

S K Y E W I L S O N



HER
FAKE
WOLF
DADDY

Her Fake Wolf Daddy

A Friends To Lovers Shifter Romance

Alpha Wolf Bachelor

Book 1

Skye Wilson

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Chapter 1

Felicity

I trudged to the nurse's station, then leaned heavily on the med cart, feeling like I'd just power-walked through quicksand. Every muscle hurt, from my head to my feet.

"God, I'm *starving*," Lexi complained, swiveling her chair around behind the desk. Her long, pastel-pink hair swished as she clutched her narrow ribs, pouting. "I swear, I haven't eaten a single bite all day."

"You want a granola bar? I've got one back in my locker." One that I'd been planning to scarf down during my ride home, but I could spare it. "Or you could snag a Jell-O cup. We've got no shortage of those around here."

At Evergreen Hills, Jell-O cups, applesauce, and probiotic yogurts were rarely far out of reach.

"That's okay. I wanna stay skinny for tonight." She beamed up at me, her hunger already forgotten. "TGIF, baby! This weekend's gonna be so awesome. I'm stoked."

I checked the time on my watch, then the large whiteboard behind the desk where we kept track of our residents' care. Everything had been signed off for this shift—even the skilled-care patients who needed more attention than the others. Good. At this rate, I'd be home in under half an hour.

"Do you have big plans for your days off?" I said to Lexi. She was the only other RN on shift today, and she'd worked almost as many hours as I had this week. Most of the time, I tried to stay out of Lexi's business since it usually involved

either gossip or drama, but I could tell she was waiting for me to ask.

Lexi smirked. “Of course. There’s this huge rave happening in Boston tonight. Bright lights, loud music, and hot, sweaty shifters. This sexy panther guy I met on Growlr organized it.”

“And he’s inviting humans?” Growlr was a dating app for paranormals—and *only* paranormals. But I knew Lexi was on it, just like hundreds of other human women hoping to lock down a lion, tiger, or bear of their very own. In shifter circles, Lexi was what they called a *tail-chaser*—a human with a shifter kink, doomed to run after something she’d probably never catch.

“He’s inviting human *women*,” Lexi corrected. “I guess even shifters get horny for a taste of the exotic sometimes. Actually, you should come. You’d love it.”

“I dunno.” It sounded like exactly the kind of thing I’d *hate*. Lexi was a bottle-pink wildfire; I was a scented candle at best. Overpriced drinks in a loud, overcrowded bar weren’t really my cup of tea. As for men, I preferred them non-sweaty and fictional. I’d had far more luck with Mr. Darcy than with guys in nightclubs. “I’ll probably have to pass.”

“Aww, no! Why?”

“I’m pretty exhausted. These twelve-hour shifts are kicking my butt.”

And they’d continue to do so until management bit the bullet and hired more staff. Both our charge nurses had been fired last month due to abuse allegations, to which I said good riddance, but they had yet to be replaced.

“I talked to Roger today,” Lexi supplied. “He says they’re bringing in new LPNs next week. They should help lighten the load.”

“On the budget, maybe.” But not for Lexi or me. Hiring a bunch of LPNs was cheaper, but if management would loosen the purse strings a bit, they could replace the RNs. Even if all the new hires were IV-certified, they’d likely be wet behind

the ears and need a lot of direction, so Lexi and I would still be in charge of care plans, oversight, and a dozen other things. “If we’re getting fresh meat in, I don’t think I can afford to be hungover the entire weekend.”

“Oh, come on. That’s exactly why you have to come out *tonight*. Take off the scrubs, put on a hot little number, and trade those stinky old Crocs for some heels for a change.”

I glanced down at my powder-blue Crocs. They were old, yes, but *stinky*? I certainly hoped not. They were definitely ugly, too, but they were the comfiest shoes to wear when I spent most of my days on my feet.

“A few drinks, some slutty dancing, a few *more* drinks...” Lexi continued. “It’s the perfect way to blow off steam, and you’ll be recovered by Monday.” She added in a sing-song voice, “You can bring Lieutenant Fire Hazard!”

I grabbed a stack of clipboards and turned away so she didn’t see me roll my eyes. Lieutenant Fire Hazard was Lexi’s name for Xander, my best friend.

It was a step up from the last nickname Lexi had given him. Before he’d started volunteering at the Evergreen Fire Department, she’d called him Wolfy Big Dick. Flattering for Xander, maybe, but not exactly pleasant to my ears.

“I’ll definitely think about it,” I lied.

I cross-referenced the residents’ charts with the marks on the whiteboard to make sure everything corresponded with what we were putting on file. We were supposed to log everything in the complicated system that management had installed on our computers a few years ago, but that was a bust. That system was down more than it was up. Even when it was working, it was still half-broken.

“Thinking’s for suckers. C’mon. Just say yes,” Lexi whined. “And don’t give me any of that *I don’t have anything to wear* crap, either. You can totally squeeze into something from my closet. I’ve got tons of stuff you can choose from.”

“Uh, thanks.” I was only half paying attention. My brow knitted into a frown. Something on the charts wasn’t adding

up.

“It’ll be a real night to remember. Especially if you can rope Xander in,” Lexi yammered on obliviously. “Is he seeing anyone these days? I mean, he’s an alpha, so he probably is, but a girl can dream...”

“Xander doesn’t really see people. He’s got as much on his plate as we do. Weirder hours, too.” Why hadn’t Mrs. Rodriguez’s evening meds been logged in her chart? Mr. Murray’s were missing from his chart, too. My frown deepened as I juggled the conversation and the bad feeling stirring in my gut. “Even if he wants to come, he might have to split if he gets called in.”

“Bummer. Ask him anyway for me? I’ll send you loads of pics.” Lexi checked her watch and sprang up from her chair. “Anyway, it’s quittin’ time! I’m outta here.”

She all but sprinted toward the break room.

“Lexi!” I tucked the charts beneath my arm and followed her. “Did you finish your med rounds? You signed off on the board but not on the charts.”

“Oh, crap! I must’ve forgot. Can you fill in the charts for me?”

I sighed. “Yeah, I can do that.”

What I’d actually have to do is go around and make sure the work had really been completed. One of the LPNs might know for sure. Barring that, I’d have to ask the patients themselves—and hope they remembered.

“You’re a lifesaver, Lissy,” Lexi gushed. “Do you think you can cover my shift on Monday, too? Now that I’m thinking about it, I might be too hungover to drag myself in.”

“Sorry, can’t. I’m already on the schedule.”

She pouted. “Boo. You’re literally no fun at all, you know that?”

“So I hear.”

It took me a full hour to figure out whether Lexi's patients had gotten their meds. According to the LPNs, they had, and the patients all confirmed it.

She did the work. She just forgot to fill out the charts. I reminded myself of that over and over again as I input the information into each patient's chart. *It was a simple mistake. No one got hurt.*

Still, someone *could* have. Giving a resident double doses of their medication could be just as bad as not giving them their meds. I was lucky my own grandmother was still as sprightly as ever. I did my best to give the residents at Evergreen Hills the quality of care they deserved, but after everything else that had been uncovered here lately, I was glad Nana still lived in the house out on Mayfield Drive, where I'd spent my teenage years.

All the same, I'd need to have a talk with Lexi on Monday. We were caring for people's lives here. Being extra diligent about doing our paperwork was well worth the effort. We couldn't afford another slip-up like this again.

When everything was finally taken care of, I drove home in my two-tone Kia. The body was the color of uncooked salmon, the top half a migraine-inducing neon pink.

Xander called it the Flamingo. He absolutely hated it, which only made me like it more. When I went to Burnett's to buy it, he'd insisted on driving me, posing as my boyfriend so I didn't get screwed out of my hard-earned cash.

I know how Ben Burnett runs his operation, he'd argued. *He'll nickel and dime any woman who sets foot on his lot without a man at her side.*

True to his word, Xander had haggled the price down far lower than what I would have settled for if I'd been on my own. Even then, he hadn't been happy.

The thing's a liability, he'd grumbled. *Color's too flashy. That'll only get you into trouble down the line.*

I thought about calling Xander while I drove. I hadn't spoken to him since Wednesday, and he was always kind

enough to listen to me rant about work. But he was probably still at work. If he wasn't at the firehouse, then he was dealing with his pack.

The Millers had ruled as alphas of the Evergreen wolves in an unbroken line since Xander's many-times great-grandfather. When I moved back here just before freshman year of high school to live with Nana while Mom ran off with yet another millionaire boy-toy, Xander's father had held the position. A few years ago, he stepped down so Xander could rule the pack.

It was a busy gig. For someone like Xander, who didn't take any joy from holding power or being in the limelight, it was a thankless one as well. Every time I found myself at Evergreen Hills thinking, *Gee, I wish someone else would actually do their job around here*, I had to remind myself that I only had one hat to wear—Xander had more than I could count.

I'd bother him tomorrow, I decided. We were overdue for a movie night, and knowing him, he probably had some complaining of his own to do.

Instead, I took a quick detour. The Havishford house was only a few blocks out of my way. It was an old, stately two-story colonial, red brick with a balcony over the porch. When I stared at its dark green front door, I could imagine it swinging open for me, inviting me into the gorgeous foyer of a place I could finally call my home.

Mrs. Havishford, one of the residents at Evergreen Hills, still owned it, and I was still about ten thousand big ones away from a down payment. But Mrs. Havishford assured me that if I could put up the cash, she could keep her real estate agent at bay until I was ready to seal the deal.

I raised three babies in that home, she'd told me once. They all grew up, moved away, and forgot all about their old, cranky mother. That house needs a woman like you in it, Miss Felicity. You'll fill it with babies of your own someday, and by God, they'd better be nicer to their mother than mine were to me.

I couldn't promise her babies yet, of course, but with every double shift I worked, I inched a little closer to my goal.

This is what I'm busting my butt for, I reminded myself as the green door grew smaller and smaller in my rear-view mirror.

My current apartment was on the second floor of my complex—a building with cheap white siding and aged wooden stairs outside. I trudged inside in a state of near-exhaustion. It was all I could do to take a shower before I collapsed into bed.

As soon as my head hit the pillow, my phone buzzed.

Hey :), the message read. I'd kind of hoped it was from Xander, but no such luck. He didn't do emojis, and the name attached to the message wasn't his.

I forced myself to reply. *Hey Mom. What's up?*

Messages from my mother were like letters from the IRS. Once a year, they might bring tidings of joy, but more often than not, they only spelled bad news.

I snuggled back down into my pillow, closing my eyes. I loved my mother, but I was way too tired to get into things with her right now. Hopefully, she was just sending me Minion memes or something—and not looking to complain about what she'd found going through her latest boyfriend's emails again.

I nearly dozed off, but a few minutes later, I had my answer.

I'm on my way to Evergreen. Surprise! Come save me from dinner with Nana tomorrow night?

Sure. Just let me know what time, I sent back, already bracing for impact. If Mom was coming back to Evergreen, it could only be for one reason.

Sure enough, her next message dropped the bomb.

I've got someone special coming with me. I think this one might be a keeper.

Sounds great, I texted back. Can't wait to meet him.

Not that I'd bother getting too attached. Wherever Mom went, she left a long string of broken hearts in her wake—though you'd never know that from the way she told things. Every man she'd ever been with was a god in her eyes at first, and the devil himself by the time she was done with him. Her relationships rarely lasted more than a few months.

Meeting the new guy didn't exactly fill me with glee. Already, I was dreading this dinner. It was clever of her—getting me to agree to it before I knew what I was really in for.

I tried to drift off again, but it was no use. Worrying about Mom had smothered my sleepiness. After twenty minutes, I gave up and reached for my phone again.

You up? I texted Xander.

Hell yeah, sexy mama. Can't sleep. Too hot thinkin' bout you.

I snorted. He'd replied immediately, and with his favorite joke, too.

It was the same bit he did when we went out for drinks. Anytime a guy came anywhere near us, Xander would put on a big show of hitting on me in the most egregious way possible, and I'd put on an even bigger show of falling for it. He loved springing surprise acting exercises on me like that, leaving me with no choice but to react and play along. I was pretty sure he only did it to see the look on the other guy's face when we left together—as if Xander's ham-fisted flirting had actually worked.

How much do I have to pay you to knock that off? I asked.

How much do I gotta pay you to come over and get that pretty mouth around my big fat...

I laughed as Xander's text broke into a long series of eggplant emojis. If I'd been silly enough to believe there was any truth to his pick-up lines, those eggplants would have set me straight again.

Xander *never* used emojis—unless he was trying to make me laugh.

My mom's coming to town tomorrow, I texted as I crawled out of bed to grab a drink. *She twisted my arm into dinner at Nana's. Sounds like I'm about to meet my next stepfather.*

I was halfway to the kitchen when my phone rang.

“Seventh time’s the charm, right?” Xander said.

“Eighth, actually.” I opened the fridge and perused my options. “You’re forgetting about the what-happens-in-Vegas debacle.”

“Ah, right. How could I forget those seventeen hours of wedded bliss?” Xander scoffed as I grabbed a LaCroix. “How long do you think this one is gonna last? Twenty bucks says they split before Thanksgiving.”

“You’re being too generous. Fifty says they’re done by Easter.”

“You’re on. You need back-up tomorrow? I clean up real nice.”

“Nah. I’m well-equipped to handle Mommy Dearest these days.” I cracked open the LaCroix and headed to the living room, where I flopped down on my secondhand green couch. “Besides, it would only give her ideas.”

“What kind of ideas?” The flirtatious note returned to his tone.

“The wrong kind,” I assured him. “The last thing this dinner needs is another sidebar from my mother about how I need to lock you down before some prettier girl snatches you up.”

“As if there are prettier girls than you.”

This time, I almost blushed. Xander and I were only friends. It was all we’d ever be. I’d had a crush on him back in high school, of course. The same could be said for every girl who had attended Evergreen High with him. But unlike the rest, I’d laid those feelings to rest long ago.

Still, I wasn't immune to him complimenting me. Every woman in town wanted him, and with good reason. He was the total package. An absolute catch.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," I joked, brushing it off.

"Yeah? Then at least keep me in mind for a wedding date. If she decides to play runaway bride again, you're gonna need me."

"I'll think about it." Most likely, this relationship wouldn't make it to the altar. For now, Mom's new guy was Mr. Right, but in a few months, she was sure to find something to hate about him, just like she did with all the rest.

To her credit, she usually wasn't wrong.

"How was work?" Xander asked as I booted up Netflix. If I couldn't sleep, I could at least rewatch a few episodes of *Bridgerton*.

"Long and exhausting. Yours?"

"Still at the firehouse. Nothing's burned down yet." I heard him spit—the Miller family's way of knocking on wood. "You want me to have a word with your management? That place is gonna crumble if they work you to death."

"You know how I feel about you pulling strings for me," I reminded him.

"And you know how I feel about it."

As alpha of the Evergreen pack, Xander was essentially small-town famous. He knew everyone, everyone knew him, and no one ever hesitated when it came to doing a favor for their favorite wolf.

I should have never let him help me haggle on the Flamingo's price with Mr. Burnett. He'd been looking for his chance at an encore ever since.

"No meddling," I said in the most serious voice I could manage.

"I'll do my best. You got plans for tonight?"

“Lexi’s going out. Big party in Boston, if you wanna join her.” Part of me hadn’t even wanted to tell him about it, but I’d promised Lexi I’d pass the invite along.

“You going?”

“Yeah, there’s nothing I like more than spending twelve hours on my feet in scrubs and another twelve in heels.”

“Tell Lexi I’m busy, then. You shouldn’t hang out with her so much.”

“I work with her,” I reminded him. “Pretty unavoidable.”

“Still.”

“Why shouldn’t I talk to her?” I laughed. “Don’t want me spilling all your dirty secrets to the next Mrs. Alexander Miller?”

“I’d rather marry the Flamingo. Lexi takes advantage of you. I fuckin’ hate that.”

“Only when I let her.” At least I hadn’t picked up her shift on Monday. Then again, if I hadn’t already been working, I might have. When people needed something from me, I often had a hard time saying no.

“Stop letting her. I know how girls like that are. She’d manipulate you out of the shirt off your back if she took a liking to it. Your bra, too.”

I scoffed. “That’d sure give the dirty grandpas at the Hills something to talk about.”

“If I ever hear the drugstore’s got a Viagra shortage, I’ll know why. You know—”

A siren cut Xander off. It blared so loud, I had to move the phone away from my ear as he swore under his breath. “Shit. Gotta go. Fire on Main Street. Let me know how tomorrow goes, and call if you need me, okay?”

“You got it.” I clenched my jaw as an old fear tightened in my chest. It was the same feeling I got every time I heard the sirens of a fire engine tearing through Evergreen’s streets, and

it had started the day Xander had joined the department. “Text me when you’re done so I know you’re okay?”

“Only ‘cause you asked so nicely. Love ya.”

“Be safe. Love ya, too,” I said back. A second later, the line went dead.

* * *

“If your grandfather was here to see this...” Nana grumbled as we watched the conservative navy-blue Maybach pull up outside her house. A rich person’s car. My mother would never have settled for anything less. “How many sons-in-law do I have to meet before your mother finally gives up?”

“Maybe this is the last one,” I suggested, even though I didn’t believe it myself. “She says it feels right this time.”

“Taking a big dump also feels right. Doesn’t mean you ought to marry it.”

“Nana!” Laughing, I swatted her, but she only shrugged.

“Can’t fault me if it’s true.”

Mom and her new boyfriend aside, I was feeling more positive about tonight than expected. Xander had texted me in the early morning to let me know he’d gotten back to the firehouse safely. Just a tiny kitchen fire. Nothing to worry about. It felt like a good omen.

Unfortunately, Mom’s new boy-toy looked like a bad one. He was tall and thin, like a cartoon villain in a black overcoat. He didn’t even open the door for her after he got out of the car.

Mom looked so blissed out, she didn’t notice. She was dressed like she was attending New York Fashion Week, not dinner at Nana’s in Evergreen. Like me, she was a true autumn, with dark auburn hair and warm-toned skin. The pale-blue gown washed her out, and her fur coat made it look like she was preparing for a Russian winter. It was the diamonds dripping from her ears and neck, though, that drove her real point home: she wasn’t from Evergreen anymore. She was

beyond that now. Even her oversized sunglasses exuded wealth.

“She better not show up to the winter market like that tomorrow.” Nana shook her head in disapproval, sending her steel-gray curls bouncing like springs. “I’ll never hear the end of it from the gals at bingo if she does.”

“Play nice, Nana,” I reminded her. Carefully, I rubbed a smudge of flour from her cheek. We’d been cooking all day, just like we used to do when I was a kid. In our dirty aprons, I wondered if Mom’s new boyfriend would mistake us for the help. “You know how Mom gets.”

“I’ll play however I damn well please,” Nana shot back with a smirk. “It’s the boyfriend you should be warning.”

Mom burst through the front door, bringing the crisp scent of cold and a flurry of snow along with her. The weather forecast called for a storm tonight. Earlier, Nana said she suspected Mom was bringing it with her.

“Felicity! My baby!” Mom held her arms open wide and snatched me against her bosom when I moved within range. Immediately, the scent of her perfume filled my lungs. She wore enough Chanel No. 5 to drown a horse. “How *are* you?”

“I’m good, Mom,” I choked as the diamonds of her necklace cut into my cheek. When she finally released me, I rubbed my face and winced. “How was the trip?”

“Oh, it was gorgeous. Did you know Thomas speaks *six languages*?” I didn’t, and I wasn’t sure how that related to her drive to Evergreen, either, but I just smiled and nodded. “Thomas, come in here and meet my baby girl. This is Felicity. She’s my pride and joy. Even if she *is* getting a little tubby these days.”

Mom pinched my stomach and giggled girlishly. I forced a polite smile and gently moved her hand away.

I was used to getting comments about my weight. Especially from her. I’d been a chubby, awkward kid and an even chubbier, more awkward teen. Binge-eating out of

boredom in front of the TV while your mom is on her eighth blind date of the week will do that to a girl, I guess.

Even at my heaviest, I'd never hated my body. But I'd hated the comments that everyone felt they needed to make. At Evergreen High, my classmates had wasted no time hitting me with nicknames. *Felicity the Fatty. Feli-size-of-a-city.* The insults stung, but they'd simmered down significantly after Xander decided we were friends. All the name-calling had dropped off by the time he graduated, around the same time I dropped the weight.

Except when it came to Mom. To her, I'd always be her little plus-size *pride and joy*.

Behind Mom, Thomas slipped through the door. He looked me up and down, then stuck out his hand mechanically.

"Felicity. It's a pleasure." His voice was dry and crisply British.

"Nice to meet you, Thomas." He had a firm handshake, a little too firm for my liking. *Any man who tries to crush you with a handshake is compensating for something.* Xander had told me that.

I wouldn't have been surprised if Thomas was compensating for *many* somethings. He had a handsome face from a distance, but the closer he got, the more I realized it was just his bone structure. The skin over his cheeks was pulled so taut, it was kind of scary. When he took off his overcoat and looked around Nana's house, he was all sharp angles and scowls.

"This is where you grew up, then?" Thomas asked my mother. Disapproval must've been one of the six languages he spoke.

"It was much nicer when I was a child," Mom assured him, putting on an affected hoity-toity accent that she hadn't come by honestly. "Mother's become a bit of a hoarder in her old age."

"*Mother?* Is that what you're calling me now?" Nana cackled, beaming with pride at all the kitschy knick-knacks

that lined every shelf of her home. “Oh, yes. I’m just a kooky old lady, aren’t I? You wanna see where I hoard my rifle collection, Tommy? You and I could go hunting later.”

“You hunt?” Thomas almost sounded impressed. “How delightful. Pheasants or foxes?”

“Rats, mostly.” Nana’s brown eyes glimmered mischievously. “Well, come on in. Dinner’s on the table. You can leave your shoes by the door.”

Dinner was an expertly cooked prime rib served with mashed sweet potatoes, roasted vegetables, and crab cakes. The fresh sourdough on the table was my contribution to the spread, using Nana’s favorite recipe. For dessert, we had pecan pie waiting in the fridge.

The food was delicious, but I could feel Mom’s eyes on me with every bite. She watched my fork move with a laser focus, gaze flicking between the morsels on the tines and my waistline like a predator tracking prey until finally, she broke down.

“Are you sure you should be eating that?”

Nana’s knife dragged over her China plate with a screeching sound.

“Well, she’s not gonna pin it to her blouse and call it a corsage.” Nana didn’t look up. After a beat, she continued cutting into her prime rib. “We didn’t cook dinner to look at it. Eat and be grateful for the bounty before us, I say.”

“Some of us could do with a little more gratefulness, now that you mention it.” Mom’s eyes narrowed at Nana. She placed her napkin down daintily and drew her shoulders back like she was cocking a gun, then wrinkled her nose as she set her sights on me again. “Others are looking a little *too* grateful. You know, Felicity, in Europe, leaving a few bites on your plate is considered the mark of a true lady.”

“Funny.” Nana snapped her head up with a wild, defiant look in her eyes. Her fork and knife clattered to the table as she deliberately dropped them on either side of her plate.

“Here in Massachusetts, the mark of a lady is knowing when to keep her eyes on her own plate.”

Mom shook her head, slow and disbelieving. “Are you seriously telling me how to raise my daughter?”

“Oh, she’s already been raised. *By me.*” Nana nodded at my plate. “Eat up.”

Mom bared her teeth. “Felicity, don’t you dare.”

My fork wavered in my hand, suspended between my mouth in my plate. I should have felt hurt, I supposed. Or angry.

I shrugged and took the bite. Their bickering only made me feel tired.

As soon as my fork touched my lips, World War III broke out over the table. Mom and Nana shoved their chairs back, shouting at each other with unbridled vitriol.

“Pushy old biddy!”

“Stingy control freak!”

Thomas made a point of becoming deeply interested in his crab cakes, but I only sighed, put my fork down, and tugged my sweater over my stomach. Mom just couldn’t help herself. I’d accepted that long ago. She was fixated on appearances in the same way preteen boys were obsessed with fart jokes. Nana couldn’t stand it, but in my experience, it was easier to just ignore her and move on.

“Where did you two meet?” I asked Thomas, raising my voice so the question could be heard. I needed to break up the bickering between Mom and Nana before one of them said something they’d regret.

Thomas opened his mouth to answer, but Mom perked up immediately at the chance to talk about herself. She beat him to the punch by a mile.

“Oh, we met in *Bar-the-lona*,” she gushed, lowering herself back into her chair. “We were both staying at the Mandarin Oriental, and one day, he walked in on me in the steam room...”

While Mom rambled on, Nana began clearing the table. I pushed my chair back, ready to help her, but Nana gave me a firm shake of her head.

Someone had to sit and listen to Mom's stories. Thomas was already on his phone, and I had more patience for the sound of my mother's voice than Nana did.

"—and he nearly proposed right there on the spot! Although, of course, he didn't actually go through with it. I'm still waiting on that front, aren't I?" Mom took Thomas's hand. Begrudgingly, he set his phone aside. "But enough about us. Your birthday is coming up, isn't it, hon?"

"It was a week ago." *You missed it*, I wanted to add but didn't. My birthday had never ranked highly on her social calendar, and I was old enough now that it didn't bother me so much. Nana had baked me a cake, and Xander had planned a surprise party at the Wily Elephant, our favorite bar in town. That was more than enough.

"How silly of me. It must've slipped my mind." Mom fanned herself and laughed. "You're nearly *thirty* by now, aren't you?"

"Thirty-two, actually."

"Oh, bless your heart! You're just growing up so fast!"

"She sure is," Nana agreed in a low grumble as she returned with a tray bearing cups, a teapot, and fixings for tea. "Every year, she gets a whole year older."

"Well, she's certainly not getting any *younger*." Mom pursed her lips into a thin pink line and sighed. "You really need to start thinking about your future, Felicity."

"I am, actually." I took my napkin from my lap and sat up a little straighter. I didn't love talking about myself, but the chance to mention *something* positive about my life was suddenly overwhelming. "There's this house I've been looking at—"

"You don't need a house, silly girl. You need a *man*." Mom squeezed Thomas's hand. "Don't you want to be happy like Thomas and me?"

Thomas cleared his throat. “Actually, I have a friend you might like, Felicity. He’s recently divorced and very successful. You should see his portfolio.”

“Is he an artist or a photographer?” I asked politely. When I glanced at Nana, storm clouds were brewing in her eyes.

“He was a stockbroker,” said Thomas. “For a girl like yourself, he’d be quite the catch.”

A girl like myself. What did he mean by that?

A thirty-two-year-old spinster?

An overworked RN who, unlike my mother, hadn’t figured out how to farm men for divorce settlement money yet?

Or, like my mother, did he see me as a disappointment? Still chubby and frumpy, no matter my weight. Lucky that anyone would want to have me at all.

“Come to think, I have a picture of him here somewhere.” Thomas picked up his phone again. He found the photo a little too quickly. He’d probably had it on deck this entire time. As he slid the phone across the table to me, he cracked a wry, confident smile. “Shall I set up a meeting?”

I wasn’t interested in being set up, but I tried my best to look at the photo with kind eyes.

It didn’t work.

The man in the photo must have been pushing eighty. His face looked like it’d been inexpertly carved from a wizened apple, his hair was white—all three strands of it—and there was something about him that seemed distinctly...*wet*. Like he’d been preserved in Vaseline.

“Uh. Thank you, but I’m good,” I told Thomas, desperately clinging to my manners. “I’m pretty swamped with work right now, and I’m not really looking to date.”

Nana leaned over my shoulder, peering at the screen. “Swamped? Ha. That old coot looks like he crawled out of a swamp, if you ask me.”

“Mother...” Mom warned.

“I’m not sure I catch your meaning, Mrs. Jordan,” Thomas said thinly.

“No, you wouldn’t.” Nana passed out the cups, then took her seat at the table. Steam rose from the teapot’s spout as she filled her chipped China mug. “Let me put it in the King’s English for you, boy: the next time you try peddling your sweaty old friends to my granddaughter, I’ll remind you what happened the last time the English descended on Massachusetts.” She dunked her teabag in her mug, smiling like a cat with cream.

“Mother!” Mom snapped, horrified.

Nana rolled her eyes. “Don’t you snap at me. Felicity is a grown woman—”

“Which is *exactly* why she needs this opportunity!” Mom yelped.

“—and she can make her own choices,” Nana continued, as if she hadn’t heard Mom at all. “I won’t have you and Lord Pointy-Elbows over here foisting her off on some old sweat rag. I presume you remember where the door is?”

Mom drew back, paling. “What? No dessert?”

“Dinner’s over.” Nana nodded in the direction of the door. “Get going, and take your new, fancy man with you.”

“Fine.” Mom rose, her glare bitter. “But I want you to know, Felicity, if you don’t get your life in order soon, there will be consequences. Severe ones.”

I bit the inside of my lip as my stomach twisted into a knot. This wasn’t how dinner was supposed to go. First, the fighting, and now, a threat.

Mouth suddenly dry, I asked, “Like what?”

Mom smiled thinly, her eyes glimmering like cold diamonds. “Funny you should ask.”

Chapter 2

Xander

I crunched up the drive through six inches of snow and trudged through my front door in the small hours of Sunday morning, still coughing from the house fire on Waverly. It had taken us all night to put it out.

My chest burned as I braced myself against the door to take off my boots. They were as mucky and grimy as I felt. The tinny pang in my head couldn't be fixed with painkillers, only fresh air and sleep. The scent of the night's smoke and ash clung to me like an insecure girlfriend, uneager to let me go.

As long as I kept volunteering at the Evergreen Fire Department, that scent would be the closest thing to a girlfriend I'd have for a good long while.

I'd spent the last four days on-call and would have the next three off unless something major went down. After the week I'd had, I wouldn't be surprised if something did.

Some people thought winter meant that fire season was over. They were wrong. There were too many ways to accidentally burn down a building, and most of them coincided with a drop in temperature. Leave your space heater running a little too close to grandma's quilt? Feel like lighting a big, cozy fire without cleaning out your chimney first? We got the call and dealt with the mess.

Since I showed up for my shift on Wednesday, it'd been one disaster after another. Even my wolf was spent. For tonight's fire, I had an under-watered Christmas tree and a set

of old, cheap Christmas lights to thank. Instant inferno. Thankfully, the blaze hadn't spread to any of the surrounding homes. No one had gotten hurt. No one had died.

Some days, that had to be enough.

I hauled my ass to the shower and scrubbed my skin until it hurt. I used the fancy-ass shower gel Felicity had bought me for my birthday, plus the matching shampoo and conditioner. *For my favorite wolf with a lion's mane*, her card had read. *The least you can do is try to smell like a human.*

The shampoo's warm, woody scent filled the shower as I lathered my hair. Human-scented, definitely. Every note was like its own little symphony to my hyper-sensitive nose: black pepper, bergamot, just a hint of patchouli. My dark-blond waves hung to my shoulders once I'd rinsed. I stepped out of the shower and shook my head, scattering droplets of water around the bathroom. An old habit. Pure instinct.

I smelled like a human now, but on the inside, I was still all wolf.

Before the fog had cleared from my bathroom mirror, the sun was up. The cardinals at the bird feeder outside my kitchen window chattered good mornings. Last night's snowfall had simmered to a gentle sifting of powdered sugar, like the whole of Evergreen was trapped in a settling snow globe.

It was going to be a beautiful day, and I intended to sleep through the whole of it.

I tossed my towel on the hook behind my bedroom door and dove into bed, naked and still a bit damp. The sheets were soft and clean, still stretched taut across the mattress, not all rumpled the way they got after a few nights of tossing and turning. I'd washed them before my shift on Wednesday and had been sleeping at the firehouse the past four nights.

My last thought before I drifted off was that I should probably text Felicity and see how her dinner had gone, but my phone was in the pocket of my jeans, which were on the floor and far away.

Sleep found me fast, but it didn't hold me down for long.

“Good morning, Alexander.”

I woke quickly to the bright, cheery voice of my mother. As my eyes snapped open, she strode confidently across my room, her smile wide.

“Morning, Ma.” I rubbed my eyes and glanced at my alarm clock next to the landline I kept near the bed in case the firehouse needed me. The numbers 11:45 blazed in neon green. “Let yourself in, huh?”

“I brought you an apple cake. Your favorite.” Ma pulled open the top door of my dresser, frowned, shook her head, and started refolding my boxers. “I left it on the kitchen table. When you get your lazy bones out of bed, you should go have a slice.”

Ma was a tiny woman, bony and barely five-foot-one, but no one had ever told her so. She reminded me of Polly Burnett's little Pomeranian: small in stature, big in personality. While I couldn't speak for my mother's inclination to bite off toes, Ma and the dog certainly had one thing in common: they made themselves right at home in any room they were in. Both had a way of taking up all the space.

“Dad with you?” I asked, hitching my blankets securely around my waist. I preferred sleeping naked, but if I'd known Ma was going to burst in and start “fixing” the way my unmentionables were folded, I would've thrown on a pair of pajama pants.

“He's back at home, fiddling with some silly woodworking project out in the shed.” Ma held up a pair of navy boxer briefs, stuck her pinky through a hole beneath the waistband, and shook her head, tutting. “You and I need to talk.”

“About my underwear?” I grabbed a pillow, held it over my manly bits in case the blankets slipped, and moved across the room to retrieve the boxers before she could throw them away.

“Your underwear isn't half of the problem, Alexander.” She relinquished the boxers reluctantly. “I had brunch with the

pack elders today.”

“You had brunch with the old busybodies who don’t have anything better to do than shove their noses into crotches where they don’t belong.” I pointed toward the door. “Gimme a sec. If we’re having *this* talk again, I’m not doing it in my birthday suit.”

“If you bothered to shove *your* nose into a crotch or two —” she muttered on her way out.

“What the hell, Ma?”

“—we wouldn’t have to discuss your little succession crisis.”

Groaning, I closed the door behind her. We *were* having this talk again. I should’ve known from the start. It was the same talk we’d had last Halloween, and on the Fourth of July before that. She’d even pulled me aside during Luke and Mandy Spencer’s mating ceremony last spring to point out what a good man Luke was, doing his duty to produce more betas for the pack, and didn’t he look awfully happy on the dance floor with sweet, lovely Mandy in his arms?

Come to think, this was the only real talk I’d had with Ma in years. *How are you, Alexander? Doing well? Have you gotten anyone pregnant lately? No? Oh, what a shame.*

Dressed in worn-out jeans and a Bruce Springsteen T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, I stalked into the kitchen with a scowl set deep in my brow. Ma was waiting for me at the table, a thick slice of apple cake resting on a dessert plate.

“Looks good, Ma.” I sat in the chair across from her and pulled the cake toward me. I believed in respecting my elders. That was the Miller way. But the way I figured it, if I had to listen to her opinions on my marital status again, respecting her would be a lot easier if I kept my mouth full.

“You turned thirty-four last month,” she pointed out.

“What of it?” I hunched over the table and picked up my fork.

“You’re not mated yet, Alexander. You’re not even *pursuing* anyone.”

“No time to pursue anyone, Ma.” I stuffed some cake into my mouth and spoke as I chewed. “No one to pursue.”

“There are several eligible she-wolves in the pack. Lloyd Graves has a daughter a few years younger than you. A lovely young woman. And Robbie Reed’s daughter—she’s always been sweet on you, you know.”

I snorted. “Becca Reed’s only nineteen—”

“A marriageable age,” Ma countered quickly.

“—and she can barely speak to me without getting tonguetied and pink-faced. Last time I said hello to her, she squeaked ‘you too’ and ran off. And Katie Graves doesn’t want anything to do with the likes of me.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“She’s dating the receptionist at the dentist’s office, for starters.” As alpha, I had a slight interest in the romantic lives of the pack. Normally, Katie was on-again-off-again with a waitress at The Farmer’s Daughter. From the sounds of things, they were off-again for now, but I didn’t expect that to last long. It never did.

“We’ll look outside of Evergreen, then.” Ma folded her hands atop the table, locked and loaded for arbitration. “I know you think I’m a silly old nag, but the pack *needs* an heir, Alexander. The Millers have been alphas of the Evergreen pack in an unbroken line that began—”

“A hundred years ago with great-great grandpa Jameson, I know, I know.” I got up, taking the plate with me. Cleanup would be faster if I ate it over the sink. “I’ll find someone when I’m ready, Ma, and not a second sooner. I’m plenty young still, and I’m not planning on dying anytime soon.”

Ma was silent for a little while after that. Had I finally convinced her? Said the right magic words to put this argument to rest for good?

I glanced over my shoulder, and the smile she sent me made my heart sink.

“I could set you up.”

I shoved the rest of the cake into my mouth and shook my head vehemently. “No. Absolutely not.”

She didn’t like that one bit.

“Why are you so *difficult*?” Ma snapped, shoving her chair back. When she pulled herself up to her full height, she barely came up to my chest, but she looked ready to go for my throat. I was all wolf—and at her core, so was Ma. “Your brothers don’t give me this kind of trouble. Nor does your sister, for that matter. I swear, Alexander, your father never should have stepped down as alpha. What happened to the sweet little boy I raised to respect his duties to his pack?”

“He started doing those duties. The relevant ones. The ones that *matter*.”

The hair on the back of my neck bristled. Her words were meant to hurt and manipulate, but that made them transparent.

Everyone says things they don’t mean when they’re upset, I reminded myself, and kept my cool.

“Is there someone I don’t know about? Someone you’re keeping...a secret from me?”

“No, Ma, I just—”

“Is it that Jordan girl?”

“Felicity? Ha. Yeah, maybe it is.” I chuckled at the absurdity of it.

Me and Felicity? Not a chance in the damn world.

Felicity was a stunner. On a scale of one to ten, she ranked somewhere in the twenties. I’d liked her from the moment I first saw her, back in high school on the first day of my junior year. I hadn’t dared admit that I had a crush on the cute new freshman, but I’d made a point of befriending her.

And that’s what we’d been ever since: just friends. She made me laugh harder than anyone, pulled at my heart like she

had it on a leash, and baked sourdough like she was born for it.

But she'd never have me. Felicity was no tail-chaser. She knew what a pain in the ass being with an alpha could turn into for a human, and I knew better than to go around sniffing after her—and ruining our friendship in the process.

Not that Ma had ever noticed as much.

“You need a *wolf* mate, Alexander! Not some runty human,” Ma snapped. “That Jordan girl may be a pretty little thing, but when it comes to bearing cubs—”

“Yeah, yeah. I know, I know.” The plate clinked against the bottom of the sink. I turned on the tap and washed the crumbs away. “Look, Ma. I'm tired. And I'm going back to bed.”

“I'm not done talking to you yet!”

I rubbed my eyes as I crossed the kitchen. “That's alright. Pretty sure I can sleep through the rest.” I gave her a quick hug and a peck on the cheek. “Thanks for the cake. Let yourself out when you're done.”

“No, no, I'll leave now.” She tensed, pushing me away. “But you should know, you have a lunch date tomorrow with the Carter's Creek alpha's daughter.”

I clenched my jaw and took a deep breath in through my nose. “Do I now?”

“It's already been scheduled, so even if you're screwing around with Felicity Jordan, you'll need to attend.” A smile crept back onto Ma's perfectly lined lips. “The Carter's Creek pack won't be happy if you stand her up.”

No, they wouldn't be. I took another breath, then threw my hands up in surrender.

“You know what? Fine. I'll go.”

Ma arched a slender eyebrow in slow deliberation. “You will?”

“But that doesn't mean I'll like her.” I turned, waving my hand as I headed back to bed. “G'night, Ma. Get home safe.”

I was back at my bedroom door before I heard her answer.

“Sweet dreams, Alexander.”

I heard the back door open and close again. I half-considered going back out to lock it behind her, but what was the point? Evergreen was a safe town. And if I kept doing my job as alpha, it would stay that way.

The only person I needed to keep out with a locked door had just left.

I collapsed onto my bed as I mulled over my fate.

So I had a date. Tomorrow. Ha.

What a joke.

I'd been on a handful of first dates in the last five years. Never made it to a second. When it came to going out on the town, fine dining, and romantic shenanigans, I was quite a grump. I knew it, and I made sure any woman along for the ride knew it. No point in hiding it, was there?

Plenty of women were willing to suffer my grumbling, sure, but that had nothing to do with their interest in me as a person. No, they wanted Alexander Miller, alpha of Evergreen. Human women or shifter women...they were all the same.

Felicity was the only woman I could stand spending time with, and that was because she didn't give a damn what I was. Alpha, beta, omega—she didn't care whether I could shift into a wolf, a hedgehog, or a balloon animal. She never had.

