooden post beside me, I look up at the stars and let out a sigh, trying to get past this deep crevasse inside of me. I know exactly what's causing it, and the only way it's going to close is if I go to Gunner and let all of this play out. With how I'm feeling, it's going to happen soon anyway. If I'm at the point where I can't even sit still, then I know he's probably about to burst. In the club earlier today, I couldn't hear what he and Flint were talking about, but I knew it was me. Karmen told me he was focused on me the entire time. No shocker there, though. My back was turned, but I was barely thinking about the meeting I was conducting. How could I when he was only a few feet from me?

I've long since stopped trying to figure out what any of this means. Clearly, there aren't as many rules to this mate pairing as I thought. But what I don't know, however, is why now? As much as Gunner and I have been around one another, one would think this bond would have already made itself known. What was it that made it come to light a few nights ago? That's something I'll probably never know the answer to. I'll drive myself mad thinking about it.

What I do know is that it couldn't have come at a worse time. We were having so much fun with what we had, not worrying about anything. Our dynamic was perfect, but now it's totally

different. It means everything now. I wish he was here with me right now, looking at me in that way that makes my heart throb faster, like I'm the most special treasure in the world. It's odd—with my first mate, I didn't make that jump so quickly. It took me a while to accept him. But with Gunner, I don't know if it's because of the relationship we had beforehand, but this last week, I've been miserable without his warmth, his comfort, and his company. I want him.

It's frustrating that this is where we are now—I didn't want to be attached to him in any way. Having sex was the furthest I was willing to go, but I can't do anything about it but embrace it. Fighting it is impossible, but I need a little more time. I thought I had the rest of my life to deal with this, but as life does, it threw a curveball at me. Now I have to come to terms with multiple things at once, and I'm nowhere close to being ready for that.

Staying away from him has been hard, especially since we work so closely together. His spicy scent has been stuck in my nose for seven days, but with him being in the club all day, I've had to fight everything pulling me to him. I've seen him doing his workouts despite how we've been avoiding each other. He's stuck to it, and I'm proud of him. Every morning, I wanted to show up at the club and help him through this. I feel like an ass for abandoning him during such a crucial part of his routine. I never intended for him to do any of this on his own, but if I helped him now, I'm not sure we'd be able to stay off each other. We barely could without this bond between us, but now, just the sight of him has me going crazy.

With a new mate in my life, I guess I have no other choice but to face this grief I've been contending with. I'm going to have to figure this one out on my own. A new mate won't ease the pain of losing a previous one, and I wouldn't want our relationship to be like that. When I inevitably move on with Gunner, I want him to have all of me and not some version of me that still hasn't healed from past trauma and is still too afraid of losing another mate.

Looking up at the stars, I sigh. I wish this was easier, that everything had stayed the same, but the universe has a

different plan for me, one that I could have some clarity on. Maybe this was Her way of making me finally deal with everything. That's something I'll never have an answer to.

Out of the corner of my eye, a bright spot of light catches my attention, and I come back to my spot on the stairs leading up to my apartment. I peer through the wooden railing to find Terra walking down the empty sidewalk looking at her phone, worry creasing her eyebrows.

She doesn't see me—with this black blanket wrapped around me, I'm blending in with the shadows. Looks like I'm not the only one that can't sleep. She must be taking a walk to clear her head. I've taken plenty of those in my day. I'm getting ready to call out to her as she passes by, but then I notice the backpack she's carrying. Alarms start firing in my head as I reassess her, and her clothes aren't a night walk outfit. She's dressed in black skinny jeans, a hoodie, and converses, her hair is down, and she has a hat on. I've never seen Terra wear a hat in all the days she's been here. My gut sinks as I think back to when I had breakfast with her a few days ago and how nervous she was. She kept checking her phone, and now I regret ignoring her fidgety behavior. I'd bet money that this has something to do with Tobias.

Setting my wine glass down, I get up from my spot on the stairs and walk down to the very last step, and peek around the building.

"Terra!" I call out to her.

She whips around, looking at me like a deer in headlights before giving me a wide nervous smile.

"Jade?" she says. "What are you doing out here? It's two in the morning."

"I couldn't sleep," I tell her. "I could ask you the same question, though."

That smile on her face wavers, and she noticeably swallows in the second that I wait for her answer. She doesn't give a verbal response, but the fear in her wide hazel eyes is enough of a confirmation for me.

“Don’t go back, Terra,” I plead with her softly, and her eyes instantly start brimming with tears.

“I don’t have any other choice,” she says, her voice cracking. “Somehow, he got my number, and he won’t leave me alone. I don’t know what he’s going to do if I don’t come, but I know it won’t be good. He’s already waiting for me to show up.”

“You’re safe here,” I remind her. “Despite what he says, he cannot get to you here. He knows you’re terrified of him, and he’s using that to get you to come to him. Don’t fall for it.”

She sniffles and wipes her tears. “He’ll come here to get me himself if I don’t go, Jade. I don’t want anyone to get hurt protecting me. The town’s in constant danger as long as I’m here.”

“That’s not true—” I need to talk her down before she takes off, and from the way she’s standing, that could be any second now. “As long as you’re here, the Brotherhood has your back. You’re safe here, Terra. Free to do as you please. Come on—” I take a step closer to her, holding my hands out. “Let’s go into my apartment where it’s nice and warm, and we can get Flint and Blade. They’ll deal with Tobias, and you won’t have to.”

But she shakes her head. “Please don’t get them involved. I don’t want them getting in the way.”

“I’m not about to sit back and let you go back to him, Terra,” I say, reaching for her, but she takes a large step backward out of my range.

“It’s too late, Jade—” she’s walking backward now, clutching the straps of her backpack. “He’s already expecting me.”

Then she turns around and bolts down the sidewalk.

“Fuck!” I bite out, taking a step after her, but I stop and instead turn around and bound up the stairs two at a time. I run to my room and grab my phone, quickly dialing Flint as I run back out the door.

“What’s going on?” he asks on the second ring.

“It’s Terra,” I tell him, shutting the door to my apartment. “She took off. I caught her walking down the road, going to meet

Tobias.”

“Fuck,” he growls into the phone, then I hear him take a deep inhale. “I know where she’s headed. I’ll go after her.”

“Tobias is near, Flint,” I tell him, flying down the stairs. “She said he’s waiting for her.”

“He’s outside of my range then because I can’t pick up his scent anywhere in thirty miles. I’m going after her.”

He hangs up before I can reply, and I clutch my phone in my hand as I take off down the sidewalk in the same direction Terra went. She’s already disappeared off the street, so I take a deep breath, and it takes me a few tries before I finally pick it up. Following her scent down a side street, I find her already damn near too far to catch, but I’m not letting that prevent me from going after her. I push myself into a full sprint, running harder than I ever have in my life, trying to reach her before she gets to the town limits on our side, which isn’t far away.

CHAPTER 28

GUNNER

I PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE TOLD her I was coming, but I didn't think she'd answer the phone, and I need her to hear me out. I was trying to wait at least two more days, but I caved. Fighting this pull is impossible. Turns out I'm not that strong. I thought I could hold out for at least forty-eight more hours, but I didn't even come close. The past four days have been hard enough, and the idea of going two more was painful to think about in every way. The days have been shit without her, and that's not only the bond talking. I would have felt this way regardless. For the last few months, I've had unlimited time in Jade's company. Naturally, I would have wanted this distance between us to end by now, and this bond has only added to that. Nothing good is coming from our time apart; I need this to end now.

When I get to her apartment, I park out front next to her little blue Prius, and I hop out of the truck. Her scent takes up this entire area, and I'm already overcome with the desire to have her in my arms.

I start walking up the stairs, but I stop on the first step when I find a half-full wine glass and an open bottle at the top. Well, she's up. Now I won't feel bad about possibly waking her up in the dead of night. I continue up the stairs to the door and knock, but I don't get an answer. Figuring it's unlocked, I turn the knob and go inside. Her scent greets me, and I take in a deep lungful of her warm, comforting aroma.

The kitchen light is on, but she's not in there. I stand in the doorway listening for any noise, but the place is deathly quiet.

“Jade!” I call out but the silence answers.

No way she didn't hear me; her apartment is only so big, she'd hear me no matter where she is in it. And there's no way she fell asleep and left her door unlocked. On the off chance that she did, I go down the hallway toward her bedroom to find the door ajar and the lights are on. The covers on one side are thrown back, and she's nowhere in sight.

Now I'm starting to worry. Where could she have gone? Maybe she's at the docks again. She did say that's where she goes when she feels overwhelmed, and that describes what we're going through perfectly. But the wine glass and bottle sitting on the steps and the unlocked door makes me think differently, like she left in a hurry. Where could she have gone?

Making my way back out to the living room, I take my phone and call her. I expect to hear her phone ring from somewhere in the apartment, but nothing, and to my dismay, she doesn't answer. I stand in the center of her living room, not sure about what to do. Should I wait for her to come back? Will she get mad at me for barging into her place like this while she's not here?

Go after her! My bear orders me, impatient. *Follow her scent and go find her!*

A different side of him has come out since this thing with Jade started. I'm not used to him being as bossy and aggressive as he has been these past few days, but this is way better than the funk he's been in. I'll take this any day.

I readily listen to him; I can't stand around and wait for her to come back. I need to find her and get this off my chest.

Before I walk out the door, I find her key ring sitting on the table beside the entrance. Now I'm certain she left out of here in a hurry. Taking my phone out, I call her again, but she doesn't pick up.

Unease is starting to take hold of me as I think about what could have made her run out of here without grabbing her keys

or locking the door. At least she has her phone, but that would only make me feel some sort of relief if she answered it.

I don't like this at all.

I grab her keys and lock her door behind me, then I move as quickly as I can to the ground. Shutting my eyes, I take in a slow deep breath, pulling in various smells but only focusing on one. It takes two inhales to finally pick up her trail, which is heading in the direction of the edge of town.

Why the fuck is she heading there alone at this hour?

Go get her! My bear demands.

"That was the plan," I say out loud, moving for the truck.

I'm getting inside, and I'm about to shut the door, but motorcycles flying down the road stop me. Where could they be going at this time of the morning? This must be related to Jade.

I crank up and throw the truck in reverse, then drive to the entrance of the parking lot, where I stop, putting it in park again. I find Blade and Roxy tearing down the road towards me, but they slow down when they see me getting out of the truck.

Blade stops first, and Roxy comes up right beside him.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Blade hesitates to answer, then glances at Roxy before he looks back at me.

"Jade caught Terra trying to leave to go meet Tobias," Blade tells me. "She chased after her."

His words send chills up my spine, and panic sweeps through me. Both Jade and Terra are heading straight into danger. How did he get a hold of Terra, and why wouldn't she come to one of us before she left?

I'm not mad I wasn't notified about any of this. It's better for me not to know because if I do, I'm going to want to get involved, just like I do now. I've gotten used to not being informed about certain things and have come to understand

why I can't run head-on into instances like these for the time being. However, this time isn't like any of the other times.

"I'm going with you," I tell them before turning around to get back in the truck.

"Flint's not too far from them," Blade calls after me. "And the rest of the gang is headed that way. We'll bring them both back."

I shake my head without looking back at him.

"I'm going," I repeat.

"You need to stay back," Blade orders, but I disregard it.

Turning around, I lock eyes with him before saying, "I'm not going to sit back while they're both in danger. Jade is my mate. There's not a chance in hell I'm going to sit back and wait for you to bring her back to me."

I don't wait for a response, nor do I take the time to register how that news has them stupefied; I turn around and get back in the truck. They don't waste any more time once I slam the door. Blade pulls off first, then Roxy and I follow her. I press the pedal to the floor, pushing Flint's truck to seventy, staying right behind them as they zip down the road. As we ride, I try to take deep, even breaths in an attempt to stop the panic from taking over, but that's nearly impossible to do when Jade's headed in the direction of an abusive pride alpha. If they get to wherever Tobias is waiting, Terra won't be the only one going with them.

With the roads as empty as they are, getting to the town limits takes no time at all, but it seems like forever, especially since my bear won't calm the fuck down. It's taking everything I have to hold him back. Once I finally get there, I'm going to have to let him out. He's not going to stop until he's in control. I'll be risking so much, but I trust my bear. He wouldn't do anything knowing it would seriously hurt or kill us. I let that ease the worry surrounding what this shift is going to be like, and I mentally accept the pain that I know is coming.

When we get there, everyone's already parked and standing around, everyone except Talon and Blaze, who will probably

be pulling up any moment now. Before I climb out of the truck, I toss my leather jacket on the seat beside me and opt to leave my cane, then get out.

“Flint sent orders to shift,” Blade tells them. “We’re going to wherever Terra was headed once he catches up to her and gets that information.”

The entire ride over, I fought to hold my bear back, and now that I’m here, this shift is going to happen regardless of what I do. I pull my shirt over my head and toss it on the back of the truck.