Quincy Houghton, on the other hand...he must've been feeling pretty pleased with himself right now. He'd had aspirations toward joining his pack with Evergreen's for as long as I'd known him. Now, thanks to Ma's meddling, he probably thought he was getting his wish.

I hoped he handled disappointment well because that was all he'd be getting from me.

I closed my eyes, grateful that sleep would relieve my mind of all this. Tomorrow's problems were best left for tomorrow. Today, I needed rest.

Somewhere between my worries and my dreams, Springsteen's "Born to Run" stirred me awake all over again. It was the ringtone I'd programmed for Felicity.

I shot out of bed and found my jeans on the floor in the hall. My phone was still in the pocket.

"Hey, Cheeks," I said through a yawn. "How's it going?"

"You're awake." She sounded surprised.

"Barely."

"I heard the news about the fire on Waverly." Her voice cracked. "I was worried you'd still be at it."

"Wrapped things up a few hours ago. I'm safe. Everyone got out okay." She'd been worried about me. Sweet of her but unnecessary. "Hey, how'd it go yesterday?"

There was a long pause.

That couldn't be good.

"It's Nana," Felicity finally said. Her voice broke again, this time into a sob. "She's going to lose the house."

"Fuck," I swore. It seemed like the only reasonable reaction to the news: *fuck*. But once it was out of my mouth, my ability to rationalize kicked in. "Wait. Doesn't your Nana own her house? How—"

"It's a long story."

"Tell me, anyway." I headed to my closet. I needed a fresh shirt and some clean socks. I was wide awake now. If I stopped for coffee, I could be at Felicity's place in fifteen minutes. Less if I ignored the speed limit.

"Before Grandpa died, he got really into sports betting, I guess. Hundred bucks on the Patriots here, five hundred on the Red Sox there. Mom and Nana never told me, but it added up. It *really* added up. And after he died—"

"The bookie came calling," I guessed. I knew how these turf accountants liked to work. Gamblers die. Debt, like diamonds, was forever.

“He wanted Nana to settle up Grandpa’s accounts. No one will say exactly how much he owed. Only, it was enough that Nana had to ask Mom for help.”

“That doesn’t sound like Nana Jordan.” I’d once watched Felicity’s grandmother laugh in the face of a stock boy at the Hannaford for having the audacity to offer to carry her groceries. Nana Jordan wouldn’t even let me scoop out her driveway for her; if I didn’t get up and head over with my shovel before sunrise after every snowfall, she’d beat me to the punch.

The Jordan family’s independent streak was rivaled only by their stubbornness. The former might have skipped over Felicity’s mother, but the latter ran straight through from Nana Jordan to Felicity herself.

“That’s how I know it must’ve been bad. Nana wouldn’t have asked otherwise. Mom only agreed to make payments on the debt if Nana would take me in. That’s the reason I got shipped here back in high school. All this time, I was just part of their deal.” I heard her blowing her nose, then she sniffled into the phone. “Only now, Mom says she’s tired of it.”

“It’s her mother. You don’t just get to wash your hands of family.” Even I wouldn’t stoop that low, and Nana Jordan was a far more likable person than my own mother had ever been.

“Mom doesn’t agree. Xander, she’s going to make Nana sell the house to cover the rest of the debt. She wants Nana to go to a nursing home. Not even Evergreen Hills...somewhere in Boston, or somewhere even farther away—”

“Whoa, hey. Slow down there.” I grabbed a fresh white T-shirt from the stack above my hanging clothes, juggling the phone while I pulled off the Springsteen shirt and exchanged it for the white one. “Where’s all this coming from? I thought you were just meeting the new boyfriend, not walking out in front of a firing squad.”

“The boyfriend was just bait. The real reason Mom wanted to have dinner tonight...” She sighed. “She thinks it’s time I got into the family business, I guess.”

“Family business?” I shrugged on an old, well-worn flannel and started the search for clean socks.

“Getting married to creepy old men. You should have seen the guy she had picked out for me, Xan. One of the boyfriend’s friends. He looked like a soggy corpse, but he’s a stockbroker, and Mom says he’s loaded—”

“That shouldn’t matter.”

“To her, it does. She wants me married off, and *soon*. Said I’m embarrassing her by not settling down with someone. I don’t think she’s going to be happy until I’m exactly like her.”

“Not being like your mother is one of your better traits,” I pointed out. “What’s any of this got to do with Nana Jordan?”

“Collateral damage. A threat. If I don’t fall in line, Mom’s cutting Nana off completely. That’s the deal: either I start taking my love life seriously, or Nana pays the price.”

“What’re you gonna do?” My boots were by the door. So were my keys. My truck was already de-iced, so that wouldn’t be a problem.

“I’ve got plenty of money saved up. I’ll just...take over the payments, I guess. I’d rather take care of Nana myself than give in to my mother’s demands.”

“That’s the money you’ve been saving up for the Havishford house, though.” Felicity had been working her ass off for years to get a down payment for her dream home. I knew she was close, too.

“It doesn’t matter. I can take the hit.”

As I shoved a foot into one of my boots, my phone buzzed against my ear. I glanced at it.

Ma had texted the details for my date tomorrow. It was almost funny how alike our mothers were.

Our problems, too, in a way.

Actually...

“What if you didn’t have to?” I said slowly, a plan already forming in my mind.

“What do you mean?”

“Hold on a sec.” I put the phone on speaker and forwarded Felicity the text from Ma. “I’m texting you some details. You still got that blue dress you wore to the Christmas concert?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Okay. Put it on, get all gussied up, and meet me at The Farmer’s Wife at two tomorrow. Can you do that for me?”

“Maybe? I have work, but if I push my lunch break back...” She paused. “Why?”

“I was about to drive over and bring you some comfort coffee, but this will be way better.” I smirked. If we could pull this off, both our problems would be solved quickly. “If we’re going to do it right, I’m gonna need you to help me screw something up first.”

“Xander—”

“I’ll fill you in with more details when you get there.” Telling her now would only make her nervous. The suspense would frustrate the hell out of her, too, but Felicity was on her best game when she didn’t have time to overthink. “Just show up and play along. Do that for me, and everything will be okay. Scout’s honor. You trust me?”

“Yes...” she said tentatively. “But I don’t like this.”

I smiled and eased my foot back out of my boot. “You will.”

* * *

“You must be Alexander Miller,” the blonde announced in her smokiest, sultriest voice at The Farmer’s Wife the next day.

“That so?” Part of me still wanted to talk my way out of this. If I wasn’t so damn recognizable around these parts, I would’ve pretended to be someone else. *Alexander Miller? Never heard of him.*

“I don’t see any other handsome, six-four alphas around. So I figure you must be him.” The blonde lowered her eyes, batting her lashes almost shyly. “I’m your lunch date.”

“You don’t say.” She was a looker; I’d give Ma that much. But her little coquettish song and dance wouldn’t win her any real estate in my heart. It was too put-on. Too manufactured. Too *fake*.

There were few things I hated more than fake.

“Should we grab our table?” the blonde asked. It occurred to me that she hadn’t told me her name. Probably thought I already knew it.

She thought wrong.

“After you,” I said, glancing over my shoulder. *Hurry up, Cheeks*.

Felicity was probably still busy at work. That place had a way of holding her hostage. But as far as I was concerned, she couldn’t arrive soon enough.

This was a rescue mission, after all.

“Nice restaurant you’ve got here,” the blonde said as Lola, one of the owners, led us to a table in the center of the room. Even that I hated. Ed and Lola always sat shifters out in the open where everyone could see us. I didn’t begrudge them for it—it was good for business since shifters tended to draw crowds—but being on display made my skin crawl.

“We get all the food from our son’s farm north of town,” Lola replied cheerfully. “Used to be his daddy’s farm. Aldeman Acres. But he took it over once we opened up the restaurant here. It’s named after me, you know. I’m the eponymous farmer’s wife. We’re a good family business, a real farm-to-table kind of place.”

The food might’ve been fresh from the farm, but every table was draped in a pristine white cloth, the lighting was gentle, and there wasn’t a paper napkin in sight. Upscale. It was the nicest place to eat in all of Evergreen. The most expensive, too. Probably the reason Ma had chosen it.

Today, I was expected to flaunt our wealth. Wine and dine to impress.

“It’s much nicer than anything we’ve got in Carter’s Creek,” the blonde said.

I didn’t doubt that. Carter’s Creek was a dying town, barely big enough to sustain itself. Its biggest business was the soda vending machine outside the post office.

“Who’s your lady friend, Xander?” Lola asked me as we took our seats.

I raised my eyebrows, caught red-handed. “Uh...”

“I’m Melony,” the blonde supplied. She waited for me to say something back, but small talk had never been my forte. What was I supposed to tell her? *Melony, huh? Rhymes with felony!*

Somehow, I suspected that wouldn’t go over so well.

Lola glanced between the two of us, then smirked. “Can I get you folks something to drink?”

Melony ordered an espresso martini. When I ordered water, she decided that she wanted a Diet Coke.

“Should we get some appetizers?” Melony asked, and I grinned.

“Oh, definitely.” I turned my smile up to Lola. *So it begins.* “I’ll have the blue cheese and bacon crostinis, the ghost pepper buffalo wings, and...do you have anything with anchovies in it?”

“Not on-menu, but Jax is cooking today.” Lola shrugged. “I can ask.”

“Surprise me.” I turned back to Melony. “You want anything?”

Melony’s red-lipped smile went politely thin. “Just a salad, thank you. Dressing on the side.”

“Got it.” Lola scratched our orders down on a tiny notebook. “Will that be all?”

“Hmm.” I furrowed my brow, thinking hard. “You know what, let’s get some garlic bread, too. Extra garlic. Some horseradish, if you’ve got it.”

“Horseradish? On garlic bread?” Lola cackled. “Wouldn’t choose it for myself, but for you, I’ll make it happen.”

“Sounds great.” I grinned at Lola, then at Melony. “I want to feel it in my sinuses by the time we’re done.”

Chapter 3

Felicity

As expected, work was a nightmare on Monday. Lexi came back from her wild shifter weekend so hungover, she didn't even have the energy to brag about it. One of the orderlies uncovered a group of patients tonguing their pills and trading them like they were kids with Pokémon cards, which was a thrilling and dangerous surprise disaster to unfurl. The short-staffing kept me on the move so constantly, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to take lunch at all.

Luckily, things quieted down after the residents were served their lunch. I spent a few hours playing catch-up and managed to slip out to meet Xander in the nick of time.

When I arrived at The Farmer's Wife, two major things stood out to me.

First, the entire restaurant *smelled*. Not in a bad way or anything. No, the scents wafting from the kitchen were all delicious, as they always were.

But boy, were they *strong*.

Garlic, onions, spicy peppers, smoky bacon, and a myriad of others hit me hard as soon as I walked through the door. I took a step back, blinking furiously as my eyes watered.

Whatever they were cooking in the kitchens today, they'd pulled out all the stops on the smell factor. I'd probably need to take my coat to the dry cleaners tomorrow. I could practically feel the scents clinging to my lapels, my scarf, my hair, my skin.

The second thing I noticed was that Xander was already here, seated at the best table in the house, the one Ed and Lola always kept free for well-to-do out-of-towners, shifters, or, more frequently, the Miller clan themselves. He had on his dad sweater, the one that made him look like he'd just come home with an armful of groceries from Whole Foods. His hair hung to his shoulders in dark gold waves that somehow, despite its messiness, always looked perfectly intentional.

He was grinning broadly, laughing and talking with his hands.

And he wasn't alone.

I could only see the back of the woman's head. It was all I needed to see. She was clearly beautiful, that kind of gorgeous plucked straight from a magazine. Her hair was long and blond—paler than Xander's—and shiny and wavy like it had never been creased by a hair tie. Her sweater had a low back, revealing flawlessly pale shoulder blades and a slender waist.

I unwound my unruly hand-knitted scarf slowly, feeling self-conscious. Xander had told me to wear a specific dress, the blue one I wore to Evergreen High's Christmas concert back in December. It was a good idea since that dress hugged my curves in all the right places but was loose enough around the stomach to hide a food baby. Perfect for a lunch date.

Unfortunately, I hadn't had time to change into it. Instead, I was wearing a pair of scrubs. If it hadn't been for the snow, I would've had my Crocs on, too. Luckily, I'd changed into boots.

But snow boots weren't going to save my pride. Not when *she* looked like *that* and *I* looked like *this*.

“Table for one, Felicity? Or are you grabbing a seat at the bar?”

I startled as Lola Aldeman sidled up next to me. Her white hair was pulled back efficiently, not a strand out of place. She held a handkerchief over her mouth and nose to stifle some of the smell, but I could tell she was smiling from the crinkles around her deep blue eyes.

“I’m supposed to meet Xander, but it looks like he’s already indisposed.”

Lola followed my gaze to the blonde seated at Xander’s table and cackled. “I don’t know about that. Go on over, hon.”

“Should I? It looks like a table for two.” *No room for third wheels.* What was I supposed to do, pull up another chair?

“Don’t you worry. I’ll stop by in a few with a menu for you once she’s gone.”

Cautiously, I approached the table. It wasn’t like Xander to invite another woman to sit in my seat, but he was an alpha. Women were always helping themselves to his presence, attention, and time.

With every step, I felt more and more like we were back in high school. Xander always used to save me a seat at lunch, but by the time I made it through the line, I usually had to displace a member of the cheer squad or one of the marching-band flag twirlers to sit in it.

Just play along, okay? That’s what he’d told me on the phone yesterday. But what was he playing at? Was this all part of his plan?

“Babe! You made it.” Xander rose as he caught sight of me. His grin was shit-eating and a mile wide.

“Oh no,” I whispered to myself as he bounded over to me. It was all I could get out. The next second, his arms were around me, sweeping me off my feet and spinning me around like I was a fairytale princess on the ballroom floor.

“What are you doing?” I hissed in his ear, kicking my feet until he put me back down.

Xander took my face in his warm, callused hands and lowered his lips an inch away from mine.

“Just play along,” he whispered, sending a wave of humid garlic breath toward me.

Then, he moved in.

Like he was going to kiss me.

No. Not *like* he was going to kiss me.

Kissing me was *exactly* what he was trying to do.

Thinking fast, I placed my finger on the tip of his nose and pushed his face away, grimacing. “Your breath stinks. *Babe*.”

“Does it?” Xander cupped a hand over his mouth, huffed into it, then raised it to his nose. “Woof! Yeah, you’re right, it does. But you know how I am.” He smirked, the very picture of charm. “I get a whiff of garlic bread, I can’t help myself.”

“Smells like you helped yourself plenty.” I laughed, then sniffed his breath again. “Is that *horseradish*?”

“Maybe a little.” Xander rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish. “Still love me?”

A prim *ahem* saved me from having to answer. The woman at Xander’s table was on her feet. As she looked me up and down, two deep lines appeared between her eyebrows. Even frowning, she was gorgeous, but she didn’t look happy. Not at all.

And now I knew what Xander had meant when he’d said he needed to fuck something up.

It looked like things were going according to his little plan.

“Hello there.” The blonde’s voice was razor-sharp and ice-thin as she stuck out her hand to me. “I’m Melony. And you are...?”

“This is Felicity.” Xander threw an arm around my waist and pulled my body against his. A little kiss to my temple was the cherry on top. “My girlfriend.”

“Your...*girlfriend*.” Melony made the word sound like it had five syllables. Her voice hadn’t warmed in the least. She stared me down as if I’d just eaten the leftover takeout she’d been saving for dinner.

And I could hardly blame her. Out of all of Xander’s zany schemes to avoid settling down, this one took the cake.

“Yeah, we must be...what? A couple weeks away from our two-year anniversary?” Xander asked me, his hand tightening

around the curve of my waist.

“Try a couple *days*.” I swatted his chest, gaping like I was incensed. If he insisted on being my fake boyfriend for this little ruse, I would leave him no choice but to play a bad one. “You didn’t forget again, did you?”

“Aw, babe, I’ve just been so busy with the pack lately...”

“Always busy with the pack, aren’t you? What about *me*, Xandie? What about *my* needs?”

“You seemed pretty happy with how I took care of your needs when I had you in the shower last night, making you—”

Melony cleared her throat again in another little *ahem*. “I see. I wasn’t aware you were in a relationship, Xander. Nor was my father.”

As her gaze flicked from me to Xander, her blue eyes flashed gold.

In an instant, the temperature in the restaurant dropped. I couldn’t prove it without a thermometer, but I would’ve sworn under oath it was true.

The air pressure also changed. I felt it in my ears, the sudden shift that even my human senses could pick up on.

The restaurant went silent. Every pair of eyes was on us. The other diners had felt it, too.

And we were *human*. I could only imagine how intensely Xander and Melony were feeling this tension right now.

Xander didn’t react. Not at first. He let the silence hang until it was unbearable. When I looked up at him, his eyes were still green as ever, but his smile was gone.

“None of that,” he said, his tone dark and dry. “Not in here.”

“Sorry.” Melony’s voice had gone small and breathy. She lowered her eyes as she took a step back. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“They teach manners out there in Carter’s Creek?” Xander asked.

“They do. Forgive me. I didn’t mean any harm. I just... forgot myself.” Melony took another step back, then another. For a second, it looked like she might have something else to add, but she seemed to think better of it. Instead, she grabbed her coat off the back of the chair and picked her purse up from the floor. “Enjoy your meal.”

She fled the restaurant like it was a crime scene, leaving a ribbon of cloyingly floral perfume in her wake. After a few seconds, even that was gone. Only the fumes of garlic and bacon remained.

“C’mon, sit down.” Xander pulled my chair out for me, then slid it beneath me as I lowered myself into it. The cushion was still warm.

“You wanna tell me what was that about?”

“Ma finally set me up in a way I couldn’t get out of.” Xander sighed and poured himself back into his seat. “Not without help. Thank you, by the way.”

“You owe me.”

He let out a tired laugh and dropped his face into his hand, massaging his temples. “I know.”

Lola came over with a plate of hot wings for Xander and a menu for me. She had a wry smile on her lips, like she knew exactly what Xander and I had just done—and she was proud of us for doing it.

After the way Melony had flashed her eyes at Xander, I was beginning to feel a little proud myself. That kind of behavior was a major show of aggression for shifters, even if I didn’t understand why or how. Doing it to an alpha? In *public*, no less? She was beyond lucky that Xander had let it slide.

If he’d been anyone else, she could have easily lost a limb—or her life. Or started a war.

I ordered the caponata pasta. Xander asked for the steak sandwich and two grapefruit IPAs.

“So, who was she?” I asked Xander when Lola left to put our orders in. “Must’ve been someone important if you

couldn't talk your way out of meeting her.”

Xander scoffed. “She’s nobody.”

“Didn’t seem like nobody.”

“She’s Quincy Houghton’s daughter.”

I stared at Xander blankly.

“Quincy’s the alpha of the Carter’s Creek pack.”

“So, *he’s* important.”

“Hardly. Ma took the liberty of RSVP-ing me before she informed me I had to show up. Carter’s Creek is small-time, but they’re close enough to Evergreen that if I’d canceled, they would’ve just rescheduled,” he explained. “And if I kept canceling, I would’ve been seen as rude.”

“And the little stunt we just pulled was the height of politeness, huh?”

“Not exactly, no.” Xander frowned. “Quincy’s probably going to be pissed.”

“So will your mother when she hears what happened,” I reminded him. Xander’s scheme had been sufficient to drive Melony Houghton away today, but he clearly hadn’t been thinking about tomorrow. “Honestly, where’s your head at? When your mother lets it slip to Carter’s Creek that I’m not really your girlfriend, things will only get worse.”

“Well...about that.”

Slowly, Xander raised his eyes to me, big puppy-dog greens. Even after nearly two decades of friendship, when he looked at me like that, it still had the strangest way of making my heart flip-flop.

“Stop it.” I laughed, rolling my eyes. The flip-flopping didn’t mean anything. Normally, when Xander looked at me like that, he was just trying to get me to give him my extra fries. It usually worked. “If you’re planning on professing your love to me, Mr. Miller, you’re about eighteen years too late.”

Xander looked faux-wounded. “What the fuck? I tell you I love you all the time.”

“Different kind of love.” I smirked as Lola brought over our food. Jax must’ve been working in the kitchens today because the food came out fast and piping hot.

On top of my pasta, Xander’s sandwich, and the IPAs, Lola brought over a plate of hot wings and a side salad. I hadn’t heard Xander ask for them, but he got free stuff comped for him all the time in these parts. Either that, or they’d been part of his earlier order.

I reached out to help myself to one of the wings, but just as my fingertips brushed its sticky, saucy coating, Xander caught my wrist.

“You don’t wanna eat that,” he said seriously.

“Why not?” An old hurt speared my chest. I was used to my mother critiquing my food choices, but it wasn’t like Xander to go down this road.

“They’re ghost peppers,” he revealed, and a laugh of relief left my throat.

“Why did you order—”

“Focus, Cheeks. I’m trying to scheme with you here.” He released my wrist and handed me his napkin.

“Okay. What kind of scheme?” I asked, delicately wiping the ghost pepper sauce away.

“The kind that creates a solution. To your problems and mine.” Xander pushed the ghost pepper wings aside and reached for his steak sandwich. “Your mother wants you to get married, or Nana loses the house to the bookies and gets packed off to the nursing home. Right?”

“She’s *not* going to the nursing home,” I insisted. Not while I lived and breathed.

“No, she’s not,” Xander agreed. “Now, *my* mother wants *me* to get married, too, and there will be no end of Melonies and their ilk until there’s a ring on my finger.” He raised his sandwich and pointed to his ring finger, inviting me to imagine a gold band there. It was no small feat. Xander was notoriously difficult to pin down.

“So...we’ve got the same problem.” Nosy mothers with control issues. Tale as old as time, right?

“Same solution, too. It’s been right in front of us this whole time.” Tentatively, Xander set his sandwich down and moved his hand over mine. The rough ridges of the calluses on his palm scratched against my knuckles, but when his touch settled, all I felt was warmth.

“Uh...”

Xander had big hands. They were masculine, rugged from hard work. The hair on his knuckles and forearms was dark gold, coarse, and complementary to the golden tones in his skin. Even his hands had something wolfish and animalistic to them, making it impossible to forget what he was. What he could do. What he could become.

My heart fluttered so fast, I had to take a long, slow breath to calm myself.

Was he actually proposing that we...get together? Date? Become a *couple*?

“What’s wrong?” Xander smiled slyly. He must have clocked the confusion on my face. “I’d be a good fake boyfriend, Cheeks. Best you’ve ever had.”

The fluttering in my chest screeched to a stop. Like a hummingbird that had just lost the will to flap its wings, it faltered, then plummeted.

Fake boyfriend. Emphasis on the *fake*.

“Xander, no. Bad idea,” I pointed out as gently as possible, composing myself. “We *can’t*.”

“Why not?” He took a huge bite of his sandwich. Suddenly, I wasn’t hungry at all.

“You’re too tall for me, for one thing,” I said, my shoulders tense. “We’ll look silly together. How would we even fake-kiss?”

“Huh.” Xander chewed as he considered, then swallowed. “Well, I guess I’d bend down to your level, and you’d pop up

on your toes. Either that, or I'd just pick you up and move you where I want you. Can't be that hard."

A flush rose to my cheeks as I squeezed my knees together. Suddenly, I was hyper-aware of how nice Xander's lips looked, all pink and broad and pillowy, with a smear of aioli on his lower lip that he quickly licked away with a flick of his dark pink tongue.

I was even more aware of how long it had been since I'd last been kissed.

"It will be too awkward." I cleared my throat. Why was it so hot in this restaurant? Lola must have turned up the heat. "We'd never be able to pull it off."

"You think so?" Xander frowned. "I don't. We already hang out with each other all the time. We know more about each other than anyone, right? It might be a little awkward at first, but I bet we'd get over it pretty quick."

"But..." I frowned back at him. There had to be some other argument against this, right? Some other excuse.

"Go on." Xander smirked. "I can do this all day. Both our mothers are terrors; you can't pretend otherwise. Why shouldn't we fake them out for a little while if it's for everyone else's benefit?"

"Because...because someday, you're going to meet some girl who's going to make you forget why you were ever single," I said, forcing confidence into my voice. "Someday, I hope I'll meet a guy who makes me feel the same way. I have to believe that they're out there somewhere, waiting for us. And if we do *this*...if we're still doing it when we meet them..."

"We fake a breakup," Xander said with a shrug. "Simple as that."

I stared at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. "You're not kidding, are you? You've completely lost your mind."

"If that's true, I should've lost it a long time ago."

I laughed. Not because this was particularly funny, but because it was absolutely *ridiculous*. “No one’s going to buy this, Xander. Everyone knows we’re just friends.”

“Why not? Friends fall in love all the time. You and me, let’s say we’ve...kept it on the down-low. Didn’t want other people in our business; you know how nosy people get. We already spend enough time together, so when word finally gets out, people will wonder why they didn’t realize it sooner. Then, all I have to do is fake a proposal, and we’re in the clear.”

“A *proposal*?” As if fake dating wasn’t bad enough. “Are we going to plan a fake wedding, too? Fake-argue with a catering company?” I laughed again, more incredulously this time. “You do hear how nutty this sounds, right? Where does it stop?”

“I figure we stick it out a year or so.” Xander nodded sagely. “Give or take. That should give you enough time to save up and buy that house you’ve got your heart set on, and it’ll give me the time to come up with another plan.”

“And when the year’s up? Your mother will start needling you as soon as she realizes you’re on the market again.”

“She might. But an entire year of reprieve from the arm-twisting and manipulation is more than worth it to me.”

“What about *my* mother?”

“You’ll be inconsolably heartbroken over losing me. Far too depressed to believe in love again,” Xander said, his green eyes sparkling teasingly.

“Oh, *I’ll* be heartbroken, will I?” He was baiting me, and I knew it—but at least this joking around felt more like *us*. “Who says I won’t be the one breaking your heart?”

He grinned. “Does that mean you’re in?”

He was now doing a different kind of puppy-dog eyes: the victorious kind that implied he already knew he’d won.

“It means I’ll think about it,” I said slowly. “I’m not sold yet...let me mull it over for a while. This is a pretty big ruse

we'd be pulling off. I don't want to jump into it without considering it thoroughly first."

"That's all I'm asking." He sucked his thumb clean of a rogue glob of aioli. "You want dessert?"

"The biggest slice of pie they're legally allowed to serve me," I declared, hit by a fresh wave of hunger. "And you're buying."

Xander laughed. "For you, sweetheart? Anything you like."

Chapter 4

Xander

Dad's truck rolled up my driveway nice and slow. Probably because Ma already had the passenger-side door open, half-hanging out of it as she hollered her latest complaints at me.

“You've shamed yourself, you've shamed your family, you've shamed your pack, and worst of all, you've shamed *me!*”

“Good morning to you, too, Ma.” I tossed the snow from my shovel onto the growing pile of mounded white, then dug in for another scoop.

It had snowed again after I got home from lunch at the Farmer's Wife. When I woke up this morning, the world was covered in another two inches of powder and ice.

I thought I'd at least have enough time to clear out the drive before word of my failed date with Melony made it back to Ma.

Obviously, I'd thought wrong.

“Morning, kid.” Dad emerged from behind the wheel of his truck after parking it. His voice was muffled by the thick woolen scarf wrapped around the bottom half of his face. He tugged the scarf down and gave me a close-lipped half-smile, half-grimace. “How you doing?”

“We know *exactly* how he's doing. Feeling proud of yourself, aren't you?” Ma nearly slipped on the snow as she marched over to me, furiously pulling off her mittens. “The

Houghton girl is inconsolable, Alexander. What did you *do* to her?”

“I didn’t do anything to her,” I said, then frowned. “Wait, no, that’s not true. I bought her a salad and a Diet Coke.”

“I hear from Quincy Houghton you brought some floozy with you yesterday. He seems to think you’re already in a relationship.” She balled up her mittens and threw them at me. They hit my chest and flopped uselessly to the ground. “Which we all know isn’t true.”

“No floozies, Ma,” I assured her. “It’s like you said the other day. I’ve been seeing someone, but I’ve been keeping it to myself until I could see how serious it was getting.”

“That so?” Dad stooped to pick up Ma’s mittens. “You know we’d love to meet her when you’re ready.”

“You’ve been seeing someone?” Ma drew back, processing this news. “And you hid it from me. *Deliberately*. Is this how the alpha of the Evergreen pack handles his business now? By lying, conniving, and sneaking around?”

“We’re not sneaking around.” I shrugged and leaned on my shovel. “Just didn’t want you to scare her off.”

Ma had the decency to blush, though whether that was from embarrassment or rage was anyone’s guess. “Scare her off?”

“To be fair, Marianne...” Dad cleared his throat and placed his hand on the small of Ma’s back. “Even you’ve gotta admit, you can come on a little strong. Why don’t we go inside and talk about this over some coffee?”

“How old is she?” Ma snapped, shoving Dad away. She leaned into me, the cold vapor of her breath bellowing from her lips like steam. “From which pack?”

“Who said she’s from a pack?” I countered, which *really* set her off.

“Alexander Jameson Miller, I swear to all that is holy—”

“Enough of that.” Dad placed a hand on Ma’s shoulder. His eyes flashed golden, and she shrank down slightly, lips

pulled back in a snarl. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it? Be happy for the boy, Marianne. He’ll tell us all about his little lady when he’s ready.” Dad leveled his gaze on me. His eyes were green once more but no less stern. “Won’t you?”

“Sure,” I said, though I was playing with fire here. Now that I’d planted this seed in my parents’ heads, I’d set an expectation as well. Ma wouldn’t rest until she knew who this mystery woman was. Dad might not be alpha anymore, but he didn’t have to order me around to make himself clear.

My parents *would* be meeting my so-called girlfriend. If Felicity didn’t agree to put on this ruse with me, I was screwed.

“Can she have children? At least tell me that much,” Ma said, sounding exasperated.

I shrugged. “Haven’t gotten around to testing her fertility yet, believe it or not.”

“You should have told me about this before I went through all the effort of setting you up and—”

“I might have,” I lied, feeling somewhat vindicated. “Except that by the time I found out about it, you’d already set the date. Somehow I doubt it would’ve stopped you.”

“How *dare* you—”

“He’s not wrong,” Dad cut in, to my surprise and Ma’s shock.

“You’re turning on me now, too?” she hissed, drawing away from him. “Is that how it is?”

“You married a Miller, Marianne. Your son’s a Miller. If you wanted children you could boss around, you should have shackled up with a beta.” Dad rubbed his eyes with his gloved fingers. Suddenly, he looked incredibly tired.

“I want this girlfriend of yours at Macy’s mating ceremony on Sunday. Or else.” Ma hugged herself, glaring at Dad and me alike, but the fight in her voice was half-hearted. “Come on, Anthony. We’re leaving. I’d hate to overstay our welcome.”

Ma trudged back to Dad's truck, shoulders hunched. Dad lingered, watching her go.

"You shouldn't antagonize her," he said quietly as Ma crawled into the passenger seat.

"I'm not trying to."

"That may be." He shook his head and sighed. "See you on Sunday, kid. Looking forward to meeting your lady friend. She must be something special."

"She is," I said, but the confidence in my voice was manufactured.

I had no clue if Felicity would say yes.

After my parents took off, I went back inside. Every few minutes, my eyes wandered back to my phone. After about half an hour, the texts from my siblings started pouring in. Ma must've started calling them as soon as she left.

Kingston texted first, warning me that Ma was on the warpath. *Just do what she wants*, he begged, even though he knew it wasn't that easy. *If she doesn't get her way with you, it's only a matter of time before she starts harping on me.*

Dylan was more interested in my new girlfriend than anything. *How serious is it? If I have to show up to another mating ceremony this year, she'd better be hot.*

My sister Macy only asked if I was bringing a plus-one to her own mating ceremony. When I told her I'd have to get back to her on that, she sent a heart and didn't push further.

I'd always known she was my favorite for a reason. Kingston was a beta, happiest when he was following orders and avoiding any stirring of the pot. Dylan, a reclusive sigma, was even more evasive. When he could help it, he avoided the pot entirely. But Macy was an alpha, like me. She tended to see the big picture and naturally felt inclined to ensure everything was in place.

Though she was the youngest of us, she was the only girl in the family. Ma had focused all her energy on getting Macy hitched before the rest of us—and to Ma's delight, she'd

finally succeeded. Macy knew better than anyone how much stress could be piled on top of us when Ma decided to play 3D chess with our love lives.

I replied with a heart emoji, then opened my messages to Felicity.

Still nothing. She'd gone completely radio silent since yesterday's lunch.

God, I hoped I hadn't scared her off with my batshit plans.

I finished scooping out the drive, then hit up my friend Brody, who I worked with at the fire department, to see if he wanted to grab a drink. Brody wasn't a shifter, which was exactly what I needed right now: no pack politics, no talk of succession crises, just craft beer and a few laughs.

He agreed right away. Brody was as single as I was but far more interested in changing that. He was usually good for a spontaneous afternoon at the bar. We settled on meeting at the Wily Elephant.

If nothing else, it'd be a nice change of pace.

An hour later, I had my ass on a barstool and a cold one in hand while Brody flirted with Kelsey, the brunette who managed the bar. She was ten years older than him, divorced with two kids, but that didn't stop Brody from shooting his shot—at least until she threatened to cut him off if he didn't stop bothering her and let her get back to work.

“That's the kind of woman we need,” Brody mused, watching Kelsey move down the bar to serve other patrons.

“The kind that tells you to stop feeding her lines, or she'll stuff you full of olives and toss you out on the street?” I laughed as Brody scowled.

“So she's got some fire in her. I like that in a woman!” His scowl dissolved as he shook his head, laughing with me. “Plus, you don't have to wonder if she'll turn into a MILF or not. She's already there.”

I turned the subject toward work after that. Given the day I'd had, talking about women and dating was the least of my

interests. As we discussed how badly the station needed a new firetruck and whether or not we should take the animal shelter up on their offer of a dalmatian mutt as a new mascot, I found myself relaxing for the first time all day.

Still, I checked my phone regularly, hoping to see Felicity's name lighting up my screen. Part of me was still anxious to learn whether she agreed to my idea, but a much bigger part of me was concerned that I'd come on too strong.

Any other woman in town would have agreed to this ridiculous plan without giving it a second thought...and every single one of them would have gone into it hoping our fake relationship would turn into something more. Evergreen was alpha-obsessed, just like the rest of the world. The life I'd come into by birthright and chance fascinated humans, especially human women.

But Felicity was different. Always had been. Sure, she sometimes joked about having a crush on me when we were younger, but a joke was all it was. The men Felicity was interested in lived in the pages of her Jane Austen novels, and a Mr. Darcy I was not. Someday, she would take that trip to England she'd always dreamed about, meet some foppish, soft-handed lord, and get the happily-ever-after she deserved.

The fake engagement I'd proposed was as close as I'd ever get to dating Felicity Jordan. But if I'd fucked up by even suggesting it...

My throat went dry as I checked my texts again. Still nothing.

At this point, I was becoming concerned that she'd never talk to me again.

"Get off your phone," Brody muttered, elbowing me in the ribs. "Check out the pretty little thing who just walked through the door. Now *she* looks like trouble."

I glanced at the door and stifled a groan. Brody's *pretty little thing* was trouble, alright.

Melony Houghton had just walked in, surrounded by a gaggle of girlfriends. Her blond hair was piled high on her

head, and the tip of her tiny princess nose was pink from the cold. I shrank down as she scanned the room, willing her gaze to gloss over me.

No such luck. Her eyebrows shot up as her eyes locked on mine, like she was surprised to see me. I didn't buy it. I'd never seen her at the Wily Elephant before, and it was well-known around town that this was where the guys from the fire station liked to drink.

If I had to guess, she showed up here looking for me—or a fight. Probably both.

Melony's friends scurried off to a table in the center of the bar, but she didn't join them.

“Shit. She's coming our way.” Brody raked his fingers through his shaggy brown hair. “How do I look?”

“Like you're trying too hard. That girl's a shifter, bud. You don't want anything to do with her.”

“I don't know about that.” Brody smoothed his hair down one last time, then rose as Melony approached. “Hey there. I'm Brody. *Officer* Brody, if there are any fire hazards in the building...and in my expert opinion, I think I'm looking at one.”

“Hello, Brody.” Melony smiled, close-lipped and demure, then turned to me. “Hey, Xander. Buy you a drink?”

I raised my beer. “Already got one.”

“Next round's on me, then.” She crossed an arm over her body, grabbing her elbow and playing the innocent. “I'm surprised to see you here.”

“You two know each other?” Brody asked.

“We do.” I didn't take my eyes off Melony. My gaze was pure black ice. “What are you doing here?”

“Just grabbing drinks with some gal pals. One of my friends has been fooling around with the owner. He said we could come in for free drinks and a good time whenever we want.” She arched a blond brow. “Is that okay?”

“Would be, if I believed you.” I cocked my head toward Kelsey, who was working the taps. “But I don’t think the owner swings that way.”

Melony frowned. “I swear this wasn’t planned.”

“I hope you’re not swearing on anything important, then.” I kept my face firmly expressionless. “If you’re here to drink, fine. Enjoy yourself. Brody and I were just leaving, anyway.”

“We were not!” Brody interjected, and I fought the urge to scowl at him. “Melony, you said your name was? What brings you here to Evergreen?”

“We thought we might take in the sights. The town is so gorgeous in the snow,” Melony said politely to Brody. But like clockwork, she turned her gaze back to me again. “Carter’s Creek isn’t much to write home about, but you and your boys should drive over sometime. Compare and contrast. We’d show you a good time.”

“I like the sound of that,” Brody said, beaming.

I shook my head. “You know what I don’t get, Melony?”

“What?”

“Why you’re still sniffing around here. I thought I made it clear yesterday—I already have someone. Someone I care about deeply.” Technically, that wasn’t a lie. “I’m not on the market, and no amount of coercing on your part is going to change that. I’m a taken man.”

Brody’s brows knitted together as he opened his mouth, but I kicked him beneath the bar, and he closed it again.

“I understand that you’re otherwise involved,” Melony said, her tone filled with ice. “But I smelled her yesterday, and I know she’s not one of us. Do you really want to spend your life with a human, Xander? I know I wouldn’t. They’re not our kind. They never will be. That girl you were with doesn’t belong with you any more than your friend Brody here belongs with me.”

“Hey!” Brody yelled, wounded.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” Melony challenged, locking her gaze on mine.

I shrugged. “You’re wrong. And after that little display, I’ve changed my mind. You and your friends can go back to Carter’s Creek and drink there. You’re not welcome in Evergreen anymore.”

“What?” Her laugh was haughty and high. “Because I had the decency to tell you the truth?”

“No.” I pushed my barstool back and set my beer down, drawing myself up to my full height. “Because Felicity is ten times the woman you are, and I won’t hear anyone talking shit about her. Especially not some trumped-up tart from Carter’s Creek.”

She opened her mouth, scowling, but I shook my head before she could get another word in and pointed her to the door.

“Out,” I ordered. “Now. If I see you in this town again, I’ll be speaking with your father. He won’t like what I have to say.”

“No need to speak with him,” Melony said as she took several steps backward. Her lips twisted in disdain. “I’ll be telling him all about this when I get home.”

She marched back over to her gaggle of friends, who whined and pouted but put their coats back on. Melony didn’t look at me as she hurried to usher them away, but plenty of the others were more than happy to shoot me dirty looks on their way out the door.

“What,” said Brody, gaping, “the fuck was that about?”

“Like I said.” I slumped back down on my stool and wrapped my hand around my frosty beer glass. “Shifters. You don’t want to get caught up in our mess.”

“Yeah, I got that. I meant the thing about your *girlfriend*.” He leaned in, wide-eyed. “Are you and Felicity Jordan finally an item?”

“Not exactly.” I glanced at my phone again. *Come on, Felicity*. If she didn’t say yes at this point, I would have a lot of ass-covering to do. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Brody looked like he wanted to ask me a dozen different questions in rapid-fire, but even he could take a hint. Eventually.

“All I’ll say is this, then.” Brody spun on his stool to face the bar and sipped his beer. “If you two are screwing around, it’s far from my place to tell you to stop it. But you and Felicity have been friends since high school. These things have a way of making people catch feelings...and they have a way of blowing up in people’s faces.”

I scowled at my phone and shoved it into my pocket. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good. Hey, Kelsey!” Brody waved the bar’s owner down. “Can we get a couple of waters over here? You look so fine in those blue jeans, you’re making me *thirsty!*”

Brody and I had a couple more beers, then walked across the street to grab pizza from Polly’s. With an extra-large, extra-greasy spicy sausage and pepperoni, we soaked up any lingering alcohol in our system and shot the shit until we were good to drive. Brody didn’t broach the subject of Felicity again, but even after I was home, his words of warning still lingered on my mind.

If Felicity agreed to this...*could* I catch feelings? Was that something I needed to worry about? The crush I’d had on her all those years ago seemed unimportant now that we were adults. It was more like an old scar than a fresh wound, one that I stroked from time to time. Not something I was looking to open up again.

At this point, I was more worried that this was going to blow up in my face.

Especially if she turned me down—or worse, never spoke to me again.

After I showered, I texted Dad to warn him about Melony's little encore. She shouldn't have come back to Evergreen, not so soon after flashing her eyes at me in a public place. And she definitely shouldn't have spoken about Felicity like that.

Ma's meddling in my love life had emboldened the Carter's Creek pack a little too much for my liking. Dad and I discussed it a little over text, and he didn't think it was anything to worry about—just a shifter girl with wounded pride—but something about it didn't sit right with me. A wise man once said something about hell, fury, and a woman scorned.

If she didn't hate me already, I had a nasty feeling that Melony was the kind of girl who believed in *third time's the charm*.

That night in bed, my worries about Melony quickly shifted to thoughts of Felicity. It was the funniest thing—I could still remember what she was wearing the day I first met her. She'd been fourteen to my sixteen. First day of school, my junior year. No one in Evergreen ever dressed up too fancy for school, especially not on a Monday morning, but she'd been new in town. Olive-green dress, bright blue bands on her braces, her auburn hair curled.

To me, in my gym shorts and booster-club T-shirt, she'd looked like a goddess. Autumn incarnate. A goddess of leaves changing color, warm days and cool nights, apple cider and pumpkin spice.

God, I hoped she wasn't pissed at me.

I rolled over in bed and grabbed my phone. I needed to text her. If nothing else, I needed to apologize. I'd figure out how to fix the rest of the mess I'd made with this wild plan in the morning.

For now, all that mattered was making sure she was okay. That she knew we were still friends and that I was sorry for dragging her into this mess.

As I squinted at my phone screen, I realized my apology text was unnecessary. While I'd been worrying about her, she'd texted me.

Two simple words:

I'm in.

Chapter 5

Felicity

I'd spent the last twenty-four hours questioning my sanity. I was still pretty sure I'd lost my entire mind.

I sent Xander the text from the bathtub while sulking in the silken foam of my favorite rosemary-and-lime scented bubbles, the way I always did when I had a big decision to make.

I'm in.

Just like that, with two simple words, I sealed my fate. We were doing this. No turning back now.

After the text was out into the world, I found myself too nervous to look at my phone. I toweled off, got dressed, hopped behind the wheel of the Flamingo, and drove.

The streets of Evergreen were dark and empty, dimly lit by a smattering of streetlights. Sand crunched under my tires, keeping the ice off the road.

Evergreen was at its most beautiful at night in the winter. Nana Jordan had built her life here with Grandpa. When the whole town was all sleepy and quiet like this, dusted with powdered-sugar snow, it was easy to understand why they'd chosen it.

It was a pretty little town. There was no denying that.

Had Nana suspected back then that Grandpa would gamble away a small fortune behind her back? Had there been warning signs that she'd chosen to ignore to preserve the facade of their perfect life here? Or had she been entirely

blindsided by all of it, completely in the dark until a bookie showed up on her doorstep one night, the soil still loose and loamy over Grandpa's grave?

Maybe the shifters here weren't the real magic of Evergreen. Maybe it was the way that all the quaint little houses and perfectly manicured front lawns were perfect for hiding everyone's deepest, darkest secrets. Maybe that was how every small town was: unassuming on the outside yet falling apart within.

I drove past Evergreen High, a three-story brick building with a sprawl of sports fields behind it. Just seeing the high school brought back rogue memories—some good, but mostly bad.

Wearing Xander's white away-game football jersey to class on Fridays and getting hateful side-eyes from the cheerleaders. Sitting alone in the bleachers as I cheered him on while he, as quarterback, took the team to State. Sometimes, I'd been convinced that even the teachers had hated me, though I had no idea whether that was because of my weight, my lack of athletic ability, or something deep and intrinsic about me that I couldn't see. Something that was impossible to like.

I kept driving, huddling into my coat as the Flamingo's heater worked overtime.

Before I started looking the way people here wanted a teenage girl to look, only Xander had been kind to me. He'd had to work his ass off to make everyone else fall into line.

I owed Xander a lot, and I'd never forget it.

No matter how nervous this plan of his made me, he needed my help. As I found myself driving toward the Havishford house again, I was reminded that this plan would benefit me as well.

With a guy like Xander on my arm and his ring on my finger, Mom couldn't possibly pretend that I was becoming some old maid before her very eyes. Once we launched our relationship, she wouldn't have any excuse to make threats

anymore. She'd be appeased, the bookies would continue to be paid, and Nana would be safe.

And honestly—how hard could faking an engagement really be?

I drove back home and got up the courage to check my messages. There was only one, from Xander.

You're on, Cheeks. Meet me for breakfast tomorrow so we can discuss specifics?

I took a deep breath as my fingers flew across my screen. *Let's get this over with. When and where?*

* * *

At six the next morning, I showed up at the Pancake Emporium out near the interstate. It was the only place in all of Evergreen that was open before Xander and I started our shifts.

I didn't recognize any of the waitresses. They were all bleary-eyed college-aged girls, probably students at the community college just outside of town. A yawning brunette showed me to a booth. Her dress was a tan vintage number with a stiff collar, a short skirt, and an apron tied around her waist. The get-up reminded me of *Twin Peaks*. She looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't quite place her face. According to the tag pinned over her heart, her name was Amanda.

"Breakfast, lunch, dinner, or all three?" she asked, handing me a newspaper-sized laminated menu. "We do everything here."

"You really do, don't you?" I flipped through the heavy pages, astounded at the offerings. Despite the early hour, I could order a triple cheeseburger, a forty-ounce steak, or an extra-large chocolate malt if I was so inclined. "Just coffee for now, I think. I'm meeting someone. We'll order when he gets here."

Amanda left to get the coffee, and I looked around the restaurant, sitting in the massive booth and feeling strangely

anonymous in the way only a twenty-four-hour diner could provide.

Two female truckers sat near the pie display, attacking gargantuan stacks of pancakes with their forks. A group of goth girls were in the corner booth, working their way through a pot of black coffee and sketching with charcoal. A few booths away from mine, four sleepy twenty-somethings—three girls and one guy—sipped milkshakes and debated over directions to Niagara Falls.

When Xander walked in, every head in the restaurant turned his way.

His firefighter's coat was unzipped, the dull khaki highlighted by yellow stripes. Beneath it, he was in his work navies, a pair of dirty boots on his feet. As he made his way over, I was reminded of how tall he was. Even in an oversized place like this, he made the tables and chairs look doll-like.

The goths stopped sketching. The Niagara Falls travelers whispered and giggled excitedly. When Xander took off his coat, even the truckers looked impressed by the size of his biceps beneath the rolled cuffs of his shirt. One nearly did a spit-take. The other tried to take a bite of her pancakes but poked herself in the chin with her fork.

“Hey, Cheeks.” Xander grinned as he slid into the booth across from me. “Hungry?”

“No, but I think you just made everyone else in here pretty thirsty,” I said with a laugh.

“Did I?” Xander ruffled his golden hair and looked around the restaurant. Everyone else quickly looked away. “Huh. Didn't notice.”

“Of course you didn't.” I rolled my eyes as Amanda hurried over with the coffee and another menu, now with a fresh coat of lipstick on. When it came to ignoring the effect his Adonis-like appearance had on others, Xander was an expert.

I ordered hash browns, eggs, and sausages. Xander got a full English breakfast with an add-on called “Bacon

Mountain.” Exactly his kind of meal.

Amanda giggled at everything Xander said. Even when she headed to the kitchens to put our orders in, I could still feel all the attention in the room being siphoned toward us. It made my skin crawl.

“One of these days, you’re going to have to get used to people staring at you, you know,” I said.

Xander blew on his coffee mug like he was oblivious to all of it. “They’re not *just* looking at me.”

“If they’re staring at me, it’s only because they’re hoping I’m your sister,” I pointed out.

“Time to start disappointing them, then.” He grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips. “My love.”

“About that.” I pulled my hand back and wiped it on my napkin like he had cooties. “If we’re going to make this work, I want to nail down details. Extensive ones.”

Xander furrowed his brow. “Why?”

“Because you and I are about to embark on a year-long session of the Newlywed’s Game. If anyone gets even the slightest whiff of a falsehood about this, it’s all going to fall apart.”

“I was thinking we could just wing it,” Xander admitted. “But if it makes you feel any better, let’s talk shop.”

Over the next hour, we ate our food and built our love story. The foundations were already there, according to Xander: we’d been friends for so long, we were already in love and just hadn’t realized it yet. I argued for a little while about how impossible that was. The way I saw it, the better you knew someone, the more you understood how much you loved them and in what way. But Xander said we should stick to the truth as much as possible.

“It’s just easier,” he declared, mouth full of crispy pork plucked from the peak of Bacon Mountain, “to pivot off a truth than it is to fabricate an entire lie.”

I wanted to tease him about how he'd gotten so good at lying, but the reality was, I already knew. I was grateful that my mother had been off living her own life for most of my teenage years. Xander hadn't had the same luck. Normally, he was honest to a fault, but when it came to dealing with his mother, he'd been forced to develop the skills of an expert con artist. All the Miller kids had.

At least I was learning from greatness. If Xander was a con artist, I was now a con-artist-in-training.

For the most part, I let Xander do the talking. He only needed a little nodding to encourage him and a few pointed questions to keep him on course. By the time he finished conquering Bacon Mountain, he'd decided on the big moment Cupid's arrows had finally struck us both.

"So one night, we're out on one of our regular movie dates." He kept his voice low, leaning across the table and narrating with all the charisma of a sexy Morgan Freeman. "And as I'm walking you back to your car, it starts to rain."

"Oh no! My hair!" I clutched at my waves pitifully, then grabbed a menu and held it over my head, imagining a fake downpour.

"It still looked fine to me, though. In fact, you looked more beautiful than ever. Smudged mascara and all." His eyes glimmered wistfully across the table from me, as if he was really staring at me and falling in love. *Damn, he's good.* "But you were shivering and couldn't find your keys, so I took off my coat and wrapped it around your shoulders."

"We shared a moment," I suggested, deciding to join him in the yarn-spinning. "You were so close, so warm..."

"Maybe it was the rain," Xander added. "Maybe we just couldn't hold our feelings back anymore. I leaned in to kiss you—"

I grinned wickedly, swatting his cheek. "And I smacked you across your handsome face."

"No." Xander took my hand in his, pulling it down to rest on the table. He didn't let go. "Maybe you wanted to at first..."

but then you realized you only wanted to hit me so bad because as soon as my lips were against yours, you wouldn't be able to hide how you really felt anymore." His gaze was serious now. His voice had a magic to it, like a hypnotist putting me into a trance. "That part scared you—how bad you wanted it. How hard you were fighting to stop from wanting it at all. And you asked yourself, why keep fighting? If I want this so bad...why say no?"

"And then what?" I asked, a little breathless.

"Then I kissed you so hard your toes curled, and once you realized how safe you were in my arms, you kissed me back." Xander let go of my hand and leaned back in the booth, looking smug. "What do you think?"

"It's a little...melodramatic," I said, trying hard not to blush.

"Every love story always is, if you tell it right."

"It's not very believable." Only because it was *too* good. "Maybe we should fabricate some more moments before that one. As build-up, you know?"

"What?" he scoffed playfully. "Kissing in the rain not good enough for you?"

"That was our aha moment. But there has to be more foreshadowing before that." I shrugged. "It's how it happens in the books."

"Ingrate. And to think I lent you my coat!"

"Your coat smells like an electrical fire." I bit off a corner of my toast and pointed it at him. "And when you're in the rain, you smell like a wet dog."

"I do not," Xander declared, but he looked unsure.

"You do." I laughed, shaking my head. "You absolutely do."

We invented a few connecting bits, the tendons that could hold the skeleton of our story together. Accidental drunken sleepovers where we'd come a little too close to crossing a line. Tiny moments where I'd caught sight of Xander in just

the right light, or he'd noticed something alluring about my smile.

The more we talked, the less impossible a relationship between us seemed.

A fake one, anyway.

"The most important thing is how we act together when we're in public," Xander informed me. "Especially around shifters. We're pretty good at reading body language. We have to be. So, if we don't sell this physically, no one's going to buy it."

"Are you suggesting that we..." I winced, making a rude little gesture with my fingers. "Uh, take things to pound town?"

Xander threw his head back, roaring with laughter as he thumped his palm against the table. "God, no. I wouldn't put you through that."

"Chivalrous of you." I joined in his laughter. It made me feel warm with relief.

So, no sex. That was for the best.

"We *will* need to get a little more comfortable with each other, though," Xander said.

"How?" I asked.

"For starters...come here."

He beckoned me over to his side of the table. Warily, I got up and went over. The booth was massive enough that we could have both sprawled out comfortably, but that clearly wasn't what Xander had in mind.

He put his arm around me, pulling my body close to his while he dragged my plate across the table.

"How's that feel?"

"Weird," I admitted. We'd never really been into cuddling before. Being this close to him made my body feel tingly, especially where my knee touched his and my hip brushed against his side.

“But bearable?” he asked.

I nodded, then swallowed hard. “I can deal.”

“Good. You ought to smell like me. If I nuzzle up to you like this, shifters will catch my scent on your skin.” Xander dropped his head and folded his body across mine. To anyone else in the room still watching, it looked like we were making out. But Xander wasn’t going in for a kiss. Instead, he rubbed his cheek against mine, then nuzzled lower, first against my jaw, then down my neck.

As he rubbed himself on me, I started giggling. At first, just a little irregular titter, then an uncontrollable wave that left me clutching my ribs and shaking.

“What’s so funny?” he hissed, pulling back.

“Your stubble. It’s scratchy.” I pinched his prickly cheek, and he pretended to snap at my fingers with his straight white teeth.

“Gonna have to get used to it,” he warned me. “Wolves are big on scent.” He pulled back and looked at me strangely for a moment, then nodded. “But the giggling is a nice touch. Makes it sound like you like me.”

“As opposed to how I really feel,” I joked, elbowing him gently in the ribs. “How long should we sit like this so your stench will stick to me? I don’t know how I can finish eating if I’m plastered to your side.”

“Simple, Cheeks.” He grinned, hugged me tighter, and reached for a fork. “I’ll feed you.”

Somewhere near the end of my hash browns, all eaten carefully from the tip of Xander’s fork, it hit me.

We’re really doing this.

It felt too natural.

Too much.

Too *real*.

“Do you really think we can pull this off?” I whispered, suddenly all too aware of the eyes on us. Xander had pulled

my attention away from them with such ease earlier. Now, I was convinced they'd been watching us this entire time.

"I think if anyone can do it, we can." He pressed a kiss to my cheek, then waved to Amanda for the bill.

Xander paid. Insisted on it. I was used to that. He seemed to take some bizarre pleasure from picking up the check. But I was far less used to *letting* him. I'd always taken such pride in being able to pay my own way. It was a tiny middle finger to my mother—the master of not splitting the bill.

Now that we were an item, I guessed those days were finally over. I couldn't even complain—not without putting cracks in our facade.

Xander would never dream of letting his girlfriend buy her meal.

He kept his arm around me as we left. I wasn't sure if it was to solidify our union or if he was just trying to prevent Amanda from reading too much into the twenty-dollar tip he'd left her.

Instead of splitting off and walking to his truck like normal, Xander walked me back to the Flamingo. He even opened the door for me.

Before I could slip behind the wheel, he grabbed me and wrapped me up in an enormous hug.

"Thank you for this," he whispered in my ear. "I mean it."

I laughed and pulled back. "I'm the one who should be thanking you. You're keeping the bookies off Nana's doorstep and my mom out of my hair, remember?"

"Have you told her yet?" he asked, his arms still around me, though settled a little lower than usual—the small of my back instead of around my ribs.

"Not quite." It was a conversation I wasn't looking forward to having. There was every chance my mother would be thrilled, of course. Xander was handsome, he had money, and he was locally beloved. She had no reason to be anything but thrilled for me.

But knowing Mom, if there was a way to extract disappointment from a situation, she'd find one.

“Ah, well. I haven't told mine yet, either.” He gave me a smirk and a final squeeze. “Me and some of the guys are grabbing drinks after work tonight. If you wanted to drop by...”

“You wanna drink up the courage to tell them at the same time?” Calling Mom while Xander drunkenly egged me on would take the edge off things.

“I was thinking we might do a little test run of this, at least,” Xander suggested. He tugged my hips closer to his, then released me. “Gotta make sure playing pretend-girlfriend doesn't turn your stomach, right?”

“If you squick me out, I'll be sure to vomit discreetly.” I smiled. “Drinks sound good. Be safe today, okay? I don't want you getting hurt and standing me up on our first date.”

“Wouldn't dream of it.” He pinched my cheek. “Love ya, Cheeks. See you tonight.”

“Love ya, too.”

He kissed me on the forehead again, then backed away. Once I was behind the wheel and buckled in, he closed my door. With two thumps from his palm on the roof of the Flamingo, I was dismissed.

I watched him walk away before I put the car in reverse and drove to work.

Xander's kiss was a searing brand on my forehead the whole way there. The gentle pressure of it lingered, like he'd tattooed the imprint of his lips in the center of my forehead, even long after I'd wiped it away.

* * *

It was a good thing that Xander and I had started the day with such a big breakfast. I definitely needed it.

I was the only RN scheduled for the day. I found that a little odd since Lexi and I were usually on the same schedule. When I ran into Roger on his way to the vending machines, I mentioned it to him.

“Lexi switched shifts with Karen,” he explained without slowing down. His threadbare comb-over flopped in the breeze his power walk created. “But Karen’s kid is sick or something. I don’t know. Can you handle it?”

“I’ll get by,” I said since that was the only option. Our residents had needs that couldn’t be half-assed or shoved under the rug. “It’d be easier if we had a few more RNs to help fill out the roster, though.”

“Budget cuts. Sorry.” Facing the vending machine, Roger reached into his pocket, cracked open his wallet, and finally looked at me. “Do you have any change for a twenty? My wife’s got me on Atkins, but if I don’t get some carbs in me soon, I’m going to lose my mind.”

“I might,” I admitted, feeling petty. “If you promise to look into the budget again.”

Roger groaned and looked at the vending machine wistfully. “I’ll see what I can do.”

I reached into my pocket and broke his twenty with four fives and a smile.

Things could really start looking up soon. If Roger made good on his promise, work might become manageable again. And once Xander and I had our mothers distracted with the smoke screen of our fake relationship, I’d be able to breathe a lot easier.

Unfortunately, those hopes didn’t stop my day from quickly turning into a tornado merged with a wildfire. Every time I stopped to catch my breath, something new cropped up that I had to rush to take care of.

I hurried to the break room with an armful of charts so I could fill them out while scarfing down some lunch. As I rounded a corner, I ran into Gena, one of the other RNs.

Literally.

“Oof!” The charts went scattering. I had to grab Gena’s arms to make sure I didn’t topple over as well. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry.”

“You okay?” Gena asked, pulling her long red hair back into a scrunchie as I dove to collect the charts. “You look frazzled.”

“I am,” I admitted. My brain felt like someone had chucked it into a deep fryer, and the non-stop pace of work had given me the jitters. “What are you doing here? I thought you were on the night shift.”

“Roger called and let me know you were doing the day shift alone.” Gena knelt to help me gather up the charts. She shot me a smile. “When he asked if I was free, I told him, ‘put me in, Coach.’”

“Thank you. Seriously,” I told her. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too,” Gena said. She handed me the last of the files with a concerned look in her eyes. “Girl, we need to talk.”

“As long as we talk on the move.” I found my feet and headed for the break room again. “What’s up?”

“You are, actually.” Gena fell into step with me. “I don’t know how your ears aren’t burning. People are talking about you all over town.”

“Seriously?” In a town as small as Evergreen, that couldn’t be good.

“I heard gossip about you at the bank *and* the salon today,” Gena confirmed. “I didn’t want to make any assumptions without hearing it from the source, but...are you and Xander finally biting the bullet and taking the plunge?”

“Oh.” I blinked. “That got out faster than expected.”

Gena’s jaw dropped. “So it’s *true*?”

“Uh...yeah,” I said slowly. “I guess it is. How did everyone find out?”

“From the sounds of things, you guys were getting pretty hot and heavy at the Pancake Emporium this morning.” We

reached the break room. Gena went to the fridge and grabbed two bottles of water. “Polly Burnett’s daughter had your table and saw *everything*.”

Oh. So *that* was how I knew the waitress. She was Amanda Burnett, daughter of the guy who’d sold me the Flamingo—and the town busybody.

For our first unofficial outing as a couple, Xander and I had put on a show for one of the biggest mouths in Evergreen.

“We weren’t getting hot and heavy,” I explained.

“No? Then what *were* you doing?”

“We were just...sitting close together. Sharing some food.” I sighed heavily as Gena handed me a bottle of water. “It’s not like we were making out.”

“You know how starved Evergreen is for gossip. Especially shifter gossip. *Especially alpha* shifter gossip,” Gena said. “Everyone’s been wondering *will they, won’t they* about you and Xander for years. What did you think was going to happen? More importantly, why didn’t you tell me?”

I winced. Gena and I had been friends since my first day at Evergreen Hills. She was a few years older than me and had worked here for a few years longer. To my relief, she’d been generous with helping me get the lay of the land.

I spent so much time at work these days that apart from Xander, she was probably my best friend.

Now I’d hurt her feelings. *And* I’d weakened the story that Xander had concocted.

Would people really believe that we’d kept our relationship secret from even our closest family and friends?

“Things have been pretty crazy over the last few days, and you were scheduled all weekend. But I swear, it’s not what it sounds like.” Quickly, I filled her in on everything she’d missed. My mother’s visit, her ridiculous threats, Xander’s plan...and my tentative acceptance of it.

I trusted Gena. If she was in on the con, she’d help us pull it off.

“Holy shit. Okay.” Gena stared at me with wide eyes. She blinked several times, then shook her head. “You don’t want to hear this, but this is such a bad idea.”

She was right. That was the *last* thing I wanted to hear right now.

I frowned. “You think so?”

“I mean, do you really think it’s a *good* one?”

“I thought it was...well, not the worst idea, I guess.” I went to the cabinets over the kitchenette and helped myself to a Jell-O cup.

“Oh, for what you and Xander want to achieve, it’s perfect,” Gena assured me. “But...you and Xander are already essentially married, you know? All you’re missing is the mushy stuff, which you’ll now be faking for the whole town to see.”

“We clearly faked it okay this morning.” I took umbrage at the idea that Xander and I were apparently already married. Since when could a guy and a girl not be just friends?

“I’m not worried about your capacity to fake it. I’m worried about what faking it will bring. He’s a shifter, right?”

“Right...” It wasn’t much of a question. Everyone in Evergreen knew Xander, knew what he was.

“So he’s got one of those fated mates, *right*?”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course he does. It’s not a problem. This isn’t a long-term thing, Gena. We’re in it for a year, that’s all. Less if we meet someone else. We just need to buy ourselves some time. That’s all.”

“A year is a long time, girl. Someone’s going to end up hurt.” Gena crossed her arms and hugged herself. “Trust me. There’s no way this will end well.”

Before I could offer a rebuttal, duty called. A crash sounded in the hallway, followed by several pained yelps, moans, and plenty of cursing. Gena and I rushed outside to find that there’d been a collision between two residents—one with a walker, one with an electric wheelchair. By the time we

got them upright and assessed for injuries, our other duties had piled up so high, we didn't have a chance to speak again for the rest of the shift.

* * *

It was dark out when I got home. Gena's warning had haunted me on my drive. It was silly, of course. Ridiculous, even.

Shifters didn't fall in love the same way humans did. It was part of why humans found them so attractive. They somehow knew who their mates were intrinsically, as if they could sniff out their own fates. Shifters didn't cheat. Shifters didn't get divorced. Once mated, they were in love for the rest of their lives.

If there was any chance of Xander *catching feelings* for me, he would have caught them long ago. And as for me, my crush on Xander was dead and buried. A little fake snuggling wouldn't change that.

We were going to be fine.

I clung to the comfort of that thought as I got ready for bed. I was too exhausted to do anything else, even text Xander. Once again, work had sucked the life clean out of me.

I only looked at my phone once I was in bed to make sure my alarms were set for tomorrow so I could do it all over again.

As I swiped down to open my alarm settings, a notification caught my eye.

Next payment due tonight. Mom had punctuated her text with a smiley face, which only made her words seem even crueler. *What's it gonna be?*

Mom was playing dirty, and she wasn't wasting any time.

Fuming, I dialed her number and shoved the phone against my ear, my anger ramping up with every ring. When she didn't pick up, I called again. And again.

Finally, she answered.

“Felicity. How lovely to hear from you.” Her tone was at war with her words. In the background, I could hear faint smooth jazz and the buzz of a restaurant crowd. “To what do I owe this thrilling interruption?”

“I got your text.” Raw heat bubbled in my chest. Nana was on the precipice of getting shaken down by some shady mafiosos, and Mom was eating dinner like it didn’t matter at all. “Is this really how you want to play things?”

“I warned you that there would be consequences.” She’d never sounded so smug. “You didn’t listen.”

“That’s not Nana’s fault. Are you really going to punish her like this just because I’m not doing what you want?”

“It doesn’t have to be this way. If you’d entertain the simple notion of going out on a date—with a man of my choosing, of course...”

“I *can’t*, Mom,” I said in exasperation.

“Can’t or *don’t want to*?”

“Can’t.” Finally, it was my chance to feel smug—and time to finally pull out the Xander-shaped ace up my sleeve. “I’m already seeing someone.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

There was a pause—a long one. I could imagine her sitting there in her fancy dress at some overpriced Los Angeles restaurant, vacillating between congratulating me for finally breaking the seal on my love life and chewing my ass for ruining her matchmaking plans.

“Alright,” she finally responded. “How tall is he? What does he do for a living?”

“It’s Xander,” I said.

She coughed as if she’d sucked caviar down the wrong pipe. “Alexander Miller? You hardly seem like his type...” Another pause. “How in the world did this happen? And *when*?”

“About a year ago, actually.” I gave her the whole spiel that Xander and I had cooked up. The slow build of feelings. How hard we’d fought against those desires. The big moment where it finally came together.

“In the rain? Oh, how romantic! I swear, Felicity, if this is some kind of joke at my expense—”

“Not a joke.” I had to hand it to Xander. His storytelling had preyed on my mother’s inner dramatist perfectly. She wasn’t just buying it—she *wanted* to buy it. “It’s like you’ve always said—I needed to lock him down before someone else came along to snatch him up. So I did.”

“The apple doesn’t fall so far from the tree after all, hmm? He *is* awfully handsome. And an alpha. That’s very *en vogue* these days. It’s not who I would have chosen for you, of course—an older man would have been better, someone more established, but...hmm. Are you his *mate*, then?”

I winced. It would have been so easy to lie, but the repercussions would have been annoying to handle down the line.

When shifters found their mate—even if that mate was a human—they didn’t break up when the year was out. They stayed together for life.

I needed a different strategy for this: *avoidance*.

“I love him, Mom. He’s good to me. And...and the Millers *are* established. They own more land in Evergreen than anyone.”

The third pause was the longest of all. I’d just thrown Mom a curveball. Xander and I was the last thing she would have expected, but there was no pretending that he was anything short of an ideal partner. He had it all: the looks, the money, the good family name.

I had her on the hook. Now all I had to do was wait to reel her in.

“Fine, fine,” she huffed. “I’ll make the payment. But I hope you’re taking this relationship seriously. I won’t be happy if I learn that you’re not.”

“There’s nothing I like more than making you happy, Mom,” I said, grateful for my mother’s narcissistic streak. She’d never detect my sarcasm. I was telling her exactly what she wanted to hear.

“All you have is your youth, honey,” she said in parting. “Use it while you can.”

Twenty minutes later, she texted me again. Nana Jordan was safe for another month. The payment had been made.

I collapsed onto my pillow and tossed my phone onto my nightstand, still reeling.

Phase one of Xander’s plan had been executed—and incredibly, it had worked. I’d just fought the first battle of the war that Xander and I were waging against our mothers, and with the help of his lie, I’d won.

No going back now.

Chapter 6

Xander

Sometimes, I got the sense my mother was trying to kill me. Not on purpose or in a malicious kind of way. No, it seemed more like it was out of obligation. She loved me, she wanted the best for me, but it was her civic duty to hen-peck me to death.

“Remember, the full moon is this Sunday,” she informed me over the phone on my way to work on Wednesday. On the bright side, she seemed to have forgiven my great transgression of having a girlfriend without her say-so and was finally talking to me again. On the flip side...she was talking to me again. “If Macy’s going to have her mating ceremony, it’s imperative that we finish planning.”

“You and Macy should handle that. She knows better about what she wants than I do.” Macy had met Leo Alban at a full-moon run his pack had hosted in Boston only a few months ago. He was a beta, which Ma didn’t approve of, but Macy and Leo had both had the wolf-dreams of running together in the moonlight. They’d both felt the fateful tug of a soul-bond. In all the ways that really mattered, they were already promised to each other for life. Once they completed their mating ceremony to publicly announce their relationship, they’d be officially recognized by the pack as mates. Which meant even my mother couldn’t separate them now.

“Need I remind you of your responsibility to your pack? You’re the alpha. You’re expected to officiate.”

“Just let me know what time to show up and whether I’m giving the long version or the short one.” Ma would want the

former, but knowing Macy, it'd be the latter. My baby sister had never been one to sit through three hours of formality when three minutes would do.

“You'll need to rehearse,” Ma warned me.

“And I will. At the rehearsal.”

“Don't you think you might be a little rusty?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose to stem my impending headache. “I've done this a dozen times, Ma. I'll be fine.”

“Still, practice makes perfect. You should be involved in the planning as well.” Her pause had a sharpness to it, like her words were a dagger, but she was still deciding where to stick it. “Unless you're too busy with your little floozy to make time for your family, of course.”

“She's not a floozy.” Furthest thing from it, actually. Felicity's idea of casual sex was jumping into bed after the tenth date. Last Halloween, when all the other women in town had transformed into sexy pirates, sexy cops, and sexy frying pans, Felicity had shown up to the pack's annual party as that creepy girl from *The Ring*.

I grinned at the memory. She'd scared the shit out of Kingston in that costume. It was the best part of the entire night.

“Speaking of your new girlfriend, will she be attending the ceremony?” Ma asked. “I can mark you down as bringing a plus-one if you need.”

Clever, Ma. She made it sound like she was just working on the seating chart, but I knew what she was really getting at: figuring out if my mysterious special someone was a member of the pack.

“She won't be there,” I assured her.

“Why not?”

“She's gotta work.” Knowing how hectic Felicity's schedule had been lately, it probably wasn't a lie.

“You know what I think? I don’t think this girlfriend of yours even exists. I think you’re just pretending to upset me.”

I sighed. “Come on, Ma. When you’re upset, all I get out of it is a headache. Look, I’ve gotta get to work. Let me know how the planning goes.”

“Oh, I will,” she said bitterly.

“Love you, Ma.”

She ended the call without another word.

A few trucks stood in the station’s parking lot, all belonging to the firefighters who’d worked the previous shift. I looked to be the first one here for my shift. We’d start trading off as the others came in.

As I grabbed the duffle bag that contained my fresh clothes and necessities for the next several days, Ma’s words clung to me like a chewed piece of gum beneath my boots. She was already accusing me of lying to her about my love life. That wouldn’t have been much of a problem if she weren’t right on the money for once.

Should I invite Felicity to Macy’s ceremony? It wasn’t unheard of for humans to attend pack celebrations. Macy had already invited some of her human friends so Felicity wouldn’t be the lone ambassador of her species. She’d also been to plenty of our full-moon parties before—as a friend.

Would it be so strange, bringing her along as my girlfriend this time?

Strange, no. Difficult? Perhaps. When Ma threw a party, she tended to make an entire debacle of it. Managing my family would already be a handful, as would managing the pack. They’d want to know if *I’d* had the wolf-dream, for one thing. For another, I still wasn’t sure how Ma would react to learning that my new *floozy* had been right under her nose all along.

Putting on a show with Felicity would only cause more stress for both of us.

Brody pulled up to the station before I could head inside. He was a burly guy from Newark, the kind who'd cackle as he cut you off in traffic, but he was always the first to show up when you needed to move a couch. I considered him one of my closest friends.

"Hey there, lover boy." He clapped me on the shoulder, grinning broadly as we walked inside.

"Hey. What's happening?"

"*You* are. Whole town's gossiping about you and your new main squeeze. Or should I say *fake* squeeze?"

I elbowed him in the ribs, then grabbed him by the collar and pulled him aside. "Keep your voice down. I don't need the whole town knowing my business."

Brody chuckled. "Then you picked the wrong town, bud. People around here are so starved for new gossip, they'd kill for it if they thought they could get away with it. Just let me know when you two call it quits, yeah? Felicity's a looker. Hardworking, sweet as pie, and that ass..."

This time, I elbowed him harder.

"Oof! What was that for?"

"Checking out my girlfriend's ass, for starters." In my chest, my wolf already had his teeth bared and his hackles raised.

That was...strange.

Being protective of Felicity was in my nature, not necessarily my wolf's. Normally, my wolf had nothing to do with it at all. He was a feral, vicious creature that lived inside me, only allowed to come out when I gave him the go-ahead and took him off the leash. He had control of all my most intense emotions—jealousy and possessiveness among them—but *I* was in control of *him*.

Except now, he was ready to spring forth and rip Brody's throat out with his teeth.

And for a second, I was tempted to let him.

“She’s not your mate, man. She’s not even really your girlfriend.” Brody scowled, shaking his head and shoving me away. “And she’s a catch. That’s all I’m saying. Unless you think you’ve even got dibs on women you’re *not* wolfy-shifter-soul-bonded to—”

I scowled back at him. “Of course I don’t.”

“Good. Then, when this charade of yours is over, I wouldn’t mind the chance to shoot my shot with her—only, you know, for real.”

I was in a foul mood for the rest of the day. Couldn’t put my finger on why. We only had a few calls, low-level stuff that I normally would have welcomed since it helped pass the time. But today, every damn call pissed me off more than the last. By the final incident of the night, out at the Sutton house at three A.M., I was so on edge that I had to step outside. Brody and the other guys wrapped up for me, calmly lecturing Joyce Sutton’s three pre-teen daughters about the dangers of holding séances by candlelight.

The next morning, despite several hours of uninterrupted sleep, my mood hadn’t improved. Still, I woke up with a wild idea in my head.

After checking the time, I called Felicity. She answered on the third ring.

“Hey. Wanna come to a pack thing on Sunday?” I asked, slinking down to the engine room so Brody and the others wouldn’t overhear me.

“Depends. What kind of pack thing?”

“Macy’s mating ceremony.” I frowned, trying to remember if I’d explained those to Felicity yet. I didn’t want her thinking she’d be showing up to watch my sister and Leo get it on. “A wedding, essentially.”

“Oh, wow. That’s a big deal, then.”

“Not really,” I admitted. “Everyone already knows they’re mated. There’s no chance anyone’s getting left at the altar. I’ll say a few words, they’ll nuzzle on each other a little, then the

humans will eat while the pack does their full-moon run. It's more of a formality than anything."

"Formalities are always big deals," she insisted. "Are you sure you want me there? I don't want to be a wedding crasher."

"You wouldn't be crashing. You'd be my date. I figured it would be a good time for our big debut as a couple."

"Oh." A pause. Then, with greater emphasis, she said, "Oh."

I chuckled. "Did you already forget that you're supposed to be the love of my life?"

"Maybe a little. Sorry." I could almost hear the bright pink sizzling on her cheeks.

It made me grin like a dope. Felicity always blushed at the drop of a hat. It was one of her more adorable qualities—and the reason she'd earned the nickname Cheeks.

"You can make it up to me by being my date on Sunday," I informed her. "Just show up at the pack lodge around six and dress warm. I'll take care of the rest."

"I don't know. I don't want to steal the spotlight from Macy, and if your mom decides she doesn't approve of our union..."

"Macy's not one to give up the spotlight willingly," I reminded her. "And I'll manage Ma. C'mon, Cheeks. You're dating the pack alpha now. With all the gossip around town about us, it'd be fishier if you *didn't* show up."

"Okay, okay. Count me in, then," she relented. "How are we going to play this?"

"We flirt a little, make eyes...normal couple stuff, I guess." A noise upstairs had me moving deeper into the engine room. The rest of the guys were probably waking up. "I might need to be a little more, uh, physical with you, now that I think about it."

"Physical, huh?" Felicity giggled. "What's that entail?"

“We wolves are primal creatures, Cheeks. Protective of our mates.” I gritted my teeth at the memory of my wolf wanting to attack Brody earlier. Just a fluke, though. Had to be. All this talk of fake dating had confused my inner monster. “Just promise that if I grab your ass, you won’t smack me.”

She snorted. “I won’t...in public.”

“That’s all I can ask for.” I scratched the stubble on my chin. Once I hit the showers, I’d need to shave. “Oh, and I’ll need to mark you with my scent before the ceremony starts. That way, everyone will know you’re mine.”

I wasn’t sure what did it. The mention of marking her? The idea of having a woman on my arm before the pack, claimed as my own? It might have even just been those words: *you’re mine*.

Either way, my wolf took over for a second. A dark, gravelly growl left my throat.

“Uh. You okay?” Felicity asked.

“Yeah. Fine. Just a little smoke-logged from last night.” I cleared my throat, ignoring my wolf’s reaction. “Sunday, then?”

“Sunday,” she agreed. “Text me later with more details. If this is going to be our big debut, I don’t want to screw it up.”

After we said our goodbyes, I headed back up to the kitchen, feeling a whole lot lighter. Brody was at the stove, scrambling up a mass of eggs.

“What are you smiling about?” he asked, eyebrow cocked as he glanced at me.

I raised my hand to my mouth and felt the grin on my lips. I hadn’t realized even realized I’d been smiling. “Huh. Dunno. Must’ve slept well.”

“Jackass,” Brody grumbled, shaking his head and turning back to the eggs. “I slept like shit. Must be nice.”

My mood greatly improved over the rest of the day, although I couldn’t shake my wolf’s reaction. Rubbing up on a

pretty woman and marking her as your own always felt nice enough, but that growl? It'd spoken of more than just *nice*.

When I finally got off work, I was half-convinced that I needed to download Growlr. As much as I hated that ridiculous app, it had clearly been too long since I'd gotten laid.

I was surprised to find Dad's truck in my driveway. If Ma had been with him, I would have found him at my kitchen table inside while Ma snooped through my things, so he must have come alone. He was waiting for me in the truck, running the engine to keep warm.

"Hey, old man." I hugged him when he got out of the truck. When I pulled back, he had a tired look in his eyes, like he hadn't slept at all last night. "What's wrong?"

"I gave your mother four healthy, hard-headed, strong-willed cubs." He threw an arm around my neck and put me in a headlock, then ruffled my hair. "And every single one of you is driving her up the wall."

I ducked out of his grip and grappled with him briefly, but his heart wasn't in it. Tapping out, he asked, "You got beer in the fridge?"

"No Red Stripes, but I've got some craft stuff." I slapped his back and pushed him toward the door. "C'mon. Let's expand your palette."

In the kitchen, I pulled two Triple IPA tallboys from the fridge and slid one across the table to Dad.

"So," I began, "what have the Miller kids done this time?"

He groaned as he cracked open the beer. "Where do I even start? Your mother's tearing her hair out over this new girlfriend situation of yours, for one thing. If she doesn't figure out who the lucky lady is soon, she's gonna be bald by Sunday."

"She won't have to wait much longer. Word's out around town already. I'm bringing her to the mating ceremony. Figure it's best if Ma meets her properly before she hears about it from Polly Burnett."

“That so?” Dad asked. “I thought she had to work.”

“Change of plans. She’ll be there.”

“Looking forward to meeting her, then.” Dad laughed joylessly. “And your mother will be thrilled. Or pissed, depending on who she is.”