“Gunner.” I turn around, and there’s Blade casting a disapproving look on me. Everyone else behind him stares at me the same way. “Don’t push yourself. You can stay here. We’ll bring them back.”

“It’s too late,” I tell him, shoving my pants down. “He’s already coming out. I can’t stop him. He’s the one in control now.”

This is the first time my bear has ever pushed his way to the forefront. Usually, I call on him and hand him the reins, but this time, he pulls me inward, and I have no control over what happens.

I expected there to be pain, but I underestimated how intense it would be. I try not to bite down on my sharpening teeth as my muscles catch fire from the sudden stretching, feeling as if they’re going to rip. If not for the amount of yoga I’ve been doing, my abdominal muscles probably would have torn apart. The strain is unbearable, but I breathe through it, sucking in deep breaths as bones move around and my muscles stretch and reshape. I’m almost brought to tears by how painful it is.

But it’s not all for naught. As soon as I’m done, the agony subsides, and the first breath I take is like inhaling life. My thoughts are crystal clear, smells have an entirely new dimension that I’ve forgotten about, and the pounding of my heart pumps adrenaline lace blood through my veins. Never in my life have I felt so invigorated and strong. Powerful. I’m brand new. What’s more, the pain in my abdomen that I’ve become accustomed to is cut in half.

I feel fucking amazing.

I turn my sights on the gang still staring at me, but astonishment replaces their disapproving looks. I don't give a shit right now. There's a primal rage coursing through me, and I have to get to my mate in that forest. I don't wait on the others to shift. I motion with my head that I'm going in, and I disregard Blade ordering me to wait. I barely even hear him as I follow Jade's scent into the dark forest.

I'm going to get my mate.

CHAPTER 29

JADE

SHIT! She's fast as fuck! How the hell is she running like it's no big deal? I guess this is the advantage she has in her human form, being a lioness—she has the added bonus of speed on her side. On top of that, those long legs of hers help her cover distance effortlessly. The second she turned and ran away, I had no hope of catching her. Even if I hadn't gone inside to get my phone, she still would have left me to eat her dust.

Damnit. I should have driven to close the distance she gained when I ran inside to get my phone. I would've at least been closer to her right now.

I follow her scent into the trees, and out here, I can pick it up better. I follow her sweet scent, willing myself to keep going. If I stop, I'll lose her, and I'll never see her again. Even though I want to collapse on the forest floor, I make myself continue on. I can't give up on her. I won't.

My perseverance pays off. Finally, I catch sight of her again, but I think it's only because she slowed down a little bit. She's unfamiliar with this forest, and in her panic, she may have lost her direction. Whatever made her reduce her speed, I'm happy for it. With how fast she was moving, I wasn't sure how far out she got. Now if she would just come to a complete stop and let me get to her, that would be fantastic.

“Terra! Stop!” I call after her, but of course, she doesn't.

She looks over her shoulder, and to my extreme displeasure, she speeds up, and it seems like she's going faster than before. When this is all said and done, and she's safely back in

Penfell, I'm going to need her to give me tips on how to up my cardio so I can run nonstop like that without taking a break. This is next-level shit right here.

Groaning, I force myself to pick up my pace, pumping my arms faster, trying as hard as I can to close some of the distance between us. That's not going to be easy, no matter how fast I run. I don't even have an advantage when we enter the forest. Anyone else knows this land like the back of their hand, but I'm unfamiliar with the terrain. Even though she slows down, I stumble over roots, branches, and misstep into shallow holes—I see why she slowed down. But I don't let any of this stop me.

It's darker within the trees, and the only reason I know where she is is because of the scent trail she's leaving and the gibbous moon shining down through the treetops, which really helps. My night vision is subpar at best.

“Terra, wait!” I call, and I wish I hadn't. One, calling out to her isn't going to get her to stop, and two, that was much-needed energy I just wasted.

I can barely even control my breathing anymore; it feels like my lungs are about to explode. They're burning in my chest, and I'm so close to giving up. I protest against my aching muscles, and I keep going, but I can't keep pushing myself much longer. My will is strong, but my body is calling the shots. I start slowing down, and Terra gets further away from me.

But relief floods me when I spot a bear up ahead. She skids to a stop and changes her direction, but it's no use. There's another bear where she decided to turn. I lean over with my hands on my knees, sucking in huge gulps of air. My heart pounds loudly in my head and chest, and a cramp forms in my side, but I hold my head up, scanning the landscape up ahead to find eight pairs of eyes shining in the moonlight. They all emerge from the shadows, huge, sleek black bears hidden from plain sight, their scents mixing in with every other wild thing out here.

Hell yeah. The perimeter guards save the day once again.

As I stand here, almost dying, still struggling to catch my breath, I watch as the bears surround Terra, who's still trying to get around them, but she's not going anywhere. They're circling around her, quickly closing her in, and when she realizes she's surrounded, her frustration explodes out of her.

"Get out of my way!" she yells at the top of her lungs. That's the first time I've ever heard her speak that loud. "Let me go!"

The desperation and fear in her voice breaks my heart.

When they don't move, she crumples to the ground, crying.

Hearing her sobs, I force myself to move, walking on shaking legs to where she sits surrounded on the ground.

"Dax," I say as I approach them. He looks over his shoulder, his green eyes heavy with concern, and he moves to the side so I can get through.

When I get to her, I lower down in front of her, mostly because I want to get on her level, but I also don't have the energy to stand. She looks up from her hands, distraught, her face tear-streaked and red.

"Tell them to let me go, Jade," she pleads, her voice cracking. "I have to go."

"Even if I told them to, they wouldn't listen," I tell her. "Flint, Blade, or Slash have to give that order. But I wouldn't tell them to do that anyway. You cannot go back to him, Terra. You're free now. Stay here and be happy. Let the gang protect you."

The pain in her eyes makes my heart sink.

"How can I be free when he's out there?" she asks. "He's not going to stop trying to get me back, and everyone here is in danger as long as I'm here. I should never have come here. I should've stayed where I was. This isn't going to stop Jade. Tobias has so many men that he can come here with. It's easier if you just let me go to him. Save everyone the trouble."

"Flint has plenty of ally gangs that have no problem fighting alongside him," I tell her. "We're glad to have you here, Terra," I try to reassure her. "You deserve to be happy, to live a

full life. You can't do that if you go back to him. You might even end up dead."

She snuffles, before she says, "At least this will all be over then," she rationalizes. "I'd finally be free of him."

I swallow hard at the sad resolve she's settled on.

"Terra," I whisper as tears sting the back of my eyes. "That's not your only way out."

She doesn't say anything, but the hopelessness in her eyes answers for her. Even after being in Penfell, she still hasn't grasped that her life is hers to control again. So much was taken from her, and it's going to take some time for her to find herself.

When I take her in my arms, her body is shaking, and she's so tense. My heart breaks for her realizing just how terrified she really is. I pull her close to me, and much to my surprise, she doesn't fight my embrace—she actually accepts it. I rub my hand in the center of her back as she sobs in my arms.

We sit here for a moment before I hear heavy footsteps approaching, and I glance up to find Flint coming toward us.

Thank fuck.

"Give us some space," Flint orders as he walks through the bears.

They back up, doing as he says, but they stay close. Flint's whiskey-colored eyes gleam in the moonlight, and he remains stone-faced as he approaches us. My mouth goes dry as I take him in, and I'm frozen by the cold expression on his face. I can feel the anger coming off of him, and it's absolutely frightening. I'm not used to seeing him this way; I feel sorry for whoever ends up on the receiving end of his fury. I've only heard stories about what he's like when he's pissed and hoped I'd never have to witness it. I hold Terra tighter against me, worried she might get scared seeing Flint this way. I've known him longer, and I even want to hightail it out of here.

He lowers down beside me, and for the first time ever, I hear a deep rumbling coming from his chest. It's so rich and smooth—I can't help but fall into it. I shut my eyes and let it permeate

every fiber of my being. The panic I previously felt dissolves, and Terra stops trembling in my arms.

It goes on long enough for me to relax, and when he stops, my mind feels fuzzy. I open my eyes as exhaustion slams into me. Running out here took all the energy I had left.

“Terra.” Flint’s tone is much softer than that look in his eyes. She lifts her tear-stained face from my shoulder and takes a deep breath as she meets Flint’s gaze. “I need you to tell me where Tobias is waiting for you.”

She snuffles, then says, “I was supposed to go to a certain spot and let him know when I got there. He was going to pick me up. I don’t know where he’s waiting. Please just let me go, Flint. He’s going to come for me. I just don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

“I get that,” Flint nods. “I do. But you don’t have to sacrifice yourself to protect us—that’s the Brotherhood’s job. We protect this town. I know you’re used to being vulnerable and left at someone else’s mercy, but when you came here, all of that ended. You don’t have to worry about being targeted. You’re surrounded by bears that will fight for you. You’re not going back there, Terra. I know you’re worried about us, but we aren’t new to any of this. Let Tobias come. That’ll be the end of him when he does.”

She looks at him with crocodile tears flowing down her cheeks. “Flint—”

Her phone cuts her off, her ringtone blaring into the night, startling her.

“Is that him?” Flint’s tone is no longer soft. The malice in it matches the glare in his eyes. Terra nods mechanically, hearing the change in his voice, and he says, “Answer it and put it on speaker.”

It rings two more times before she lets out a shaky breath.

“Hello?” she says in a small shaking voice.

“Where the fuck are you?” Tobias’ voice comes through low and angry.

Flint takes the phone from her and stands straight up, holding the phone close to his mouth.

“Terra isn’t coming, Tobias.” Flint spits his name like it tastes bitter to say.

The line is silent for a moment. “You’re getting yourself into deep shit, *Smokey*,” Tobias growls into the phone. “Handing that bitch over would make your life a lot easier. She’s not worth the shit you’re bringing on yourself.”

Terra goes rigid in my arms, and I hold her close, trying to comfort her.

“Listen and listen well,” Flint says calmly enough into the phone, but his voice is dangerously low, and his other hand is clenched into a white-knuckled fist at his side. “This is the last time I’m going to tell you to stay the fuck away from Terra and from my town. I showed you mercy the last time—I didn’t think you’d be dumb enough to come near here again, but I’m going to rip your *fucking head off* the next time I see you, and I won’t lose a wink of sleep over it. You and your entire gang are dead the next time you show up here.”

A cynical laugh comes through the phone, completely unphased by Flint’s threat.

“That was a real stupid move. You’re going to regret not giving her over,” Tobias promises. “You should stay ready.”

The line goes dead, and Flint crushes the phone in his hand. I glance up at him as he drops the pieces to the ground.

When he turns back to Terra and me, I’m almost too afraid to move. I’m surprised this entire area hasn’t gone up in flames. It’s like looking at the hood of a car in the summer. His rage is just that strong. It’s suffocating. Light from the moon bounces off his eyes, making him come off much more bloodthirsty. I thought he was pissed before. That was nothing compared to this.

Not even the rustling coming from the trees pulls my attention off of him.

He fixes his eyes on Terra, and she stills.

“Tobias is as good as dead,” he tells her.

She nods absentmindedly then he holds his hand down to her.

“Come on, let’s get back,” he says.

Terra hesitates before taking his hand, and he helps her to her feet. My legs currently feel like jello, so I plant my hands on the forest floor and push myself up. When I’m standing, that’s when I finally notice the other bears that have joined us.

Gunner walks towards me, his beautiful pale blue eyes shining. Behind him, Slash, Tiberius, Blade, Roxy, and the others come through the trees, but my focus is on my mate, standing before me in bear form when he shouldn’t even be out here.

I’m not sure I’ve ever gotten this angry at a single sight a day in my life.

CHAPTER 30

JADE

WHAT THE FUCK? Why the hell did he think that coming out here was a good idea for him, and what on Earth made him shift?! I hope he's picking up the obvious anger I'm throwing down as I help Terra onto Blaze's back. He's standing right beside me, so he'd have to purposefully be trying to miss my displeasure with him. The *only* reason I'm not going completely off is because Terra's trembling again, and there are so many others around.

When she's comfortably on Blaze's back, he starts walking forward, carrying her back the way they came. Everyone else goes, too, and the perimeter guards fall back into the shadows they hide out in. I, on the other hand, stand right where I am with my arms crossed, finally focusing on Gunner. I don't say anything for a moment; I'm trying to figure out what to say, along with waiting for the others to get far enough away.

Gunner sits watching me, patiently waiting. It's rare when I see his bear—I've only seen them all a handful of times, but it's easy to tell who's who. Gunner's giant black bear has the same kind, curious eyes, the only difference being the shade of blue is paler in comparison to the deep blues I'm used to. I'm thoroughly pissed at him for shifting, but it's hard to stay mad at him with the way he's looking at me.

I am glad he's okay.

When I feel like everyone is far enough away, I finally talk.

“Why?” I ask him. “This wasn't your wisest choice, shifting then coming out here to fight even when you aren't done

healing.” He nods, agreeing with me. “Then why would you shift without making more progress first? You could have really been hurt, Gunner.”

He bobs his head up and down, saying he understands, completely getting where I’m coming from.

“Did you even think before you shifted?” I ask him. “Or did you just jump right into it without considering what might happen?”

Stepping forward right in front of me, he sits back on his hind legs, and we’re face to face, but his size makes me feel significantly smaller. If he were to stand on his back feet, he’d be much taller than me. His eyes are full of apology as he looks at me, and some of my anger dissipates as we communicate without any words whatsoever. Knowing that he’s aware of how reckless his decision was what softens me just a bit. But there’s something else in his eyes. They’re shining brightly, and there’s more life in them than I’ve seen in months. He sits before me, majestic and powerful, and how can I remain angry at him when he looks like his old self again?

“You’re feeling pretty good, huh?” I ask him, and he nods his head. “You still should’ve thought about it first,” I tell him, leaning closer. Reaching out, I touch his soft fur and rub my hand through it. “You could’ve hurt yourself even worse, Gunner. Shit like this is why I’m terrified to be mated again. All of you do crazy shit like this. It scares me that you were willing to risk that kind of harm even when everyone else was already coming out here. You could have been killed had a fight broken out. Did you think about what it’d be like to shift back? What if that’s more painful?”

And somehow, with absolutely no trouble at all, he conveys that he was worried about me by tapping my chin with his nose. I have no clue how I know what it means; I just have a feeling in my gut that tells me that’s what he’s trying to say. I thought the first time I was just reading him well, but that’s not the case. I can fully understand him.

I wasn't able to do this with my first mate—understanding Gunner in his bear form is completely new to me, and tears almost spring to my eyes. I never considered experiencing new things with a new mate—I wasn't even thinking about what the future could be like with Gunner. I've been so focused and scared about losing him that I completely overlooked what we'd be like together. I skipped right over the good parts and went to what life would be like if I lost him.

As this hits me, I suddenly don't want to be away from him anymore. Deep longing to be with him grips at my core. Yes, I'm scared of losing him; I don't think I'll ever be free of this worry, but I can change how I face it. I want to explore this new relationship and figure out what it's like to be Gunner's mate instead of fearing life without him. It's inevitably going to happen, and I'd rather not regret missing the chance to be with him on this level. We worked great as friends and paired well as lovers, so this bond between us can only be as easy as the rest of our relationship thus far.

I step closer to him, overwhelmed by emotion, and I wrap my arms around his neck, nestling into his warm furry body, snuggling my face in his neck. I relax into him, finally easing that nagging ache that's been growing for the past few days.

“Sorry,” I say. “I didn't mean to come off so harsh at first. I was worried about you too. I'm always going to be concerned about your well-being. I won't be able to control that. I'm a worry wart by nature, and I've already lost one mate. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you, and I've been scared of that.”

I feel him nod, and he takes a deep breath. His body expands in my hold, and he relaxes as he exhales. I push back off of him, but I stay close to him, unable to pull myself away completely. He lowers his head and nestles his face in my chest and stomach, then he peeks up at me with his laughing eyes before he does it again, really telling me he's alright.

“Okay, okay,” I giggle. “You do seem okay.” As I inspect him, I comb my fingers through his soft black fur, something I'm quickly finding that he enjoys. He leans into my caress with his eyes closed, and I move my hand faster for him. “You're really not in any pain? You're okay?”

He opens his eyes, and they're soft this time. I thought he had easily discernible emotions in his human form, but as his bear, he's much easier to read. He presses his cold nose to my forehead, and my heart throbs, reverberating through my entire body as shivers run through me. This small but loving gesture yanks at my heart, and I get close to him again. After tonight, I'm not going to be able to stay away from him. I wouldn't even if I was able to. Between the days I spent away from him and the absolute fury I felt seeing him coming towards me as a bear, it's nice to be with him in the quiet of the forest, listening to his powerful heartbeat. This is the most at ease and at peace I've felt in a while. One of his strong arms wraps around my back, and his strength and warmth make me feel safe. I could stay like this forever.

As I stand here pressed into him, I let time stand still, trying to savor this moment. I don't think about how anxious I've been these past four days without him; I ignore my overwhelming fear about losing him. I don't let anything past or possible tragedies get in the way of the serenity of this moment. Being here with Gunner feels right, and that's why I've been so scared about being near him. I knew I'd easily give in the moment I let my guard down, and that's exactly what happened, but discovering our ability to communicate without talking made me fall even harder. Our connection is like nothing I've experienced before, and I'd like to see what our future holds. I don't want to run anymore. I want to get better for Gunner, but I don't see why I can't get there while being with him. I'm not prepared for the troubles that may come up, but I'll do my best to handle them so I can be a good mate for Gunner.

I'm not sure how long I'm standing like this with him, but after some time, I pull away from him and press my lips to his nose before patting his sides.

"We should get back. Everyone's probably waiting on us."

He nods in agreement before turning around and then lowering down so I can climb onto his back. His heat rises up, and I lean over, lying down into his fur, smiling as the rumbling from his chest vibrates up through his back. Once I'm situated

on his strong body, he makes sure I'm good before starting into the forest.

CHAPTER 31

GUNNER

DESPITE THE SITUATION that pulled us all out into the forest in the early hours of the morning, I still feel more alive than I've felt in months. I breathe in, and a simple inhale collects a variety of scents: the many different kinds of plants, various animals, the sweet smell the wind carries, the bark on the trees, the water nearby—I forgot what it's like to breathe in a place where every other scent isn't human. In this darkness, I can see clearly, making out any little thing that moves. Up ahead, I can hear the others shuffling back to the edge of town.

My heightened senses are one big thing, but with my mate on my back, this is so much better. She's light on my back, her legs straddling me as she leans forward, her chin resting on my head. The moment I walked through those trees and finally found her, the fear and anxiety that was coursing through me turned into instant relief. No matter how angry she was, I was just glad to see that she was safe. I knew she was going to be pissed, but I'd rather have her mad at me than hurt and in danger or not talking to me at all.

It doesn't even matter that she can't shift—I could walk around the forest with her on my back like this for hours. Just because she can't shift doesn't mean we can't find other ways to connect. How we are now seems like something we could make a regular practice of. She doesn't need to be a bear to connect with me—we already have a rather deep connection without her being able to shift. Even if the witches can't help her, I'm confident we'll be able to find other ways to get close.

I almost want to stay out here with her. I don't want this moment to end. But after running behind Terra, I know she probably wants to get in bed.

By the time we get back to town, everyone has already shifted back, and they're getting dressed. Terra stands hunched beside Roxy, a blanket over her shoulder. When we emerge from the trees, everyone's eyes are on us. They all look worried, probably nervous about me shifting back, but I'm confident I'll be able to get through it. Of course, it's going to hurt, but I'm ready for the pain. Shifting back can't be worse than changing into this huge beast of a mammal. I lower down to the ground, and Jade slides off of my back but instantly comes around in front of me. She doesn't pay any attention to anyone standing around. Her hands caress the sides of my face as she looks down at me with an encouraging smile on her lips. I see through it, though—she's nervous. I'm not sure how this is going to feel to shift back, I can only hope that it's not as painful, but I'm going to have to do it. I can't stay a bear forever.

Jade gently rubs the sides of my neck, the slow-motion soothing.

"Just breathe through it," she coaches me. "You got through one shift. You can get through this one too."

I can't help but lean into her hands as she talks to me.

"I'm here," she coos, then kisses me between my eyes.

She chases away any nervousness I was feeling before. I'm much more comfortable now than I was when I shifted the first time. It's just her and I right now.

I begin taking in deep breaths before I start the shift back, and as sharp pain spreads out from the tight area in my abdomen, I find it's bearable this time. Changing back isn't quite as painful, but it still hurts nonetheless. My muscles stretching during the first shift made going back to my human form a bit easier.

Once I'm done, I turn over onto my back, catching my breath, and I laugh up at the sky.

I can shift, and even though my body's throbbing from the change I just put myself through, there's an indescribable pleasure running through me as I lie naked on the ground. I focus on Jade's gorgeous face hovering above me, a soft smile on her lips as she brushes my hair out of my face.

"Hey," she whispers.

Her green eyes glow, and the electricity surging between us crackles.

"Look at that." Flint's voice reminds me that everyone else is standing around. Jade jumps—she also forgot we have company, and we both turn to find everyone watching us. "You're back."

The smile that spread across my face reveals exactly how I'm feeling. I reach up to place my hand on Jade's cheek, and she leans into it.

"It feels good, too," I tell him.



The ride back is a stark contrast from my ride over. I have Jade by my side, my bear isn't raging, and there's a calm blanket around me. We're on the same page; neither of us is avoiding this anymore. She hasn't explicitly said so, but she doesn't need to—I felt it the moment she made the decision back in the forest. It was like a switch flipped on, and both of us lit up. It was incredible, something I'd never heard of happening. The moment when mates accept each other is a sensation of total calm that feels like floating.

I know she's worried about me. After what she's been through, I don't blame her, and considering the shit the gang gets into, she's not off base with her concerns. And as I think about tonight, her anger was warranted. I shifted *and* ran straight into danger. I haven't exactly done anything to ease her mind at all. But I need her to know I can't sit around if she's ever in danger. She knows what it's like to lose a mate, and I will do everything I can to ensure I don't lose her.

“Jade?” My voice is loud in this quiet we’ve been riding in.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry I scared you,” I start. “I did think before I shifted, but I couldn’t control it. My bear forced his way out. But even if he hadn’t, I still would have shifted just to get to you. You were running towards a violent pride leader. I couldn’t have sat still, knowing where you were headed. You know how I found out you chased after Terra?” She remains silent, waiting for me to answer. “I went by your place wanting to talk to you. I was on my way to tell you that I didn’t want to stay apart anymore. This past week has been so hard without you. I’ve been missing you like crazy, Jade.”

“I’ve been missing you too,” she admits. “This week has been hard, but I was scared, Gunner. I mean, I still am—that’s not going to change. Even if you weren’t part of the gang, I’d be scared of losing you every moment of the day. But I’ve decided I can’t let that stop me from being with you. Some things I know are out of my control. I was instantly furious when I saw you coming through those trees because I thought you were being reckless. But seeing that you were okay and how happy you were—my anger washed away. I know you’re still in the gang, and one of these days, you’ll return to doing gang work, and I have to get used to that idea. I know you love what you do, and I can’t let my fears get in our way.”

I would love to get back to doing my work for the gang, but I don’t know what my future is looking like with that. To be fair, I don’t know what any part of my future looks like. Up until a few moments ago, even my future with Jade was rocky and unclear. I might be able to shift, but it’s not a seamless transition, and it hurts more than I’ll let anyone know, so I don’t see myself picking up where I left off with the gang anytime soon. Now that I think of it, I’ve never considered doing anything other than what I do with the gang, so if for some reason, I don’t get back to doing that, I don’t know what I’ll end up doing instead. That’s been a constant blurry area of concern that mingles with the thoughts that keep me up at night.

I'm not ready to share that with Jade yet. That would be yet another thing she'd have to help me with.

I pull into the parking lot of her apartment complex and park close to her stairs.

"I know you're scared of losing another mate, and I'm going to be conscious of that before I do anything dangerous," I tell her. "Getting over what happened all those years ago is going to take a while, I know, but I want to give you a brighter tomorrow. I'll do whatever I can to make every day worth smiling about."

With her hand on the door, she looks over at me and gives me a soft smile, adoration in her eyes.

"You already do, Gunner," she tells me. "Since the day I met you. That was part of the reason I gravitated towards you, and it turns out, it ran deeper." She stops talking for only a moment and sighs. "I'm going to have to do a lot of work myself. Some things we can't control, and you can't let my fears stop you, either. I know how much you love the work you do for the gang, and I won't get in the way of that. I wouldn't take that from you. That's one thing I'm going to have to wrap my mind around. I want you to be happy."

"As long as I'm with you, I will be," I reply, making her smile grow.

She reaches out and rubs my arm as she pulls on the door handle. "Come on. Let's go inside. I'm tired, and I need to shower."

I follow her up her stairs and dig her keys out of my pocket once we get to the door. Right away, we go into the bathroom, and she turns the water on full heat before taking her clothes off. A nice hot shower is exactly what I need to soothe my sore body.

"You stand under the water," she tells me as she lets her hair down. "You're probably really feeling that shift right now, aren't you?"

"Can you read my mind now?" I ask her, taken off guard.

She giggles, pulling the curtain back. “It was just a feeling,” she says, then steps in the shower.

I finish undressing, and I climb into the shower after her. The scorching hot water beats down on my sore back and shoulders, and it feels like heaven. I close my eyes and lean my head back, fighting the moan that’s rising in my chest. The heat of the water feels absolutely amazing.

I hear a bottle open, but I don’t pay any attention. A sweet vanilla scent fills the air, and I inhale it. Then I feel something coarse on my chest, and when I open my eyes, she’s washing my chest with a loofah.