“What else is going on?” It was probably best not to mention Felicity’s identity to Dad just yet. From the sound of things, he had a lot on his shoulders. Once he heard Felicity’s name, the entire conversation would be permanently derailed.

“Macy’s got your mother in a tizzy about the mating ceremony. Living in Boston is rubbing off on her, I guess. She’s got some wild new ideas about how she wants things. Your mother, of course, doesn’t approve.”

“Can’t be that bad, can it?”

“She wants a pancakes-and-pajamas brunch instead of a rehearsal dinner, and she doesn’t want me to give her away. Says it’s *barbaric*.”

“It kinda is,” I admitted. Moreover, the idea of Macy being anyone’s property—to give *or* take—was perfectly laughable. If Dad had said she wanted to stick a collar on Leo instead of exchanging scents, I wouldn’t have been surprised. “Macy’s not easy to argue with, either.”

“Don’t I know it,” Dad agreed. “But you know your mother. Everything has to be traditional. Her way, or hell to pay. And then there’s Dylan.”

“What’s wrong with Dylan?” My youngest brother had never been one to stir up much of a fuss.

“He took one look at the guest list and decided he wasn’t coming.”

“Ah.” I winced as I took a sip of my beer. I should have expected that.

Dylan had always been the most introverted of all of us. For a long time, Ma had assumed he was a beta like Kingston. We’d only realized he was a sigma in high school—bad at

taking orders, good at keeping the others in place, but unlike an alpha, sigmas stayed on the sidelines.

Dylan had never met a spotlight he hadn't tried to outrun, and with the crowd we were expecting on Sunday, he'd almost certainly be dragged front and center with the rest of us.

"It'll be about thirty more years before Dylan warms up to being part of things," I reminded my father. "You know how sigmas are."

"Too much testosterone to contend with crowds until his hair starts going gray." Dad laughed humorlessly. "Still, Macy will want him there."

"I'll talk to him," I offered. "But no promises."

"Wouldn't expect it. Boy's got a mind of his own."

"Is Kingston staying in line, at least?"

Dad laughed so hard, he nearly spat out his beer.

"Oh, fuck," I swore softly. "What'd he do?"

"Nothing. That's the problem. Your ma's been trying to call him all week, but he's not answering. I think he's somehow sensed that she's going to try and pawn that Houghton girl off on him, now that you're spoken for."

"That Houghton girl is trouble," I warned him. "If Ma thinks she's setting any of us up with her, she's gonna be sorely disappointed. I've banned her from Evergreen."

Dad's eyes widened in surprise, so I quickly explained what had happened at the Wily Elephant. I kept Felicity's name out of it, but by the time I got to the part where Melony insulted my girlfriend, I could tell he agreed with my decision.

"Do something for me, kid?" he asked when the conversation tapered off.

"Sure. What do you need?"

"Tell me your lady's name. I wanna know how hard to brace for impact when she shows up," he explained.

Leaning back in my chair, I shrugged. “It’s Felicity Jordan.”

Slowly, Dad cracked a smile. “Ha.”

“That all you have to say about that?”

His grin widened. Of course it wasn’t. “Always hoped you two would get together. You remind me of your mother and me, when.”

I thought of Ma, how she’d barged into my room and, disapprovingly, taken stock of the contents of my underwear drawer the other day. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Your ma wasn’t always like this.” Dad heaved a weary sigh. I got up and got him another beer. “When we were younger, we were friends first. Just like you and Felicity. Always thought that was the best way to do things. Then again...”

His voice trailed off. I grabbed him a fresh beer, popping it down in front of him.

“What do you think changed in Ma?” I asked, genuinely curious. He and Ma were fated mates, just like all shifter couples. Naturally well-suited for each other and meant to be together for life. But for as long as I could remember, something hadn’t been quite right between them. Whatever it was, it had started before I was even born.

“Just life, I think.” Dad cracked his second beer. “It’s not easy being married to an alpha. Your sister’s new husband’s gonna find that out pretty quick. Felicity might, too, if things turn out that way.”

“Can’t be that bad,” I said. My duties as alpha could be time-consuming, but the pack had been fairly quiet this winter. “Can it?”

“You’ve been managing our pack well since you stepped into the position,” he said. “More importantly, you’ve been lucky. Eventually, no matter how good you are, something’s gonna come along and make you wish you could step aside and let someone else deal with the shitstorm.”

Dad glanced up at me. There was something almost apologetic in his dark brown eyes, like he was trying to apologize but couldn't quite find the words.

"I was happy to take your place, you know." I didn't need him feeling sorry for me, for the life he'd handed over to me. "Nothing has changed since I took over. You made sure all our shit was together before you passed the torch."

"The damage had already been done, then," he said softly. "I thought stepping down for good might take some of the stress out of your mother's life once and for all. Some days, I think it only made things harder on her."

"You think it'll be rough on Felicity?" I asked, and for a sharp, anxious moment, I forgot that Felicity would never *be* married to an alpha. Not unless she went and shacked up with the leader of some other pack. She wasn't really mine. "If things turn out that way, I mean."

"I think Felicity Jordan's got a better head on her shoulders than most women around these parts." Dad gave me a tight-lipped smile and raised his beer to me. "I've got a feeling she's made of tougher stuff than she looks."

Chapter 7

Felicity

I was finishing up the charts near the end of my shift on Friday when Gena joined me at the nurse's station.

"Today can't be over fast enough." She grabbed half the remaining charts and sat next to me. "Let me help."

I wasn't going to argue. As exhausting as this week was, things had gone smoother than usual. With Lexi working nights and Gena on days now, we'd managed to do everything twice as efficiently in half the time. I hoped our schedules would stay this way. I could get used to this.

"Big plans this weekend?" I asked.

"Absolutely nothing," Gena said with a laugh. "Jax was kind of hinting about doing something together, but he totally chokes every time I think he's going to make a move."

She had my sympathy there. Gena and Jax, the cook at The Farmer's Wife, had been playing chicken with romance for years now. Just when I worried Jax was stringing her along, he'd do something sweet, like drop by with lunch or buy her a book. I'd started to think of him like a burger-flipping long-range boomerang: the moment you thought he was gone for good, he came flying back.

"What about you?" Gena asked. "And you better not tell me you're watching *Downton Abbey* again."

"I'm going to one of Xander's pack things, actually." As wary as I was of interacting with the pack as Xander's girlfriend, I was a little proud of myself. If not for Xander,

watching *Downton Abbey* again would have been at the top of my to-do list.

“Seriously?” Gena looked up from the charts, her eyes wide. “Like, a full-moon party?”

“A mating ceremony. For his little sister.”

“You’re *kidding*.” Gena’s full attention was on me now. “I’m so jealous! Those things always sounded awfully romantic.”

“You think? I’m afraid it might be a little awkward.” I’d never been to one before, but from what Xander said, there’d be a lot of nuzzling. Apparently, nothing said *I love you* like covering someone in your stink.

“Your Jane Austen novels are *awkward*,” Gena countered. “Those characters would die if they had to be so straightforward. Who cares about sensual, clandestine hand-touching when there’s a big, growly wolf-man ready to throw you over his shoulder, carry you back to his den, and take you in a manly fashion?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not what happens.” I laughed, trying to imagine *any* man throwing Macy over his shoulder and dragging her back to his den. It’d be a good way to get a fat lip. He’d be lucky if she let him off without a knee in the balls as a parting gift. “You should come. There’s always plenty of food and lots of good-looking men at these gatherings. Maybe you could meet someone who’ll give Jax a run for his money.”

“At this rate, Jax would probably just see it as an opportunity to run, period.” Gena chewed her lip, thinking it over. “You sure you’re allowed to bring a plus one? You’re already a plus one, aren’t you?”

“Good point. Let me check.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and thumbed to my text thread with Xander.

Hey, am I allowed to bring back-up on Sunday?

Like always, Xander answered immediately. *Of course. Just not Lexi.*

Nope. Gena. You met her at the nursing home's Christmas party. Although, with the way Lexi had monopolized Xander's company the entire night, there was a good chance he and Gena hadn't exchanged much more than introductory greetings.

Bring her. At this rate, we'll need all the reinforcements we can get.

"It's a go. I'll see you there." I shot her a smile as I tucked my phone away again. "It'll be nice to have someone else in my corner for my big debut as Xander's girlfriend."

Gena gasped. "He hasn't told his family yet?"

"I think he's hoping they'll take it better if they're distracted by the ceremony stuff." So was I. Hopefully, Macy and her mate would suck up all the attention for themselves—and rightfully so.

"I dunno..." Gena's nose wrinkled as she grimaced. "Some people see weddings—or mating ceremonies, for that matter—as the perfect venue for making things all about them. At my cousin's wedding last year, the groom's ex-wife showed up in her old wedding dress. I was sure we'd have to drive her out of town with torches and pitchforks."

"You think Xander's mom might start something?" I could practically feel my blood pressure rising.

"Depends. How well do you two get along?"

"Well...she didn't *love* me at first. Xander got into a lot of fistfights because of me back in high school," I explained. Some moms would have been thrilled that their sons defended the dorky, chubby new girl like Xander had. Marianne Miller, on the other hand, had labeled me as a bad influence and ceased all critical thinking beyond that. "But since he graduated, she's always been nice enough. His dad's the chill one. His mom..." What was the nice way to put it? *Was* there a nice way? "She's a little high-strung."

"She's not one of those anti-human types, is she? I hear shifters can be weird about that kind of stuff. Even if she liked you as Xander's friend...now that you're his girlfriend—"

“Fake girlfriend,” I corrected.

“Whatever. I’m just trying to say that things might change.”

Fanning myself, I forced a laugh. “Are you trying to make me sweat through my scrubs?”

“God, no. Forget I said anything.” She waved her words away. “Whatever happens, I’ll back you up.” Winking, she added, “Even if I have to bring a torch and a pitchfork.”

* * *

It was already dark out by the time I got off work and headed to the Wily Elephant to meet up with Xander. Once again, Gena’s warning lingered, even after we’d said our goodbyes.

This weekend would be our big debut performance, and the audience in question was nothing to sneeze at. Not only would we be putting on the show for Xander’s family, we’d be doing it for his entire *pack*. Everyone who was anyone in Xander’s life would be at Macy’s ceremony.

I wasn’t worried about Xander’s dad and siblings.

Xander’s mom, however...

She was half the reason we’d decided to fake this relationship in the first place. If she didn’t approve—or if Gena was right, and she suddenly decided to start getting precious about what *species* I was—the whole charade could quickly fall apart.

If we were to sell this relationship, Marianne Miller would be our toughest customer. And our most important one.

It was a relief that we’d at least get to do a test run of things tonight.

As I pulled into the Wily Elephant’s parking lot, I could tell it was going to be a rowdy night. The lot was already stuffed with cars and trucks, and I had to squeeze the Flamingo into the last available parking spot. I suspected the

elephant-shaped tea kettle behind the bar where tipsy patrons relinquished their keys was already full to the brim.

Before I got out, I flipped the sun visor down, the automatic lights around the tiny mirror illuminating my face.

Yikes.

I rarely wore much makeup at work. Usually, that was in my favor since the male residents often took the slightest hint of a little lipstick as an invitation to start cat-calling. But tonight, I wished I'd gone home first, or at least tossed my makeup kit into my bag.

My messy bun was lopsided, my skin sallow. The dark circles beneath my eyes were prevalent. Nana also had them, which suggested they were genetic. Mom, of course, had paid a plastic surgeon to fill hers in years ago.

I frowned at myself. What I wouldn't have given for a little concealer. Even some bronzer would have done the trick.

How would anyone believe I was Xander's girlfriend if I showed up looking like *this*?

I grabbed my purse and dug into it as I toed off my cros. There were spare sneakers at the bottom of my bag, and I tugged them on. They wouldn't do much to dress up my scrubs, but even if I'd had heels to put on, it would have looked ridiculous.

A good hair-brushing worked the grease in my roots down my waves, taming them slightly. As far as makeup went, all I managed to find was some tinted lip balm. I dabbed some on my lips, cheeks, and eyelids, then nodded to myself in the mirror.

I didn't look particularly glamorous. I *definitely* didn't look like the kind of girl everyone expected Xander Miller to pull. But I looked acceptable. Tired but put-together.

Maybe people would assume Xander was with me for my heart of gold.

Multicolored lights shifted dimly from behind the Elephant's frosted windows. Muffled music escaped from the

slit between the floor and the door. When I stepped inside, the music exploded in my ears. Xander's friend Brody was at the little karaoke stage in the corner, doing his best Biz Markie as he belted off-key about how she says he's just a friend.

Save for the cheap blues and pinks of the disco lights, the space was dark and cozy. The familiar scents of slightly sweet stale beer and buttered popcorn from the antique popper in the corner drifted to my nose.

Xander and I had probably been to this place a hundred times. It was our favorite hang-out spot, our oldest haunt. Still, my heart hitched a little as I spotted him at the bar with Shane and Max, two of the firefighters on his shift.

Xander was a head taller than both of them and had twice as much hair. Beer sloshed over his mug as he thumped it down on the bar. He looked to be in the middle of a hilarious story, one he was telling animatedly. Soot streaked his cheeks, a telltale sign that his day had been much rougher than mine.

He looked exactly like what he was: an alpha, the most charming man in town, with a wolfish mane of blond waves and a natural ability to command attention.

What am I doing here? The worries I'd tried to cover with lip balm back in the Flamingo suddenly reared up and kicked me in the teeth.

Xander looked *good*, even with soot all over his face. *Especially* with soot all over his face. And I looked...well, like me. The worst version of myself: unshowered, no makeup, and coming off a long shift.

Gena had been wrong. No one was going to get hurt because no one was going to buy Xander and me as a couple. Not in a million years.

Max and Shane threw their heads back as Xander's story came to an end, laughing raucously. Whatever punchline he'd landed on had clearly hit home.

Max and Shane weren't the only ones paying attention to him, either.

“Just go talk to him,” a woman at the table to my left urged her friend. The woman had a chic blond bob. The friend was a redhead. They were both dressed in high-end business attire. Both were pretty, heavily made-up, and not local. “He’s hot, you’re single. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“His girlfriend comes over and throws her drink in my face.” The redhead rolled her eyes knowingly. “Guys like that are never single. He’s taken. I’d bet my Louboutins on it.”

“I don’t see a girlfriend hanging on his arm. Do you?” The blonde raked her fingers through her hair and adjusted her posture, pressing her chest out. “If you don’t go for it, I will.”

Gently, I took a step back.

The blonde was Xander’s type, as much as he’d ever had one. She was forward. Confident. She lacked that enigmatic aura of power that shifters usually radiated, but if she were one, she’d be an alpha.

That was the kind of woman Xander needed in his life. And here she was, ready to march over there and throw herself at him.

What if she’s his true mate? Whoever Xander was meant to be with, he probably hadn’t met her yet. *What if he’s about to meet her now?*

Our test run could wait. If the blonde wanted Xander, I wasn’t about to get in her way.

Just as I was about to turn and leave, Xander looked straight past the blonde—and right at me.

“Cheeks!” He waved, grinning broadly. “Over here!”

The blonde and the redhead both whipped around to gawk at me.

My face flamed. No way to back out now.

I tucked my hair behind my ears and made my way to Xander and his friends. He hopped off his barstool and threw an arm around me, plastering my cheek with a wet, firm kiss.

He smelled like IPA, woodsmoke, and pleasantly masculine sweat.

“You’re blushing,” he whispered against my ear.

“Shut up, I’m not.” I tried to shove him away, but he didn’t let me.

Of course he didn’t. I was his girlfriend now. Boyfriends didn’t let their girlfriends push them away.

“You remember Shane and Max?” Xander wheeled me around to face his friends.

Shane raised his beer to me with a shit-eating grin. He was one of the oldest men at the station, with a big, goofy nose and a bigger, goofier mustache. “Remember us? She’d better.”

“Maybe if we get enough drinks in her, she’ll be lucky enough to forget us, too.” Max elbowed Shane away from me. “What’s your poison, Felicity? First round’s on me.”

“I’ll start with water.” I nudged Xander with my elbow. “Guess I’m a cheap date.”

“A smart one, more like,” he countered. “These two have been trying to drink me under the table since we clocked out—and that’s the table beneath the table that Brody’s drinking *them* under.”

I laughed as I followed Xander’s gaze to the stage, where Brody, propped up by the mic stand, was swaying.

“He okay?” I asked as the music faded out and Brody stumbled slightly.

“Work hard, play hard.” Xander winked. “He’ll be fine.”

Max handed me my water with a smile. “It’s good to see you two out together. Properly, you know. It’s a shame we finally shut down the betting pool over when you guys were gonna get together. Someone would’ve made a fortune tonight.”

“Had to wait to make my move until you fuckers were done casting odds on it,” Xander joked. “Though if I’d been

smarter, I would have had Brody place a bet for me and cleaned you all out.”

Hoots and hollers sounded from the bar crowd as the MC forced Brody to give up the stage. Laughing, he raised his hands in surrender and handed off the mic.

The music changed. The blonde and redhead who'd been checking out Xander got up on stage. They received wolf whistles as the name of their song appeared on the sing-along screen: “Bang Bang My Baby Shot Me Down.” It was the slow, sultry Nancy Sinatra version, and I found myself swaying along to the tune.

“Wanna dance?” Xander offered, squeezing me against him.

“With you?” I looked him up and down, putting on a flirtatious smile. “Hmm. I’m not sure...”

“You can always dance with me instead,” Shane offered. “Unlike Miller here, *I* won’t step all over your feet.”

“I think I can trust Xander’s agility tonight.” I glanced down at his beer mug. “At least, for one more drink.”

Grinning, Xander set our drinks aside and took my hands in his, drawing me out onto the dance floor. The music was slow enough, and Xander was suave enough that I didn’t fear for my feet.

“Just like prom all over again, huh?” He squeezed my hip, then wound his arm around me, pulling me in a little closer than we normally would have danced.

“Not quite.” I smirked. “I don’t think you’ll be sneaking off to make out with any cheerleaders tonight, for one.”

He groaned. “Oh, c’mon, Cheeks. That was one time. *One time!*”

My smirk shifted into a smug grin. “And I’ll never let you live it down.”

We danced in little more than a sway, careful not to bump into anyone else in the crowd. When I glanced up at Xander, he was staring at me with a perfectly lovesick look in his eyes.

It made my cheeks flush too much to bear for long. I looked to the stage instead, where the two women were singing with voices better suited for *American Idol* than drunken karaoke, only to discover that they were both staring back at me with unguarded jealousy.

I couldn't exactly blame them. Xander was, well... *Xander*. Any woman would have killed to be in my shoes right now—as long as they didn't know that this was all a ruse.

I resigned myself to pressing my cheek against Xander's chest and closing my eyes. That was far safer, I decided, than paying attention to any of the other looks we'd be getting tonight.

His chest was warm, and his heart beating against my ear was comforting. I lost myself in the music, letting my body follow his lead.

"This is easy, isn't it?" he purred, his voice low but easily audible.

I opened my eyes and realized the music was beginning to fade out. The song had reached its end.

"It is, actually," I admitted in surprise.

In truth, I wouldn't have minded dancing with him for just a little longer. It felt good to have my body so close to his. Weird, but...*right*.

It was a shame that the song was over so soon.

As the crowd broke into applause and cheers around us, Xander let go of me to clap along with everyone else. I found myself hoping for another slow song. Something to justify Xander putting his hand back on the small of my back while I closed my eyes and leaned against him again.

To my dismay, the opening chords for "Amish Paradise" flowed from the speakers next, followed by "Baby Got Back." For the rest of the night, the performers only chose pumped-up jams, parody songs, and '80s hair metal.

We didn't get a chance to slow dance again.

After a few hours of joking around with Xander and the guys, several more beers on their part, and a strangely erotic rendition of Springsteen's "I'm on Fire" by Xander that left my skin absolutely tingling, I decided to call it a night.

"Naw, c'mon. Stay for a few more songs," Xander urged, catching my hand as I drew away. "You haven't even had anything to drink yet."

"Exactly. I have no intention of leaving my precious Flamingo here." I placed my empty water glass on the bar and glanced down at Xander's fingers, still interlocked with mine. "You want a ride home?"

He chuckled, tossed back the last of his beer, and fished in his jeans for his wallet. "You're a saint, babe."

Xander kept hold of me as he threw a fifty down on the bar, closed out his tab, and guided me to the door.

Usually, I tapped out early while Xander stuck around until the bar closed. He liked chatting with people into the early hours of the morning, making sure everyone found taxis or designated drivers and preventing any late-night brawls. I liked getting my beauty sleep. I sure as hell needed it.

But for the first time since we'd started drinking at the Wily Elephant, we left together hand in hand.

The streets of Evergreen were frost-kissed and empty as I took the familiar turns to his house. Xander rolled the window down and stuck his head out of it slightly, closing his eyes and letting the wind rush against his face.

"You're shit-faced, aren't you?" I chuckled as an image of a golden retriever, panting happily and preparing to bark at oncoming cars, flashed in my mind.

"Nope. Just buzzed. Trust me, I paced myself. Drinking's a marathon, not a sprint." He leaned away from the window but kept his eyes closed. "I'm just trying to enjoy the moment, Cheeks. You had a good time tonight, didn't you?"

"I did, actually." *Especially when we were dancing.* If he was drunk, I might have added that part, but since he was just buzzed...no, he'd only give me shit for that.

Some things were best left unsaid.

I pulled into Xander's driveway, feeling a little wistful. The night was definitely over. I was tired, Xander was vibing with his carefully controlled blood-alcohol content, and there was nothing left to do but go back to our respective homes.

Still, part of me wasn't entirely ready for the evening to end.

"Do you think your mom is going to be...happy when she finds out it's me?" I asked as Xander unbuckled his seatbelt.

He slid the belt back over his shoulder and looked at me with a glimmer in his greens. "Cheeks, I think you're the best surprise anyone could've hoped for."

He leaned over and kissed me wet and firm at the corner of my eye. When he pulled away, I reached to touch where his lips had been.

Weird. The tingly feeling was back again.

"You look great tonight, by the way." He opened his door, casting a glance over his shoulder at me as he got out. "Don't remember if I got a chance to say, but you really do."

I smiled knowingly. *Just buzzed, huh?* Someone clearly had beer goggles on. *A marathon, not a sprint, my ass.*

"See you on Sunday?" I said as he lingered, framed in the open passenger side door.

He nodded, still smiling. "See you on Sunday. It's a date."

* * *

Sunday arrived with a fresh bluster of snow. I couldn't speak for the pitchforks Gena had suggested bringing to the ceremony, but from the sounds of things, torches wouldn't be entirely out of the question. At least they'd help stave off the cold.

Xander's dress code suggestions had been unhelpful at best. *Just dress warm*, he'd told me over and over again on

Saturday. When I pressed him for more over text, he'd only added *and comfortable*.

In the end, I layered some fleece-lined leggings beneath my favorite pair of jeans and added a dark blue sweater, plus my snow boots and heaviest coat. It was cute, though hardly typical wedding attire. I texted Xander a pic to make sure I wasn't underdressed. He seemed to approve. Good enough.

I picked Gena up, who was dressed a lot fancier than me. She looked the very picture of winter elegance in her high-waisted slacks, silk top, dark overcoat, and leather boots. Then again, Gena was nearly a foot taller than me. She would've looked elegant in a feed bag.

"You excited?" Gena asked as she hopped into the passenger seat, green pendant earrings dangling against the backdrop of her red waves.

"Either excited or nervous." My laugh sounded more like the latter. "I don't think my body has decided which yet."

"They're both the same feeling," Gena said, nodding sagely. "It's all about what you make of it."

I drove the Flamingo north of Evergreen to the pack lands that sprawled for ten miles either way. The trees grew thick here: snow-covered pines, live oaks, and holly still heavily laden with their red winter berries. Once, Xander's family had defended this land tooth-and-claw from other packs in the area. They'd bled—died—for everything they had.

As I caught sight of a small tower of stacked stones alongside the road, brushed free of the snow by some pack member, I was thankful that this was a more civilized age. Those towers were found throughout the pack lands, marking the places where members who had fallen in battle were buried hundreds of years ago. Gone, but not forgotten.

My fingers gripped the Flamingo's steering wheel so hard, my knuckles were white. The idea of making my first appearance to Xander's family as his girlfriend had me incredibly on edge. It was a relief that he would never have to

see battle. That, I was pretty sure, was more than my nerves could take.

The moon was high in the blue-black sky as we pulled up the long gravel drive to the lodge. It was a stone-and-log building with massive picture windows through which an amber glow emanated like a beacon in the night. Its sloped, snow-capped roof was peppered with chimneys. Dozens of vehicles were already parked in the broad driveway.

“Wow,” Gena breathed, pressing her hands and nose to the window as I pulled up. “This place is beautiful.”

“Just wait until you see the inside,” I said. It only got fancier from here on out.

The lodge looked like the kind of place where wealthy skiers and hunters would hold a Christmas party, both inside and out. In fact, the Millers often rented it out for that purpose. The interior was outfitted like a rustic five-star hotel. A sauna, hot tub, and heated pool could be found out back. But on the full moon each month, the lodge was for pack members, their families, and their guests.

There would be no skiers or hunters here tonight.

As we got out of the Flamingo, a big, bearded guy with a familiar face emerged from the lodge.

“Kingston? Is that you?” I called out, beaming.

The face split into a grin. “Cheers! I thought that ugly old car was yours!”

I let out an excited yelp as I ran to hug him. He wrapped me up tight in his arms and spun me around until I was almost too dizzy to stand when back on solid ground.

Kingston was Xander’s younger brother, the second oldest of the Miller kids. He was just as tall as Xander but burlier, almost bear-like somehow, despite the fact that they shifted exclusively into wolves. He and Xander shared the same blond hair, but Kingston kept his close-cropped and tamed. His eyes were the color of good whiskey—a far cry from Xander’s brilliant green. Back in high school, he’d been two years younger than me, so I’d gotten to know him better than

Xander's other siblings. After Xander graduated, Kingston had been my tagalong during my junior and senior years.

"You look better every time I see you, I swear," Kingston said approvingly as he gripped my shoulders, looking me up and down.

"So do you." I laughed, wobbling slightly. The world was still spinning a little, like a wonky carousel. "Have you met my friend Gena?"

"I don't think I've had the..." The smile died on Kingston's lips as Gena approached. "Pleasure," he finished lamely.

When I looked over at Gena, her gaze was locked on Kingston and as cold as dry ice.

"I'm not sure that *pleasure* is the right word," Gena said, keeping her distance. Her nose twitched like she'd just smelled something foul. "You're a Miller?"

"Guilty as charged," he said thinly. "And you're... Felicity's friend."

"Did I miss something?" I asked through a nervous laugh. If I didn't know better, the temperature had just dropped ten degrees.

"No idea," Kingston said with a shrug, looking anywhere but at Gena. "I should go...help...something."

He left without another word. To *help something*, apparently.

"Okay, that was weird." I turned to Gena, confused. "What was that about?"

"It's nothing," Gena huffed. She hugged herself tight and rubbed her arms quickly. "Can we get inside? I'm freezing out here."

Nodding, I led the way up the front steps of the lodge.

Inside, the heat from the fireplaces rushed to greet us as soon as we opened the front door. The electrical lights had all been turned off for the evening, but they were more than

replaced by the flickering glow of hundreds—maybe even thousands—of candles covering nearly every surface. They gave the space a sepia tinge, like it had been preserved in amber.

Delicious smells wafted from the kitchen. Roasted meat. Peanut oil. Lemons, rosemary, thyme. My mouth watered, and my stomach rumbled like I hadn't eaten all week when in reality, I had panic-eaten half a pint of Ben and Jerry's before leaving my house.

The pack members greeted us with warm smiles, handshakes, and a few hugs. I didn't know all of them by name since some lived out of town here in the pack lands, rarely venturing into Evergreen itself if they could help it, but they had always been kind and welcoming to me. After the weirdness with Kingston earlier, I was relieved that they gave Gena the same treatment.

"This looks like something out of a movie," Gena whispered as we moved through the space to warm ourselves. "Or a dream."

"The pack sure knows how to throw a party," I agreed. "Just wait until they shift. It's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen."

The shifting wouldn't happen until later, though, after the ceremony. Watching it had always been strangely thrilling for me, mixed in with a little bit of jealous longing. It looked *fun* to run around in wolf form, leaving your human woes and worries behind.

Even though I'd never get to experience it, I was glad that Xander could. Watching him enjoy himself was almost as fun. Not quite, but almost.

We wandered the lodge, nibbling on appetizers and searching for Xander. Gena and I acquired mugs of spiced cider along the way, perfect for warming our hands but still too hot to drink.

"There he is!" Gena pointed through one of the windows to the backyard. Sure enough, I spotted Xander out in the

snow, fiddling with a string of twinkling lights that had fallen from the arbor.

Gena and I went out the back door to join him. The backyard was somehow even more beautifully decorated than inside. There were no candles out here—the wind would have blown them all out with a single puff of its icy breath—but the lights that Xander was fixing were strung all over the place, making the yard look like a fairytale wonderland.

No less than Macy deserved.

Xander himself was dressed in something I could only describe as a costume. On any other man, the big, billowing crimson robe would have looked utterly ridiculous, but Xander, with his six-foot-four, muscular frame, managed to pull it off. The fact that he wasn't wearing a shirt underneath it probably helped, of course. Whenever Xander flashed his bulging pecs and rock-hard six-pack, he rarely came off looking like anything short of a god.

“Aren't you cold?” I called out to him as we walked over. The walkways had been shoveled, but the sky was still spitting ice crystals. A thin layer of snow crunched beneath my boots with every step.

Xander turned his head in our direction. His eyes widened—probably at the sight of Gena since I was hardly anything to write home about tonight.

“I don't get cold.” He grinned at me. “But I could warm you up if you like.”

I almost snorted and ran over to give him a purple nurple for teasing me. *Almost*. But that was what Felicity “Cheeks” Jordan, best friend of the pack's alpha, would have done.

I wasn't Cheeks tonight. I was Xander's girlfriend.

Even if there was no one else around to see it, I needed to put a moratorium on the horsing around and really *sell* this.

“Lookin' good, Xander.” Gena gave a low whistle as she looked Xander up and down approvingly.

“Hey, Gena.” Xander barely glanced at her. His smile turned back to me almost immediately. Something about his grin was perfectly *dangerous*. It made my heart skip a beat. “Hey, you.”

He tossed the lights over the arbor carelessly. A second ago, he’d been wrangling them like they were the most important things in the world, but now, it was like he didn’t care.

Instead, all his attention was focused on *me*.

He moved to me with an excited urgency. Three long, swift strides, and he was close enough to touch. His cologne smelled like fresh rain and the ocean. Despite the winter cold, I suddenly felt like we were on a beach together, caught in the middle of a summer storm.

I stared up at him, quietly panicking. Was I supposed to hug him? *Kiss* him? Did it even matter? The only person around to see us right now was Gena, but if anyone was watching from inside...

Why the hell hadn’t we planned this out more?

Xander seemed entirely unfazed. When he was done staring at me like I was something he wanted to eat, he placed his fingers at the nape of my neck and raked them up through my hair, pulling me against him. His lips brushed against the shell of my ear, warming it with a caress of heated breath.

“Ready to put on a show?”

I gulped, then nodded.

Pull curtain. Stage lights up. *I’m ready for my close-up, Mr. Miller.* We were on.

He pulled back and cupped my face. The way he was looking at me...if it wasn’t for my heavy coat, I would have been wholly convinced he could tear all my clothes off with his eyes alone.

I waited for his next move. He’d have to be the one to make it. Suddenly, my entire body was frozen in place.

He kept me waiting. For a long, tense moment, it was like my face was the most enthralling thing to him in the entire world.

Finally, his smile returned. With it, the tension dissolved.

“Sorry for being so scarce this week,” he said. “I missed you.”

I tried to reply but nearly swallowed my tongue.

“I missed you, too.” My words were forced. *Come on. Pull it together.* I smiled back at him, which helped a little. “I knew you could turn into a wolf, but I didn’t realize you could become a ghost, too.”

He chuckled and pulled me against him again. He hadn’t been kidding about warming me up. His chest was a muscle-bound space heater, radiating comfort. “I’ll make it up to you later. Promise.”

Playfully, I pushed him away from me. “In that case, I’ll forgive you when you do.”

His laughter rang out easy and relaxed as he dipped his lips to my forehead and seared my skin with a kiss that burned between my eyes long after it was over.

That was when I heard it. The gasp.

I turned to find that Gena wasn’t the only member of our audience anymore.

The pack had emerged from the lodge and formed a half-moon around us. Xander’s entire family was there, save Macy. Everyone looked stunned—except Xander’s mother.

Marianne Miller stood at the front of the pack, gaping at us like we’d just taken a baseball bat to her car.

Chapter 8

Xander

For one blissful moment, the backyard was silent. The only thing that existed was Felicity, tiny and warm in my arms, the steam of our breath mingling, the snowflakes falling and catching in her long, dark eyelashes like glitter from the sky.

I'd never felt anything quite like it before. I would've liked to capture the moment in a snow globe to keep on my nightstand, so I could shake it up and bring it back to life at will.

Unsurprisingly, Ma was the first to shatter it.

"Is this a joke?" She marched forward, peering at Felicity like she was viewing a particularly scandalous roadside show.

Felicity drew even closer to me beneath Ma's gaze.

I held her protectively and made a point of scanning every face in the pack, which had gathered around us in silent filaments. "Don't hear anyone laughing."

"We'll discuss this later," Ma insisted, her tone dark and threatening.

I defused it with a laugh. Laughable—that's all she was. "Nothing to discuss, Ma. Go get Macy. It's about time to start."

She didn't say anything in response, which I supposed meant she'd finally remembered her manners. Glaring witheringly at us for a moment longer, she turned and walked back to the house a little less than gracefully.

Oh, she kept her back straight and her head held high, but I knew her better than that. The tension in her shoulders and the nasty look she'd shot me before disappearing through the door told me all I needed to know.

For a woman who'd wanted me to settle down so bad, she was awfully pissed.

I refocused my attention on Felicity. I was supposed to be in love with her, after all, and looking at her was a hell of a lot nicer than watching Ma storm off.

Despite Ma's bad reaction, when my eyes met Felicity's, it was hard to contain my smile. She looked cute, all pink-nosed and breathless. When she returned my smile, it immediately put me at ease.

Fake relationship or not, she was still my best friend. It was difficult to be in a bad mood when she was around.

"You ready to watch me officiate this thing?" I asked.

"Sure," she replied, straightening my lapels and smoothing out my hair. "You know how much I love watching you grandstand."

Chuckling, I leaned into her touch as she tucked my hair behind one ear. It was nice to have her fussing over me, especially after Ma's outburst. Sweet. Caring. Intimate and dignified. Totally unbothered by my mother's lapse in manners.

Exactly what an alpha's girlfriend would have done.

* * *

Macy emerged from the lodge wearing a heavy white robe with a rabbit-fur collar and cuffs. Her wavy golden-brown hair was long and loose. She didn't have a lick of makeup on, no jewelry, not even a veil, but at my side, Leo stared at her like she was dripping with gemstones so bright, they outshone the sun and moon combined.

My parents walked behind her, arm in arm. Unsurprisingly, Macy had won out in the end. No one would be giving her away tonight. The only person who could ever give away my baby sister was Macy herself.

Lloyd Graves played “Calliope House” on his fiddle while Luke Spencer accompanied him on his mandolin. With every step she took, Macy’s bare feet melted footprints in the snow.

I nearly laughed as I realized how much Felicity would have hated walking barefoot down the aisle. Especially in the snow like this, she never would’ve cut it. She’d have to be carried down the aisle or hold off until summer. That girl had the coldest feet of anyone I’d ever known.

Macy and Leo embraced, then joined hands in front of me. Ma and Dad shifted to Macy’s side while Leo’s parents stepped up next to him.

“Who welcomes this woman into their family, their pack, their hearts, and their lives?” I asked, speaking with my booming, hear-it-in-the-cheap-seats voice. Most of the pack had superhuman hearing, but a few older members were going deaf and were too proud for hearing aids.

“We do,” Leo’s parents said in unison.

“And who welcomes this man...” I began, repeating the same spiel to my parents. Macy had won on this front as well. A traditional mating ceremony could involve hours of talking, honorifics, reading the names of ancestors, and reciting ancient verses our families had brought over from the old country when they immigrated to the States. Macy’s version of things would last about ten minutes, tops, and my voice would thank her for it.

“Tonight, we’re here in honor of my sister Macy and her mate, Leo Alban,” I announced after both families had expressed their approval of the union. “Now, I haven’t known Leo for long, but I figure any man that Macy’s willing to spend the rest of her life with must be a cut above the rest. Macy, he gives you any trouble, you give him hell.”

“I’ll be sure to do just that,” Macy said, shooting Leo a satisfied smirk.

Laughter rippled from the pack. Even Leo gave a chuckle. The guy knew exactly what he was getting into.

“Welcome to the family, Leo, and congratulations, Macy.” I placed a hand on each of their shoulders, then gave them a single nod of acknowledgment. “We love you and look forward to seeing you share your lives together until death and beyond.”

“Until death and beyond,” they echoed, then came together and kissed like death was already at their door.

The crowd averted their eyes, me included, as Macy and Leo slipped off their robes. Shifters weren’t known for being particularly precious about nudity, especially the non-sexual kind that briefly preceded switching forms, but staring was still seen as impolite. We operated largely on locker-room rules: if it’s not attached to your own body, don’t gawk at it.

In my peripheral, I saw the flash of golden brown and black fur that told me their joint transformation was complete. Now, two wolves stood before me, pacing in a figure eight around each other, sniffing each other and yipping softly the way wolves were wont to do.

The golden-brown wolf turned her chin up first, quickly swiping it against the black wolf’s muzzle. The black wolf responded in kind. They marked each other with their scents, nuzzling and barking louder until they threw back their heads in unison and howled at the moon together for the first time as an officially mated pair.

I rubbed my jaw and realized I was grinning, then clapped my hands together to begin the applause. A few rowdy hoots joined Macy and Leo’s howls, along with some shrill whistles and whoops. As Macy and Leo shifted back and began to gather their robes once more, I scanned the crowd for Felicity, but she was such a tiny little thing and hard to find in the sea of much taller folks.

Before I could search for her, there was still more pack business to attend to. Now that the ceremony was over, the party had officially begun. Once Macy and Leo were back in their robes, I hugged them and wished them congratulations yet again, then shook hands with Leo's dad and hugged his mother. Other pack members came forward to praise me for the ceremony—a bunch of ass-kissing if I'd ever heard it—or to comment on how beautiful the lodge looked tonight, which was hardly my doing.

I suffered through it all while keeping my gaze moving across the gathering, scanning every inch of the crowd with vigilance.

“Looking for me?” Felicity said at my elbow. I nearly jumped. For a human, she could move awfully quiet when she wanted to. Especially when I was otherwise distracted.

“A little,” I admitted. “But I need to keep an eye out for trouble, too.”

“What kind of trouble do you have to worry about at a wedding?” She laughed and inched closer to me, reminding me that we were supposed to be a couple tonight. Immediately, I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and tugged her against my side. “Or a mating ceremony, I mean. Crooked caterers? Drunk uncles?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But mostly, I'm keeping an eye out for Macy's exes.”

“Really? I thought since you guys mate for life...”

“Oh, we do,” I assured her. “But we're also pretty possessive. Especially when we haven't met our own mates yet. So I better not catch you slow-dancing with any of the Riley boys later.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” she said with a roll of her eyes, even though I wasn't entirely joking. The Riley boys had a reputation for getting handsy with their dance partners. Since Tommy Riley had dated Macy back in high school, there was a good chance he'd be in a foul mood tonight.

“What did you think of the ceremony?” I asked Felicity as she placed a hand on my chest and clung to me. Having her so near was less awkward than it should have been. I figured it was because of the cold. She was just chilly, and with the full moon overhead, my body was putting off so much heat, I was practically sweating through my robe.

“It was beautiful.” She smiled up at me. “A little simple, though.”

I reeled back a little, faux-wounded. “Is simple so bad?”

“I expected a little more...I don’t know, *sparkle*, I guess.” She flicked the fingers of one hand and wiggled them like she was casting a spell. “But I liked the bit about ‘until death and beyond.’”

“Me too.” I smiled down at her, enjoying the way her hazel eyes sparkled as she repeated the pack’s sacred words. “Hungry? We should get you some food before all the wolves descend on the buffet.”

“I’m starving,” she agreed. “Let’s go.”

I kept my arm around Felicity as we made our way through the crowd. I still kept my eyes peeled for any signs of trouble, but it was a little more difficult now.

The entire pack was staring at us. Most of them were doing their best to be covert about it, so Felicity seemed oblivious, but the few who gawked at us openly gave away all the rest.

The attention annoyed me, but I couldn’t fault them for it. It’d been a long time since I had a girlfriend. I’d never brought any of my exes to a full-moon gathering before. The pack was used to seeing Felicity, but never like this.

Tonight, their alpha had a beautiful woman on his arm. That was bound to earn us some stares.

Near the buffet table, we found Gena. Her face was smeared with barbecue sauce as she gnawed on one of Dad’s famous ribs.

“Oh my *god*,” she gushed. “I’m lucky I’m not part of your pack. I’d spend all day stuffing my mouth with all this meat.”

Behind us, I heard a few snickers at Gena's comment. I turned and shot the Riley boys a firm look until they sighed and walked away.

As the Riley boys disappeared, I caught sight of my mother rushing across the room toward us. "Alexander!"

I rolled my eyes and kissed Felicity's cheek. Her skin was incredibly soft. It felt like kissing a cloud. "Be right back. Don't get into any trouble while I'm gone."

I hated leaving her and Gena alone again so soon. They were my guests, after all, and I'd only just scared the Riley boys away. But the look in Ma's eyes spelled an oncoming tantrum if I didn't deal with her.

Sometimes, it was easier to bite the bullet and hear her out.

"Hey, Ma," I said as she grabbed my arm and dragged me across the lodge.

"Don't you *hey, Ma* me," she snapped. "We need to talk."

Sighing, I allowed her to haul me into the study. It was empty, save for a few abandoned champagne glasses and the coats of our guests.

Ma closed the doors behind us, then posted up in front of them like she expected me to do a runner. "What are you playing at here?"

"I'm not playing at all, Ma," I said tiredly. It was strange, the way she could suck the energy right out of me. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was a vampire, not a wolf.

"I want to see you happy, Alexander."

I nodded, already guessing where this was going. "Good to hear. I am."

"Not with that girl, you won't be."

And there it was. To her credit, she'd held it in for longer than expected. Despite the smile she'd plastered on for the mating ceremony, she must have been seething on the inside since she saw Felicity in my arms.

“You wanted to see me taking my love life seriously,” I pointed out. “Now I am. What’s the problem?”

“I have no problem with Felicity,” Ma said, playing the diplomat. “But her mother is another story. I went to school with Eliza Jordan. That woman was faster than a cheetah on cocaine, and from what I understand, she still is to this day. She even made a pass at your father once. These things run in families, you know, and—why are you laughing?”

I swiped the tears away from the corner of my eyes and let out another chuckle, shaking my head. “Felicity’s nothing like her mother. You know her better than that.”

“Be that as it may...there is the other issue. The obvious one.”

“And what would that be?”

“She’s a *human*, Alexander!” Ma threw her hands out like she was a nuclear explosion. “And before you go calling me some kind of...*speciesist*, you should remember that you’re an alpha. At least one of your sons will need to be an alpha to carry on the family legacy.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Mating with the human cuts your chances of having shifter babies in half. And the chance that one of them will be of the right temperament to become your heir...it’s not realistic, Alexander. You need a nice shifter girl, not a human from the same stock as Eliza Jordan. This whole debacle...it’s bad for the bloodline, is what it is.”

I gritted my teeth and stared her down. The wolf within me wanted to go for the throat; she may have been my mother, but I was the alpha of this pack now. I decided who I shacked up with. When I had children, they’d be with a mate of my choosing—human or otherwise.

Even though my relationship with Felicity was fake, I found myself all too ready to fight for it.

“I don’t care what my kids are. Shifters, humans, little green aliens. They will be loved. That’s all that matters to me.” I narrowed my eyes and considered flashing them at her; it

would put her in her place. “If Felicity ends up being the mother of your grandchildren, you’d be the luckiest woman in the world.”

“Your feelings on the subject aren’t the only thing you need to be thinking about,” Ma said thinly. “Think of your family, Alexander. Think of your *pack!*”

I arched an eyebrow. *How deep did this bullshit go?* “You’re telling me you’d deny your own grandchildren if they turned out to be human?”

“Don’t you dare put words in my mouth.” She screwed up her face petulantly, crossed her arms, and refused to meet my eyes. “My concerns are valid. I’m only thinking about the future of our pack. As our alpha, you should be thinking more about that, too.”

“You’re right,” I said, and for just a second, my mother’s face lit up in victory. Then, I hit her with the sucker punch: “I *am* your alpha. Question me, my choices, or *especially* my girlfriend again, and see how far it gets you.”

Her jaw went slack.

Got her.

“Ingrate,” she spat at me, then turned and stormed off.

The doors slammed behind her, leaving me alone in the study.

Even in her absence, my red was still up. She shouldn’t have questioned me. If I brought her before the pack elders for that, they’d ban her from pack meetings for at least a few months, if not more. But to my surprise, that wasn’t what got under my skin.

It was her anger about *Felicity* that made my wolf claw and snarl within my chest, desperate to leap out and attack.

It didn’t matter. Not really. Or it shouldn’t have. This relationship was fake. There wouldn’t be any grandchildren coming out of it.

But it did make me stop and wonder...

What if I *did* fall in love with a human? Felicity was so certain that there was someone out there waiting for me. My true mate. That fabled woman who'd make me question why I'd ever wanted to be single.

What if she wasn't a shifter? Or, maybe just as bad, what if she *was* a shifter but the wrong kind? If Ma had this kind of reaction to the idea of me settling down with a human, how would she react if I ended up with a doe, a lioness, or—God help me—a cougar?

What if Brody was right, and I ended up falling for Felicity?

I shook my head and forced myself to laugh. Out of all the things I had to worry about tonight, that was the least of it. Felicity and I were already testing the bonds of our friendship by putting on this little farce. Falling for her—really falling—was too great a risk. Absolutely unthinkable.

If I did that, it would be the end of our friendship. I wouldn't be able to stand having those feelings for her without being able to act on them.

And I was no fool. She'd never love me back.

As soon as I opened the doors to the study, I heard shouting.

"Fuck," I swore under my breath, clenching my fists and heading toward the source.

The commotion was coming from the front door. Already, the crowd was streaming that way. I joined the flow, sensing an anxious, aggressive shift in the energy.

What the hell was it this time? Sometimes, being alpha of the pack was like taking the world's shittiest multiple-choice quiz. Was it:

A) Tommy Riley tearing into poor Leo over how Macy had belonged to him first?

B) One of Tommy's brothers harassing Gena about making her meat dreams a reality?

C) My mother laying into Felicity over her disapproval of our relationship?

D) All of the above?

At the entryway, I nudged people out of my path until the crowd began to part. I quickly realized all my guesses had been wrong.

E) None of the above.

An icy wind blustered in through the open door, whisking around Ma and Dad. On the other side of the threshold stood a man with a shiny bald head and a snarl on his lips. His worn denim jacket bore the sigil of his pack: a howling wolf's head positioned over two crossed oars.

Quincy Houghton, alpha of Carter's Creek.

"State your business, Quincy." I placed my hands on my parents' shoulders, parting them and moving them aside. "I don't recall seeing you on our guest list."

"Oh, I wasn't invited." Quincy's eyes were wild amber. No wonder there'd been a commotion; his eyes were a clear, blatant threat. "It's a real shame, come to think. I still recall the days when the Evergreen pack knew how to be friendly to their brothers and sisters in Carter's Creek. Seems that manners have gone out the window with these new generations." He looked me up and down, then glanced to Ma and snorted. "I also remember a time when a wolf's word was as good as blood."

I stayed silent for a moment, processing.

"What did you promise him?" I asked, turning to Ma.

"The joining of our packs, of course," Quincy answered for her. "Your mother and I discussed at length the benefits to both our packs if we were to see you and my daughter mated. An agreement was made. Imagine my surprise when, not once, but twice, my Melony returned home from Evergreen in tears."

"An agreement, huh?" My focus was still on Ma, whose indignant gaze was quickly wavering. Quincy might have been

flashing amber at me, but I doubted his head was far enough up his ass to consider attacking me in front of my entire pack.

“It’s not my fault,” Ma hissed. “I wasn’t aware you were otherwise involved. The boy tells me nothing, Quincy. I was as blindsided by this as you were.”

Quincy leaned back, chewing the inside of his cheek. “That may be. But breaking a promise to an alpha...that’s bad blood, Marianne. There’ll be consequences, unless you can make this right.”

“If we could only—” Ma started, but I held up my hand.

Hell must’ve frozen over while Quincy was talking. For once, she lowered her eyes, took a step back, and shut her mouth.

“If you wanted a match between your daughter and an alpha, then you should have dealt with an alpha,” I informed Quincy. “It’s not my fault that you were too chickenshit to come to me directly. My mother doesn’t speak for me, and she doesn’t speak for our pack. I do.” I took a step forward, edging him away from the door. “And right now, I’m saying that you should leave.”

Quincy’s lips twitched. “This isn’t over.”

I grabbed the door handle, preparing to shut it on him. “Isn’t it?”

Quincy’s eyes were locked on mine. They lit up, no longer amber but a poisonous yellow, bright as a full moon.

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. “That a threat, Quincy?”

“No, it’s a promise,” he snarled. “And if you know only one thing about the Houghtons, it’s that when we make promises, we keep them.”

Chapter 9

Felicity

The crackling static in the atmosphere remained long after Xander had slammed the door in Quincy Houghton's face. Sometimes, I was certain I could feel it when shifters got riled up. I lacked their heightened senses and their animalistic nature, sure. But you didn't spend a decade as a registered nurse without learning how to read a room.

"I still have goosebumps," Gena murmured. She crossed her arms over her chest and rubbed her shoulders, then shivered. "It reminds me of when we're at Evergreen Hills, and you can tell a patient is going to die."

Gena and I were inside the lodge with Macy and Leo's human friends. Xander's orders: all humans were to stay inside. He didn't know what Quincy might pull now that he'd all but declared war on the Evergreen pack, but he clearly saw us as liabilities for the time being. Even my position as his not-so-real girlfriend hadn't saved me from being put in time-out while the pack regrouped.

They were in the backyard, grouped in the snow beneath the twinkling Christmas lights. Leo held Macy close. At first glance, it looked like he was comforting her, but the longer I watched them, the more I realized that Leo was holding her back. Kingston and Xander's father were on either side of Xander. The pack had circled around Xander's mother.

Incredibly, she held her head high. I didn't know how she managed it. If I had been in her place right now, I'd probably be on the verge of tears.

“Should I go grab us some plates?” Gena asked, shifting from one foot to the other. “You barely had a chance to eat anything earlier. Or I could track down the champagne. It looks like they might be out there for a while.”

“Sure. Yeah. Sounds good.” I took a step forward and held my breath. Xander was shouting. If I listened very closely, I could make out his words.

“Where the hell do you get off?” he bellowed at his mother. “What? Are they having a two-for-one sale on audacity at Wegmans?”

“I did it for the good of the pack,” she replied. The look she punctuated that sentence with was positively scathing. “Everything after that was out of my hands.”

“You need to learn how to keep your nose in your own business and your hands to yourself. You’ve crossed a line. You’ve made us an enemy.”

“Not a permanent one. You know how to fix this. It won’t even be hard. Melony Houghton is a beautiful girl. Mate with her—”

“No. No, I don’t think I will.” Xander drew himself to his full height. In that moment, it was obvious who he was to the pack. Even standing in the midst of them all, he was the tallest. The strongest. The leader, the voice, the one with all the control. “You are banned from any further pack activities. I don’t want to see your face at meetings. I don’t want to see you running with us at the full moon. You will not host pack members at your table. You will not take a place at any of theirs. If any of the rest of you pass her on the street, you keep walking and look away.”

Silence. Xander’s mother turned round and round, carefully at first, then with growing desperation as she searched for a kind face in the crowd. She didn’t find one.

“You can’t do this to me.” Her lips pulled back, flashing her teeth as she marched up to Xander, fists clenched at her sides. “I am your *mother*.”

Xander let her words hang in the air for long enough that it only highlighted how ridiculous she sounded. She was his mother, yes. But he was the alpha. When it came to pack business, his word was law.

When he finally did answer, his voice was colder than the wind.

“My mother never would have put our people at risk like this.” Xander turned to his father. “Get her home. You can run with us when you get back.”

Xander’s mother reeled around again, but one by one, the pack was already drifting away. Each member headed for the tree line at the back of the property, stripping out of their clothes while they walked through the snow. As they discarded the last vestiges of their outfits, they shifted. By the time they hit the forest, they were on four legs instead of two: brown wolves and black ones; here and there, a red, a yellow, a white.

Xander’s father took Xander’s mother by the arm and gently but firmly pulled her in the opposite direction. She fought him—I wasn’t sure her pride afforded her any other option—but even then, it was half-heartedly.

Only Xander remained. His shoulders heaved, shaking with every ragged breath he took. His exhales turned to mist in the air next to his lips, billowing outward like an engine letting off steam.

I glanced over at Gena, but she was gone. I tracked her to the buffet, where she was putting together two plates for us.

Food, I decided, could wait.

I tucked my fingers into the sleeves of my sweater and rushed outside. The closer I got to Xander, the more I realized how badly he wanted to punch something. I couldn’t say exactly how I knew. A sixth sense, maybe. ESP. Something even more undefinable. Regardless, I *knew*.

“Hey,” I called out as I approached him.

“Hey, Cheeks.” He didn’t look at me. His vision was focused on the fat silver moon overhead, like he was looking to it for guidance. I wondered if the wolves prayed to it like

Christians prayed to God. I wondered if it ever said anything back.

“You okay?” I asked, even though I knew he was not.

“Go back inside,” he said. “Pack’s gone. You don’t need to play girlfriend right now.”

“I’m not playing girlfriend. I’m *being* your *friend*.” I stepped up next to him and stared at the moon with him for a second, looping my arm in his. “Come on. Let’s go for a walk.”

“I don’t need a walk.”

“Yeah, you do.”

Gently, I took his hand, half-expecting him to pull away.

He didn’t.

The snow crunched under our feet as the strange newness of hand-holding blended with the familiar. We fell into step with each other like we had since high school. His long strides shortened, and my small strides quickened. Apart from our interlocked fingers and the palpable shadow of Xander’s anger looming over us, it was just like old times.

When I squeezed his hand, my heart fluttered as he squeezed mine back begrudgingly.

I’d seen Xander like this before. He had a temper. There was no denying that. But he wasn’t the kind to snap, go feral, rush into things swinging. That was the alpha in him, I was pretty sure. He wasn’t afraid of getting his fists bloody; he just thought about it long and hard before he did.

“You okay?” I asked again as I guided him around the perimeter of the lodge. The woods would have been nicer, but I didn’t want to guide him into the path of his pack right now. They could enjoy their run without the burdens that leadership brought with it. Xander wouldn’t be able to enjoy anything until his head cooled and his temper calmed.

“I look okay?” he shot back.

“No. No, you don’t.”

“Then you have your answer.” Xander’s mouth moved upward in a stiff sneer, then dropped back down. “She had no right to promise me to Melony Houghton like that. No fucking right at all.”

“What’s it mean?” I asked, still pretty oblivious.

“What?”

“Promising you. Making a deal with an alpha. I don’t know as much about shifter stuff,” I reminded him. “I heard you all say a lot of things back there, but I don’t have any context for it.”

Xander sighed and hung his head. “It happens when the heir of a pack alpha doesn’t look likely to find a mate in the natural way.”

“The natural way? Like how Macy and Leo found each other?”

“Exactly,” Xander confirmed. “If the alpha determines that his line of succession is in jeopardy, it’s customary for the alpha’s wife to step in and arrange a partner for the heir.”

“But your mom isn’t the alpha’s wife.”

“No. Not anymore. I think she forgets that sometimes.” Xander kicked the snow as we walked along. “Dad said part of the reason he stepped down in the first place was to try and get her back to her old self. It clearly hasn’t worked.”

“That sounds frustrating,” I prompted. What a lame thing to say; pointing out the obvious, really. But one of the first things I’d noticed about Xander was how few people he could open up to. Even back in high school, people had always wanted to know what he thought, not how he felt.

All it took was a little nudge.

“I just wish if she felt like she had to do this, she wouldn’t have gone running to another pack alpha,” Xander said. “All that shit Quincy was saying about promises and blood...”

“Those weren’t just a turn of phrase, then.”

“No such luck. Shifter society is built on hierarchies. On structure and respect. Ma disrespected me by going over my head to try and make a match for me. She disrespected Quincy by offering him something he can’t have.”

“Why does he want to join your packs, anyway? I saw Melony. It’s not like she can’t get dates without Daddy’s help.” I squeezed his hand again. “She was hot.”

Xander scoffed. “Haughty, more like.” After a beat, he squeezed back. “And bland.”

“Melony Haughty-ton?” I suggested, and Xander laughed.

A smile crept onto my lips. That laugh meant we were making progress. Talking Xander down was an art form, though not a particularly difficult one.

“Seriously, though,” I said. “Why’s Quincy want this so bad?”

“Carter’s Creek is a dying town, and Quincy’s only got the one daughter. No official heir,” he explained. “She can’t inherit, so he needs someone else.”

“That’s a little misogynistic,” I pointed out. Melony seemed like a deal-and-a-half, sure, but from what little I knew of the Houghtons, the apple had fallen within spitting distance of the tree.

“You have no idea,” Xander agreed. “But Quincy’s betas and omegas will never respect Melony as their alpha, and Carter’s Creek needs fresh blood. New income, too. Combining our packs through marriage would allow Quincy to name me as his heir, which means I’d be obligated to help Carter’s Creek financially. For him, it’s the best-case scenario. Two birds, one big goddamn stone.” He laughed again, more quietly and darkly. “Or a little diamond-shaped one, I guess. Not that he’ll get any of it now.”

“What happens now?” I asked, a little nervous to hear the answer. Normally, Xander didn’t mention pack business to me. But after our debut tonight, I was part of this.

“If we’re lucky, everyone calms down, apologizes, and forgets this ever happened.”

“And if we’re not lucky?” I asked.

Slowly, Xander brought us to a stop. It took me a moment to realize why, but once I saw them, there was no need for him to answer.

At the edge of the tree line, the moonlight illuminated a stack of flat, crooked stones half-buried in the snow. A pack grave for a fallen wolf, like the one I’d seen on the drive in. The longer I stared at the tree line, the more stacks of stones I saw. They peppered the ground beyond the trees like buckshot. I counted a dozen, then twenty, before the shadows of the trees enveloped the rest.

I turned to Xander. “There’s an obvious way to prevent that, you know.”

“Is that so?”

“See how things go with Melony.” I shrugged. Sometimes, the simplest solution was the best one. “Give her a chance. A *real* chance. If things don’t work out, at least you can say you gave it the old college try.”

Xander arched a golden eyebrow. “I’m already taken, remember?”

“Fakin’, you mean.” I forced a smile and shoved his shoulder playfully. He didn’t budge. “C’mon. You won’t hurt my feelings. I can even put on a big show of dumping you, if you like. Or you can dump me. My ego can take a pretty good beating, and I bet Melony would like that.”

I barely knew Melony, but I felt like I had a pretty good read on her. Being a loser for half of high school had made me pretty good at picking out mean girls. Melony struck me as the kind that had peaked senior year and would never let those glory days go.

Knowing that Xander had dumped me for her would feed Melony’s ego enough that all of this would wash away like snow in warm rain. And it’d be worth it. No fresh sets of stacked stones.

All I had to do was give him up. Accept the beating. Take the fall.

My heart twinged a little, but I kept my game face on. What else were friends for?

Xander was failing to see the brilliance in my plan, though. He looked at me strangely for a moment, then took me by the shoulders and gripped them tight.

“Melony Houghton will never fucking have me, Cheeks.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because I don’t like her, I don’t want her, and I sure as shit don’t want to go sticking my dick in her. Plus, I already banned her from coming back to Evergreen,” he said, which was news to me.

“Why’d you go and do that?”

“Doesn’t matter. More importantly, her father just drove the final nail into the coffin. If Quincy hadn’t pulled that shit tonight—showing up unannounced, making threats, flashing his goddamn eyes at me—I’d maybe try pawning her off on Kingston...but, no. He was hostile tonight. On my own lands, and on Macy’s special day.”

He let go of my shoulders, his gaze rising to the moon again. The anger had left his body, which pleased me. I’d talked him down a little, but not completely. Though his shoulders weren’t tense anymore, I could still see the weight he carried on them etched into his muscles.

“Head back to the house,” he told me. “I need to shift.”

Before I could turn away, he shrugged his red robe off and handed it to me. I was quick to turn my head before he followed suit with his pants, which he handed to me as well. With my arms full of Xander’s clothes, I started to move away to give him some privacy, but my curiosity held me back.

Normally, I’d be back at the house by this point, collecting glasses and trying to make myself useful. I’d never seen Xander shift up close before.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him turn from man to beast.

If I'd blinked, I would have missed it—the transformation happened that fast. He lunged as if breaking into a sprint, and his trajectory blurred. In a brushstroke, his warm, tan skin melted into a color almost the same as the snow. He landed on four massive paws that skidded to a stop, shaking his body like he was working the rust from his bones.

Xander's wolf was white, even paler than his natural hair color. When his transformation was complete, the most shocking thing was how *massive* he was. Wolves weren't just shaggier, wilder dogs. They were the creatures that dogs had forgotten how to be. Huge. Imposing. Large enough to ride while looking don't-fuck-with-me enough that no one in their right mind would ever try.

As he turned his eyes to me again—red eyes, *demon's* eyes, his familiar greens completely consumed by a sinister crimson glow—a prickle of fear passed through me. It struck my throat first, traveling to my heart and twisting in my gut.

He could take my neck in his jaws and snap it in two if he wanted to. His claws were sharp enough to rip through the soft skin of my belly and leave my guts spilling out like loose threads.

He was beautiful only so much as he was *dangerous*.

He took a step toward me. Instinctively, I took a step back. I'd seen the wolves before, but never this close. Never *alone*.

I took another step backward, but Xander stopped me with a soft, deep bark. Not so much a *woof* as it was a *boof*.

I froze, unwilling to disobey him. He stalked forward, then wagged his tail and licked my hand. His tongue was soft, wet, and warm.

My fear melted away.

“Xander, you're...” I said uncertainly. My breath stalled.

How could I describe it to him? Suddenly, there were so few words.

“You're beautiful,” I whispered. My fingers crept toward his coat, and I buried them in his impossibly soft, thick fur.

He snorted, turning the cold air to steam as he leaned into my touch.

This close, he seemed even bigger than before. His head came all the way up to my chest. When he turned his nose up, his muzzle reached my jaw with ease. He nuzzled me, and it was only then that I realized what he was doing.

He was marking me as his. Claiming me with his scent.

When he was done, he gave another soft *boof*, circled me once, then trotted away. At the tree line, he raised his head and let out a haunting howl at the moon. Distantly, the howl echoed again and again.

Xander was calling, and his pack answered.

Without so much as a glance over his shoulder at me, he disappeared into the trees with a swish of his shaggy white tail.

I stumbled back to the house in a daze. I found Gena on the couch in the living room, two plates of food on the coffee table before her. One was half-finished. The other was still full, a glass of champagne next to it.

“Where’d you get off to?” Gena asked, holding her own flute of bubbly.

“I wanted to make sure Xander was okay.” I considered sitting next to her and digging into the food, but my appetite had been replaced with a cold coil of fear that my body was still untangling.

“That was tense earlier, huh?”

“That’s one way to put it.” My laugh came out shaky and unconvincing. My heart was still pounding from my encounter with Xander in his wolf form.

“You okay?” Gena asked, frowning. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“A wolf, actually. Xander’s.” I laughed again, fighting back a shudder. “They’re a lot scarier up close than I realized.”

“I can imagine.” Gena patted the couch next to her. “Wanna hang while you wait for him to come back?”

I glanced out the window toward the tree line. “We should probably head out. The pack’s gone out to run. I think that’s our cue to go home.”

Reluctantly, Gena rose. We took our plates and glasses back to the kitchen, then headed for the door.

Just as we were about to exit, the door opened. On a flurry of snowflakes, a man entered. He was a dead ringer for Xander, only several inches shorter and looking about five years younger. Despite the snow in his long blond hair, he didn’t look the least bit cold.

“Dylan?” Xander’s youngest brother had been absent from Macy’s ceremony, which wasn’t unusual for him. He lived in New York, where he worked at an accounting firm. For the most part, he stayed out of pack business. Often, it seemed like he’d left his wolfish side behind entirely. I hadn’t realized he was here tonight.

“Felicity! Hey!”

“Shouldn’t you be out running with the pack?” I asked.

“Nah. Kingston and I decided to help Dad get Mom home. We figured we should let Macy and Xander have the night off from here on out. We just got back.” Dylan’s eyes darted warily to Gena, and I recalled how shy he was. When he turned back to me, his smile came easy, though. “I hear you might be joining the family soon. About time, huh?”

“The family might have a thing or two to say about that,” I joked. Although, given how things had gone tonight, maybe it wasn’t such a joke.

“You headed out already?” Dylan asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, I think it’s time for the humans to go home to their nice cozy beds. Let Xander know for me? He’s out running with the pack. I think he might be a while.”

“You’re not sticking around?”

“I’m not sure I’d be of much use here.” I cast a glance behind me. A few of Macy and Leo’s human friends were still hanging out, but the party looked to be thoroughly over. “I could help clean up, I guess...”

Dylan chuckled. “Cleanup’s not gonna be what Xander has in mind. Shifters tend to have a lot of, ah...let’s say, *tension* to release after running under the full moon.”

“A lot of...oh.” My mouth fell open slightly as I realized what Dylan was implying. Something that, as Xander’s girlfriend, I had extensive reasons to be *very* interested in. “Wow. I guess I’ve really been missing out.” I linked arms with Gena. “I do have to drive Gena home, though. As much as I’d like to stay...”

I had no intention of doing any such thing. Putting on this show had already caused problems for the pack. I didn’t want to spend my night jumping on his bed and making sex noises to convince any eavesdroppers that I was worth the trouble.

Dylan and I began a back-and-forth of excuse-making and excuse-dismissing while Gena drew back, mouthing the word *awkward* but otherwise staying silent. Clearly, Xander hadn’t shared the information about our *fake* relationship with Dylan.

When the door swung open again, interrupting us, I was relieved.

This time, Kingston entered. Gena shifted behind me like she was trying to hide, but his gaze fell on her almost instinctively.

“What’s going on here?” Kingston asked.

“Felicity’s trying to dip out of the party early,” Dylan explained. “She says she needs to give Gena a ride home.”

Kingston looked from Dylan to Gena, then from Gena to me.

“No worries,” he said. “I’ll drive her.”

“No, he will *not*,” Gena said a little too loudly.

“Yes, he will.” Kingston cocked his head toward the door. “Come on. I just turned the truck off. Engine will still be

warm.”

Gena sighed heavily and moved to follow him.

“You okay?” I caught her shoulder, a little worried. “You don’t have to go with him if you don’t want to, you know.”

Harshly, Gena laughed. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine. You just enjoy your night.”

“You too.” I felt a little defeated—and betrayed! Gena knew that Xander and I wouldn’t be blowing off any steam tonight, and here she was, abandoning me, anyway. “Text me so I know you’re home safe, okay?”

“Can do, but I don’t expect an answer until tomorrow morning.” She winked at me on her way out the door. “Then, I want *details*.”

* * *

After Gena and Kingston left, I enlisted Dylan in helping me get Macy and Leo’s remaining friends set up for the night. Normally, the task would have fallen to Xander’s mother, but considering the part I’d played in the night’s drama—small and unintentional as it was—it only felt right that I should step up in Marianne’s absence.

Dylan, on the other hand, was significantly less enthusiastic about interacting with his family’s guests.

“Fuckin’ party girls.” Dylan narrowed his eyes at a brunette in a silver dress as she tipped a bottle of champagne into her blond friend’s mouth. “You sure you can’t handle this on your own? Babysitting Macy’s human tagalongs isn’t really my speed. I outta go check the perimeter, or—”

His scowl deepened as the champagne bottle slipped from the brunette’s hand. The girls squealed and leaped back, giggling as the bottle cracked at the neck and bled foam all over the living room rug.

As a sigma, ushering Macy’s booze-fueled friends off to bed was naturally low on Dylan’s list of priorities. Talking to

people in general—humans or shifters, intoxicated or stone-sober—wasn't his calling. He probably would have preferred to be running in the moonlight right now—if not with the rest of the pack, then on his own.

Taking care of people came more easily to me, but I wasn't fooling myself. A couple of tipsy girls I could deal with. Twelve champagne-drunk twenty-somethings, however, was more than I could handle alone.

“Help me with this, and I'll owe you one.” I shoved a wooden salad bowl into his hands. “It's all for the pack, right? Just hold the bowl and make sure everyone gets their keys in it. If you can preserve the peace and keep them from driving their cars into trees, I'll take care of the rest.”

“Fine,” Dylan relented sullenly as the drunk girls dropped to their knees, haplessly trying to salvage the remaining champagne from what was left of the broken bottle. “But you *do* owe me one, and I'm authorizing myself to use force if necessary.”

Thankfully, Macy's friends gave up their keys graciously. Dylan was even generous enough to keep an eye on them as I cleaned up the broken glass and peeled people away from the party in twos and threes. I made sure everyone had a bed, a towel, and a glass of water before shutting them into their rooms for the night.

When I got downstairs again, Dylan was sitting on the couch, the bowl of keys in his lap.

“You're good at this, you know. Managing people.” He rose slowly and yawned, looking drained. “Don't know how you do it, but you handled that nicely. Better than I would've.”

“Like you said, playing host isn't your speed.” I took the bowl from him and gave him a small smile of gratitude in exchange. “Managing drunk kids, though? When you get right down to it, they're not so different from the residents at Evergreen Hills.”

“Still. You did good.” Dylan patted me on the shoulder and returned my smile. “I can see why Xander's with you. Glad

you stuck around.”

At that, he turned and made his own way upstairs. I was grateful Dylan’s aversion to long conversations had saved me from replying.

I wouldn’t have known what to say.

With everyone in bed, the lodge was eerily quiet. Eventually, the rest of the pack would be back from their run, but that could be hours from now.

I finished picking up, blew out the candles—the last thing Xander needed tonight was a house fire on his plate—then sought out Xander’s room to wait for his return. It wasn’t hard to find: his room here was the largest, located on the top floor with the best view. I showered in the en suite, helped myself to one of Xander’s spare flannels and a pair of his boxers from the wardrobe, and crawled into bed to wait for his return.

Explaining to him why I was still at the lodge would be an awkward conversation. *Especially* if running around on wolf business made him...horny.

But it was late, and I was tired, and his bed was cozy.

Closing my eyes for a minute wouldn’t hurt anything.

When he got back, I’d wake up and explain the rest to him.

Chapter 10

Xander

I trudged back into the lodge near sunrise, horny, naked, and exhausted. Outside, the vicious red horizon painted the snow a bloody blaze.

The rest of the pack had called it a night hours ago. They'd probably headed home by now, or grabbed a bed at the lodge so they could sleep off the charms of the moon. But I'd pushed onward, paws thundering relentlessly against the frozen earth, long after the last of the pack had peeled away, until my muscles seared and my breath billowed dagger-sharp in my chest. Like a dog chasing his tail, I raced through the woods, never quite finding satisfaction. Whatever I was snapping my jaws at tonight was too immaterial to catch.

The candles inside the lodge had been put out. Only charred wicks and puddles of melted wax remained. The leftovers from the buffet line were in the fridge. I pulled out a Tupperware container and ate ribs straight off the bone while hunched over the vegetable crispier. My form was human again, but my wolf was still front and center in my brain.

All it could think about was meat, fucking, and sleep.

With the former need taken care of, I washed my hands at the kitchen sink and set my intentions toward the latter. It was a pair of knees in my hands that I really wanted, shapely thighs spread out across the bed in front of me, a breast beneath my tongue and a hot, slick channel wrapped around my shaft. I wanted it far more than I wanted to rest. But after the night I'd had, fucking was out of the question. Even if there'd been a

woman in the pack I was attracted to, I wouldn't have dared approach her for sex.

Felicity was my woman now, even if it was only for show. I wouldn't dream of insulting her by screwing someone else on the sly. She deserved better than that, even from a fake boyfriend.

If I had a single regret about tonight, it was that I hadn't gotten the chance to see her home.

Up the grand staircase and down the hall, all the way to the end where the master suite awaited me, I lurched along, already half-asleep. Felicity must have left hours ago, but her scent lingered, haunting me. My wolf bid me to raise my nose to the air, breathing as much of her in as my lungs could handle. Even in absence, she smelled fragrant, heady, sweet.

My room was dark. I didn't bother with the light. The curtains to the balcony were open, but the suite was on the western end of the lodge. Perfect for watching the sunset, but it would be the last to be touched by sunrise.

I closed my weary eyes and found my way to the bed on muscle memory alone. Felicity's scent was even stronger in here—but that had to be muscle memory, too. I'd read that somewhere, hadn't I? Something about the brain binding neural connections together by scent. She had been the last thing on my mind before I shifted, after all. The first thing I'd done in my wolf form was mark her. Somewhere between then and now, all the wires in my head had gotten crossed.

She was probably back at her place, curled up into a little ball for warmth the way she always did, no matter how many blankets were piled on top of her. Like a kitten or a pill bug. It was a lucky thing that we weren't in a relationship, come to think. We'd never share a bed the way couples do. She slept so adorably, so contentiously, taking up as little space as possible. I slept like a selfish bastard, splayed out across the mattress like a dead man.

I fell into bed, prepared to do exactly that. Beneath me, the mattress was uncannily lumpy.

Against my collarbone, it squeaked.

My cock twitched, shooting to full attention immediately as I grappled under me, searching for a pillow and instead finding the stiff nub of a nipple beneath worn flannel against my palm.

Someone was already in my bed.

“What the—” My eyes snapped open, adjusting quickly to the darkness as I scrambled back off the bed. A female form stirred between my sheets. I sniffed the air and caught my scent—and Felicity’s.

So. That hadn’t been a trick.

She was still here.

“Cheeks,” I breathed, shaking my confusion out of my head. “It’s only you.”

“*Only me*, huh?” she mumbled as she rubbed her eyes. “Flattering. You come in here, squish me, grab my tits while I sleep, but it’s okay ‘cause it’s *only me*.”

“I didn’t mean to grab your tits,” I pointed out. I hadn’t even grabbed her tits, plural. It had only been the one.

“Someone else’s, then?” She sat up, scowling. Her eyes must have still been adjusting because she had yet to notice I was naked. With her grumpy mood, I wasn’t about to draw her attention to it. “Honestly, Xander, who else would it be?”

“Dunno. It’s been a weird night.” *Even weirder now*. I clenched my thighs and grabbed a pillow for dignity, willing my cock to soften before Felicity noticed.

“Yeah,” she agreed wearily. “It has been.”

She rolled over, like she intended to go back to sleep.

I stood over her, cock still stiff against the cool linen of the pillow, body still exposed, mind still half-wolf.

She’s your woman. In your bed, my wolf growled, intruding on my thoughts. One that I didn’t dare follow.

Felicity *wasn't* my woman. There were other beds in the lodge. The right thing to do would be to remove myself from this situation and leave Felicity to her dreams. Find somewhere else to sleep.

Except, the second that Felicity and I emerged from separate rooms tomorrow, everyone would suspect there was trouble in paradise. That wasn't the kind of story we needed to be pushing right now.

I cleared my throat. "If you're gonna sleep in my bed tonight, gonna need you to budge over."

"Fine," she grumbled, shifting across the mattress so I could climb in next to her. "But keep your hands to yourself."

Maybe I should have pulled on some pants, but that felt like a morning problem. Felicity and I had fallen asleep next to each other before. On a couch, not a bed. And fully clothed, for that matter. But I was too wiped to do anything but hit the pillow and fall asleep.

The mattress was still warm from her body. Somehow, even that stirred desire in my cock.

Down, boy. I'd never felt more exasperated with that appendage in my entire life.

I closed my eyes and listened to Felicity's breathing. Her inhalations came slow and deep, her exhalations heavy. She was falling asleep again, and rapidly.

Even though I was exhausted, I quickly discovered that it was impossible for me to do the same.

Not while her body was so close to mine, just a few inches away.

With a few more hours of closing my eyes and clearing my mind, I might have been able to drift off eventually. But as fate would have it, I never got the chance.

Felicity rolled over in her sleep, her knee brushing against my thigh and her arm settling on my chest. Clumsily, her fingers curled around the swell of my pec, squeezing like my muscles were her personal stress ball.

Before I knew it, *she* was groping *me*.

She woke with a sharp inhale of breath, squeezing even tighter. “Xander...”

“Yeah,” I grunted, knowing where this was going.

“Where are your clothes?”

I gritted my teeth. “I gave them to you, remember? Anyways, it’s dark. Not like you can see anything.” Gently, I removed her hand from my chest. “It’ll be fine. Just stay on your side.”

“But if you’re sleeping in bed with me...”

“No, *you’re* sleeping in bed with *me*,” I corrected. “Put some pillows between us if it bothers you so much. I’m beat.”

“Fine,” she grunted, grabbing a pillow and shoving it between us. “Weirdo.”

“Prude.” I shoved the pillow back, and Felicity laughed.

The world went silent again as we settled back into our places, divided by the feather pillow border. Felicity on her side, me on mine. My cock was still painfully stiff, but there was nothing to do but ignore it now. Even if I’d had the audacity to tug one out with Felicity in the bed next to me, I had no energy for it. My bones felt spent.

Just when I was on the edge of sleep, a shock of ice brushed against my ankle. I shuddered awake.

“Jesus, Cheeks! Your feet are freezing!” It was like cuddling up to Frosty the Snowman—Snowwoman, as it were.

“No, you’re just...really warm.” She snorted and rubbed her toes a little higher up my calf. “Deal with it, or find a new bed.”

I groaned, then reached across the pillow for her. “Come here, then.”

“Seriously?” she sputtered as I pulled her toward me, shoving the pillow between us aside. “But...you’re *naked*.”

“Yeah, and you’re cold. If I don’t warm you up now, those little ice cubes you call toes will be waking me up all night.”

“Fine.” She scooped closer to me and carefully positioned her body next to mine. Her feet sent shivers up my legs, but her cheek against my chest felt ...right. “Just don’t get any ideas. We’re just faking it, remember?”

“Just faking it,” I agreed.

I didn’t sleep. I couldn’t. I was so tired that if I’d been in bed alone, I might have slept the whole day through. But I wasn’t alone in bed, was I?

Felicity was plastered against me all night.

My cock was the problem. My cock, and the damned wolf instincts still howling in my skull after the run. All I could think about was how good it felt to have her soft, delicate body next to mine. How *right* it felt, holding her in my arms.

Only, it wasn’t right at all.

I fought those thoughts. Nothing good could come of them. Indulging in them would’ve been an act of supreme cruelty toward Felicity and myself.

It was probably nothing. It probably just felt nice to have *someone* in my arms for a change.

The thing that worried me was the chance that my *probabilities* were wrong.

It was probably nothing.

But probably not.

After a few hours of blissful torture, I remembered I wasn’t a masochist and disentangled myself from her embrace. If I wasn’t going to sleep, I needed coffee. A hot cup of dark roast would help me set my head straight.

I pulled on a pair of pajama pants from my wardrobe and lumbered down to the kitchen to brew myself a pot. A shirt wasn’t necessary. The rest of the pack would still be sleeping and would likely stay that way until well into the afternoon. Any of Macy and Leo’s friends who’d stayed behind had

probably taken off already—or, fingers crossed, had the good sense to stay in their rooms.

We wolves weren't exactly dangerous to humans. Not unless we wanted to be. But the day after a full moon run, we tended to wake grumpy—and God help the poor sucker who woke one of the pack members before they were good and ready.

Downstairs, the lodge was mostly as I'd left it when I came in from my run, except the candles were gone. I sniffed the air, wondering who'd beaten me to it, and smelled coffee already bubbling away in the kitchen along with a familiar, wolfish scent.

“Morning, Dad.” I gave him a nod as I entered the kitchen. “You make it home okay last night?”

“Okay enough.” He was at the counter, pouring himself a mug of coffee. Without asking, he grabbed another mug and poured me one as well. “Dylan and Kingston drove us home so I could console your mother during the ride.”

“That was good of them.”

“It was.” Dad turned and handed me the second mug. He looked tired, like he'd gotten about as much sleep as I had.