She peeks up at me and says, “Sorry, I don’t have anything other than this sweet-smelling stuff.”

“It’s fine,” I reassure her. “In reality, this is probably better for my skin than a body wash I can also wash my hair with.”

Her giggle bounces off the shower wall as she washes me.

I turn around, and she scrubs my back. When she’s done, I take the loofah from her. I squeeze more body wash on her before I put it on her body and suds her up.

It’s impossible for me to not get hard as I wash her. Before, it was difficult, but now there’s no fighting it. My cock rises when she lifts her arms to gather her hair to one side. Then she turns around for me to get her back, and when I’m done, I run my hands through the suds on her back. As I’m rubbing her shoulders, she reaches back and takes hold of my cock, tightening her fingers around it. Instantly, I thrust into her hand, something she seems to like. A small seductive smile turns up on her lips, and she tightens her grip. Her slick starts to take over the sweet vanilla scent and dominates it.

I take the back of her head in my hand and pull her closer to me, leaning down so I can taste that sweet mouth of hers. She continues stroking my growing cock, and I pump into her grip, needing to feel a different kind of tightness around it. In no time at all, we’re surrounded by the thick, hypnotizing aroma of her slick, and I delve my hand into the valley between her legs to find a slippery wetness waiting for me.

Lifting her arms, she takes the hint and wraps her arms around my shoulders. I slide my hands down her dripping body and glide one of my hands through the water on her skin, moving all the way down to her ass to the back of her thigh so I can hook her leg around my waist. Her pussy opens for me, and I slide right inside of her.

“Fuck. Yes.” She moans as I ease inside of her.

I lift her other leg, and she slides further onto me, so deep she lets out a small gasp before she settles onto it. Backing her up against the shower wall, I pump into her. Now that I’m inside of her, I know I’m not going to be stopping for a while, and with how wet she is, I don’t think she’s going to have a problem with that.

CHAPTER 32

JADE

IT'S BEEN SO LONG since I felt this kind of tranquility. It's different from how I remember it. It could be because the bear I'm with isn't the same. I don't have many experiences to go off of, but I'm guessing this bond holds the same rules as any relationship. It's a bond but with someone different. I don't know of anyone this has happened to, but for me, so far, it's just as intense as the first, but this time, that familiarity isn't just a feeling. I genuinely feel like I've known Gunner for longer than I have.

I didn't know Michael that long before we figured out we were mates. I had to get to know him despite that feeling in my soul that I'd known him for years. But with Gunner, I've gotten that part out of the way, and this bond is already like soaring. I would love to know who he was from my past life, that every aspect of my current existence is made much more fulfilling when he's around.

He said something that's been bouncing around in my head since he said it. "I want to give you a brighter tomorrow."

I never doubted that he could do that for me. He's never disappointed me, and without him, I'm not sure where I'd be right now. He doesn't know this, but there have been many dark days when I've leaned on him for support. He's always made each of my days more bearable. I just hope I can do that for him. There are some things I can't deliver on, and one day what we have now might not be enough.

Gunner brings his hand up to my hair and twirls a lock of my hair around his finger.

“You’re quiet. What are you thinking about?” he asks me.

Better to get this out of the way now. I turn around in his arms to face him, then I take a deep breath when I get settled.

“I was thinking about how happy you’ve made me up to this point and the promise you made me. I feel so lucky that you ended up being my mate out of all the others in the world. But I won’t be able to deliver on some things, like cubs.”

He’s silent for a moment, contemplating what I just said. “Honestly, I never really saw myself having kids. I don’t think I want any, actually. It’s not that I don’t like little ones. I just prefer to be able to give them back to their parents than be the one the cub is handed back to.”

“You won’t be disappointed with not having any?” I ask him

“No, not at all. The fun part is trying anyway,” he grins, pulling me closer.

I smile hearing him say that. Thank goodness.

“That must have been taking up a lot of real estate in your head,” Gunner states.

Truthfully I say, “It’s been one of the things I’ve been worried about not being able to give you.”

“All I need is you, baby,” he says. “Nothing else. We could be the last two left on earth, and I’d be completely fine with that. You’re perfect the way you are. I want you to be able to see that for yourself.” I know where he’s going with this. “Not being able to shift doesn’t take away from how amazing you are either.”

I don’t reply. I can’t agree with him on that. Even he wasn’t happy again until he could shift again.

“I know that’s one thing that will always upset you,” he says when I don’t reply. “And I have a way to help you.”

Taken off guard, the solution he brought to me the other day comes back to my mind. I’m not ready to revisit that. I’m still getting over the most recent time I tried.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for that,” I admit.

“Is it because you’re scared it won’t work or because it has to do with witches?” He asks me.

“It’s a mixture of both but mainly the first one.”

He nods, then starts rubbing circles in my lower back.

“I get that. Roxy vouched for her,” he tells me. “I know it’s pretty taboo, but we only learned to be wary of witches because some practice black magic, but not all of them do. Not all witches are like that, and I’m sure in today’s time, there are more good ones than bad. This witch specializes in earth magic and natural healing. If Roxy didn’t talk shit about her, then she can be trusted. I’m sure Roxy wouldn’t set you up with someone that means to do you harm.”

I don’t really know what to say. If Roxy goes to her, then it must be safe, but still. The idea of letting a witch work her magic on pieces of me that I don’t even know is intimidating. But this is the only other thing I haven’t tried. What if this is the only thing that can help me?

“Roxy spoke with her,” Gunner continues. “Her name is Aspen. She confirmed this is something she can do. I have her card. I’ll give it to you so you can make the call whenever you’re ready. If it doesn’t work, I won’t put you through it anymore, and I’ll be here for you no matter what. But this isn’t an opportunity I think you should pass up.”

I let out a long breath, then swallow the reluctance I feel. I don’t want to completely shoot this down because this just may be the only thing that helps me, but what if it doesn’t?

“I still don’t know, Gunner,” I say. “Let me sleep on it. I’ll have an answer in the morning when I’m not so exhausted.”

“Say no more,” he says. “I’ll give you the card in the morning.”

“Okay.” I take his face in my hands, wanting to change the subject. “How are you feeling after shifting?”

“Back to being stiff,” he replies. “But I feel good. I don’t think that’s something I could have done had you not been pushing me and working with me these past few weeks.”

His arms come around my waist, pulling me closer to him. He nestles his face between my breast, and my head rests on the top of his head.

Bliss.



The little white gold-lettered card sits on the coffee table in front of me. Despite last night's chase into the woods, I couldn't sleep thinking about this little card Gunner gave me. I've been out of bed since seven trying to decide if I want to call the number or not.

Such a small thing holds so much weight. This could be the solution to all of my problems, or it could be the very last time I face this kind of self-disappointment. If a witch can't help me, then there's nothing that can be done for me. A part of me wants to try this out so bad. If this works, I'll come out the other side a shifter. That same thought is why I've been let down so many times, but as many times as it hasn't worked, I've never given up hope. I'm at the end of my rope now.

I have the number on it dialed—all I have to do is press send, but every time I make the move to press the button, I chicken out. Yes, I'm nervous about putting my faith in witches. I know that they aren't all bad and wicked. As Gunner said, there are probably more good ones than there are bad ones, and Roxy knows this one. I trust Roxy with my life, so going to witches for something like this on her recommendation should be safe.

I nervously chew my lip, trying to come to a decision. I'm so close to calling the number. If I don't, then I'll never know if this is just what I needed. Either I could be setting myself up, this could turn out in my favor, or I'll never know at all. Is not knowing better than being disappointed? My mind is telling me to rip the card up to prevent the hole that's going to form inside my chest, but my soul tells me to go for it. I'll get over the disappointment, but not knowing is going to nag me.

Taking a deep breath, I make my decision. It's impossible not to get my hopes up, but I'll have Gunner to catch me if I fall.

Before I can back out again, I hit the call button, and my heart starts thumping hard in my chest as I wait for her to answer. The phone rings only twice before she picks up.

"Good morning. This is Aspen." Her voice is sing-songy and sweet. Pleasant. It helps me collect my nerves so I can answer her.

"H-hi," I say nervously into the phone. "I'm Jade—I'm a friend of Roxy's. I think she spoke with you about helping me with shifting."

"Jade!" she says excitedly into the phone. "It's nice to be talking with you. It feels like I already know you! Roxy talks about you so much."

That's surprising.

"She does?" I ask her. "Roxy's not one to go in-depth about much of anything."

"I don't think she realizes she does it," Aspen laughs. "I love her. But yes, she spoke to me about what you need help with."

"Did she seem mad that I didn't tell her?" I ask her curiously, wondering how that conversation went.

Aspen hums thoughtfully. "Hmm, not mad. Maybe a little disappointed, but I can understand your hesitancy to tell anyone. It's not the same, but being a witch isn't exactly a revered identity. When anyone finds out what I am—whether they're human, shifter, vampire, orc, or fairy—everyone is frightened away or hates us. I'm sure a shifter that can't shift must have a hard time in your world."

I guess I never really thought about what that's like for them, being hated without personally giving anyone a reason to feel that way. That has to be shitty. I'm not hated because I can't shift, but I have been looked at as less than by some.

"How do you deal with that?" I ask her. "With everyone instantly disliking you?"

“With my business,” she tells me. “If some know that not all of us are bad, then eventually it’ll just be the bad ones that are hated, like it should be with anyone that decides to hurt anyone just because they can.”

It’s really easy to like her.

“Have you helped many shifters like me?” I ask her.

“Seven, actually.”

“Wow.” I’m actually shocked. “I know there are more out there like me, but you’ve met more of them than I have.”

“You’d be surprised,” she says. “And not all of them are half-shifters.”

“What? Full shifters have this problem too?”

“Yeah—sometimes it can be a mental block, other times it’s because their energies are off. But I’ve helped four half-shifters get in touch with their primal side. Most full shifters come into the world connected to their bears, whereas half shifters sometimes need their bear to be awakened.”

“So, you’re telling me I have a bear; she’s just sleeping.”

“Precisely,” Aspen says. “She just needs a lil’ shake, is all.”

“You make it sound so simple,” I say.

She lets out a laugh.

“It only sounds that way. The process is a bit more tedious,” she tells me. “It takes the help of another witch to open the channel to your primal half. What we would do is take you out to the clearing behind my house so you can be soaked in the light of the full moon. All your personal power comes from it, and this is the time when your connection with your bear will be the strongest. She’ll have the energy to come out once we connect the two of you. You’ll lie in the middle of a salt circle to protect yourself against any opportunistic or evil spirits while you’re in a vulnerable, meditative sleep state, but you’ll still feel like you’re awake. However, on the outside, you won’t be. While you’re in that state, I’m going to be using a combination of spells and crystal work on you to remove the blockage that’s probably there and to wake your bear. Once I

do that, you'll be able to see her, which will ultimately lead to you being able to shift into her."

"Really?" I ask her. "I should be able to shift once I see her?"

"Not should-will," Aspen says confidently. "Tonight or tomorrow night will be best. Tonight is a full moon, but tomorrow the energy from tonight's moon will still be present, so the ritual will still work."

I blow air through my lips. "I don't have much time to decide, huh."

"You can take your time. Full moons aren't rare, you know. If you need a month to think it over, do that."

"No," I quickly say. "Tonight. Let's do it tonight. Is that too short notice?"

"Not at all. In fact, I was hoping you'd say tonight. Just come with an open heart and an open mind. Otherwise, this may not work, and we might have to do it again. Get rid of your doubts. You're in safe hands with Harper and me."

"Roxy recommended you, so I'm confident you'll be able to help me," I tell her. "How much is this going to be?"

"Eh, let's consider this a favor for a friend."

"Aspen—"

"No, really," she cuts me off. "I want to do this for you. I feel like this has been a source of pain for you for a long time now, so I want to help with that."

Oh shit...

"Okay," I say because I have no clue what else to say.

"Great then!" she exclaims. "Then I will see you tonight, and remember—show up with an open heart."

"I will. See you then."

After we hang up, I stare at the phone in my hand as nervousness begins to creep in. This is really happening. I'm really doing this.

I stand up, and as I move to my room, it feels like I'm in a dream. When I get to my room, Gunner's sitting up against the headboard, and he looks at me approach him.

"So tonight?" he asks, and I nod.

I let out a deep, shaking sigh, and he lifts the comforter. Instantly I go to him and snuggle into his side, my head resting on his shoulder.

He doesn't need to say anything at all to take my worry away—he doesn't have to say a word. Being with him like this is doing enough.



After that early morning call, I try to get myself to see this as any other day, at least until it's time to go see Aspen. That way, I don't explode from nervousness and excitement, but it's hard. Per Aspen's words, I keep all the negativity out of my mind and remain optimistic about what I'm going to be doing tonight.

I just have to get through the day first, which is going to start by checking on Terra. After the night she had, I want to check in on her and make sure she's okay.