“How's she holding up?” I asked.

I'd hoped I could put off speaking with Dad until the dust had settled on the issue with Ma a little more. I'd all but cast her out of the pack last night for her negligence. Whether or not she'd done wrong, she was still my father's mate.

It was always going to be an awkward conversation, this one. It was just a shame it couldn't wait until the tempers had died down a little and the wounds had scabbed over.

No such luck, though.

Dad took a deep breath, then raked his fingers through his hair as he released it. “She's feeling pretty terrible, truth be told.”

“About what she did, or how she's being punished for it?”

Dad winced. “Wish I could say it was the former, but we both know it’s the latter. Deep down, I think she knows she did wrong. But you know how she is. Stubborn.”

“Sounds like her.” I forced a laugh to try and lighten the mood a little. “Guess I had to have gotten it from somewhere.”

“Guess so.” Dad reached for the sugar bowl and dumped two spoonfuls into his mug. He offered it to me next, but I shook my head. “So. What’s your next move, kid?”

“Dunno,” I admitted. “I was hoping you’d come back last night to run with us, so maybe we could talk it out after. Dylan and Kingston, too. We missed all three of you.”

“Yeah, missed you, too.” Dad moved to the fridge, searching for milk. “No idea what your brothers got up to after they left, but I figured I probably needed to stay with your mom.”

“You have any wise words for me now?” I asked.

I took a sip of coffee while Dad poured milk into his mug. The coffee was scorched just how he liked it, but at least it was strong enough to whisk some of the tiredness out of my eyes.

“We don’t need trouble with neighboring packs,” Dad said after a long stretch of consideration. “We haven’t had issues with Carter’s Creek in generations. It won’t do anyone any good if we start now.”

“I agree.” I took my coffee to the kitchen island and sat my ass on one of the bar stools. “I’m just concerned that Ma made that decision for us already. Between her and Quincy, I don’t see how we can get out of this without spilling blood.”

“I wish...” Dad frowned and leaned over the island opposite me.

“What?”

“I wish I knew what your mother’s motive was for all this,” Dad admitted. “Not to speak ill of her, but this nonsense about combining packs...well, that’s all it is. Nonsense.”

“We’re already bigger than most packs,” I added. I’d been thinking the exact same thing. “We have nothing to gain from throwing in with Carter’s Creek and plenty to lose.”

“Quincy would definitely be getting the better end of the deal,” Dad agreed. “So I figure your mother’s just focused on making sure you’ve got an heir. Little did she realize...”

“What?” The few brain cells in my skull that the coffee had roused bounced off each other uselessly, like a bad *Three Stooges* parody.

“Felicity,” Dad said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Even you’ve gotta admit that after all the years you two spent insisting you were only friends, your relationship came a little out of left field.”

“Right.” I pinched the bridge of my nose and massaged it. I was so exhausted, I’d almost forgotten that Felicity and I were faking a whole-ass relationship. “Things are pretty fresh between us still, truth be told. I mean, we haven’t exactly discussed kids yet or anything.”

“You do that when it’s time,” Dad suggested. “Right now, smoothing things over with Carter’s Creek is top-priority. Having an heir can wait. I don’t suppose we could offer up Kingston for—”

“No,” I cut him off. “I already thought about that. Melony Houghton has no business in our family *or* our pack. And Quincy? He crossed a line last night. If anyone should be worried about smoothing things over, it’s him.”

“What about—”

Dad stopped talking as his eyes focused on the stairs behind me. I glanced over my shoulder just in time to see Felicity descending the stairwell. Her auburn hair was messy, her cheeks were gently flushed, and she was still in my clothes, covered in my scent.

“You sure you haven’t been talking about kids?” Dad whispered.

I caught his meaning.

Felicity looked freshly fucked.

“Morning, Felicity!” Dad called out, giving her a wave.

She startled at the sound of his voice, clearly still half asleep.

“Oh, hey, Tony.” She shot him a sleepy smile. “You boys have enough coffee to share?”

“You bet,” I said, trying not to stare at her. It wasn’t an easy task. After feeling her pressed against me all night, now that it was light out, all my eyes wanted to do was spend the morning wandering up and down her curves. “But fair warning, Dad made it—so it’s burned to all hell.”

“I should be getting back to your mother. Good to see you, Felicity.” Dad threw an arm around my neck and gave me a quick hug. “Love you, kid.”

After Dad left, Felicity and I dithered around the kitchen in silence for a while. Every time she moved, my body somehow managed to move into the same place. After running into each other one too many times, she ordered me away from the coffee maker, and I retreated to the barstool at the island.

This wasn’t normal. Once upon a time, we’d moved around each other with ease, perfectly in sync.

Now, everything had gone fuck-ways. Something was off.

“How’d you sleep?” I asked. I didn’t know what else to say.

“Uh, yeah. Good, I think.” She poured herself a cup of coffee, not meeting my eyes. From this angle, I could see her profile perfectly: cute nose, long eyelashes, full lips, and a quickly deepening blush rising on her cheeks.

Cheeks. I’d called her that for as long as I’d known her. She’d stopped flushing crimson every time she talked to me after a few months of getting to know each other, but lately, I’d started noticing the color creep back into her face again.

It was fascinating. The only thing that had changed between us was our so-called relationship status...

And unless she was embarrassed to be dating me, that couldn't be it.

"You okay?" I asked in concern. Maybe she *was* embarrassed by me. With the way Ma and Quincy had acted yesterday, she'd have plenty to be mortified about.

"Yeah, fine." She sipped her coffee and stared out the kitchen windows. She still wouldn't look at me.

That wouldn't do at all.

"Cheeks. Hey." I got up, wondering if I should go over to her. Wondering if I should *make* her look at me. "I know something's eating at you. At least tell me so I can try to fix it."

"Nothing's wrong, Xander!" she said, her voice rising in pitch. But at least she turned my way.

For just a moment, her hazel eyes met my greens.

Then, she looked back out the window. There wasn't much to look at out there, but from the way she was acting, it was far more interesting than me.

"Well..." I scratched my head, stumped. Something was *obviously* wrong, but I was either too tired or too shit-for-brains to deduce it without her help. "I think everyone's sold on us, at least."

"Yeah? Can you be sure?"

"Dad smelled me on you when you came downstairs," I admitted. If he'd had doubts before, they were gone now.

"Oh." She stared at the floor, cheeks redder than ever. "That's good, then."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"Yeah," she agreed to my agreeing.

We drank our coffee in silence.

* * *

“So, when’s our encore?”

We were on our way to the Flamingo, its garish pink hues bringing an otherworldly brightness to the dull gray sky and muted snow. After coffee and a chance to shower, Felicity had warmed back up to me. She was dressed in yesterday’s clothes, having left the flannel and boxers she’d slept in neatly folded on the bathroom counter.

“Encore?” I asked. My brain was still sluggish. *God, I need sleep.*

“We’re supposed to be doing this for a year. And make it convincing, too.” She shrugged, fishing in her pocket for her keys. “I figured regular dates would make sense.”

“You don’t have to think of them as dates,” I pointed out. “It won’t be any different from us hanging out. Just like normal.”

“Like normal.” She turned out one pocket, then reached into the other. “Right.”

“We just have to *look* like a couple,” I continued. “Ma’s gone and gotten a stick up her ass about us, so she’ll be looking for any sign that things aren’t going well.”

“I get it. I have a nosy mother, too, remember?” She pulled out her keys, along with her phone. “Only, mine is in Los Angeles right now. And if we’re keeping up appearances...”

She held up her phone like a question.

“You want a picture of us?” I blinked. “Together?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be as convincing if we took them separately.” She turned her phone’s camera to selfie mode and edged closer to me. “Just keeping up appearances, right?”

“Right,” I agreed, my throat suddenly dry.

I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and stooped down so we were both in the frame.

On Felicity’s phone screen, my smile looked dopey. My eyes were bloodshot. My hair was a mess. But Felicity couldn’t have looked more beautiful. Her cute pink nose and

wind-kissed cheeks were adorable, and her eyes sparkled as she grinned.

She snapped a few pictures, assessed them, and turned to me again.

“I think...” Her voice trailed off as she stared down at her feet.

“What?” I asked, craning my neck for a look at her phone screen. “Don’t tell me I’ve got something in my teeth.”

“Your teeth are fine.” Her cheeks were a brighter pink now, flushed enough that I could no longer blame the wind. “Okay, don’t hate me, but...we might need to kiss.”

I laughed in disbelief. “For a photo? Your mom need a copy of our sex tape, too?”

Felicity’s eyes stayed trained on the ground. “Mom doesn’t exactly think someone like me could score a guy like you. I mean, if it’s too much, or too gross, or too awkward, I underst—aah!”

I grabbed her before she could say anything more, curling my fingers around her hips and tugging her body against mine.

“Take it,” I commanded, holding her tight so she couldn’t wriggle away.

She drew in a sharp breath, eyebrows shooting upward. “Take...what exactly?”

“The picture, Cheeks,” Felicity’s mother had some nerve—coupled with some deep, deep delusions. The next time I saw Eliza Jordan, we’d be having a little chat about how she was allowed to address her daughter. “That’s what you want, right?”

She blinked and nodded. “Right.”

I swept my fingers up her cheekbone, tucking her auburn waves behind the shell of her ear. Even the tips of her ears burned bright pink.

There. No hiding behind her hair now. When her mother saw this picture, there’d be no question about whose face was

in the frame with me. No doubt about whose lips were pressed to mine.

“I’m going to kiss you now. Okay?”

Felicity’s tongue slicked across her lips. “Okay.”

It never failed to surprise me how soft a woman’s lips were. But Felicity’s lips were even softer, so gentle and silken that when our mouths met, I inhaled sharply in pure disbelief that something so good could be real. Beneath my big, rough hands, her body felt impossibly small: delicate and fragile, like fine China. She tasted like bad coffee, and beneath that, something sweeter I couldn’t quite place.

My wolf growled, ferocious and low, in my chest. It only stopped when a bright light burst in front of my eyes.

In the flash of the camera, it was done. Our kiss, preserved forever in digital glory.

It was only as I watched her taillights disappear down the drive that I realized that kiss had been our first.

* * *

At home, I trudged directly to the kitchen. The sink was empty, the counters clean. I wanted to take steel wool to something, find some stain I could scrub out until it vanished, but I’d left the house spotless.

Fuck.

I put my shoulder to the fridge and shoved it aside, a Hail Mary if ever I’ve known one. But the dust bunnies behind the fridge were sparse. Weren’t these things supposed to multiply? I guessed they hadn’t been getting any, either. Sweeping them up barely took five minutes.

It wasn’t my house I wanted to scrub clean, and I knew it. Not really. It was my brain that needed the spit and polish. My skin still burned where Felicity had touched me. Her perfume lingered on my jacket, floral and sweet.

I had it bad. Dangerously bad. She'd set fire to a tinderbox of desire within me. Like a cartoon coyote with a stick of dynamite, no matter how hard I tried to blow out the sparks burning their way through the fuse, it was no use.

I stripped out of my clothes on my way to the shower, determined to get her scent off me. I turned the tap on full heat and stepped under it, bracing for release. I didn't find it. I could still smell her on me.

I couldn't stop breathing her in.

Felicity was nicotine, salt and vinegar Pringles, cheap Scotch, and pricey bourbon.

She was every bad habit I'd never been able to kick.

But how could I kick a habit I'd never even started?

I had no idea what was going on between Felicity and me. What I did know was this: if I didn't get a hand around my cock soon, I would end up out on the street, chasing taillights until I found hers.

I fisted my cock and gave it three firm strokes while I thought about Felicity's kiss. Bright echoes of the camera's flash exploded behind my eyelids as I replayed that moment over and over again. Just recalling her taste was nearly enough to make me come—but I stopped myself.

This was Felicity Jordan. Cheeks. My best friend. Not some woman I could jerk off to because my hormones had gone out of control.

She deserved better than that.

I *had* to be better than that if we were going to make this work.

So instead, I got out of the shower and made another cup of coffee. I cradled the mug, staring at nothing, hoping that would help.

It did not.

Chapter II

Felicity

On Tuesday, I was back at work, throwing myself into every task with extra oomph. Lexi was working the day shift with me again, and I even picked up her slack more or less without complaint.

Anything to keep my mind off Xander, his lips, and how we'd parted.

"You wouldn't believe how many guys tried to take me home this weekend," Lexi gushed. She lounged in the swivel chair at the nurse's station like she was being paid to sit on her backside and brag. "It was an absolute feeding frenzy. You should've been there."

"I probably wouldn't have enjoyed it much, honestly." I blinked, struck by the harshness in my tone.

Lexi's cheeks darkened a shade. "Why not?"

"Because you're...you. The guys wouldn't even have noticed me." I shook my head and forced a smile. "Sorry."

She laughed but didn't press, for which I was grateful.

I was on edge. Every second I wasn't thinking about Xander, I was a flurry of motion, calculation, and supreme tension.

Every second I was thinking about him, things only got worse.

In all our years of friendship, I'd never desired him sexually. Even during my brief crush on him, I'd been too innocent to fantasize about more than just a kiss.

And yet, I'd dressed in his clothes. I'd placed myself in his bed. Worst of all, I'd clung to him like a spider monkey all night, my clothed body against his naked one. When I woke to an empty bed the next morning, I shouldn't have been surprised. He'd probably pried me off him with his super-wolf strength and fled the scene as soon as he realized I was too deep in REM to notice he was gone.

Clearly, swearing off men for the last three years had left me a little beyond pathetic. I was starved for physical touch. That was all.

At least, that's what I'd hoped before he walked me out to his car.

The second his lips pressed to mine—a pity kiss if I'd ever known one—there was no pretending. Not for me. The only thing I'd felt at that moment was pure, slick desire.

I was beginning to think Xander and I were playing a truly dangerous game.

After work, I drove to Soul Coffee to meet Gena. There, I ordered two small mochas with extra whipped cream—our favorite. I sipped at my drink, taking in the ambiance of the café while I waited for Gena to arrive: smooth jazz, roasted beans, and the clickety-clack of laptop keyboards. This was where the local freelancers came to work. Some on novels, some on spreadsheets.

Gena arrived a few minutes later, and we exchanged hugs. “Hey,” I said, smiling. “You look like you survived your ride home with Kingston okay.”

“I'd pay good money to avoid hearing that name again for a few months.” Gena laughed tiredly as I slid her coffee over. “Thanks for this, by the way. How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Consider it a bribe.”

True to her word, she'd texted me on Sunday night to let me know she'd gotten home safe. After a little arm twisting, I'd convinced her to meet me here and finally dish about what was going on between her and Xander's brother. No matter

how hard she insisted that it was nothing, it was obvious that wasn't true.

"Okay, okay," she relented. "But you can't tell anyone. Especially not Xander."

"That bad, huh?"

"It was a huge mistake." Her eyes darted nervously toward the door, like the whole Miller clan might burst in and accuse her of gossiping about them. "We met at a New Year's Eve party about a year ago and hooked up a few times. I thought it might turn into something more than that...but it never did."

"That sounds like Kingston," I said. Xander was hard to pin down when it came to women, but Kingston operated like a greased pig threatened with the prospect of becoming bacon.

Gena lowered her face into her hands and groaned. "I should have known better. He clearly isn't the monogamous type. But I held out for too long, and then I got angry, and then I made an ass of myself. So if you ever talk to him, promise me you won't mention any of this."

"Of course I won't. Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" It wasn't like I would have judged her for it. Once feelings got involved, everything always got messy.

"I wanted to tell you. If I'd known he was Xander's brother, I might have." Gena raised her eyebrows and tapped her fingertips against her coffee mug, her gaze focused on the table. "It's just that I, uh...never got his last name."

I grimaced. "Ouch." Gena was smart, but she was also living, breathing proof that emotions screw up everything.

"Yeah. Plus, I didn't want to admit that I was falling for a guy who didn't feel the same way," she continued.

"You were falling for *Kingston*?" He was a handsome enough guy. I could see the appeal...in the same weird way you came to understand why a woman could be convinced to date your little brother.

"I'm not *proud* of it." Gena rubbed the side of her neck. "Nor am I proud of what I did to his truck when I decided he

was leading me on.”

I gasped. “You’re the one who keyed *Rat Bastard* into his hood?” At the time, Xander and I had laughed until we’d cried. Xander was certain Kingston had more than earned it, but Kingston had never given us any clues about the perpetrator. I’d almost forgotten about it.

“Well, he was *acting* like a rat bastard,” Gena rationalized. “So it seemed apt at the time. In hindsight, though? It was an overreaction, and I guess we never exactly had the ‘where’s this heading’ talk. Not until it was way too late.”

“What happened after he drove you home?” As I recalled, Kingston had been pretty eager to chauffeur Gena on Sunday night. He hadn’t been willing to take no for an answer. “No rat bastard part two, I hope.”

“No. Not at all.” Gena sighed. “He was really kind, actually. He wanted to talk about what happened between us, but I wasn’t in the mood. I probably won’t *ever* be in the mood, come to think. Once something hits a certain point of fucked up, there’s no going back, you know?”

“The past is the past and ought to stay that way,” I suggested, and she nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes! Exactly. We fucked, we failed, we moved on. It was an entire year ago. Why bother rehashing it? Right?”

I agreed, at least enough that I didn’t press her for any more details on the subject. If she wanted her fling with Kingston to be dead and buried, I considered this conversation the tombstone on top of the grave.

“I’ve got a secret now, too, I guess.” Tit for tat, right?

“Oh my god.” Gena leaned forward eagerly. “Spill. Immediately.”

“Xander and I...well. A lot of things.” Quickly, I rehashed the highlights: Xander climbing into bed with me, totally naked. Cuddling against him all night. The moment we’d shared when he walked me to my car the next morning. A little reluctantly, I even fessed up to the kiss.

As I spoke about kissing him, I could feel his lips on mine all over again.

“You’ve got it bad,” Gena said, grinning deviously. “I knew it! I told you this would happen, didn’t I? You guys have always had good chemistry. Like yin and yang.”

“That’s not chemistry,” I said, laughing even as my cheeks flamed. “That’s Taoism, I think.”

“Taoism, chemistry...same thing.”

I laughed again. It really wasn’t.

“So...where do you go from here?” Gena asked.

“No idea,” I admitted. “All of this? It’s probably nothing. We’ve known each other for so long! If there were going to be feelings, why didn’t they rear their ugly heads earlier?”

“It’s probably the forced proximity,” Gena suggested. “You can’t fake intimacy, not for long. It’s why actors fall for their love interests in films, you know? Bogie and Lauren Bacall, Brad and Angelina...”

“It’s not like that,” I assured her, deflating slightly.

She’d missed my meaning entirely. What she was talking about might have applied to humans, but Xander was a shifter, and shifters didn’t take eighteen years to recognize their mates.

I wasn’t his, and that meant he wasn’t mine. *Couldn’t* be mine. It was simple as that.

“You fake something like that long enough, it becomes real,” Gena finished with a triumphant grin. “Manifestation, baby!”

“We’ve been doing this for a week, Gena.” That was all it had taken. After a week, I was already starting to question everything.

Meanwhile, Xander’s *real* mate was still out there somewhere, oblivious to the fact that butterflies were swarming in my stomach at the memory of kissing her man.

God, I was in deep shit.

“I guess for you two, a week was enough.” Gena licked her lips, like my drama was even tastier than the whipped cream in her coffee. “When do you see him again?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “But since we need to keep up appearances...probably soon.”

I couldn’t have been more wrong. Wednesday went by without a single phone call or text from him. Thursday came and went, but Xander was still MIA. I texted him a few times—nothing serious. Just shifter memes, pictures of the clouds, and once, a daring selfie of me with Mrs. Havishford, the woman at Evergreen Hills whose house I was hoping to buy, who always liked to remind me what a grade-A beefcake she thought Xander was.

He never replied.

By Friday, I was beginning to run out of patience. I was getting worried. Xander had never ditched me like this. Normally, he was my rock, the one constant in a sea of chaos.

Something was definitely up. Given my current assessment of us, it could be any one of two dozen things.

Maybe he was regretting that kiss. Maybe I kissed like a dead fish.

Maybe I’d gotten too handsy in my sleep. Maybe I’d muttered his name while I dreamed.

Maybe I’d overstepped a boundary when I crawled into his bed or at any other part of the night.

There was the issue with Melony and the Carter’s Creek pack to contend with, too. Maybe he’d taken my advice. My stupid, ridiculous advice: dump me, go be with her. I’d seen the solution to his problems with Quincy Houghton easily enough. Maybe he’d finally seen it, too.

Maybe his mother had finally gotten to him. I wasn’t a girlfriend, not even a fake one. I was a joke.

I had an entire dictionary of possibilities and what-ifs. I had a whole Wikipedia of them.

But which one was it? Why had my best friend dropped off the face of my entire world?

There was one what-if that trumped them all: what if he'd realized how much I'd liked his lips against mine?

What if he suspected that, though I'd never be his mate, I still wanted him to kiss me like that again?

I swung by the fire station on Friday after work, mostly out of desperation. After a full day at Evergreen Hills, I must have looked like a sloppy zombie. I hadn't even changed out of my scrubs yet.

The guys still wolf-whistled and cat-called at me anyway.

"Holy shit, boys! Sound the alarms, we've got a live one here!"

"Hey, Felicity! You wanna take a ride down *my* fire pole?"

I decided Evergreen's firefighters didn't see enough women while they were on shift.

I ignored their hooting and hollering. They weren't serious about it, anyway. Instead of giving them a piece of my mind, I posted up in the center of the engine room, placed my hands on my hips, and hollered for Xander. It felt a little silly, but that's what he'd instructed me to do if I ever dropped by the station and needed to be rescued.

A few seconds later, he emerged from the back room. His face was clean-shaven, and his uniform navies looked clean and freshly pressed. Part of me was relieved that he hadn't been neck-deep in danger all day.

The other, louder part of me was only more hurt. If he'd been avoiding me because he was too busy saving the town from burning down, I wouldn't have held it against him.

The look of shame on his face when he saw me only confirmed what I already feared: he'd been avoiding me on purpose.

"You wanna talk outside?" Xander asked as he approached.

I glanced to the other firefighters, who looked ready to start passing out popcorn and Milk Duds.

“Outside’s good.” Whatever needed to be said between us would be best discussed without an audience.

“You wanna tell me why the hell you’ve been ghosting me?” I asked, keeping my voice low as we reached my car.

“Aw, Cheeks, I haven’t been ghosting you.” Xander rubbed the back of his neck. “Work has been busy. You know how it gets.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “Don’t try pulling that on me. Something’s changed. I want to know what it is.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and let out a heavy sigh. “I’ve just...had a lot on my mind, I guess. A lot to work out.”

“Like what?” My voice still came out sounding angry. Anger was the emotion at the forefront right now. But I was also deeply, painfully curious.

This was a new side of Xander, one I’d never even edged toward by accident before. I felt like we were teenagers again, goofing off in the woods behind his parents’ house, turning over rocks to see what weird little creatures were hiding underneath—only this time, Xander’s psyche was the rock, and I had no idea what to expect beneath its stony exterior.

Hopefully, it wasn’t worms.

“Okay. Do you remember Maggie Temple?” Xander asked.

I blinked. “From high school?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“I remember she hated your guts,” I added. “And on senior skip day...didn’t she try to run you down with her Porsche?”

“She *did* run me down with her Porsche,” Xander corrected, rubbing his lower back. “Right in the parking lot. I’m lucky wolves heal fast.”

“Yeah, she was something else.” I frowned. “What’s she got to do with anything, though?”

My pulse thudded a little faster as I waited for him to answer. Maggie had been one of the popular girls in Xander's class. Good-looking and from money. I was pretty sure she'd gone off to Europe after graduation. Was she back in town?

Maybe she and Xander had made amends. Or something *more* than amends.

"Oh my god," I blurted out as the silence dragged on. My stomach turned to lead.

Maggie Temple, always prettier than me, wealthier than me, better liked, easier to love. Maggie and her swishy, silken brown hair. Maggie, who was tall enough to model. Tall enough to kiss Xander whenever she wanted to, instead of having to wait until he pitied her enough to stoop down to her level.

"Are you fucking Maggie Temple? Is *that* what this is about?"

"What?" Xander looked disgusted. "Fuck, no! Why would you think that? Maggie and I only ever dated...God, it must have been in middle school. We were friends first, then she asked me to some boy-girl dance in the library basement..." He shook his head. "Details don't really matter. Point is, it didn't work out. And she hated me after."

"Enough to run you down with her Porsche," I said slowly.

"Exactly. And no offense, Cheeks, but you're a much better driver than Maggie Temple ever was. If I'm gonna buy the farm, I'd rather that 'death by Flamingo' wasn't on my autopsy report."

"I wouldn't do that to you." I narrowed my eyes. "You're too big for that. I'd rent an SUV."

Xander stared at me for a moment before letting out a sharp laugh. "An SUV wouldn't cut it. I'd recommend something military-grade. Maybe a tank."

We laughed together, awkwardly at first. It broke the seal on the strange tension that had bottled up between us. Slowly, I watched Xander relax, then felt the tightness in my chest release.

“Seriously, though,” I said. “You realize that whatever happened between you and Maggie Temple...this isn’t really the same thing. For so many reasons. I don’t have to spell that out for you, right?”

“I know it’s not, Cheeks. I’m not saying it is. Just...” He shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked the loose gravel around the pothole between us. “After we kissed, I thought—”

“The kiss was fake,” I pointed out. Deliberately.

For him, at least, it had been.

Maybe if I kept saying it out loud, it’d become true for me, too.

“Right,” Xander agreed, averting his eyes. “Of course it was. But...Christ, Cheeks, I’m not the brightest guy, okay? I don’t want to lose you. That’s all.”

“If you don’t want to lose me, then start texting me back, asshole!”

“Stop sending me such shitty memes, and maybe I will.”

I marched forward, put my hands on his chest, and shoved him as hard as I could. He stumbled back a full step, which was how I knew he was truly sorry. No one moved Xander Miller unless he wanted to be moved. Most of the time, I couldn’t push him around in the slightest.

He retaliated quickly, throwing his arms around me and wrestling with me the same way he did with his siblings, though a lot more gently than he would have with Kingston or Dylan. Even Macy, a wolf and an alpha, was made of tougher stuff than I was.

We ended up in a hug, clinging to each other and breathing heavily from our laughter. This is the Xander I know, I thought as I pressed my cheek to his chest. For the days he’d been ignoring me, I’d gotten a tiny taste of what it might be like not to have him in my life.

I didn’t ever want to experience that again.

“Are you sure we should keep going with the charade?” I asked, resting my head against his shoulder. “We don’t have

to, you know.”

I didn't want to lose him. Nothing would be worth that. Any cost was too high.

“Don't be like that,” he murmured before pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “I got scared, is all. It's not a feeling I'm used to. I got scared, and I choked.” He pulled back, green eyes shining. “Forgive me?”

“I suppose.” I gave him a small smile. “Just don't pull any more shit like this again.”

“Never,” he promised. “You've seen me at my most chicken-shit now. I'll make sure to avoid an encore.”

He walked me the rest of the way to the Flamingo and even opened the door for me. All the hurt in my chest had coiled into a small, hard pebble. Something that could easily be plucked out and dropped along the roadside or left in a coat pocket, forgotten when it went into the wash. The rest of my body felt as light as angel food cake.

But instead of getting in the car, I found myself lingering.

Because of me or for his own reasons, Xander also lingered.

“I guess you'll be getting back to work?” I mentioned lamely.

“What?” Xander blinked as if he'd only been half-listening. “Oh. Yeah. I guess so.”

An awkward silence. Maybe things weren't as patched up between us as I'd hoped. Maybe he was just being polite.

“I'll text you when I get off, though,” Xander said, his eyes darting away from mine. “When I'm done with work, I mean.”

I tucked my hair behind my ear, shifting from foot to foot as I looked away as well. “Yeah. I'd like that.”

“Aw, fuck it. C'mere.” Xander threw his arms around me again, engulfing me in the warmth of his embrace once more. But this time, there was no hint of roughhousing in the hug.

His hands ended up too low on my hips, settled just above my ass. His hips were settled differently, too.

He was leaning into me full-body instead of pulling away.

“What...” I started, and Xander chuckled.

“Sorry,” his voice rumbled. “We’ve got an audience.”

I didn’t have to glance at the station to know that the guys were watching us. Once again, we were on display.

I pulled back to stare up at him, trying to imagine myself as Lizzy Bennett and Xander as Mr. Darcy. It was a long shot. Keira Knightley would never be cast to play me; I had too many curves. And Xander couldn’t have been further from a stodgy, upper-crust gentleman. He was too salt-of-the-earth, too rugged, too wild.

I wish he’d kiss me again.

The words popped into my head, unbidden and fully formed. It wasn’t like my other thoughts, which were amorphous, half-words, half-images, like listening to a movie from another room. It was clear. Distinct. Powerful.

His green eyes smoldered, and I wondered, even if it was only for a second, if he was thinking the same thing.

“I should, um, head out, then. I guess,” I whispered, my knees quickly turning to jelly.

“Right. Yeah.” Xander did kiss me then, just a peck on the cheek. “Drive safe.”

“You too,” I said, and it wasn’t until I was halfway home that I realized how silly that sounded. I replayed it over and over again in my head, blushing furiously.

Drive safe.

You too.

Chapter 12

Xander

The mess hall in the station eternally smelled like tomatoes, onions, garlic, and spices—proof that most of the guys here didn't know how to cook much beyond chili or spaghetti. Several members of our squad were ex-military, the kind who actually enjoyed MREs over normal food. The rest didn't exactly have refined palates or high expectations for station house food.

Tonight, it was chili. After seeing Felicity off, I headed upstairs, grabbed a bowl, and slid onto a bench next to Brody.

To his credit, he let me get a few spoonfuls in before he started pestering me with questions.

“So,” Brody began conversationally. “What was that about?”

I stared down into the murky red depths of my chili, wondering the same thing. I'd been an idiot, and I knew it. Even after our conversation, Felicity still believed I'd intentionally ignored her texts.

Ignoring her wasn't possible, though. It'd be easier to ignore a hole in my chest, to turn off my own heart.

“She's been in my dreams,” I confessed, keeping my eyes on the chili. “Every one of them, all week long.”

I didn't look up. I didn't want to see the smug look on Brody's face when he realized he'd been right. Faking it was just a gateway drug. Now, I was craving the real thing.

“What kind of dreams?” Brody asked pleasantly. *Dickhead*. He knew exactly what kind of dreams I was talking about. It was like he enjoyed watching me suffer.

“The kind you wouldn’t mention to your mother.” I’d woken up hard every night this week. Most of the time, I had to jerk off twice to get my erection to finally retreat so I could catch a few hours of sleep.

“So, you might say...” Brody let his sentence trail off, leading me toward the words he wanted to hear me say.

I groaned. “You were right.”

“Music to my ears.” Brody roped an arm around my neck and ruffled my hair. “Christ, Miller. I’m not sure if I should laugh at you or pity you.”

“Neither,” I suggested. I didn’t much enjoy being laughed at, and especially didn’t enjoy being pitied. Then again... “Both.”

“Is that what you were down there telling her, then? That you’ve finally succumbed to her feminine wiles?”

“God, no,” I said, horrified. “She was pissed at me for not texting her back all week. I didn’t have the heart to tell her it was because, ah...”

“Because if you said anything to her, you would have blurted out how you really felt,” Brody supplied.

“Because if I’d said anything to her, I would’ve asked her how fast she could get to my place in as few clothes as possible,” I corrected, hanging my head.

“Jesus.” Brody whistled low. “You’ve got it bad.”

“You’re not a wolf,” I explained. “You don’t understand. When we want something...”

“You need to hunt it like prey? I may not be a shifter, but I’ve seen my fair share of shifter porn, you know. Usually, it’s the she-wolves desperate to hump the hunky human men, but I imagine it probably works the other way around, too.”

“You fucking suck, Brody,” I grumbled. Shifter porn—I couldn’t imagine a more awkward introduction to the ways of my world. Had Felicity seen any of that? God, I hoped not.

“Maybe so.” Brody chuckled. “So. You still haven’t broken it to her yet?”

“I told her about one of my exes. A friend who became something more, then hated me for it—”

“And *then* you told her?”

“No,” I admitted sheepishly. “Not explicitly. You don’t exactly tell a girl you’ve been having dirty dreams about her.”

“Why not?” Brody shrugged. “I bet she’d be flattered.”

“I doubt that. Maybe she caught on, maybe not, but that’s what I’m worried about. If she wants me back, and I fuck her, and things go south...I lose her. Completely. I can’t risk that.”

“Aw, come on. What’s true love but a big game of risks?”

“This isn’t true love.” It *couldn’t* be. “It’s...horniness. That’s all. A temporary thing that’s gotten convoluted. Fucked up by my wolf senses and the full moon.”

Brody snorted. “Keep telling yourself that, bud.”

“I will, thanks,” I snapped, returning to my chili.

No matter what Brody said, I knew I was right. I was a *wolf*, for Christ’s sake. True love for wolves wasn’t about dirty dreams. There was only one kind of dream that would mean Felicity was my mate, and I hadn’t had it yet.

And because I hadn’t had it yet, I knew I never would.

No matter what my cock wanted, she’d never be truly mine.

We ate in silence after that, broken by cross-talk with the other guys and Brody’s occasional chuckles. Even when we weren’t talking, he was goading me.

I should have kissed her, I thought as the spicy chili burned my lips.

In firefighting, we had a term for this kind of thing: a flashover. A moment where a fire developed so quickly, grew so significantly, there was no fighting it under the normal terms of engagement. Everything in a room simply heated up to the point of ignition all at once. You had ten seconds to get yourself to safety. Maybe less.

There was a simple way to deal with it, if you managed to catch the fire before it hit that point.

You shut off ventilation. You cut the fire's supply to oxygen. You choked the flames out. That was what I'd been trying to do this week, letting things burn down to embers again.

It hadn't worked.

And now, Felicity had done the one thing that was sure to bring a fire searing to brand-new heights.

She'd opened the door.

* * *

I returned home completely exhausted once again. There'd only been one job to attend to for the rest of the day, but it had stretched on for hours.

Mrs. Flinders on Tenth Avenue had stepped out to pop a letter in her mailbox and accidentally released Mr. Sugarbiscuits, her massive, ancient Maine Coon. We'd spent all afternoon trying to track him down. We could hear him meowing but couldn't pinpoint his location. For a while, he seemed to have vanished into thin air.

I dabbed at the scratch marks on my face and neck with an alcohol-free wipe from my medicine cabinet before hopping in the shower. In the end, we'd found Mr. Sugarbiscuits stuck halfway in a drainage pipe. He'd been less than grateful when I wiggled him back out and returned him home.

The only good thing about that entire debacle was that it'd helped me keep my mind off Felicity. For four wearying hours,

the only pussy I'd been chasing had four white paws and a taste for canned tuna.

My phone buzzed as I stepped out of the shower, and my heart hit a gallop until I saw who the message was from.

Not Felicity.

Dad.

* * *

We took my truck to the city limits and turned down a country road that was more dirt than gravel. Out here in the farmland between Evergreen and Carter's Creek, a neutral zone had been established long ago, back when our packs had still relished the taste of war.

Dad and I brought two of our betas along with us. Quincy claimed to be traveling our way with three of his pack members, and showing up to these kinds of talks outnumbered was never a good idea. We had about twenty betas in the pack with the right level of combat experience to be useful if things came to blood, and maybe five I could trust to keep cool heads no matter what Quincy threw at us.

I'd chosen the two most even-tempered of them. While Dad rode shotgun, Luke Spencer and Lloyd Graves sat in the back.

When we reached the spot, Quincy was waiting for us. My lips pulled back in a snarl as I counted the headlights on the side of the road.

Fucker. He'd contacted Dad to set this meeting under the pretense of *just talking*. Likely a lie.

There were six vehicles parked at the meeting spot. Depending on how full they were, there was a chance Quincy had shown up with the entire Carter's Creek pack.

"Is he *looking* for a fight?" Lloyd hissed as I pulled up on the other side of the road.

“Probably.” It certainly appeared that way. “But we’re not giving him one if we can help it.”

Dad nodded in agreement. “Keep your tempers under wraps, but your fangs at the ready. If he wants to start something, we might not have a choice but to defend ourselves. But we don’t have to do his work for him.”

Quincy and I met in the middle of the road while the others hung back. As soon as he opened his mouth, I could tell this wouldn’t be a pleasant exchange.

“Come to your senses yet, Miller?”

“Funny.” I didn’t laugh. “I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“I never lost my senses in the first place.” Quincy tucked his hands in his jean pockets and stared up at the sky, where the moon was waning. “Can’t say the same for the rest of the world, though. Times are changing for us. For all of us.”

“Not for Evergreen,” I pointed out.

“For all of us,” Quincy said again. “Used to be humans and shifters kept their distance from one another. We knew that humans would only dilute our bloodlines, and they knew we’re the monsters who haunt their nightmares. It was a better time, back when men who turn to wolves were just the subjects of their horror movies.”

“If you’ve got a bone to pick with *Twilight*, you’re barking up the wrong tree, Quincy. I didn’t write it.” It was the same boring argument that the older shifters always brought up. I didn’t like the Growlr app or *Teen Wolf*, but not liking something didn’t stop it from taking hold. “Nothing wrong with shifters and humans mixing. If anything, it allows us to do more good.”

“Good for them, maybe. We dump our money into their charities. We scare their men into thinking twice before they grab a woman’s ass at a bar or raise a hand to their wives. But do *we* benefit from it?”

“The fuck does it matter, Quincy? I didn’t come here to talk inter-species politics with you.” If I’d wanted that, we

could have had this out over Facebook. It would've saved me some gas.

“Intermingling,” Quincy said. “You don’t see it yet. You’re too young, too cocksure. You still have the privilege of being an optimist about how humans and shifters currently coexist. But I’ve seen it firsthand—more shifters shacking up with humans every year. Every year, fewer alphas are born.”

“Last I checked, a pack only needs two alphas at a time.” The leader and his heir.

“What happens when there are no more alphas born at all?”

I sighed. “So you had a daughter instead of a son. That’s not my problem. Either talk to your people”—I nodded to the line of vehicles parked behind him, the glares of their headlights burning my eyes—“and explain to them that they need to learn how to respect a woman as a leader, or pass the torch to someone else. Just leave me out of it. Leave *Evergreen* out of it. Your succession issues aren’t our responsibility.”

“Maybe not,” Quincy allowed. “But *your* succession issues must be on your mind. How long do you think your pack will put up with being led by an alpha with no heir? An alpha who spends his time rutting with a *human woman*, no less.”

“Careful,” I growled. I wouldn’t stand for him insulting Felicity. Human or not, fake girlfriend or not, she had my protection. She always would.

Quincy held up his hands, showing me his palms. “All I’m saying is, my Melony is a proper she-wolf. An alpha, like you. Your children would be—”

“Nonexistent,” I suggested.

“No, they’d be *alphas*. Exactly what both our communities need.”

“Last I checked, deciding what *Evergreen* needs was my job.” I resisted the urge to glance at my watch. “You want your daughter to mate with an alpha, look to your own pack.”

“Yeah. Thanks, kid.” Quincy scoffed bitterly. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

I forced myself to keep my face expressionless. It was hard to tell if Quincy knew what he’d just revealed. The way he treated me, like I was some dumb-shit kid, suggested that he had no idea.

He wanted Melony to shack up with an alpha, and he’d been forced to look outward, beyond his pack.

That could only mean one thing: there were no available alphas in the Carter’s Creek pack. Maybe no alphas at all.

“Right,” I huffed. “Quincy, I don’t grudge you or your attempts at problem-solving. I understand your hardships. I know the weight of the load on your shoulders. I carry the same on mine.” Now was the time to start smoothing things over. I couldn’t give him what he wanted, but he could have my sympathy at least. “But the fact of the matter is, you tried to play a dirty game, and you lost. You want to make a match for your daughter? Look to Boston. Look to the other rural communities. Hell, she’s a clever girl. Let her look for herself. Whatever you do, keep Evergreen out of it. You’re not going to find what you want with us.”

“You owe me. Your mother *promised* me,” Quincy snapped. “Where I come from, words mean things.”

“My mother isn’t alpha of the Evergreen pack. I am. She’s not my second-in-command.” I cocked my head behind me toward Dad. “He is. She’s not on my council, she’s not a pack elder. Any promise she made you was *just* words. Nothing more.”