I knock on her door when I get to her apartment, and immediately, she tells me to hold on. Didn't expect that. Usually, it takes knocking a few times to get her to reply.

The door swings open, and she's already dressed for the day. When she sees me standing here, she gives me a soft smile.

"Hey," she says, opening the door wider. "You want to come in?"

Oh wow, now I'm really shocked. "I'm good, actually—I just stopped by on the way to work. Thought I'd check on you. How are you?"

"Better," she tells me, wringing her hands. "I didn't get much sleep, but I'm still better than I was. I was actually on my way to apologize to you?"

Confused, I purse my lips and ask, “Why? You don’t have anything to apologize for.”

“I feel like I do,” she sighs.

“But you don’t,” I reiterate.

She purses her lips as she regards me for just a moment, then she nods.

“Then let me thank you,” she says. “When I was being carried back here, I was so grateful that you were sitting outside last night. I’m glad I’m here. You know how those doubtful voices in your head convince you of things that aren’t true? Mine have been kind of loud lately, but after last night, they’ve been quiet. You, Flint, and the gang saved me from making a choice that was controlled by fear last night.”

Hearing that come out of her mouth makes me smile.

“You have a place here, Terra,” I remind her. “We would do anything to keep you here, including running ten miles to prevent you from leaving. You don’t know how happy I am to hear you say that. You deserve to live a fulfilling life.”

She nods along, agreeing with me. “That’s another reason why I was on my way to the club. I wanted to talk to you about that pole dancing class. I want to do it. I have since the day you asked me. I just didn’t know if I was going to be here for long. I wasn’t sure I was wanted here.”

“Well, you definitely are,” I say. “Just...for the future. Come talk to me if you need someone, okay? You don’t even have to talk. We can just hang out. Don’t let those dark thoughts win.”

She seems so relieved she almost looks relaxed.

“Okay,” she smiles. “I’ll do that.”

“Good.” Now, I smirk at her. “We can discuss that pole dancing class some other time. Today, if you want to take the day off, you can.”

But she shakes her head. “After hiding away in here, I want to get out and be around others. I need to be.”

“Okay, well, do you want to ride to work with me then?”

“Yeah! Just let me get my stuff. I’ll only be a second.”

She turns to go back inside her apartment, leaving the door open.

I stand here waiting for her, elated that she’s come to this point. One of the things that kept me up all night has been cleared from my list of things to worry about. At the end of the day, another will be checked off, and I’m optimistic that the outcome will be positive like Terra’s.

CHAPTER 33

JADE

I LEAN AGAINST THE TRUCK, staring up at the full moon, soaking in as much of its magic as I can. I'm going to need it. Gunner stands silently beside me, giving me silent encouragement. All day, I've kept a positive mind, and as we patiently wait for Roxy to get here, I imagine what it's going to be like to finally run through the forest as my bear. I've been picturing it, and that vivid image in my mind is really what kept me the most positive.

When Roxy finally pulls up, she doesn't get off her ride—she comes to a stop in front of us and asks me if I'm ready.

I'm beyond ready. I'm so anxious to get there that I feel like I might actually explode.

After riding to the outskirts of Bayton, we re-enter the forest, driving down a dirt road with houses on both sides, but Roxy doesn't stop at any of them. Instead, she keeps going to the end, then she leads us down a barely noticeable trail through the trees. The closer we get, the colder my hands become, and my excitement rises. Gunner rubs my leg soothing me.

Finally, we come to a small wooden cabin in a clearing. The door opens, and light floods out from the doorway, the light silhouetting someone, probably Aspen, waving at us. Roxy parks a little ways from the house, and Gunner stops beside her. Now that we're here, my entire body is shaking.

"This is going to work, Jade," Gunner tells me. "You're going to be okay."

"It's hard not to be nervous."

“You’ve got this,” he says, then kisses my forehead, and I relax just a bit, letting out a sigh.

Knocking comes on my right, and I look over at Roxy, smiling through the window at me.

“Take your time; I’ll be inside,” she says.

After a few more minutes, I finally gather the courage to get out of the truck, and Gunner follows me to the front door that’s still open. Inside I find Roxy sitting with three women on a chocolate-colored couch. I almost miss them on account of the forest in this place. I take a deep breath, and the sharp scent of eucalyptus and cedar fills my nose and clears my sinuses.

“Welcome to my home!” A woman with wild, curly red hair greets us.

Aspen. Her voice is easily recognizable. She’s cute with her face full of freckles and her little pointed nose. Her silver eyes hold an infectious excitement that takes away some of my anxiety. She motions for me to come over to where they’re all sitting. “Come join us.”

“Alright,” I say, making my way over to the group of women.

Roxy moves to sit on a velvet bronze ottoman right in front of Aspen and the others, and I sit beside Roxy.

“I’m Harper,” the girl on the end with the shaved head says. “I’ll be helping Aspen with the ritual.”

“Rowan,” the strawberry blonde introduces herself. “I was here hanging out and decided I’d stick around just in case they need help.”

“Sorry, I don’t have anything for you to sit on,” Aspen says, looking over at Gunner. He’s still standing close to the door.

“It’s not a problem,” he says. “I’m fine standing.”

“Who are you?” The strawberry blonde asks him.

“Gunner,” he answers.

She nods, then looks back at me.

“You’re in good hands,” she tells me before she looks back and forth between Aspen and Harper. “If the two of you have this, I’m going to help him—” then she looks over at Gunner. “—if you’ll accept my help.”

I glance at Gunner, and he’s looking at me already, but then his eyes go back to Rowan.

“Me?” he asks her.

“What’s going on?” I ask. We haven’t been here five minutes, and somehow, she may have found something wrong with Gunner.

Rowan stands up and goes over to him, carefully looking him over. “I’m not sure yet,” she says as she thinks. “I’d like your permission to figure that out, though. I can only feel that something is going on with you, but I won’t look any deeper until you say I can.”

He glances at me, and I hesitate for a breath before I nod. This might actually help him, and I do feel comfortable enough with the witches to not worry that something’s going to happen to him.

He looks back at her and agrees. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Can I use your workroom?” Rowan asks Aspen.

“Sure,” she says, then looks at me. “And you’re going to follow me to my moon space. You can stay here, Roxy. This will probably take a while. I have that jerky you like in there. Help yourself.”

“Sweet!” Roxy says, going straight for the kitchen.

I follow Aspen down the hallway outside the backdoor and cover the distance from her backyard into the forest. It’s dark out here; the only light comes from the moon, and the wind gently blows, making the treetops rustle and sway. If not for the subtle buzz coming from the moon, I think I’d be more nervous than I am. Without Gunner by my side, I do feel more anxiety, but talking to the three of them did a great deal to make me a little more comfortable than I was this entire day.

Once we make it through the trees, we walk into a clearing where everything is still.

“Stand here, and I’m going to make the salt ring,” Aspen says. She turns around, and her red curls bounce behind her.

Hands come down on my shoulders, and Harper starts massaging them. “Loosen up some dollface,” Harper says. “Nervousness is natural and expected. You’re going to be fine.”

Because of Gunner’s steady reassurance and my optimism, it’s easy to believe her.

“Okay,” I say, rolling my head from side to side. “I’m loose.”

“Good,” she laughs, coming around to face me. “Declaring it solidifies it. Now breathe with me.”

She takes a deep breath and then blows it out, and I follow her lead. “Use the energy of the full moon to guide your shift. But be ready for the pain that comes with it. Most shifters who have never shifted before aren’t prepared for how bad it hurts.”

“That, nobody has ever mentioned to me, but I kind of figured there has to be some amount of pain when every bone and muscle in the body moves and reshapes,” I reply. “But I’m ready for it. I’ve been waiting my entire life for this moment.”

Harper smiles at me. “It gets easier the more you do it, so you won’t have to worry about the pain remaining the same.”

“Okay!” Aspen calls to us. “It’s ready.”

I turn around, and in the center of the clearing is a ring of salt on the ground. The full moon sits high above the circle, perfectly shining down right where I’ll be lying.

“This is the best spot to do anything that requires full moon work,” Aspen tells me. “I’ve taken some energizing full moon baths out here. I can set one up for you if you’re into that.”

“That sounds lovely, actually,” I reply, genuinely interested.

“They’re the best thing ever. Are you ready?”

“Yes, but I’m a little more nervous now,” I admit to her.

She gives me an understanding nod. “That’s natural, but as long as you still know this will work, we can work with that.” She presses her hand into my lower back and guides me forward. “You’ll be just fine.”

“Just go ahead and lie down,” Aspen says. “While you’re meditating, we’re going to help link your spirit and your bear together.”

As instructed, I lie flat on my back and stare up at the full moon above me.

“We’ll get started whenever you’re ready,” Aspen says.

After a few more deep breaths, I shut my eyes, trying to latch on to the silence so I can start meditating. I try to clear my mind as best as I can. It’s hard to do that when everything in the forest speaks to me. I have no idea how long I have my eyes closed before it starts to feel like I’m floating in this dark void with peace surrounding me. The sounds of the forest never cut out. In fact, they become louder as I float in this darkness. It feels nice being suspended like this and cradled in this palpable warmth.

The rustling becomes louder, and I’m met with a little light that I float towards. But I don’t have to move for it—everything around me becomes brighter as the forest comes at me from the darkness. Everything is crisp and bright, as the sun shines down on the world around me. I just want to run, so I burst forward, letting the exhilaration take over as I run full speed over fallen pine needles. Maybe I don’t know what it’s like to be running through the forest as my bear, but this is like nothing I’ve ever felt before. I follow the lively energy that pulls me deeper until I get to a cave carved into the side of a mountain. Most of the energy is coming from there, so I curiously follow the pull and wonder inside.

It’s dark, but there’s a light way in the distance, and I go to it because I’ve ventured too far to turn back now. Behind me, the cave entrance has vanished, so my only way to go is forward.

As I get closer, I make out a lump lying directly in a beam of light shining down from above. It’s moving, the center of it slowly rising and falling. Then, I start to hear deep, even

breathing, sounding loud in this closed-off space. For a moment, my throbbing heart freezes me in my steps. I'm terrified to wake this slumbering beast, but I don't have to approach it. She stirs, and her head lifts. I take a step back, but when she looks over her shoulder, I stop.

Squinting, I take a step closer as she rises to her feet.

Is that...me?

She gets to her feet and then stretches, pushing her butt into the air to release the tension in her back before she makes her way to me.

As she gets closer, I inhale, taking in her majestic presence and graceful stride. She sniffs as she gets closer, but as she does, it really connects that that's me. Her shining silver eyes take me in like she's known me forever, then she lifts her wet nose to my forehead.

Shutting my eyes, I bring my hands to the sides of her face as a vibration rolls through my entire body. It goes straight through my third eye all the way down to my feet, then spreads outward to my body.

My bear lets out a huff of air.

"Wake up!" I hear whispered in my ear.

My eyes fly open, and it's nighttime again. I feel like I just woke up from a surreal dream. My eyes land right on the shining silver moon, and the deep breath I take this time feels so very pure that I feel like an entirely new person. There's a buzzing chord going straight through my body that wasn't there before. How I thought I felt the world before has nothing on what it is now. It's like I'm a part of nature, like I just stepped into an entirely different plane. The forest is alive with a vibration I wasn't even aware of, one that rumbles through the air and beneath my back.

"Woah," I breathe out.

"You can shift now," Aspen tells me, and I let my head fall in the direction of her voice. She stands with Harper just outside of the salt ring. "We'll leave you to do that."

Finally, I heard those life-altering words.

When they're gone, I strip out my clothes and do just like Gunner said. I breathe in the air around me and feel the environment until my bear pokes her head up. I can see her in my mind coming forward, and I grab onto that constant vibration that's now connecting us. As soon as I grab onto it, it's like it pulls me inward, and the world around me follows. My bear runs at me, and when we collide, the pain comes all at once. Like all of my bones getting smashed. My muscles are pulled just beyond their limits as a sharp throbbing splits my entire skull, just as my whole body breaks out into an itch so unbearable my skin feels like it's on fire. I can hear every single one of my bones clacking together inside of me as I shift.

Finally, that's done, and I remain on the forest floor, unmoving as my body throbs, but it subsides rather quickly. The beat of my heart is steady but powerful, and as I push myself up off the ground, an energy that I've never felt before takes over. The air smells sweeter, and the world around me is so much clearer. But the one thing that really gets me is the familiar scents. Roxy's rosy scent comes to me, but Gunner's scent is so much spicier and oakier than before. I take my first steps, and it's like I've been doing this all my life.

It feels natural. I pick up speed as I walk until I'm running full speed through the trees, following my mate's scent back to the little cabin.

CHAPTER 34

GUNNER

REWIND to when Rowan took Gunner into Aspen's workroom

I'm standing in a dimly lit room with pillows piled in the center of the floor. Shelves hang on the wall with crystals, sage, and incense organized on top, and there's a bookshelf in the far right corner of the room. To my right, there's a refrigerator, and of course, there are plants everywhere. On a table on the left wall of the room, labeled organization bins sit stacks on each other, and different decks of tarot cards are placed in front of them. There's so much going on in here, it's hard to really focus on just one thing.