I spoke slowly, calmly, with conviction. My inner hothead was entirely under wraps. I may have been a younger alpha than most, but my father had prepared me for the role my entire life. Someday, I’d teach my own son the same things, in the same way.

As Quincy fumed, staring me down while he searched for a suitably scathing response, a vision struck me. It was so much more than just an idle thought. For a moment, long

enough that I had to worry I was hallucinating, I *saw* something. A little boy, standing between Quincy and me. He couldn't have been older than five or six. His hair was auburn, just like Felicity's. His eyes, like mine, were green. He smiled at me, a big cheesy grin that was perfectly infectious, even though I knew it couldn't be real.

Before I knew it, I found myself smiling back.

That's when Quincy lost it.

"You little shit. You think this is funny?" He launched himself forward, and the vision of the child between us dissolved. Quincy's breath reeked of cheap cigarettes and a hint of whiskey. His teeth flashed. So did his eyes. "Keep smiling, Miller. See where it gets you—and that human slut you've been dragging around, too."

One after another, the latticework of threads holding my patience together snapped. If it had only been me there, I would have torn him apart like a rag doll.

No one talked about my Felicity like that.

But I couldn't just think about myself. If I jumped Quincy now, his pack members would flood us. Dad, Luke, and Lloyd would be forced to fight.

The notion hadn't escaped me: Quincy had brought enough of his people with him tonight that a fight seemed to be *exactly* what he was looking for.

"Get gone," I snarled, muscles straining as I held myself back. "Now. And as you go, I want you to remember: any form of attack you pose against me, my people, my town—or my woman—you'll find back on your doorstep, ten-fucking-fold."

Quincy didn't speak. Further evidence, as far as I was concerned, that he'd been hoping I'd throw the first punch.

I left him there, speechless and staring. Back at the truck, Dad clapped me on the shoulder like he was proud of me, but I shook off his touch.

“When we get back to Evergreen, I want troops on the ground,” I said as I got back in the truck. “Patrols every hour. This won’t end here.”

“He didn’t take to diplomacy, then,” Dad guessed, climbing into the passenger seat.

“No.” I turned the key in the ignition. The engine rumbled to life. “I’m not sure that was ever in the cards.”

* * *

“Whelp. Let’s get you a drink then.” Dad shuffled into the kitchen, his tone oddly casual.

We’d dropped Lloyd and Luke off at their houses before going back to my place. The guys had been quiet for most of the ride. Impossible to read. But as I pulled the truck away from Luke’s place, I saw him through his living room window. He walked straight past his wife to his gun cabinet. A second later, Mandy pulled the blinds.

“I think I’m out of beer. Sorry.” I slumped into a chair at the kitchen table and placed my face in my hands. I’d done my best to hold firm with Quincy, to explain that I understood where he was coming from, to suggest another plan of action.

My best just wasn’t good enough.

“This isn’t an evening for beer, kid.” Dad opened up kitchen cabinets and rifled around in them until he found what he was looking for: a bottle of Irish whiskey, only short a few shots.

“Not sure I can drink myself out of this one,” I said.

He chuckled. “No, probably not.” He produced two shot glasses from another cabinet and filled them up at the kitchen table. “But you’ve just had your first stand-off with another alpha. A stiff drink’s customary. If your granddad hadn’t passed on before I stepped up to the plate, he would’ve done the same for me.”

“Just the one, then,” I relented. My blood still felt like it had been set on a hot stove and left to simmer. What I really wanted to do was break something, tear through something soft. I wanted to shift, run all the way to Carter’s Creek, and sink my teeth into Quincy Houghton’s throat. None of which would benefit the pack.

Whiskey would have to do.

“You’re worried.” Dad slid one of the shots toward me. I caught it in the shell of my palm before it skittered off the edge of the table.

“I’m surprised you’re not.”

“Shit like this? It happens, Xander. Alphas don’t always play nice. In fact, for most of history, they *haven’t* played nice.” He raised his shot glass to me. “To keeping the peace for as long as it lasts.”

As far as toasts went, it was a grim one. From the way he talked, peace wasn’t a guarantee. At this point, it might not even be a possibility.

I tossed my shot back, feeling the burn all the way down.

“Have you talked to your mother yet?” Dad asked, thumping his glass down on the table.

“Ma? No. Not since the full moon.”

“You’ll have to see her eventually, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m hoping when I do, I won’t still be so pissed.”

“I’m sorry for what she did. I should’ve...I don’t know.”

“Kept her in line?” I suggested, and we laughed. My mother wasn’t one to be convinced or controlled. Her mind was entirely her own. Once, I was pretty sure Dad had liked that about her.

Now, I wasn’t sure about anything anymore.

“Give her my best,” I told Dad as he prepared to leave. “I don’t...I don’t wanna hate her. I’m just still processing. Waiting to see how bad shit gets.”

“Whatever comes next, we’ll get through it,” Dad assured me. “All of us. Together.” He patted my shoulder and wrapped me up in a tight hug. “You did me proud tonight. Love you, kid. Always have, always will.”

After Dad headed out, I helped myself to another shot of whiskey, then started making calls. There was still a chance that Quincy was all bluster and bluff with no follow-through. His pride was wounded, his pack was faltering, and his daughter was a real piece of work. Of course he’d started talking shit. Of *course* he’d made threats.

Maybe threats were all it would ever be. Like Ma’s promises: just words.

But on the off chance that he did try something, I wanted us to be ready. It had been generations since the Evergreen pack went to war. As much as I hated the idea of that peace ending with me, I’d hate it even more if we started a fight only to lose.

I reached out to the pack members one by one, making sure they knew as much as they needed to.

Stay alert. Stay vigilant. And stay the fuck away from Carter’s Creek.

When I had made all my calls, I rinsed out the shot glasses, put the whiskey away, and went to bed. There was nothing more I could do tonight. The best thing to ensure a more hopeful tomorrow was to rest.

But of course, sleep came with its own problems.

Like every night since the full moon, Felicity was in my dreams.

This time, we were teenagers again, out in the woods behind my parents’ home. She still had her adorable softness, the baby fat around her jawline and in her cheeks, like she’d been trapped at the age of fourteen. I was shifting for Felicity for the first time, showing her how my fingers curled and receded, the way my palms stiffened and broadened into paws before her eyes.

Separating dreams from memory could be difficult, but distantly, I was aware that this had never happened. Other girls had been obsessed with seeing me transform from man to beast, but Felicity had never pushed me to show her my shifter side. Especially not back then. She'd either been too polite to ask or too afraid of what she'd see. Uncertain which it was, I'd never offered.

Memory was never this visceral, anyway. No memory was ever this clear.

With my shifting complete, she stared at me, mouth agape. What was she feeling? Fear? Concern? I nudged her hand with my nose to reassure her. I couldn't speak to her with my words in this form, so I communicated in the only way I could—in the language of wolves.

It's alright, said the lap of my tongue against her fingers. *You're safe. I won't hurt you. Don't be afraid.*

She smiled at me, and my tail wagged as excitement burst through my heart.

“You're beautiful,” she whispered as she placed a hand on my shoulders. Her fingers dug trenches through my thick white fur. I shuddered as she scratched that place between my shoulder blades I could never reach myself. “I wish I could join you. You're the most incredible thing I've ever seen.”

The dream twisted. In an instant, eighteen years passed. Standing before me now was the Felicity I knew from the waking world. The baby fat had smoothed out into elegant cheekbones. Her hair was longer, brushed into shiny, soft waves. She was still cute, but she was no longer *only* cute.

She was beautiful. Delicate and small, with a woman's curves, a woman's lips, a woman's questioning hazel eyes.

Instinctively, I lowered myself for her. An offering, one I'd never made to anyone else—asleep *or* awake. She only hesitated for a moment. Then, carefully, she climbed onto my back, thighs hugging my hips, arms wrapped around my neck. The moon was full, the night sharp with scents: crisp snow, prickling pine, *her*.

I ran, bearing her weight effortlessly. My legs were strong. Her body was warm. My heart pounded in time with the beat of my paws against the icy earth. I could hear her heartbeat, its rhythm matching my own.

“Take me, Xander,” she hissed against my cheek. Immediately, the folds of my ears perked up, standing at attention. “Claim me. Make me yours.”

I woke up sweating. Panting. Rock-hard.

Outside my window, the moon waned. Further proof that it hadn't been real. Just another goddamned dream.

I rolled over and bit my pillow, heart still thundering.

Just a dream.

But her words haunted me.

I *wanted* them to be real.

There was another way to prevent a flashover, as long as you caught it before it exploded all around you. Fire thrived on fuel and oxygen, but flashovers were a problem of pent-up heat.

So, you chop a hole in the ceiling. Kick down the door. Break into the room at key points, strategically choosing the openings to drop the temperature without feeding the flames.

Some fires could be starved. Others needed more drastic measures.

Some fires? The only choice was to let the heat out.

Chapter 13

Felicity

Bzzzt. Bzzzt.

I cracked my eyes open, sleepily searching for the source of the noise that had stirred me from my dreams.

Crap. Had I fallen asleep with my vibrator on?

My alarm clock read six o'clock in neon green numbers. That was around the same time I'd gotten to bed this morning after coming home from work, which meant it was night now. I'd slept all day.

I found my vibrator tangled in the sheets. Thankfully, it was off. I'd been using it more frequently lately, probably because I'd started working the night shift at Evergreen Hills. Coming home with the sunrise every morning wasn't doing much for my morale. Neither, I supposed, was falling asleep in an empty bed.

Bzzzt. Bzzzt.

I searched through the sheets again until I found my phone, the source of the mysterious buzzing noise.

"Xander?" I answered, stifling a yawn. "What's up?"

"Did I wake you?"

"Yep."

"Good." His voice was low and smoky, with just a hint of his Boston-ish accent. "Put on some shoes and meet me outside."

“What? Are you already here?” I didn’t remember us having any plans.

“Not yet. But I can be in a few minutes.”

“Why?” I asked, rubbing my stomach. I hadn’t eaten since the start of my shift yesterday afternoon. If we were putting on an impromptu performance, I hoped it involved food.

“I’m taking you to dinner. Just the two of us. Sound good?”

“You’re an angel.” I laughed, then raked my fingers through my hair. “But I’m gonna need an hour.”

“Seven it is,” he responded. “See you then, Cheeks.”

I dragged myself out of bed and into the shower. One by one, I mentally ticked off all the little boxes that suggested a functional self-care routine. Hair: washed. Body: exfoliated. Legs: shaved. Normally, I sped through all of this as quickly as possible, but tonight, I took my time.

All these late nights at the Hills were wearing on me. I hadn’t felt like a real person since Macy’s mating ceremony. These days, I was more of a graveyard ghoul—a sweaty, greasy one at that.

Going out with Xander was exactly what I needed. There was nothing like dinner with a wolf to make a gal feel human again.

I slathered my body with lotion and wrapped myself in a towel. The temperature outside was still flirting with freezing, which meant most of my cute outfits were out of the question. I tore through my closet until I found a bodycon sweater dress. It still had the tags attached.

I held it up to my body and looked in the mirror. Too sexy? Maybe. It had long sleeves and a modest skirt, but it would cling to me like a second skin. A Kardashian could’ve pulled it off effortlessly, but me? Doubtful.

I tried the dress on after I blow-dried my hair. Tight didn’t begin to describe it, but the material was stretchy and soft. Comfortable.

But *tight*. No wonder the tags were still on it. This was way clingier than anything I normally wore.

I kept the dress on as I did my makeup. Smoky eye. A little bit of eyeliner, which I usually didn't bother with, but I decided to go the extra mile. I even fished the lone lipstick I owned out of the bottom of my makeup bag. The color was called Spiced Ginger, a matte reddish brown that a woman at a makeup counter had assured me would suit my skin tone.

Even once my hair was curled and my shoes were on, the dress was still giving me anxiety. The camel-brown fabric made my hair pop. The way it clung to my breasts and hips... hmm, it was a good look. No denying that.

Frowning, I pinched my stomach. I had a tiny pooch there that body-positive magazines wanted me to believe was mostly organs. Sometimes, I bought it. But at the same time, my mother's voice was in my head.

That's fat, sweetie. The last lingering proof that I'd once been so much chubbier than I was now, and that I still had more to lose.

Dejected, I went back to my closet. The dress was gorgeous, but I wasn't ready for it yet. I probably never would be.

Before I could trade the dress for a pair of jeans and a nice top, a low whistle sounded from behind me.

My hour was up. Xander was here.

He stood framed in the doorway, clad in a brown leather bomber jacket with a sheepskin collar and a pair of faded blue jeans.

"You let yourself in, huh?" I gave an awkward laugh.

"I did," he confirmed, then nodded to somewhere between my neck and my hemline. "Goddamn."

It wasn't often that a single word could hold so much meaning. Normally, people used full sentences. They padded out their words so there was no confusion about what they meant. But when someone screamed "fire!" or "bastard!" or

“fuck!”, a single word was all that was needed. In a word, you knew something was ablaze, a man had done something incredibly shitty, or someone had screwed something up so deeply that there weren’t enough words in the world to explain it.

Xander’s *goddamn* was like that. Emphatic. Short, precise, and vast. A *goddamn* could mean so many things, but at that moment, coming from his lips, inflected like *that*? There was only one potential meaning, poetic in its brevity.

He thought I looked *good*.

“I was, uh...just about to put on something warmer.” My body tingled from scalp to shins. “Unless—”

“Don’t,” he said quickly. “That’s perfect. We’ll only be outside for a minute, and you look...” He blinked, raising his eyebrows. “Yeah. You should wear that.”

“Okay,” I said quietly. “I’ll wear this.”

“Good.” He nodded, his Adam’s apple bobbing beneath his stubble. “Yeah, good.”

“You look pretty good yourself,” I said, nodding to his outfit. Beneath the bomber jacket, he wore a button-down, unbuttoned just far enough for me to see the lines of his pecs. Normally, he stuck to T-shirts or sweaters.

So. He’d dressed up as well.

“Yeah, so do you,” he said, then shook his head slightly. “I mean, I already said that.”

“No, you didn’t.” I smiled slightly. *Come on, Xander. You’re being a dork. That’s not like you at all.*

Xander blinked some more, then looked away. His cheeks didn’t turn pink, but the tips of his ears did. It was cute, seeing *him* blush for a change.

Then, he cleared his throat, and I realized what he was looking away from. My vibrator was still on my bed, a two-toned pink wand that I only realized at that moment was the same color as the Flamingo.

I dove for my sheets, pulling them up over the vibrator. There wasn't any hiding it now, but I covered it up, anyway. Like somehow, if it was out of sight, Xander had never seen it.

"We should go," he said, clearing his throat again.

"Yeah," I agreed. My cheeks had never burned hotter. "Let's go."

He didn't mention the vibrator. Not one peep. Not for the entire drive, all the way out of town. Instead, we made stilted, awkward conversation about the weather and the landscape and Evergreen High's basketball team, who were nearing the end of another losing season.

Somehow, not talking about it only made it worse. As if by ignoring its existence, we'd brought it into Xander's truck with us. It might as well have been sitting on the dashboard buzzing away, even though it was all the way back in Evergreen, inexpertly hidden in my bed.

"Where are we headed?" I asked as Xander accelerated onto the interstate. A nice, normal question. A topic of conversation that didn't feel like throwing a sheet over something sexual and private that had recently been pressed against my spasming clit.

"Huh?" Xander glanced over at me, then gripped the wheel a little tighter. "Oh. Boston. Thought it might be nice to eat somewhere we wouldn't be gawked at for a change."

"That does sound nice," I agreed. Being gawked at still ranked pretty low on my list of favorite things, especially while I was eating. "But doesn't that kind of defeat the point? We're supposed to be keeping up appearances, right?"

"We're still spending the evening together," Xander pointed out. "Beyond that...I dunno. I thought it might be nice, taking a night off from the act."

I leaned back in the seat and stretched out my legs experimentally. My feet hurt, my shoulders ached, and my head buzzed in that strange, caffeine-deprived way it always did when shift changes threw off my sleep cycle.

"A night off sounds perfect," I said.

Xander smiled as if he'd just thought of a joke only he knew.

And we drove.

* * *

“What *is* it?” I blurted out in frustration after the waitress finished taking our orders and ferried our menus away.

Xander raised his nose to the air and sniffed. “Greasy fries, chocolate ice cream...someone in the kitchen just burned the bacon, and the lady behind us is wearing too much perfume.”

I stared at him pleadingly. We were in a fancy burger restaurant in Cambridge, the kind that justified selling sandwiches for twenty bucks a pop with a quirky menu and wagyu beef. Xander had talked me into ordering a double bacon smashburger on a Krispy Kreme donut bun, fries, *and* a caramel milkshake. But apart from discussing the food, the awkwardness had quickly returned.

“I don't mean the smell, Xander. I mean *this*.” I gestured to the space between us. I didn't know how to put it into words. “I hate it. Something feels off.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean.” Xander rubbed the back of his neck. “I hate it, too.”

“If it's because of the stupid vibrator—” I started.

At the same time, Xander said, “Lately, I've been thinking a lot about us.”

We stopped talking, and a weighty silence lingered.

“You first,” I urged, blushing. “Go on.”

“Anything to avoid talking about your vibrator again, huh?” Xander smirked wickedly, and I let out an exasperated laugh.

“Pretty much,” I admitted. “What have you been thinking about us?”

“Just that you're right. Things have changed.”

I stared at my lap and nodded slowly. So, it wasn't all in my head. "I miss how we used to be, you know? Casual around each other. Effortless. Like putting on a comfy old T-shirt that's gone through the wash too many times. Now it feels like dancing in someone else's shoes."

"It's the lying, isn't it?" Xander suggested.

Those damning words.

"Maybe," I admitted. At least I hadn't been the one to say it.

Xander nodded. "I think it's probably time we called off the charade."

I ignored the pang in my chest. That was just anxiety. I needed to focus on damage control.

"Of course. I totally understand."

Mom was still out in Los Angeles. If I didn't tell her, she wouldn't realize that Xander and I had split until I wanted her to know. Even if she found out somehow, I could play the broken heart angle. And if she didn't buy *that*...well, I had options. I could support Nana. I'd take over her payments to the bookie as soon as Mom stopped. Mrs. Havishford had waited this long to sell me her house. She could wait a little longer. I could even pick up a few more shifts at work, really lean into the overtime...

"Cheeks, look—"

"No, it's okay." I shook my head and plastered on a smile. "Did you meet someone else? Is that what this is about?"

"God, no. Why would you—"

I frowned. "Is it me? Did *I* do something wrong?" Crap. That was the worst of the possibilities. What could I have done? When had things started going to shit? "If it's about me falling asleep in your bed after Macy's mating ceremony—"

"It's not that."

"Oh." I blinked, a fresh realization hitting me. "Fuck. It's the other shifter pack, isn't it? Quincy and Melony. You know

I never meant to get in the way of your pack business, Xander. Any problems I caused, I swear—”

“Cheeks.” Xander leaned across the table and took my face in his hands. God, his touch was warm. “Calm down. You’re not hearing me right. Take a breath and let me talk, will you?”

I swallowed hard. “I just want you to tell me what’s going on.”

Xander’s eyes were bright and honest. “I just don’t think we should pretend anymore.”

“Yeah, I got that,” I huffed. “But why—”

“I don’t think we should pretend anymore,” he repeated, “because I want to try this for real.”

My scowl deepened. “We *have* been trying this for real!”

“No, we haven’t. We’ve been faking it. I don’t want to fake it anymore.” His voice was soft and gentle on my ears, but his tone was firm. “So, I want to take you out. On a proper date. An actual one. No more lying.” Under his breath, he added, “Especially not to myself.” He cleared his throat. “Now, if you don’t want to—”

I drew back quickly in confusion, took a sip of my water to soothe my bone-dry throat, and promptly choked on it.

“Dammit, Cheeks.” Xander shifted to the chair next to mine and rubbed my back soothingly as I hacked up a lung into my sleeve. “If you’re gonna reject me, you don’t have to kill yourself over it.”

“I’m not rejecting you,” I rasped and coughed again. “I just...I...” My cheeks were on fire. My throat ached. “This is really unexpected.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Is it?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“Shit,” he cursed under his breath. “That’s my own fault, then. You’re telling me you haven’t felt it, too?”

“Felt what?”

“This.”

He took my hand, moving his fingers into the spaces between my own. Our hands fit together so well...but that didn't mean anything. They were just hands. Standard issue. Everyone's hands fit together like this.

I closed my eyes, searching for whatever our twined fingers was supposed to mean. I loved how warm his skin was, but that wasn't special, either. Xander was a shifter. He always ran hot, not just for me. I loved his calluses. My hands were always raw from all the washing and disinfecting I had to do at work, but compared to Xander's palms, mine felt delicate and soft.

I loved how he squeezed me and held tight when I tried to pull away.

“I noticed it that night at Macy's mating ceremony.” His voice drifted over me like a warm, gentle wind. “I was pissed as all get out, and you took my hand. It didn't do much for my temper, but it felt...well, it felt like this. That's something, isn't it?”

I opened my eyes and bit my lip, watching the way he stared at my mouth.

For a blissful moment, I thought he might pull me across the table and kiss me.

Oh.

I laughed nervously. *Xander Miller wants to take me out. On a date. A proper one.* If I could go back in time and regale fourteen-year-old Felicity with this news, she would have called me a dirty liar.

Thirty-two-year-old Felicity was still tempted to agree. Xander had been captain of the football team. Homecoming king. Salutatorian. Every girl's dream.

Come to think, he still *was* every girl's dream. Melony Houghton wanted him so bad, her father was ready to start a war over it. And she didn't even know how good he was at guessing the end of movies. Or how quick he was to show up

with ice cream and fuzzy socks when I had a rough shark week or a bad cold.

“You’re serious, then,” I breathed. “You and me. For real.”

“There you go.” He chuckled. “Thank fuck. Finally.”

“What about Meggie Temple?” I said warily. “Aren’t you afraid I’m going to run you down with my car?”

“Not if I don’t fuck this up.”

I arched a brow. “You sure you’re capable of that?”

“Losing you would fuckin’ kill me, Cheeks.”

“Are you sure *I* won’t fuck this up?” I asked. That was the more likely scenario. When it came to romance, I’d never met a man I couldn’t find a way to burn bridges with.

“You might.” Xander’s green eyes sparkled. “But I’d forgive you.”

“Generous of you.”

He smiled. “You’re easy to be generous with.”

“And if it doesn’t work out—”

“It will.”

“If it doesn’t,” I repeated. “We can still stay friends. We don’t have to stay together just to avoid losing what we already had. Right?”

“Right. We stay friends. No matter what.”

“Okay.” I looked around the restaurant. For once, no one was staring at us. “So, how do we...start?”

“How about the movies?” he suggested.

“Sounds like a good way to kick off our first argument as a couple,” I joked. The last time we’d had a movie night, we spent an hour debating whether we should watch *The Hills Have Eyes* or *Little Women* first.

“I considered that,” said Xander. “I got us two tickets to *Crimson Peak*. Horror for me, gothic romance for you. Best of both worlds.”

“That movie came out like a decade ago, didn’t it?”

“They’re showing it at the drive-in. Throwback night.”

“The drive-in?” I shivered preemptively. “Xander, it’s freezing outside!”

“I’ve got blankets in the truck.” He checked the time on his phone. “If we leave now, we can make the opening credits and pick up hot chocolate on the way.”

“We haven’t gotten our food yet,” I said, scanning for the waitress.

Xander rose from his chair. “We’ll get it to go.”

We headed to the drive-in with a brown paper bag of overpriced burgers and fries between us and two milkshakes in the cupholders. The concession stand did, in fact, have hot chocolate, but the thin, chalky kind made with boiling water and Swiss Miss.

As we watched the film and ate our food, the silence between us slipped into something more comfortable. Until the steamy scenes, anyway. I squeezed my knees together, suddenly deeply relieved that Tom Hiddleston was dark-haired in this, and Xander was so incorrigibly blond.

If Xander was moved in the same way, he didn’t show it. When it got cold, he wrapped a blanket around me. When the film’s monster showed up, he let me squeeze his hand as tight as I wanted and didn’t complain a bit. The whole ride home, he made fun of the plot’s melodrama until I laughed so hard, I nearly blew the last sips of my milkshake out my nose.

A cold sleet pounded down when we hit the interstate. The road ahead was shiny and slick. Up ahead, hazard lights flashed, along with the cherries and berries of three police cars. I grabbed Xander’s wrist as he shifted gears, staring at a semi-truck that had skidded into the guardrail. A casualty of black ice.

“Don’t worry,” Xander said, slowing down and driving true. “I’ll get us home safe.”

And he did. I'd never met a better driver in my entire life. As we passed several other wrecks on the drive back to Evergreen, my nerves faded, and I realized all the awkwardness between us had been whisked away. Only warmth remained.

This was what I wanted: just me and him, free to be ourselves again.

I'd almost forgotten it was supposed to be a date.

We arrived back at my place in high spirits, howling and giggling and quoting the film to each other with dramatic flair. As Xander pulled his truck into the parking lot of my apartment building, I hesitated to open the door.

The rain hadn't let up. It shimmered on the pavement. The puddles under the streetlights had turned to gold. Inside his truck, the heater was on full blast, creating a cocoon of delicious heat.

"I guess I should be going." I stared up the rickety wooden steps to my door, which were soaked and darkened with rain. I had no desire to leave at all.

"Guess so," Xander agreed. He was staring at my door, too. The rain pounded down like bullets, half-frozen before it hit the ground. "I'd say we should do a runner for it, but that sounds like a good way to fall on our asses."

He shrugged off his jacket and put the truck into park.

"You coming?" he asked.

"You're coming up with me?" I squeezed my knees together again as my heart began to flutter.

"Didn't think to bring an umbrella." He shook his jacket at me. "But I figure this will keep the rain off you. At least a little. Actually, stay there."

He hopped out of the truck and came around. When he jerked my door open, a rush of icy wind blustered in, rain peppering my skin like buckshot.

Xander held up his jacket, and I slipped beneath it. Ducking down, we slipped and stumbled our way across the

parking lot and up the stairs. The whole time, Xander kept me under the safety of his leather bomber, out of the rain.

By the time we got to the top of the stairs, we were laughing again. Even Xander, with his superior balance and wolfish grace, couldn't keep his footing, and I was way worse. I tripped on the landing and skidded, limbs flailing. Xander slid in behind me. I hit my front door first. A second later, he followed.

“Oof,” I exhaled as Xander's warm body shoved against my back. “I've never seen you so clumsy before.”

“No?”

Slowly, I turned to look up at him, my back against the door. I meant to thank him for such a lovely night and for getting me home safe, but as his green eyes met mine, I forgot every word I knew.

He was staring at me strangely, like he'd just seen the future. Or a ghost.

“What?” I finally asked, breathless laughter still lingering in my voice.

“You've got raindrops in your eyelashes.” He raised his hand to my face. I closed my eyes as he brushed the rain away with the faintest touch of his fingertips.

I drew a breath, then his lips were on mine. The searing, hungry heat of Xander's mouth was a stark contrast to the rain and cold. His hands clenched in my hair, tugging at my damp roots. His tongue ran across my lower lip. A question. I slipped my tongue out to meet his. An answer. Our bodies pressed together from chest to hips. I could feel every inch of him. And all those inches radiated warmth.

My mind reeled. This wasn't right. We were just friends. We had been for so long, how could this not feel wrong?

But the longer he kissed me, the more right it felt. My body knew better than my mind. It screamed for him with every fiber, craving him, needing him.

All it would have taken was a simple sentence. *Come inside. Don't leave.*

Before I could decide which sounded better, he pulled back with a growl, panting like a dog in the sun.

“Get inside.” His voice was gravel and broken glass. “Go.”

“But—”

“Go,” he said again, more forcefully this time.

I nodded, digging into my pocket for my keys. Xander took a step back, then another. His shirt was soaked. Through its fabric, every muscle of his chest was taut and flexed.

“Felicity...” he said as I went inside.

I turned to him, confused. Stunned. Horny and swimming in whiplash.

He didn't call me Felicity often. His eyes were dark and brooding, serious and sharp.

“Lock your door,” he growled.

My heart crashed hard inside my chest with every beat as I slipped through the door and did as I was told.

What the fuck? I was practically hyperventilating. Every inch of my body was gooseflesh and shivers. Every inch except my lips, which were still hot from his kiss.

What the fuck was that about?

My mind was a chaotic whirlwind of emotion and need. I was in no state to unpack what he'd meant by any of that. The kiss, the longing, the *lock your door*.

I tried to put it from my mind as I drew a bath. Hot water. A queen's ransom in bubbles. That was what I needed right now.

But even after I was undressed and in the tub, I couldn't stop thinking about him.

I slipped deeper into the bath until the bubbles were up to my chin. Luxurious warmth engulfed me, driving out any cold

lingering in my bones, but not even the steaming water could hold a candle to the throbbing heat between my thighs.

Xander's touch. Xander's scent. His kiss, so hungry and searing and sweet. Just the memory of it all made me feel like I was going to burst. My pussy pulsed as if it had its own heartbeat, and I ran my fingers over it, feeling the silky smoothness of my shaved skin beneath my palms. The slick juices between my folds clung to my fingertips, more viscous than the water.

I'd been wet before I got in the bath.

I stroked my slit, emptying my mind of all the worries that constantly lingered around the edges of my thoughts, all too eager to creep in and take hold. Instead, I thought of Xander's lips on mine, imagined his teeth on my neck, his tongue flicking over my nipple. Images flooded through me in vibrant explosions, and I allowed them to wash away everything else.

Closing my eyes, I imagined him in the bathroom doorway. He'd come back. He'd kicked down my front door and let himself in. Even now, he watched me silently, seeing with his own eyes how quickly I'd succumbed to my need for him. It was incredible I'd even had time to run the bath.

Fuck. Yes. That was what I wanted. In reality, he was probably walking up to his front door right now, wondering what the hell he'd gotten himself into tonight. But this was my fantasy. And in my fantasy, he was right here.

In my fantasy, he didn't just linger in the doorway, watching me pleasure myself. He strode across the room urgently, his desire for me too much to even take his clothes off. He took my hair in his fist, plunged his arm into the thick layer of bubbles at the bath's surface, and let me pull him in with me.

Our mouths met, our tongues dancing together as we kissed. His hands were everywhere, moving over my body like he couldn't get enough of me.

He thrust two fingers inside my pussy, and I gasped into his mouth.

“Oh, God,” I moaned, arching my hips forward instinctively. I was so blissed out, my hand didn’t even feel like my own hand anymore. It felt like his. “Like that. God, just like that.”

“Is that how you like it?” he’d say. “You like my fingers in your tight, hot cunt?”

And I would answer, “Yes. Yes, I do. Keep going...just please, give me more.”

I pumped my fingers faster in and out of me, and my breathing sped up. My cunt tightened around my digits, drawing them in further. My orgasm was fast approaching, and I moaned his name.

“Xander. Xander!”

I came hard, clenching around my fingers as waves of pleasure crashed through me.

Xander. Xander.

Oh, God.

I was in trouble.

Chapter 14

Xander

The real world returned the way it always did. If every moment I spent with Felicity was preserved in a little snow globe, life was a big, heavy hammer wielded by a destructive toddler. Once I was away from her, that hammer shattered the glass, letting the water flow out and carry me away.

At home, there were dishes to be washed, groceries to be bought, socks to match and fold. In Evergreen, the pack was still bracing for Carter's Creek's next move. And at work, like always, there were fires to put out.

I sat in the firehouse between jobs, checking my gear piece by piece. It was mechanical work, stuff I could do on auto-pilot while my mind wandered. And wander it did.

All I could think about was Felicity and how good her body had felt against mine, how perfect she'd tasted, like dark chocolate and red wine. And her lips. God, her lips. I was still reeling from how hot they'd burned. The woman was a fire hazard in her own right.

"Fuck," I cursed under my breath as I tugged my boot's shoelace so taut that it snapped.

I'd been so close to taking her. Another second of kissing her, and I would have been forcing my way into her apartment and tearing off her clothes.

If I hadn't heard the click of her door locking behind her, I would have followed her inside. Not a good look for a first date.

How had it taken me so long to realize? Felicity was what had been missing from my life, and all this time, she'd been right under my nose.

I knew the answer, of course. It was fear. Fear, and being a complete fucking idiot. For so long, I'd told myself that a woman like her would never want a man like me. She was too good, too kind, too sweet, and I was a ferocious monster, the leader of a pack of other monsters. We didn't belong together. Women like Felicity needed a man with soft hands and a softer heart. A Mr. Darcy type, like the ones in her books. I'd etched that belief into my very soul.

And little by little, ever since we started our charade, she'd worn that belief away.

Truth be told, it pissed me off. If I hadn't been such a coward, we could have been together for decades already. There wouldn't have been a succession crisis. No worries about the future of the pack's leadership. No chance for my mother to stick her nose into my love life and make a mess of things.

No long nights of stroking my cock to the thought of her, moaning her name.

All my worries had done was burn reputations, expectations, and time.

Around lunch, Brody interrupted my brooding. "Hey, man. You've got a *visitor*."

I glanced up from my gear, hoping to see Felicity standing behind him. Instead, my eyes met my mother's. She was dressed in her most severe black outfit, like she was in mourning.

"Hello, Alexander."

I took a deep breath and put my boots aside. I'd known it was only a matter of time before she wanted to talk, but I'd waited for her stubborn ass to bite the bullet and break the seal.

I took her out to lunch at The Farmer's Wife. She'd like that, I figured. Even though she and Lola Aldeman didn't get

along well, it was still the fanciest place in town. As Lola took us to our table, I caught Ma peering at the women in the surrounding booths. No doubt looking for jealous expressions.

See? Her smug smile seemed to say. My son loves me. When was the last time your sons took you to lunch?

We ordered, ate, and ignored the elephant in the room. Ma seemed to be two-stepping around it at all costs. I waited for it to sit down and crush something beneath its rear end.

“I’m sorry if my actions upset you,” she finally said, her gaze intent on the dessert menu. “Should we try the chocolate tart? Maybe Lola has improved her recipe.”

I put my menu down and sighed. “Ma, if we’re gonna talk about what happened, we’re gonna *talk*. Dessert can wait.”

“I’m not sure what there is to talk about,” she said curtly. “I understand you had a very strong reaction to the decisions I made for our family and pack. I’m sorry you felt that way. Now, I think it’s best if we go back to the way things were.”

I didn’t mean to, but I laughed. Ma looked like I’d just insulted her hairdo.

“We can’t go back to the way things were,” I explained as if I was speaking to a child.

“Why not?”

“Because the way you think things were isn’t how they were in the first place. You’re not married to the alpha anymore, Ma. Dad stepped down. I’m in charge now.” I shouldn’t have had to spell that out for her, but here we were. “Now, I can imagine how that’s been difficult on you, but it doesn’t justify your behavior. Right now, we’re dealing with things as they *are*. I run the pack. I call the shots. If you have a problem with how things are being handled, you come to me. Simple as that.”

Ma pursed her lips. “If I’d come to you about Melony Houghton, would you have given her a chance?”

“No,” I said firmly. “I was never in a place to give her a chance.”

“Because of that girl.” Ma’s voice was as scathing and bitter as scorched coffee gone cold.

“Her name is Felicity,” I reminded her, as if she’d have forgotten. “I chose her. We’re together. There’s no room for anyone else.”

Especially not Melony fucking Houghton, though I refrained from adding that. I’d insulted Melony Houghton enough already—to her face, no less. I would’ve liked to say she was a nice girl, but her actions had dissuaded me of that notion.

Melony Houghton was a bitch, plain and simple. She was no different from the girls in high school who’d taken one look at Felicity and seen nothing but a target.

Even if I were single, I would’ve rather mated with a tube sock.

Not that it was worth telling Ma any of that.

“Let’s talk about Felicity, then.” Ma pulled her napkin off her lap and dabbed at her lips. “You’re clearly infatuated with her. That’s all fine and well, but she is not your *mate*, Xander.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. She’s been getting you into trouble since you were sixteen.” Ma snorted and tossed her napkin on the table. “If she was meant to be yours, don’t you think your wolf would have noticed?”

I kept my face blank. Inside me, my wolf remained silent.

That worried me. For once, Ma was right. If Felicity was meant to be mine, my wolf would have known immediately.

“Who’s to say it hasn’t?” That was fair, I decided. My wolf and I hadn’t exactly been in sync when it came to women. “Unless you’ve learned to read minds, I don’t think you’d know how my wolf feels at all.”

“Have you had the *dream* yet?” she asked pointedly.

The dream. The fucking dream. Wolf-dream. Moon-dream. Whatever wolf shifters called it, it only meant one thing: the

dream a wolf has when they've met their true mate.

My heart took a nosedive into my gut, but I kept my face expressionless.

“What if I have?”

The lie beneath that implication was well worth it. Ma knitted her brows together and pursed her lips so tight, she looked positively constipated.

I hadn't had the dream, no. It couldn't be wished for. It couldn't be forced.

Felicity wasn't my true mate.

But Ma didn't need to know that.

“I just don't understand why an alpha would choose a *human* like that,” Ma said, switching tactics.

There it was. In her voice, in the way she said *human*.

She sounded exactly like Quincy fucking Houghton. She may as well have recorded his voice and played it back to me.

“That's enough,” I snapped as I put my scrunched napkin on the table. I'd already placed that *terrible* thought in her head: that Felicity really was my mate. As long as Ma parroted Quincy's views, I was more than happy to drive it home. *In for a penny, in for a pound*. “Felicity is a human, yes. *My* human. And I'll be claiming her as such. Understand?”

Ma's face fell. She stared at me with unguarded disappointment, like I'd just told her I was chopping off my genitals and feeding them to the local wildlife.

Ma rarely stopped at disappointment, though.

Quickly, before my very eyes, her expression shifted to unguarded rage.

“I refuse to listen to this nonsense.” She stood, raising her voice loud enough to make a scene. “You are the pack's alpha, my darling son, as you so *love* to remind me. *You* are responsible for the next generation of our dynasty. You owe our pack an heir. A *full-blooded* heir. An *alpha*. If you insist on continuing this...this *farce* with the Jordan girl, I refuse to

acknowledge it. I *certainly* won't be acknowledging her as your mate." She snatched her purse and her coat from the back of her chair with a huff. "And I think you'll be surprised how many of the others will agree."

The restaurant was deafeningly silent as she stormed out. Not a single fork clinked against its plate. All conversation had died off. A single cough from across the room broke the quiet, but only for a moment.

Every eye in the restaurant was on me.

Evergreen and its wolf pack had a long-standing, strange symbiotic relationship. We stayed out of local politics. We didn't run for mayor, we didn't sit as judges in the courthouse, and we kept ourselves separate from the local police force. In every noticeable way, we allowed the humans who lived here to go about their lives untouched by the goings-on of the pack.

But our presence here was unarguably palpable.

We owned land here—more than anyone else in the county, truth be told. The tax dollars from our enterprises funded the local schools, the free walk-in health clinic, the library, and the food bank. When a tree crashed through someone's roof during a storm, they could count on a pack member to swing by and help patch it up. Kids in Evergreen didn't end up in the foster system. If their parents were ever out of line, we arrived in the night, either to put the fear of God into them or to give their children a safe place to stay until better accommodation could be found. Hell, Brody had spent half of middle school living with my family until his dad finally got his shit together and started being the father Brody deserved.

For Evergreen, the pack meant security. In the little ways, the ones that the town's human public services often found difficult to manage, and—worst-case scenario—the larger ones as well.

In my great-grandparents' time, when packs fought for territory and humans were caught in the crossfire, the Evergreen pack kept this place safe. When I took over as alpha, I swore to continue doing the same.

That meant no matter how silently we tried to conduct our business, the townsfolk were always paying attention. Watching. Listening. Waiting with their ears to the ground, just in case we went belly-up and some other, more disreputable pack swept in.

For generations, we'd kept up the appearance of an unshakable institution. Evergreen had flourished because of it.

And now, in a single outburst, Ma had sown the first seeds of doubt. By sunset tonight, every person in The Farmer's Wife would have recounted this spat to a dozen more people. It would spread like wildfire.

Alexander Miller intends to mate with that Jordan girl, and his ma says over her dead body he will.

"Lola," I called out as I rose. She bustled over, scrambling to get her little notebook out. Worry was etched between her brows. "I'm ready for the bill now, if you don't mind. Add in a round of drinks and dessert for the entire restaurant. On me."

"Of course." She nodded quickly, then touched my arm. "Everything okay?"

"It'll be fine." I forced a smile, making sure it reached my eyes. "You know how mothers can be. It's never easy to watch your kids grow up."