"Okay, Gunner," Rowan says once the door shuts. "Bear with me. I'm working in a new space, so I'm not sure where Aspen keeps everything, but I'm going to figure it out."

"No worries," I tell her. "I wasn't expecting this, so I'm not complaining. Should I sit?" I ask her, motioning to the pillows.

"I can roll that ottoman in here if the floor is too low for you," she suggests.

"No, I can make it."

She continues to search around as I make my way over to the pillows. As she moves around the room, I glance around, finding something eye-catching on every surface, but I freeze when I land on a blue spine book on the bookshelf with gold lettering that reads *Peering into Past Lives*.

One thing comes to my mind when I see it. I need to know how I came to be lucky enough to be with someone like her. She could be with absolutely anyone on this planet, but the universe put us together. I want to be able to give her everything she deserves. I'm not trying to make her forget about her first mate, but I at least want to make sure she feels just as secure with me as she did before. I want to know why the Universe put her with someone who can't easily provide her with what she needs.

"What can you tell me about true mates?" I blurt out. "How is it possible for someone to have two?"

"Quite possible," she says knowingly. "Some people end up with the same soul over and over again. That's the most common. But there are some souls who have fallen into different cycles. Not every couple gets to love each other until they die together. I read this years ago when I was eager to find my soul mate. I try not to think about it, so I avoid an existential mind collapse. Some people have more than one mate because that's the cycle that was set in their first lives. They found their first mate, then lost them, and found their second mate in the soul that comforted them. I feel horrible for the souls that don't get to live out their full lives together, but there's some happiness to be found for the two that end up together."

Her explanation isn't what I was expecting, and it hits hard. This will always be how Jade and I come together whenever we are lucky enough to find one another. It pains me that she'll always have to endure this kind of pain in each one of her lives, but now that I know this, I'm going to make sure that she finds a reason to smile all day, every day.

Rowan gazes at me, her eyes soft. "Are you the comforter?" she asks me.

I nod. "Yeah."

"So then be strong," she orders me. "She needs you. I'm glad you came with her. I can help you help her." She smiles at me before she nods to my cane. "Why do you walk with the

cane?” she asks me, rummaging around. “I don’t think I know any shifters that need a cane.”

“I got attacked,” I answer. “Almost died that day, but a healer saved my life.”

She looks impressed.

“A magic healer?” she asks, closely looking at the crystals on the shelves. “Is she also a shifter?”

“Yeah. Wolf.”

She nods. “You know, healers are stronger when they’re shifters. They can heal practically anyone back to brand new. It’s not instant, of course. There is going to be some residual pain left over. The first few weeks are always hard, but their magic makes anyone heal completely.”

“Then that makes me a magic mystery. It’s been months since this happened, and I’ve only recently started making constant progress.”

“I hate to tell you,” she says, examining a crystal. “But that’s as much progress as you’re going to make. You’ve got a thick block getting in your way.”

I look at her, confused. “A..block.”

She nods, confirming I heard her right.

“I felt it when you walked through the door,” she tells me. “But there’s a silver lining to this. You have to be pretty strong mentally to put this kind of block on yourself. There’s no magical influence on this one. This is all you. You said you’ve been making progress recently, but there are still parts of you that have accepted your condition.”

That sounds familiar, painfully so. I can’t even count the number of times I’ve heard something similar come out of Flint and Jade’s mouth. If it had been a few weeks ago, I would’ve had a rebuttal for her assumption, but I can’t confidently dispute it. She clearly knows what she’s talking about.

“You can tell all of that with just a few questions?”

She shakes her head. "Since you accepted my help, I've been digging a little deeper and found pessimism. It's all over your aura. Thick too."

"I'm not sure what to say," I admit. "It's nothing I haven't heard before."

She looks over her shoulder at me. "What stopped you from hearing it?"

I shrug. "I figured nobody knew what they were talking about because they didn't know the extent of the pain I was in. I didn't really want to hear that I needed to have a more positive attitude when every step was agonizing."

"That's understandable," she nods, pausing in her search to look at me. "None of us will ever really know the full extent of pain someone's in, and being told to be more positive sounds like being told to suck it up and smile. In most cases, though, being pessimistic isn't as detrimental as it was for you. You'd be surprised at how strong your own thoughts are."

"Yeah, I'm learning that," I confirm.

"Do you still have scars?" she asks me, and I nod, then she goes back to searching the shelves. "That's a good indicator. No matter how deep they are, they should have healed by now. If not while the healer was working on you, then at least a few weeks later. That's one of the great benefits of healing magic. It usually leaves no scars." She turns around and holds up a clear stone. "This is going to help you."

"What is it?"

"Clear quartz," she says. "It's like the jack of all trades of stones. It can be used for so much."

Interesting.

"How does it work?" I ask her.

"What you're going to do is lie back, and I'm going to place this on your forehead," she tells me. "You're going to close your eyes and breathe while I work with the stone to remove this block."

"So then, after that, the block will be gone?"

She shrugs before she answers. “That’s the goal, and it usually works. However, everyone is different, and seeing as how you blocked yourself, we might need to take a different approach.”

I let out a sigh, ready for anything.

“Okay,” I comply, lying down.

I get comfortable, and after I close my eyes, the cool crystal touches my forehead, and Rowan’s warm fingers land on my temples. But the feel of them dissolves the longer I lie here.

It’s odd, the longer I’m here with my eyes closed, a pressure I didn’t feel before begins to crack and chip away. My entire being, physically and spiritually, starts to feel lighter as I float in darkness. It’s a peaceful space, one that can be compared with a conscious state of slumber. I could stay here a while.

“You can open your eyes now,” a voice says softly, and it takes me a moment to actually listen to it.

When I finally do open my eyes, the room is blurry for a moment.

“Take your time sitting up,” she instructs me. “That mental clarity is going to result in some lightheadedness. I was only able to remove some of it.”

“Some?” I ask, blinking, trying to get my vision to clear.

“Yep,” she tells me. “I got rid of some of it and loosened it up for you to do the rest. If it was a magic block, I’d be able to do something about all of it, but since this one is self-inflicted, you have to do the work to remove the rest. Ultimately, that’s what’s stopping you from fully healing. Your feelings of discouragement about your future, lack of faith in yourself, and overall negativity surrounding your situation are stopping that tension in your gut from leaving. It’s all concentrated there. You know how we told Jade to come with an open mind and an open heart? Well, you have to have that attitude toward the future.”

I’ve been nervous about what the future holds. Mainly because going forward with this tension at my core worries me. How am I supposed to protect Jade if I still have issues getting around in my regular form? What will our life be like if she

has to cater to me every single moment of the day? She'll eventually resent me, and I wouldn't be able to handle it if she ever started to hate me.

I need to let go of all of that.

"I'm sure you're good to get up now," Rowan tells me, and I sit up.

My head swims just a bit, but I remain sitting straight up.

"It should be easier from here," she tells me as I stand. "Let's go back out. I'm sure I heard Aspen and Harper come back in a little bit ago."

As she walks towards the door, everything I just discovered vanishes from my mind. If they're back, then that means Jade is probably shifting. Excitement flares inside of me as I picture us running through the forest side by side. A part of me feels bad her late mate never got to experience it, but I'm happy I was the one that was able to help her.

"Wait," I say, and she stops at the door. "How much do I owe you?" I ask her, reaching into my jacket pocket for my wallet.

She shakes her head, opening the door. "Nothing. I offered to do that for you. I couldn't let you go on with that kind of block."

"That only makes me want to pay you for your services more," I tell her.

"I won't accept it," she laughs. "Don't ruin the little bit of good I put out into the universe by forcing your money on me."

"I don't want to ruin that for you," I laugh.

In the living room, the front door is open, and I hear Aspen and Harper. We follow the sound of their voices outside.

"Where's Jade?" I ask Aspen.

"She should be coming through those trees any moment now," Aspen says. "We left her back there to shift."

Excitement flares up through my core, and I glance at Roxy, who's smiling at me.

“So it worked?” I ask.

She nods. “Yeah. She did well too.”

After she tells me that, the only thing I can focus on is seeing Jade coming through those trees. I stand listening to them talk, and it’s wild that they get grouped in with the bad witches. It’s easy to tell there isn’t anything vicious about them. They’re just happy women that get a bad rap because of a few bad witches. They’re just normal women trying to live like the rest of us.

I scent Jade before I see her—a sweet fragrant pine smell that takes over my nose. Then I hear her walking through the brush before she finally comes through into the clearing.

She’s sleek, her dark mahogany fur shining in the moonlight, her silver eyes glowing. I’m speechless watching her come closer to us.

Beside me, Roxy laughs.

“Of course, even her bear would be fucking gorgeous,” Roxy says.

I would have said it if I could find my words.

I go to her, happiness and admiration surging through me as I take in her graceful bear, meeting her halfway. She’s small, only coming up to my belly button, but she has to be the most beautiful bear I’ve ever seen. I place my hand under her mouth, caressing her chin, and she nestles into my hand. Like this, she’s even more precious, and I can’t help but lean over and kiss her between the eyes.

Looking right into her shining, excitement-filled silver eyes, my chest expands.

“You are beautiful,” I tell her. “In every way. Inside and out. I’m going to do everything I can to make sure you’re happy every day, Jade. I mean it. Your joy is mine, and I’ll do everything in my power to see your eyes light up how they are now all the time. I’m going to make sure every minute of our life together is beautiful.”

Carefully, she starts standing on her back legs, but she doesn't quite have that down yet, so I reach out and support her so she can rub her snout up and down the side of my face, an affectionate gesture that makes me hug her.

I hold her furry, hot body up, loving how she feels, and now I have the urge to shift with her.

"Let's go for a run," I suggest before releasing her and helping her down to the ground.

She bobs her head up and down, ecstatic. I turn around, but Roxy and the others aren't there. I figured they left to give us some privacy.

I follow her into the woods to the clearing where she shifted. I take my clothes off and put them with hers. Before I shift, I mentally prepare myself for the pain I'm about to feel, and as I shift, I tell myself that one day, I won't hurt like this at all. The entire time, Jade's by my side, keeping a close eye as I change.

When my shift is complete, she nudges me with her nose, making sure I'm okay. I definitely am, and now that I've gone primal, Jade's scent is so much better than before. She nudges me again, knocking me out of the trance I'm in because of her scent, and I gaze into her eyes to find them shining with playfulness.

She lightly nips at me a couple times, and when I get up, she takes off. I watch her run, slow at first, but then she picks up speed. For a moment, I watch her, finding pleasure in her glee before I finally take off after her.

I easily catch her, but when I do, I slow down and run a little behind her. I'm lucky that I get to be with her at this moment, joining along on her first run as her bear. She's the happiest I've ever seen her. I wouldn't trade this moment for anything.

The longer we run, the faster she gets. For as small as she is, she certainly is fast. She's half my size in weight and only comes up to my belly button, but the speed behind her is magnificent. I'm sure she's testing out what she can do with this new form of hers. I'm looking forward to the day when she figures out just how strong she is in this form and what it's

like to hunt. All the first we have to experience, and I'm the lucky bear that gets to do it all with her.

That part of my future that I am looking forward to. Never once did I think about replacing her mate, nor do I want her to forget him. He's a part of her past, but I'm her future, and she's mine. With her, it doesn't seem so daunting. We can build a wonderful life together, and who knows what that will be like—cubs or no cubs, staying at the club or returning to my duties with the gang, where we end up in the distant future—I'm fine with whatever just as long as Jade's by my side.

As I realize I'm okay with whatever, suddenly, there's a weightlessness that takes over my body, and my stride becomes faster and longer. My feet pound the ground harder than they did before as my legs grow more powerful in seconds. A bright explosion of energy rushes through me, and I feel like I could fly.

Jade looks back at me, shocked, but the movement throws her off, and she trips, sending her rolling across the ground, and I end up falling over her. We tumble for a moment, and when we come to a stop, Jade's on her side, breathing hard. I start for her, making sure she's not hurt, but then she starts to shift back. I follow her lead. To my astonishment, the shift back isn't as painful as it has been the last few times I shifted. In fact, when I'm done, the tightness in my abdomen is gone.

Holy shit...

Jade lies beside me laughing.

I wish I had a camera to capture this. Her rosy cheeks push up into her shining green eyes that now hold a different kind of zest for life. Her long dark hair has leaves and pine needles all throughout it, and she's smeared in a few places with dirt.

Fuck she's gorgeous, and she's all mine.

Her head falls over to me, adoration in her eyes. She sits up, then climbs right on top of me, straddling my legs, and she leans right over her lips inches from mine.

"Welcome back," she says in a low husky voice. "You can get rid of that cane now."

Then her slightly chilled lips come to mine, and I lose myself in her sweet kiss.

EPILOGUE

MARILYN

I GRAB onto the top of the stall wall, using it to hold myself up as Gunner thrusts into me, his hips moving in time to the beat of the music pulsing through the walls. This was never the outcome before when we danced together, but now most things end with him sheathed inside of me. Waiting until the night is over wasn't even an option. After dancing for forty minutes straight, this end was inevitable. We knew what we were getting into when we started. When Gunner leaned into my ear and whispered, "bathroom?" I already knew what was going on.

As he cums, he kisses me, and I taste myself on his lips from when he ate me out when we first got in here. I smile as his lips move against mine, and he pulls back from me, one of his eyebrows raised.

"What?" he asks.

I brush my thumb against his bottom lip, and he sucks it into his mouth.

"Nothing," I reply. "I just like how my pussy tastes on your tongue."

He gives me a devilish grin before pulling me closer to him and burying his face in my neck.

"I want to taste more of you," he says, and I laugh as his hot breath tickles across my skin. "But I'm going to have to wait. Someone's bound to come in here at any moment."

He lets me down and backs away from me, grabbing his pants from the corner of the stall by the door.

“You know how many people have fucked in this stall alone?” I ask him, digging into my purse for a wet nap. “If anyone did walk in, they’d probably be here for the same reason we are.”

He laughs as I wipe myself clean.

I tie my ruined panties up in a plastic bag and replace them with clean, fresh ones I carry around with me, something I’ve learned from being caught too many times going into heat in public. After so many times, one learns to come prepared for anything.

Pulling my dress down, I straighten my long sleeves and readjust my thigh-high boots.

“Ready?” Gunner asks me, his hand on the lock.

“Ready.”

We leave the bathroom, heading back out into loud, pulsing volume music and a packed bar. I take Gunner’s hand in mine, leading him toward the opening that leads to the main floor, and Roxy enters the short walkway.

What Gunner and I were doing back there is absolutely no secret, and I’m not embarrassed whatsoever by the assumptions she’s making that are correct.

A small smile forms on her lips before she motions over her shoulder with her thumb.

“The fights are about to start!” She yells at us over the music. “Let’s go so we can get a good spot! Elran just announced he wants to go up against Flint!”

Gunner and I are both taken by surprise.

“I know, right!” Roxy yells. “Who would have thought! Let’s go before all the good spots get taken.”

I glance up at Gunner, and the excitement on his face matches how I’m feeling. He takes the lead, pulling me along behind him and parting the crowd, easily making a path for us to pass through. As we walk, I stare at his back, and I have to tilt my head up now that he isn’t hunched over like he was. Ever since that night at Aspen’s, he’s been back to his old self. His limp is gone, and he no longer needs his cane. The mental block he

had on himself was holding him prisoner, and Rowan helped free him. I was already happy with Gunner before, but now it's like being mated with my best friend.

He hasn't gone back to working with the gang yet. Although he's practically at one hundred percent, he still wants to take some time to get stronger after the sedentary life he's been living. Instead of doing pole workouts, he's back in the boxing gym, but our yoga sessions have continued, even though they usually end with sex in my office.

As he opens the door to go outside, I can't help the swell of happiness that spreads throughout my chest. I'm so glad I have him back.

Once we're outside, he yanks me around to the front but instantly wraps his arms around my waist, making me giggle as he buries his face in the crook of my neck. He keeps walking forward, though, guiding us toward where the ring is set up. There's already a crowd around it, but Roxy leads us through all the way to the front where Blade stands.

Out of all the parties the brotherhood has thrown at the Old Storehouse, this one is the biggest. This time around, there are humans here, most of which frequent *Paradise* and have been in the bar these past few weeks. I thought it was only going to take away from the usual fun we have, but it hasn't. They're partying just as hard as us. There are more fire barrels than usual. Flint took into account that it's chillier now, and humans don't heat up like we do. They're crowded around the flames, waiting for the fights to start.

Gunner and I follow Roxy right down to ringside, where we can see everything. Slash and Marilyn are already here, Callie and Holly stand huddled beside them, and Roxy takes up her usual spot in front of Blade. Flint sits on the very edge of the ring, talking to Layla, and the rest of the gang hangs out on the other side of the ring, possibly insulting each other.

The attraction of the hour, Elran, stands talking with Esta. They're both smiling, and I'm sure Esta's drunk. She's only so big, and Roxy didn't take it easy on her. This is their party,

after all, and that's exactly what Roxy yelled as she helped Esta down a shot of tequila.

After giving news to Flint that they finally decided to move here, he made sure to welcome them in a way only we know how—with booze, music, and safe roughhousing. They seem to be enjoying themselves. This is the most I've seen Elran smile since I met him, what feels like ages ago, in the bar. I guess because so much has happened since then. That Jade and present-day Jade are two different people. This one's on the road to healing and a lifetime of happiness. I'm nowhere near where I need to be, but I'll get there.

Blade whispers something in Roxy's ear, and she nods before Blade steps around her and goes to Flint.

"Ready?" Blade asks, and Flint grins, nodding his head.

Blade climbs into the ring and goes over to Elran, who nods at Blade's question. Elran climbs into the ring, and when he does, everyone's attention goes to the two of them getting ready to go at it. I never thought I would see the day when Elran fought anyone, let alone Flint. Given his quiet, peaceful nature, I assumed he'd be a pacifist. He has the kind of aura wild, skittish animals run to. Everything about him is mellow, so seeing him in a fight is going to be action we should have sold tickets for. It's a well-known fact that orcs are pretty rough when it comes to battle, even half-orcs, but I would never have guessed that for Elran. Apparently, he has it in him despite his demeanor.

In most cases, they're stronger than full-blooded orcs, according to Gunner. If he's as strong as we're expecting him to be, this is going to be good. Elran may have met his match.

Tonight, shirts stay on as a cool breeze blows around us, but I have a feeling once they start fighting, shirts are going to come off.

"Alright," Blade says as Flint and Elran stretch their arms, legs, and necks. "These are the rules: No closed-hand blows to the face, low blows to the crotch aren't permitted, and eyes are off limits. Any kind of hold is okay, blows to the chest and

abdomen are cool, and kicks are fine just as long as they aren't directed at the head, face, or crotch. Got it?"

Elran nods as he sizes Flint up, who's already gone into battle mode, his arms by his side as he studies Elran. He's shorter than Elran by about half a foot, and Elran has him beat in the muscle department too. But Elran has already heard that he shouldn't think he has an advantage just because he's bigger.

Esta glides over to us, her usually pale cheeks rosy. Even tipsy, she's still graceful.

"I'm going to stand with you all," she says. "I'm so excited. I've heard about how strong Flint is, and I'm glad I'm finally getting to see him in action."

"Who would you put money on?" I ask her.

"Oh, naturally, Elran," she says. "I know what he's capable of."

I nod. "Fair enough."

Just then, the bell rings, and any conversation is forgotten. Both Elran and Flint spring into action, walking in a circle, waiting on the other to make the first move. Flint's the one that makes it, moving for Elran, who braces himself. Flint throws a jab to Elran's chest, which he blocks only to land a body shot in Flint's gut. From here, the noise it makes sounds like it hurts, causing the crowd to go, "oooooh," but Flint eats it and quickly traps Elran's arm.

From there, Flint delivers two blows—one punch right back to Elran's abdomen and an open palm to his chest. When Flint's palm connects to Elran's chest, Flint lets his arms go, and Elran stumbles backward.

"Shit," Esta hisses. She's watching, stunned like we all are. Flint's holding his own against an orc. "That one blow to the stomach is enough to put anyone on their knees," she tells us, then looks over at us. "And I've never seen Elran affected by a hit like that. How strong is Flint?"

Gunner shakes his head. "We're still trying to gauge that. None of us have ever been able to beat him, and now I see we never had a chance."

Elran dips low to kick Flint's feet out from under him, and Flint barely lands before Elran follows him down, elbow down. However, Flint is quicker. He rolls out of the way, and Elran collides with the mat. He's not on the ground long before he stands up and charges Flint, whose eyes are shining with excitement—both of them appear to be having the time of their lives.

“It's been a while since Elran's been in a good fight,” Esta tells us as we witness Flint get body slammed.

Before Elran can get up, Flint captures him in a headlock and flips them. He's going for a sleeper hold, but Elran manages to get out. They both stand up, and Flint grins at Elran before he takes a few quick steps forward. But Flint surprises Elran with a drop kick that connects with his shoulder. Flint twists in the air and lands on his belly, and Elran flies across the ring.

“It looks like Elran found someone to play with,” Esta giggles. “I've never seen him struggle in a fight before, but he's enjoying it.”

Turns out, Flint is much stronger than any of us thought.

They go at it for a while, tit for tat, blow for blow. All of us stand watching in amazement as Flint and Elran battle it out, all of us eager to see who's going to come out the victor. I glance over at Blade, knowing he's the only other person that has lasted this long against Flint. Elran and Blade are probably evenly matched, then.

In the end, Flint ends up pinning Elran to the ground until he taps out, and the crowd goes wild.

“Fuck,” Gunner breathes out, watching as Flint helps Elran off the mat. “Flint has to be a monster.”

Flint holds Elran's hand in the air, and the crowd cheers again. He definitely deserves some praise after lasting that long in the ring with someone whose strength and endurance can only be described as a super ability. Like a good sport, Elran shakes Flint's hand, and they both exit the ring. Esta practically skips over to Elran and floats into his arms. Her arms circle around

his neck, and he lifts her feet off the ground. Her weight is probably nothing for him to carry over to where we stand.

“That was a good fight,” Gunner tells Elran.

“Flint ain’t natural,” Elran chuckles. “The rest of you are probably stronger than normal too. A gang is only as strong as its leader.”

“Most of us grew up wrestling with him,” Gunner laughs. “Keeping up with him will make anyone a better fighter.”

The bell goes off again, and Tiberius and Ryder are in the ring this time

“I’m gonna win tonight,” Ryder declares. “I’ve been training harder than before.”

“Shut up and show me,” Tiberius rebuts.

Ryder makes the first move, but he ends up flat on his back.

We watch them go at it, but I’m not that focused on what’s happening in the ring anymore. I’m more so lost in this deep sense of belonging that I’ve found as I stand here surrounded by everyone I’ve never really felt fully connected to. I’ve always known I’m safe and welcomed here. I never had to deal with the cold shoulder that most have to face, but now I actually feel like I’m a part of the whole. Nobody but Gunner and Roxy know I couldn’t shift before, and now all three of us are connected by the secret of how I finally unlocked this part of myself. My bear hasn’t spoken yet. I’m still getting used to the idea of some other spirit living inside of me, but I have years to become acquainted with her.

Now that I can finally explore that part of me, I feel powerful, something I’ve only ever felt on stage. With this newfound power comes a confidence that I can finally protect myself and everyone I love. With this looming threat hanging over us, I don’t want to be caught in the same place as before—needing the protection of my mate in a time of crisis. This time I can defend myself, him, and everyone else I love.

Gunner’s heart beats against my back in tune with mine. This bond that I have with him is a beautiful thing. He knows he’s not replacing my former mate or is he trying to. What Michael

and I had was its own thing. What I have with Gunner is entirely different and special in its own way. I won't ever forget my first mate, and he doesn't want me to. It's in the past, but it's still a very large part of who I am today. Gunner can give me a brighter tomorrow, and saying I'm excited to see what the future holds for us is an understatement.

Want to dive even deeper into the dangerous biker gang world filled with sexy bear shifters looking for their true mate? Keep reading for a sneak peek at Talon, book three in the Blood Brotherhood series or [click here](#) to purchase now!

Can't get enough of Jade and Gunner? Click here to read my favorite scene from Gunner's POV.



Chapter One: Ava

It's a nice day today. I almost risked being late this morning just so I could enjoy the morning. Whatever Fang had to say would have gone in one ear and out the other like most things he says. The only reason I didn't take my time getting here is because I don't feel like staying later than I have to. All I want is to get back to my little apartment and be alone. That's the highlight of my day—getting back home and away from everyone in this pack.

I stare out the window as I wipe Windex off the glass, looking up into the clear blue sky. There isn't a single cloud up there today. It would have been a nice day to go to the little waterfall I discovered a while back. If I hadn't woken up late, I would've gone, but staying late last night prevented me from getting up when I should have. I don't want to be in here until two a.m. tonight. Ten o'clock, and I'm out of here. I just wish Fang had somewhere to be. I hate when he's here looking over my shoulder every hour of the day. It's Friday; I thought he'd

have somewhere to go or someone to meet, but nope. He's chilling out here today. At least I'm not at Silver's or Flash's. For some reason, their places get filthy throughout the week. I'll give it to Fang—out of the three of them, at least he keeps his place somewhat decent.

Still, I let out a sigh, wanting time to hurry up and pass by quickly today.

“Ava!” Fang yells from the living room.

I shut my eyes and push down the fire constantly burning at my core.

Glancing at my watch, I find it's not quite lunchtime, but I'm hoping he's not going to request lunch early.

Setting my cloth down on the table, I leave the room and go to where he is in the living room, stopping at the side of the recliner he's sitting in. He sits there scrolling on his laptop, focused on the screen, his brow set hard over his dark blue eyes as he concentrates. His dark brunette hair is down, falling over his shoulders. He really would be handsome if his personality wasn't hot garbage.

“Yes?” I say, watching him scroll.

“I'll take lunch early today,” he tells me.

Of course, he will. I have to fight not to roll my eyes right here. This request is something else that's going to throw off my entire day. “A Philly cheese steak with steak fries. “

Quickly, I run through everything he has in his freezer, and thank fuck he has the stuff to make it with. If I had to leave to go to the store, my day really would have gone to shit.

“When do you want it?” I ask him.

“As soon as possible,” he says without looking up at me. “I'll be leaving soon.”

Silver lining!

“Anything else?” I ask.

“That's it.”

Okay, if I get this made quick, I'll be able to get back on track if I work fast. I'll get this out the way, and the quicker I get it made, the faster he'll be out of my hair, and I won't have to worry about his presence.

As I'm walking back to the kitchen, the doorbell rings, and I go answer it. Pixie stands there with her hands in her pockets, her hair swooped over to the other side showing off the shaved left side. It's grown out longer from the mohawk she cut it into, and it's dyed pink at the tips. The smile on her glossy red lips reaches her kind, pale blue eyes, and I'm happy she's here. The only wolf here that I actually don't mind.

"Hey," she says, stepping inside. "Where's Fang?"

"Living room," I tell her, shutting the door.

I expect her to keep going deeper into the house to find Fang, but she stands back and watches me shut the door.

"We're going out tonight," she tells me. "The girls and me. You should come. You haven't been out anywhere in a while. Do you want to go?"

I stare at her for just a moment. If it was anyone else, I'd think she was being shitty, but she doesn't mean anything by it. She's the only one that actually had some sympathy when Fang dragged me back here.

If she's going out tonight, then she's here to get the keys to Fang's SUV before he leaves. None of their cars are big enough for all five of them, and if I go, the SUV would be perfect. I have a choice to make—would I prefer to be trapped in the car with five she-wolves that shoot snarky comments at me the entire ride, or do I want to sit in my little studio and have some quiet?

She's right, I haven't been out anywhere in the months that I've been back, and I would love to see anything else other than this shitty little town. But the chances that Fang actually lets me go are slim.

"Won't your friends care if I tag along?" I ask her.

She shrugs. "Who cares? But they're kind of shitty to every omega. They're worse to you because you don't take their

shit.”

“You think I want to be trapped in a car with that for forty-five minutes?” I ask her. “Besides, Fang’s not going to let me go.”

“Why not? You have that ankle monitor on. He can find you anywhere.”

I have to fight not letting my reaction show. It sucks when someone points it out. It’s the first thing on my mind every day, and I constantly think of how to get it off. I don’t need to be reminded that Fang can find me no matter where I go. She didn’t mean anything by it, but still, it’s annoying to have it brought up all the time.

“Come on,” Pixie says. “It’s been a while since you’ve been out. I think it’s safe to ask.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’m not sure I’m feeling up to it?”

“What—you’d rather sit at home then?”

“Kind of, yeah,” I reply. “It just seems like a lot of trouble.”

She stares at me for a moment before she says, “If you’re worried about Fang saying no, I could ask him. I’ll say we need a designated driver.”

“You think that would work?”

“Only one way to find out,” she says, then turns on her toes.

“Wait, Amber—” but she’s already too far out of my reach for me to stop her.

I don’t want him to think I put her up to this—he already doesn’t like that she’s nice to me, especially not after I helped that bear find his mate and then tried to escape. As the traitor of the pack, it’s only been harder since I got back—the three other omegas won’t even talk to me like they used to, not because they’ve turned on me, but because they’ve been ordered not to say a word to me. So I don’t give them any ideas, Fang said. The last thing I want is for Fang to think I asked Amber to try and convince him.

“Fuck,” I say under my breath before walking down the passageway to the back of the house toward the kitchen.

I like Amber, but sometimes, she's headstrong and doesn't consider how certain things may not end well for me. This is going to be one of those times.

I bite down hard on my back teeth and try not to think about what's coming to me. I'm probably going to be here for a while tonight.

Opening the freezer, I pull the fries and the steak mix out of the freezer, then I turn the oven on quick bake before spreading the fries out on a pan. Since Fang likes his fries baked but crispy, I brush oil over them before. I've mastered the amount of oil I need to spread on them; the entire meal would be ruined if, Universe forbid, his fries aren't crispy. He's such a picky fucking diva, and today's one day I definitely need to get it right.

I slide the pan into the oven, then grab bell peppers, onions, jalapeños, and the spices Fang likes added to just about everything he eats. Before I start cutting everything up, I pour some of the frozen meat into the pan to get it cooking, then I start chopping up the veggies.

As I am, I hear light footsteps coming my way. Amber comes up beside me and leans on the counter.

"He said you can go," she tells me, and I look at her surprised. "Don't look *so* shocked. All that drama is in the past."

Convincing him to let me go couldn't have been that easy; there has to be something to this.

"He said as long as you get your stuff done and have dinner ready before you leave, then you're fine. Don't worry," she says in a low voice. "I'll come back and help you once he's gone. I'll walk so nobody sees my car, and I'll be out of here before he comes back."

Now that I have the approval, some of the nausea that surfaced has gone away, but the feeling doesn't go away completely.

"Okay," I say, now wondering if there's going to be something else I have to do.

"So you'll come?"

“Yeah,” I confirm. “Thanks for inviting me.”

She grins at me. “Anytime.”

Then she’s gone. The front door opens, and the second it closes, I get back to work, excited but nervous. Before, I didn’t think Fang was going to say yes, and he was going to be mad, which sucked any fun out of the idea of getting out of this place for a few hours. But now that I can go, I have something to look forward to, yet I know there’s something else. I just know it. But it’s nothing I’m not used to. I can deal with whatever’s going to happen if I get to go out.

When the fries are done, I build the sandwich, toasting the bread first and then slathering mayo on it. Once I’m done, I stare at it, hesitant to take it to him because I know he’s going to drop whatever this condition is on me. I know something’s coming but standing here wondering about it isn’t going to help anything. Finally, I pick his plate up, along with a glass of ice water, and take it to him.

He’s sitting at the table in the dining room now, and when I come in, he doesn’t acknowledge me and continues to focus on his computer.

“You want to go out tonight?” he asks as I set his plate in front of him.

“I’ll have everything done,” I tell him as he shuts his laptop.

“I know you will.” He unfolds his napkin, not even looking up at me. “And my dinner. Chicken and potatoes.”

“Caesar salad?”

He nods. “Good girl.”

“Do you need anything else?”

I hold my breath as he bites into a fry and nods, and I let out a sigh when he doesn’t say anything about it. “Whenever you get back, I want you to come back here.”

There it is. Those words make me go stiff.

“What if you’re already asleep when I get here?” I ask him.

“Then you’d better be here when I wake up,” he says. “Besides, you shouldn’t be back too late. I’ll probably still be up. You’re going to be the designated driver, so you have to bring my truck back anyway.”

“You’ll get more from Pixie,” I rebut, trying to push him onto the wolf I know he’d prefer. But I guess he doesn’t like that answer because that’s what makes him look at me.

“It’s not the same,” he says. “I want what you have to offer.”

My stomach turns. Thanks to what I was born as, I get to spend the night pinned to him as he reaps the advantages of the little omega he keeps under his thumb.

Hooray.

He doesn’t find me attractive enough for sex, and thank fuck for that. But still, I hate having him touch me in any way.

Kylie, Tophi, and Raquel are lucky their focus is the pack.

I dread coming back here to climb into his bed so he can sleep. I won’t get any, but that doesn’t matter much to him. It’ll be worth it if I get to get away for a little bit.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll be here.”

His critical deep blue eyes flicker over me then he turns back to his food.

“I know.”

He starts eating, and that’s my queue to leave. Back in the kitchen, I push that later part of my night to the back of my mind and focus on the upcoming portion, smiling. It’s been so long since I’ve been outside of this little shit town, being cuddled up with Fang might not actually be so bad.



The music’s been pulsing through my body since we were standing in line outside, and now that we’re inside, it’s all I feel. The rest of my afternoon and the ride over were worth it for me to be here right now. After Pixie slipped in through

Fang's back door, she did most of the cleaning while I made Fang's dinner. I, of course, had to go back over it and do little touch-ups, but it was quicker than thoroughly cleaning everything. Once I finished Fang's dinner, I wrapped it and put it in the microwave. When it was all done, I sat at the table for two hours with a dustpan full of dirt, anxiously waiting for him to get back. After he did a thorough check, he finally let me go, telling me not to come back drunk. That's okay—I don't really need it to have fun anyway.

Now, after a car ride spent tuning out slick comments, I can forget about it with music.

Someone nudges me from behind, and Pixie's at my right, holding a drink out to me.

"Oh no, I'm good!" I yell over the music.

"Just one!" she says. "That won't hurt!"

"I'm a lightweight!"

"It's mostly juice! I know you don't really drink!"

Not by choice, but she's right—one won't hurt.

I take the drink from her and take a sip from the little black straw.

Alexis and Raegan come up beside Pixie and pull her away from me, Kimberly and Macy not too far behind. I follow them onto the floor, but I don't go exactly where they are; instead, I stay in my own area and do my own thing. I want to stay in my own little bubble, not really caring if I'm noticed or not. I never really did anything like this before—I don't like the clubbing vibe. Large crowds with loud music don't really appeal to me, but this is the first thing I've done in ages, and I want to have fun for just a couple of hours.

So, I dance. I sip on a sex on the beach and move to the music flooding my mind. The bass vibrates my body, and somehow, it's soothing me. I guess probably because I'm not thinking at all. I'm letting the music have control, and it's freeing. No worries, no fear, no pain. Just music flowing through me, pushing everything numbing me out.

It's a high I don't ever want to end.

I dance by myself for a while, getting more drunk off the beat than the drink in my hand. I'm enjoying myself, tuning everyone else out, and riding my own wave when someone comes up behind me. As I'm turning around to push whoever it is away, I catch a scent that I recognize, and it makes my heart skip a beat. His bear musk is mixed with sandalwood and pine trees.

When I turn around, I have to tilt my head back, and it takes me a second to place his face. It's his musk and the wild glint in his eyes that help me remember.

He looks a bit more put together than the last time I saw him—his wavy blond hair is falling over into his eyes, and there's a devilishly handsome grin on his lips. His sky-blue eyes are made darker by the black sweater he has on, and the slight V-neck shows off a claw dangling from a chain. There's mischief in his eyes accompanied by softness and intrigue. I almost forget to breathe, and my wolf stares at him, frozen.

That smile of his, there's something in it that I like.

He leans over into my ear and says, "You're more beautiful than the first time I saw you!"

My heart drops to my stomach, and I swallow pretty hard. That isn't something I hear regularly...or ever, I think. The only reason I know he's talking to me is because he's looking right at me. It feels like some sort of a sick joke, and I almost push him away, but that smile and genuine curiosity on his face is what stops me.

Instead of turning and walking away, I lean in closer to him.

"You remember me?" I ask him.

"I'd never forget such a sweet face, Ava!" He remembers my name! "I've been thinking about you since I saw you."

"I'm surprised you remember my name!" I say.

"Of course I would! You helped us out in a major way once! You've made it impossible to forget you!"

He pulls back and waits for me to reply, but I don't know what to say. He keeps saying shit that I have no clue how to respond to. How do I reply to stuff like that?

Seeing that I'm speechless, he leans over again.

"How about a dance?" He asks. "I like how you move!"

Fuck—it's like I've never spoken to anyone in my life. It's just the few things he's said so far are almost like hearing a different language. A part of me wants to turn around and leave him alone, but another part of me—along with my wolf—makes me stay right here. I want to dance with him.

When I finally do pull myself together, I look over at the girls. By now, they're already drunk, and nobody's paying attention to me. The last thing I want is for one of them to snitch on me out of spite. But none of them seem to care or remember that I'm here, and the chances that they remember anything about tonight are slim.

I look back up at him, eagerly waiting for my answer.

I get close to his ear and say, "I don't think our alphas would like that if they found out."

That grin on his face grows, and rebellion shines through it. His smile is full of life and excitement, and that's it. That's what I like about it.

"What happens in Bayton stays in Bayton!" he replies.

For the first since we've been talking, I smile at him. "That only applies to Vegas, but I'll dance with you anyway! Just one dance, then I should find my crew!"

He holds his hand out to me, and I stare at it for just a second before I take it. Before we start dancing, I lean in close again and say, "You know my name, but I don't know yours!"

Grinning, he bends towards me and says into my ear, "I'm Talon!"

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