Much to my relief, Lola laughed. "I know that all too well. Don't you worry, though. Your mother will come around eventually." She glanced around, then leaned in, narrowing her eyes. "And between you and me, that Felicity Jordan is a catch. If your mother can't appreciate that, she's got her head even further up her ass than I thought."

* * *

I returned to work in a black mood. Wishing for a fire was ethically barren and pure bad luck, but sitting around the firehouse waiting for one to start was nearly unbearable. I replaced my boot laces, finished cleaning my gear, then moved on to Brody's—much to his delight.

After lunch with Ma, I needed something to do with my hands. Something other than curling them into fists and putting fresh holes in the firehouse's walls.

Near the end of my shift, I texted Felicity. Thinking about her was the only thing holding me together—and more importantly, I probably needed to give her a heads-up about what had gone down at *The Farmer's Wife*.

As if dragging her through a fake relationship just to spring my desire for a real one hadn't been bad enough already...today, my mother had essentially publicly announced that I'd be claiming Felicity as my mate.

I should've texted her the second I left the restaurant. At this point, I'd be lucky if the rumor hadn't already circulated to Evergreen Hills.

Dinner tonight? I cook a mean frozen pizza.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the phone as I waited for an answer. A few minutes later, it arrived.

Frozen pizza? How tempting! But I'm already booked in with reservations at Nana Jordan's.

I frowned. Nana Jordan had an active social life in Evergreen. How many of her friends had already heard the big news and passed it along to her?

Of all the ways Felicity could find out how serious I was willing to go with our relationship, hearing it as gossip from her grandmother was among the worst.

When my phone buzzed again with a follow-up text, I nearly dropped it in my urgency to read what else she'd written.

You can come if you want. Nana Jordan misses you.

For the first time all day, the storm clouds of my mood broke, and I smiled.

Okay. What should I bring? What time?

7 tonight. Just bring yourself :)

I spent the rest of the day pulling out my phone and staring at that smiley face. I'd seen too few smiling faces today, apparently. Felicity's perked me up significantly, even if it was only digital.

Just as I was about to head home to shower and get ready for dinner, I felt my phone buzzing in my pocket.

My heart soared, then fell when I saw it wasn't Felicity calling.

It was Dad. Dad, who never made a phone call if he could help it. Dad, who only called when something urgent and dire was happening.

"I'm at Tenth and Main," he told me. "Can you get over here?"

"What's happening?" I recognized the address. He was at Evergreen Savings Bank, a pack-owned property. "We expecting a fight?"

"No fight," Dad assured me. "But you'll want to see this."

I let the guys know I was taking off for the night, then played chicken with the speed limit all the way to the bank. Every member of the pack did business at Evergreen Savings, as did more than half the town. That meant I could probably rule out an attempted robbery. No one in their right mind would be daft enough to try it, lest they ended up with an entire pack of wolves barking down their door.

It was nearing five, so the bank had been closed for a couple of hours. That meant spats between the tellers likely weren't the problem, either. Unless Polly Burnett had decided it was wine o'clock and crashed into the ATM again, I couldn't imagine what the trouble could be.

As I pulled into the bank parking lot, my questions were answered immediately.

Dad had been right. I needed to see it to believe it.

"Hey, kid." Dad stood on the sidewalk, hands tucked in his pockets and a scowl set deep in his brow. He nodded to the

double-door entrance as I approached. “Here to admire the handiwork?”

“Yeah, looks like we’ve got a regular Jackson Pollock on our hands,” I said through gritted teeth as I stared at the sloppy red letters painted across the bank’s doors, bright and huge for the whole world to see. “Who told you about this?”

And why didn’t they call me first? As if the fact that someone had defaced pack property wasn’t enough—they’d told Dad about it, not me.

Had Ma been right? Was the pack already starting to turn against me? She’d only had since lunch to sow the seeds of discontent against me...but perhaps a few hours was all she needed.

“Don’t worry. I was driving by and spotted it.” He walked to the doors and slid the tip of his finger through a streak of bright red paint. “See? Still fresh. Wouldn’t be surprised if I was the first one to notice.”

“The first, maybe,” I agreed, my worries settling a little. But not much. “You won’t be the last, though.”

The longer this was up, the more people would see it. I had to hand it to the vandals—they knew how to make an impression.

“That’s what I figured. I’ve got some cleaning supplies in the truck,” Dad said. “Wanna help me mop it up?”

I nodded and followed him to his truck. We didn’t discuss who might have done this. Didn’t have to. The red paint smeared across the bank’s entrance could only be the work of one person, as far as I was concerned.

Or rather, one pack.

I was going to be late for dinner at Nana Jordan’s. I cast a glance over my shoulder. The sloppy letters had the stink of Quincy Houghton and the Carter’s Creek wolves written all over them.

Miller clan = Dead.

And underneath, in smaller letters:

This is only the beginning.

Chapter 15

Felicity

Nana's house smelled like fresh baked sourdough, parmesan meatballs, and red sauce simmering on the stove. For dessert, we had a tiramisu setting in the fridge: store-bought lady fingers soaked in sweet dark roast, a beautiful snow of cocoa powder covering the peaks of whipped cream on top.

I'd missed this. Between my work schedule and Nana's flourishing social life, we hadn't found time for this since the last time Mom had been in town. Tonight was long overdue.

"So, you and Xander," Nana finally popped the question that we'd both been tiptoeing around ever since I showed up on her doorstep this morning. "That for real?"

She didn't look up from the Caesar salad dressing she was mixing in her biggest bowl. I listened to the fork thump against the sides of the bowl, wondering if I should tell her—and if so, how much.

"It wasn't real at first," I admitted. Nana wasn't one to judge—at least, not where I was concerned. "We were trying to pull a fast one—on both our mothers, actually—but..."

Nana cackled. "Oh, I know what that *but* means. You two have been circling each other like sharks in the water for so many years. Maybe I ought to thank your mother. She finally gave you incentive to get on with it."

"We haven't been circling each other!" I turned and flicked soapy water at her from the dishes I was washing in the sink. "We've just been...getting to know each other, I guess. For a really long time."

“Does he make you happy?” Nana asked.

I found myself smiling as I scrubbed a pan clean. “He does. This is the happiest I’ve been in a long time.”

“Then what does it matter how long it took?” Nana clucked her tongue at me. “Love is love.”

“I don’t know about that yet. We’ve only been on one date,” I confessed. I’d loved Xander forever, it felt like...but that was the love that stemmed from friendship. Not the same as romantic love. I had to be careful not to mistake the recent waves of lust I’d been feeling for boyfriend-girlfriend love, too, come to think. “But I’ve invited him to eat with us tonight, if that’s okay.”

“Plenty of food to go around. And I think...” Nana paused, and I glanced at her over my shoulder. She was smirking wickedly. “We might even be able to make this a little fun.”

“You better not torture him, Nana. If you scare him away —”

“Then he’s not worth keeping around, anyway,” Nana insisted. “A good man can take a little ribbing from a little old woman. Let’s see what the boy is made of, I say.”

I heard my phone ringing from my coat pocket in the other room. It was my standard ringtone—which meant it couldn’t be Xander.

“Be nice,” I warned her, drying my hands.

Anxiously, I retrieved my phone. If work needed me to come in, I probably shouldn’t say no, given how understaffed we were. But this was my first day off in a week, and if I left now, Xander would be having dinner with Nana alone. Alone and entirely at her mischievous mercy.

When I saw the name on the caller ID, I bit back a groan.

“Hey, Mom. How’s L.A.?”

“Exactly as I left it, I imagine.” Mom’s tone was dry and curt. “Thomas and I had business in Boston. We thought we’d swing by. That little café you like so much...what was it called again? The Wet Rhinoceros?”

“The Wily Elephant is a bar, Mom. And not the kind you or Thomas would like.” What was she doing on the east coast again so soon? Normally, she only visited twice a year—once, just in time to miss Christmas, and again, just in time to miss Memorial Day. “I’m at Nana’s right now, anyway. We’re having dinner.” I should have added, *if you want to join us*, but there was no need. Invitations were for people who hadn’t already RSVP’d, and Mom had already announced their imminent arrival.

“We’ll be there in an hour, then. Be a dear and have some red wine waiting for us. Nothing cheap or with feet on the label.”

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that.” Would she even notice if I switched the label on a bottle of Barefoot cabernet?

“Will Alexander be dining with us as well?” Mom asked.

I refrained from sighing. “Yeah. Of course he will.”

We’d be putting on another performance tonight, it seemed.

Only this time, it wouldn’t be fake. Xander would be meeting Mom and Thomas as my boyfriend for real.

I was on my way back into the kitchen to tell Nana we’d be setting two more plates when my phone rang again. This time, it was “I’m on Fire”—Xander’s ringtone.

“Hey, Cheeks. Bad news.”

“That’s the theme of the night, isn’t it?” I grumbled. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about me. Just have some pack business to deal with. I’ll be a little late. Give Nana my apologies and save me a plate?”

“Of course,” I said, relieved. A little late wouldn’t hurt. We could get Mom and Thomas settled in before he arrived, so he’d be spared their grand entrance. With the way Mom and Nana had been getting along lately, Nana might even spare him her jabs. “You’re sure you’re okay, though?”

“I will be when I get there. You need me to bring anything?”

“Just bring yourself.” I pursed my lips, remembering Mom’s request. “Actually, can you grab a bottle of wine? Red.” I smirked. “Make it cheap.”

“You got it, Cheeks. Love you.”

Love you. He meant it, I knew. Just not in any way I needed to alert the authorities about.

“Love you, too.”

* * *

Nana didn’t take the news of Mom and Thomas’s impending arrival well. I could hardly blame her. The last time they were here, they’d made it clear how they saw Nana. At best, she was a bargaining chip they could use to manipulate me. At worst, she was a financial burden Mom didn’t want to bear.

“I’m just glad your wolf man is coming.” Nana opened a small porcelain box on one of the living room bookshelves, withdrawing a small brass key. “I’ve been failing for years at putting the fear of God in your mother. Maybe if he gets growly enough, he’ll succeed.”

“It’s not right, how she treats you. You’re her mother. You raised her.”

“Not well enough. Clearly.” Nana moved to the China hutch and slipped the key into its lock. “Your mother’s a tricky character, sweetie. I know I made mistakes with her. Every mother screws up their kids somehow, you know. All you can do is try your hardest and hope for the best. Mine wasn’t good enough.”

“That’s not fair to you,” I insisted. “If you tried your hardest—”

“Your mother always wanted more.” Nana reached behind a towering stack of gold-rimmed plates and pulled out a small

bottle of amber liquid. She unscrewed the top with a twinkle in her eyes. “Nip for courage? I’m certainly gonna need it.”

“Is this moonshine, Nana?” I scanned the bottle for a label but didn’t find one.

“I’ll keep your secrets if you keep mine.” She winked, took a quick swig, then handed me the bottle.

Chuckling, I took a swig.

Mom and Thomas arrived just as we finished setting the table. As always, there was a grand entrance. Lots of cheek-kissing. Lots of hugging. Lots of empty niceties to cover up all the little jabs my mother made, all of which we pretended not to hear.

“Where’s your boyfriend, Felicity?” Mom asked as she and Thomas sat down. She took the seat at the head of the table—no surprise. “I thought we might at least catch a glimpse of him tonight.”

“This is that Miller boy, isn’t it?” Thomas sat up a little straighter, which seemed impossible. “I’ve heard fascinating things about his family here in Evergreen.”

“Yes, the Millers are locally famous,” I informed him. “Xander’s wrapping up some pack business. He’ll be here soon.”

As the minutes stretched into a half-hour, Nana and I agreed that we should start without Xander. His presence was sorely missed. We only made it a few bites into the meal before Mom showed her hand.

“Have you ever thought about selling this place?” she asked Nana. “I’m sure Thomas could help get you an excellent price.”

Nana snorted. “Why the hell would I go and do that?”

“Why not?” Mom asked.

Nana stroked her chin. “I live here, for one thing.”

“You don’t have to.” Mom waved her hand over the table like she was extending an olive branch. “Thomas and I simply

adore you. You're more than welcome to move in with us."

"Ha!" Nana coughed into her napkin, laughing heartily—until she realized that Mom and Thomas weren't joining her. "Shit. You're serious. No thanks. I'll manage here on my own just fine."

"You're getting up in years," Mom said. "You need people around you to take care of you. With any luck, Felicity will be settling down soon, and with your health the way it is..."

"I could run laps around you and Mr. Moneybags there if I was so inclined." Nana narrowed her eyes. "I could do it, and still have the energy to do Jazzercise with the gals after."

Mom scowled. "Mother, you are seventy-two years old—"

"Seventy-three, actually," Nana corrected. "Still fresh as a daisy. This house has good bones, and so do I. You'll sell this house over my dead body—and I do mean that literally, my dear."

"You know, when my own dear mother reached your age —" Thomas began.

Nana cut him off with another harsh laugh. "What, back in the time of Charlemagne?"

"I'm only trying to help," Thomas said weakly, staring at his lap. At the head of the table, Mom's cheeks were reddening with rage.

"This is a family matter, Thomas." I kept my tone as polite and understanding as I could. "If we want your input, we'll ask."

Under the table, the pointy toe of Mom's heel struck out at me.

"You're being rude," she hissed.

"I'm being honest." I winced, reaching down to rub the bruise on my shin. "Nana's not some geriatric burden, Mom. You shouldn't treat her like one. Besides, you said if I started taking my love life seriously, you'd drop all this nonsense. Where's this coming from?"

Mom stared at me. It lasted for long enough that I recognized the look in her eyes for what it was: guilt.

“Thomas has been looking over my finances lately.” Mom fanned herself, then adjusted her silverware, avoiding my eyes. Her voice was high and thin. “He’s very clever about that sort of thing. Quite frankly, while Nana may be healthy in body, funding her lifestyle isn’t healthy for my bank account.”

“Oh, shucks,” Nana deadpanned. “Guess I’ll have to cut the caviar budget.”

“You don’t fund Nana’s lifestyle,” I said, staring Mom down firmly. I was well acquainted with how she liked to twist her so-called sufferings. If I didn’t shut this down, she’d be claiming that she’d singlehandedly kept this family afloat for years by the time we started dessert. “She pays her own way, and you know it. All you cover is Grandpa’s debts—”

“To a bookie he wouldn’t have gone running to if Mother had done a better job of keeping him occupied at home,” Mom snapped. “Honesty, Mother, would it really have hurt to spread your legs for your husband from time to time if it meant saving us so much pain?”

Nana blinked, raising her eyebrows, but she said nothing.

No one said anything.

The temperature of the room had frozen over, but my blood was boiling. Every inch of my skin prickled, itched, and burned.

“She is your *mother*.” I grabbed the edge of the table to keep my hands from shaking. “She raised you. You have no right to talk to her like that, and you know it. What is *wrong* with you?”

“Do you have any idea how mortifying it is that my father gambled his life away? That he hid it from all of us? None of us had a clue until the funeral. In front of all my high-school friends, my old sweethearts—everyone who always said I would amount to *nothing*—I had to watch a man in a gold chain and a cabbie hat approach my mother and inform her that my father owed him a small fortune. Do you understand

the *shame* I have to endure every month when I send off the money to keep him from showing up here and breaking my mother's kneecaps?" Mom kept her eyes on her plate. "This house is worth money. Plenty of it. If we sell it for profit, we can pay off the remainder of the debts in a lump sum and end our relationship with that low-life parasite for good."

"And where would Nana live, then?" I asked. "Because she's not going to a nursing home. I won't let you send her away."

"I suspected you'd say that," Mom said curtly. "So Thomas and I have graciously come up with a new plan. It's simple, really. She'll move in with us."

"You'd regret it," Nana said as she rose. "If you think I'm a burden now, imagine what a nightmare I'll be once I'm living with you. I hope your boilers can work wonders, Tommy-boy." She rounded the table, clapping his shoulder and squeezing it tight. She leaned in close to whisper in his ear. "I like my showers how I like my men: long, hot, and inconvenient. *And* I like to air-dry."

The gleam in her eyes was wicked and fierce. In that moment, I had no doubt: if Nana had to move in with Mom and Thomas, she'd be walking around with her fuzzy pink bathrobe wide open every single day, not a lick of clothing underneath.

And she'd do it with a smile.

"How *dare* you—"

Conversation dissolved into name-calling. Mom doubled down, and Nana doubled down harder. I might have felt sorry for Thomas, who repeatedly tried and failed to get a word in, except that Mom and Nana only shouted louder every time he opened his mouth.

"You ungrateful old witch—"

"—preening, gold-digging sycophant—"

"At least I can *get* a man! At least I'm not old and pathetic and *alone!*"

“Oh, you can get a man, alright. Different man every week, starting with Felicity’s father—”

“Am I interrupting something?” Xander asked from the doorway, just as Nana began to twist the knife. “Sorry. Let myself in.” He held up a bottle of Barefoot pinot noir. “I brought wine.”

“Of course you did, Xander, you darling man.” Mom tugged at the hem of her blouse to straighten it. She sucked in her stomach, puffed out her chest, and plastered on a smile. If he hadn’t walked in when he did, he would have never known she had been screaming at Nana mere seconds before. “Goodness. You’re looking *very* handsome. You’ve grown into quite the strapping young man.”

My stomach churned as Mom batted her lashes at Xander. *Ew*. But if Thomas noticed that my mother was flirting with my boyfriend right in front of us, it didn’t look like he cared.

“You’re Alexander Miller?” Thomas rose, offering Xander his hand. “Thomas Spruth. I’ve heard fine things about you and your family. Good breeding. Excellent business sense.”

Xander stared at Thomas’s hand but didn’t shake it. “That so?”

“You know, if you’re ever in the market for a financial advisor...”

“The pack manages its own finances.” He looked away from Thomas, leaving him hanging. “What’s going on?”

“Mother was just in the process of throwing us out,” Mom huffed.

“I see.” Xander studied Nana’s face, then mine. I knew that look well. He was assessing the situation, all the perspectives so he could make a call. He turned back to Mom and Thomas, still expressionless. “You all forget where the door is, then?”

“What?” Mom gaped. “Excuse me, Alexander, but I’m not sure you understand—”

“You know, in the pack, when someone welcomes us into their home, we consider that a sacred act.” Xander spoke

slowly and levelly. He might have been giving a political speech. “Most shifters are territorial, see. Allowing someone else into your space takes a lot of trust, good faith...good manners.” He leveled a hard look at Thomas and my mother. “Now, being asked to leave someone’s home—their territory, if you follow me—usually means you’ve overstayed your welcome. At that point, you can make yourself scarce of your own accord...or they’ll make you scarce.” Politely, he smiled. “Guess which one has the better survival rates?”

“Are you *threatening* us?” Mom clutched her chest and stumbled backward. “Thomas—”

“It was a delight to meet you, Mr. Miller.” Thomas took my mother’s hand and pulled her toward the door. “We really must be going now, but should you ever find yourself in need of my services—” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a white rectangle of stiff paper, which he offered to Xander. “My card.”

“*Thomas!*”

“Come on,” Thomas urged her. “We need to leave. Before he changes his mind.”

“I might actually come to like you, Thomas,” Nana called after them as they fled. “That’s the first thing of any sense either of you have said all night.”

Xander waited for the front door to slam shut before he spoke again.

“I heard Nana’s famous meatballs were on the menu. We still eating?”

“Depends.” Nana looked him up and down. “You hungry?”

“Starving,” Xander confessed, and Nana grinned.

Dinner was, miraculously, pleasant in the end. Xander cracked jokes like Nana’s life depended on it. It worked. An evening that would have typically been spent keeping Nana and my mother from ripping out each other’s throats had ended up filled with delicious food and laughter.

I owed it all to Xander.

“You’re good,” I told him as we headed out to our cars.
“Too good, maybe.”

“Too good?” He chuckled. “Is there such a thing?”

“Maybe not. I can’t believe you swung tonight back around.”

“Wasn’t hard. Your Nana’s fun to be around.” He nudged me with his elbow. “So are you.”

“Are we gonna talk about the business you had to take care of earlier?” I asked, lingering at my car door. Dinner was over, but I wasn’t ready to go home. “Or is that, like, a pack secret?”

“We can talk later. I need to do something first.” Xander glanced at his truck. “Do you want to come on a run with me?”

I raised my eyebrows, surprised. It’d been a long time since I’d gone out to run with Xander. When we were teenagers, I’d accompanied him a time or two, but never since.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Let’s run.”

Chapter 16

Xander

Pine needles, damp and sweetly rotting in the dead grass. Earthworms, slowly emerging from the thawing dirt. Woodsmoke fire in the distance, five miles away or so. I was tempted to go check it out. If it was lit outside, somewhere sheltered from the rain and snow, the firehouse was liable to get a call about it.

Instead, I circled back toward where I'd left Felicity, senses singing. Everything was better, stronger, clearer when I let my wolf out. Birds sang sweeter, and the cold tasted crisper, like biting into a tart apple. Even my human problems seemed more surmountable in this state. Easily solved. Effortless. Not worth worrying about.

And especially, more than anything, my draw to Felicity was more than intense. She was still out of sight, but I could *feel* her. She called out to me without saying a word, glowing in my mind's eye like a beacon in the night.

God, I wished she could run with me like this. It was a cruel twist of genetics and fate that she couldn't shift. To have her with me right now would have made everything perfect.

I wanted her to see what I saw through my lupine eyes, taste what I tasted, smell what I smelled. I wanted her to know how it felt, exchanging skin for fur and having all the solutions to your worries laid out like surgical instruments on a table, easily utilized, cleaned, and packed away.

Still, I liked having her near. I always had. All these years, I'd been doing this without her when I should have brought

her with me every time.

Up ahead, she came into sight, and something joyful leaped into my heart. My tail wagged as I bounded forward, rushing to her.

“Whoa! Hey!” She giggled, holding her hands up and retreating as I failed to slow down.

I jumped anyway, placing my paws on her chest and tackling her to the ground. She laughed even harder as I nudged her neck with my nose and licked her face.

“*Down*, boy!” she ordered through her giggles. “Ugh, you’re getting slobber all over me.”

I panted, gave her cheek one more lick for good measure, then relented. As I sat back, she rose to her knees and ruffled my fur, scratching at that sweet spot behind my ears that made my back leg thump.

Everything else that had happened today melted away, like the snow in the rain.

“Good boy,” she praised me, and I barked in indignation.

I wasn’t a boy, I was a man—well, a wolf. Something in between.

She kept her back to me as I shifted.

“Here. Your clothes.” She grabbed them from the hood of my truck and walked backward toward me, holding them out behind her.

I grinned. “Cute. As if you’ve never seen me naked before.”

“It’s different now,” she insisted. “Just...get dressed. I’m freezing.”

I grabbed my clothes. She’d folded them while I was out running. That was cute, too.

“Okay, okay. You can look now,” I informed her once I was fully dressed again. “Come on. Let’s get you somewhere warm.”

* * *

I took her to the ridge out behind my house, wrapped up in a blanket from the truck and tucked under my arm. We sat down on another blanket, legs dangling over the ledge. Below, all of Evergreen spread out before us, twinkling like Christmas lights tangled in the waning snow.

“Feeling better?” she asked, kicking her feet gently. Her boots were so tiny. Delicate. Mine looked monstrous in comparison.

“Much, yeah. Sorry about that.” I hadn’t told her why I’d needed the run. Just that I had to do it. To her credit, she hadn’t pried. That made her a rarity in my life.

When you lived surrounded by wolves, you got used to everyone sticking their noses where they didn’t belong.

“You know, I’ve been wondering,” I said.

“Yeah? About what?”

“When I showed up to your grandmother’s place earlier, Nana Jordan was ripping into your mother about your father.”

“Oh.” She scoffed. “Yeah, we don’t mention him often, but when we do...it’s usually not a good sign.”

“You’ve never talked to me about him.” It was strange, now that I thought about it. After so many years of knowing her, I’d figured we knew everything about each other. But when it came to her father...it had just never come up.

She shrugged. “There’s not much to talk about. I never met the guy. It’s hard to describe a blank space. His name isn’t even on my birth certificate.”

“Seriously? Is that legal?”

“Must be. You want the story?”

I smiled down at her. “If you’re offering.”

“Well, as far as I can tell, it’s like this,” she said. “Mom had a one-night stand with a stranger, back before she figured

out how to milk millionaires for their cash. Nana's always suspected that my father had money, which was why Mom decided to keep me...but if he does, she never managed to get a dime out of him. She never mentions him, either. Not even his name." She laughed humorlessly, staring down at her lap. "I'm not even sure if he's alive or dead."

"I'm so sorry, Cheeks. That's—"

"No, don't." She shoved me gently. "Spare me your pity, Alexander Miller. If he's anything like my mother, I'm better off with him out of the picture. Imagine if there were *two* of her."

I snorted. "I'd rather not. Still..."

"Save it. Please. You owe me, remember?"

"Do I?"

"You were awfully late to our dinner date tonight."

"Ah. Yeah, I was. My evening didn't go according to plan."

"Don't tell me." She narrowed her eyes and stroked her chin like a cartoon villain. "Your mother showed up unannounced for dinner, too."

"Lunch, actually," I confessed. "We had a bit of a...public tiff. Well, Ma was tiffing. I mostly just listened and waited for her to storm off."

"What about?"

I winced. "You."

"Ah. I see. Funny, isn't it?"

"Not sure how you figure that, Cheeks."

"We both thought that faking a relationship would solve all our problems. Only, my mother's just using us being together as justification for booting Nana out of her home, and your mother hates me—"

"She doesn't hate you." She couldn't. There was nothing to hate.

“She doesn’t like me. At least, not when it comes to you. Close enough.” Her smile was tight-lipped. “Meanwhile, we’ve decided that this isn’t fake anymore. Hoisted by our own well-meaning petard.”

“Yeah, can’t argue with you there.”

We sat in silence for a little while, sharing warmth and listening to the wind.

“So, what happened tonight, then?” she asked. “You said your mom showed up at lunch. What kept you from making dinner on time?”

“I guess that’s Ma’s fault, too, in a way.” I gritted my teeth. I would have liked to keep her out of pack business, but there was no harm in knowledge, I supposed. She would find out eventually. “Someone vandalized Evergreen Savings Bank. Dad saw it just as I was getting ready to leave work.”

“Do you think Quincy and the Carter’s Creek pack were behind it?”

“Can’t think of anyone else who has it out for us.”

“What’s that mean for...you know.” She twisted, turning to face me. “Us?”

I leaned toward her, cupping her cold, pink cheek in my warm, rough hand. “You’ve always been an important part of my life,” I said, my eyes locked on hers. They were so gorgeously hazel, like a wild forest. Greens swirled with browns into such an undefinable color, someone had to go and make up a new word for it.

“But?” she asked expectantly.

I shook my head. “But nothing. You get more important every minute I know you. I’m a stubborn asshole, Cheeks, what can I say? I love you, and I’m not letting you go. No matter what.”

“You love me like a friend,” she corrected.

I frowned. “You *are* my friend.”

She blinked. Her eyelashes were so long. From a distance, they always looked black to me, but up close like this, I could tell they were the same deep, rich brown as her hair.

“You gonna kiss me as a friend?” she asked.

I licked my lips, leaning closer. “I’m gonna kiss you. The rest, you can work out for yourself.”

I pressed my lips to hers, gentle as a warm breath. Her mouth was soft and inviting, sending desire surging through me. Demanding. Imperative. When she moaned against my lips, it only heightened.

My heart pounded so hard, I could feel it in my ears.

I want to do this forever, I thought, relishing her sweet taste.

My wolf added, *I want to do a hell of a lot more.*

* * *

We walked back to my place, our fingers twined together.

“I guess I should get home,” Felicity said as we approached her car.

“You have work tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow night,” she confirmed. “Roger’s been screwing around with our schedules a lot lately. I think he’s trying crack some hare-brained formula, figure out the perfect orientation for the RNs so he can avoid hiring new ones.” She laughed bitterly. “If I head out now, I’ve got just enough time to catch up on some sleep before I clock in and start hemorrhaging energy all over again.”

I squeezed her hand. We were at the car now, but I didn’t want to let go.

“It’s a long drive home, you know.”

She snorted. “Ten whole minutes.”

“And it’s late.” I turned my face up to the crystal-clear skies. “Looks like a storm might even sweep in.”

“The streets of Evergreen are awfully dangerous at night, too,” she added slowly. Her eyes narrowed, sparkling.

“Terribly,” I agreed. “Plus...I don’t know if you’ve heard, but I bought a terrible bottle of wine tonight. We never got the chance to drink it.”

“Mm. True.” She glanced at my front door. “It’d be a shame to let it sit on your shelf, collecting dust.”

I grinned. “I swear, sometimes it’s like you’re reading my mind.”

Inside, I cracked open the wine while Felicity scoured my Netflix for a movie.

“I don’t know how they do it,” she grumbled, glaring at the television screen. She was snuggled so deeply in her blanket, only her eyes were visible. “I swear, they’ve got four billion films on this platform, and there’s absolutely nothing to watch.”

“We’ll find something.” I offered her one of the wine glasses. From somewhere within her blanket cocoon, her hand emerged to take it.

“No slasher movies,” she warned me.

“No slasher movies,” I promised, sitting next to her. Graciously, she admitted me into her makeshift blanket fort.

In the end, we turned on *Shaun of the Dead*. It was a generous concession on her part since the romance elements were pretty thin.

Maybe that was why she ended up falling asleep in my arms.

I caught her wine glass just before it slipped from her fingers. With some careful maneuvering, I got it onto the coffee table without spilling the last dregs.

Despite all the blood splattering happening on the screen, Felicity’s face was peaceful. I found myself transfixed by it:

her serenity, her beauty, how entirely relaxed she was.

I brushed my fingers down the curve of her cheek. God, she was pretty. I'd been staring at this face for so many years, I should have had every feature memorized. The fact that I didn't left me feeling like I'd taken them for granted. Now, up close as she slept, it was like I was seeing her face again for the first time. The elegance of her bone structure, the little scar on her temple, the way the tails of her eyebrows flared out at the tips.

I wanted to catalog her every feature. Set it all to memory: every freckle, every beauty mark.

Her eyes fluttered open before I was ready to stop staring. Her hazels found my greens.

“What?” she breathed, smiling sleepily.

“Sorry.” I forced myself to look anywhere else in the room. It shouldn't have been so hard.

“Sorry for what?”

“Waking you up.” I smiled. “I almost forgot how cute you are when you sleep.”

“Not as cute as I am when I'm awake, I hope.”

My gaze drifted back to her. She was like a goddamn magnet, always pulling me back, drawing me in.

“Fuck,” I swore.

I didn't want to lose her. But some things—like magnets, pretty pink-cheeked women, and the call of the moon—

Some things were forces too powerful to be denied.

“What?” she asked, her brow crinkling.

“I'm just thinking.”

“And what are you thinking?”

She moved against me, and my heart began to thunder. It was purely by accident. Must have been. But accidentally or not, she brushed up against my cock as she did it, sending it leaping to attention.

“If I don’t get your clothes off in the next minute, my heart might explode.”

“Well...” She reached under the blankets. When her hand emerged again, she wagged a sock in front of my face. “We can’t have that, can we?”

I tore the blanket off her and tossed it across the room. It hit the wall behind us before falling to the floor. She swung a leg over my lap, straddling me with a sleepy urgency. Her fingers fumbled into the waistband of my jeans, tugging me closer to her.

I buried my face in her neck, and her breath hitched. I could feel her heart quickening. It only stoked the need inside me.

She released my jeans and caught the hem of her shirt. With a grunt of annoyance, she pulled it up over her head. Her bra was peach, edged in pale blue lace. Felicity leaned forward as she fumbled with the clasp, pushing her breasts into my face.

“Fuck,” I swore again. My cock throbbed against my thigh, desperate to be released from the confines of my jeans.

This was Felicity. My best friend. Some days, it felt like she was my only friend.

It didn’t matter how bad I wanted her. I needed to be sure this wasn’t something she’d come to regret.

“If you don’t want this—” I stammered in disbelief.

“Oh my god, shut *up*,” she shot back.

I took her hair into my fist, forcing her to look at me. To *really* look at me. To see me, see exactly how serious I was right now.

“If you don’t want this,” I repeated, “all you need to do is say so. But say it now.” I shook my head, unable to take my eyes off her. Unable to so much as *blink*. “If I see another inch of you, I don’t know that I’ll be able to stop myself.”

Her bra dropped onto my lap. “Would you say that’s about an inch?”

I swallowed hard. “That’s a safe estimate.”

I pulled her mouth to mine. The taste of cheap wine was made delectable by her lips. Nothing mattered anymore. Nothing beyond her hands on my body, her spine beneath my palm, my fingers in her hair. A fire burned inside me, the flames quickly leaping out of control.

More importantly, inside me was a wolf who wanted nothing more than to claim Felicity Jordan as mine, and mine alone.

“More,” she panted as I broke the kiss. “Please.”

“If we do this—” I began to warn her.

She shoved a finger against my lips. “If you stop now, I’m going to fucking murder you.”

I stared up at her in awe. I was a man who very much enjoyed living.

Especially if living meant having *her*.

I trailed kisses up and down her body, worshipping every inch of her. She was the kind of woman who deserved to be worshipped. *Had* to be worshipped. She was a goddess, here on my lap, in the flesh.

I palmed her breasts and kissed her nipples. She moaned deeply as my tongue roamed over her sensitive flesh, teasing them to stiff peaks. My cock twitched with every sound she made, every taste of her, every sensual buck of her hips.

I needed more of her. More, and *now*.

I lowered her onto the couch and tore at the rest of her clothes, pausing only to remove my shirt. She spread her legs for me eagerly as I resumed kissing her body. The scent of her bloomed all around—jasmine and vanilla and musk.

It was too inviting, and I couldn’t resist it any longer; I pulled her panties aside and dived between her thighs, lapping at her pussy with ravenous energy.

“Oh!” Her hands ran over my shoulders, nails digging into my skin. Sharp bursts of delicious pain blossomed across my

back. “Xander, oh, fuck—”

I sucked at her clit while she moaned beneath me, grinding her hips in shuddering circles. As I lashed against her swollen bud with my tongue, I took her breasts in my hands and teased her nipples. Her hips bucked harder against me, and she twisted her fingers into my hair, forcing my mouth down and pulling my head up all at once.

“I need you,” she rasped. “More of you. Fuck me, Xander. Please?”

Her voice was angelic, the greatest temptation I’d ever known. My cock was so hard, it hurt. I wanted to plunge inside her, fuck her senseless until she screamed my name and begged for mercy.

“Please,” she said again, more urgently this time.

I undid my belt and shoved my jeans down. My cock stood at attention, ready and eager to be surrounded by her heat.

Condom. I needed a condom *now*.

I shoved my hand through the pocket of my half-removed jeans. I was searching for the little foil packet, the one that only a madman or a fool would have forgotten tonight.

My fingertips only found the bottom of the pocket.

“Fuck,” I growled against her heat. “No condom.”

“I don’t care,” she whined—*temptress*—but it was safe to say that was her clit talking.

I turned my head and dragged my teeth against the delicate skin of her inner thigh.

“You’ll care in the morning,” I assured her, and though she pouted, it was the sexiest pout I’d ever seen. My cock twitched again, more insistent.

I closed my fist around it and stroked as I moved my other hand between her thighs again.

Relishing her wetness, I pumped two fingers into her. Her pussy tightened, squeezing my fingers with slick heat. I worked them in and out of her in time with each pump of my

fist around my cock, doling out kisses and licks to her clit with an artist's passion. Judging by the sweet chorus of sounds that followed, I could tell her orgasm was coming on fast.

She bent her knees, pushing her ass against the couch cushions beneath her.

“Oh God...” She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut tight. “Please! Please f-fuck me...”

I smiled and kept going. I loved hearing her beg for it, but now that I had her at my mercy, I wasn't stopping until her clit spasmed against my tongue.

My fingers plunged in and out of her. My tongue lapped hungrily, teasing pleasure out of her like I was born for nothing else. My cock was hot steel in my hand, so close to an orgasm of my own that the pleasure panged almost painfully in my core. I kept my gaze on her face, on the way her expression contorted as she went wild under me. She was so beautiful, so sexy, her body so responsive to mine.

Her head lolled back against the arm of the couch. Her toes curled. Her fingers dug into my scalp, and her hips jerked erratically, as if she'd become a woman possessed. Finally, she clenched tight around my fingers. Her voice broke as she moaned, quivering with release.

Fuck. My orgasm burst out of me like buckshot, soaking my fingers and the back of her thigh. For a heady moment, the world became an ocean. I came so hard, my ears popped. The only sounds that existed were her mewls of pleasure, my grunting, and the whooshing of an invisible tide.

Still, I lapped at her clit, diligently pumping my fingers in and out of her. I didn't stop until she made me. She felt too perfect, tasted too sweet.

“Xander...” She pulled my mouth off her clit, half-laughing as I struggled against her, fighting to taste her again. “No. Come on. If you make me come again, I'm going to pass out.”

I stared down at the flushed, slick pink lips of her pussy, then licked my own lips clean.

“If you’re sure,” I relented, wiping my hand on my jeans. In my eagerness, I hadn’t even managed to get them all the way off.

Clumsily, we disentangled from each other. She rose on shaky legs, then fell right back down onto the couch and into my arms.

“Oh, fuck,” she swore, wincing.

“Did I hurt you?” I ran my hands down her body, searching for a wound. I’d been a little rough with her, but nothing out of line—or so I hoped.

If I’d harmed her somehow, I’d never be able to forgive myself.

“I’m fine,” she panted against my chest. “But my legs are jelly. I think I just orgasmed the bones out of them.”

I smiled and kissed her temple. “I can take care of that.”

I swept her into my arms and carried her to bed. She twined her arms around my neck, nuzzling against my chest until I laid her on the mattress.

“Rain check,” she murmured as I crawled into bed next to her.

I laughed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Next time,” she mumbled, wiggling back into my arms. “Next time, I’ll do you.”

An explosive laugh left my throat. “Go to sleep, Cheeks. I think you need it.”

“No, you,” she grumbled.

She was out before either of us could think of anything else to say.

Sleep didn’t find me so easily. The taste of her honey still lingered on my lips, and my cock was still relentlessly hard.

My wolf was howling like I held the full moon itself in my arms. When I closed my eyes, it growled the same word over and over again.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Chapter 17

Felicity

I woke up to a delectable scent coming from the kitchen: sausage, eggs, and toast. I raised my head from the pillow and sniffed the air.

Scratch that: burned toast. It smelled incredible all the same.

My stomach growled its approval as I lay in Xander's bed and watched the morning sun stream in through the window. I was still naked. His side of the bed was ruffled but cold.

So. He'd fallen asleep in here with me last night.

He'd fallen asleep next to me, next to my naked body, after making me come.

I rolled over and buried my face in the pillow, still processing that. From fake dating to real dating to furiously humping Xander's gorgeous lips while he played with my nipples and sucked on my clit.

Things had certainly taken a turn for the unexpected. Not that I was complaining, but...wow.

Of all the ways these last few weeks could have turned out, I would have ranked the likelihood of my current reality on the same level as alien invasion and zombie apocalypse.

I entered the kitchen in Xander's favorite Springsteen T-shirt. It was long enough on me to excuse my lack of pants. The tantalizing scents of breakfast cooking on the stove were stronger in here.

Xander stood at the range, his back to me, cast iron skillet in hand. With a flick of his wrist, he sent eggs and sausages into the air. I waited until they stuck the landing before I announced my presence.

“Hey,” I said.

Xander turned and looked at me like I’d just materialized in his kitchen, totally nude, with *fuck me, wolf boy* written in Sharpie on my tits. Surprised but intrigued.

“Hey,” he said back. “Hungry?”

“I could eat.”

He served me a wolf-sized breakfast. Six eggs, six sausage links, and six toast points—some burned, some blond.

We ate breakfast in a silence so delicate, I felt it bruise every time I sat down my knife.

God. This wouldn’t do.

“So,” I began pleasantly, putting on my best thanks-for-licking-my-pussy-and-also-for-breakfast smile.

Xander paused mid-bite of his egg. It slipped off his fork and dangled from between his teeth. He bit it free, chewed, and swallowed. “So.”

“You made me come last night.” Best to rip off the band-aid quick, right? “With your mouth.”

“Jesus, Cheeks!” Xander coughed, swiped his forearm across his mouth, then coughed some more.

“What? It’s what happened.”

“Can’t you let a man get some food in his belly before you go saying shit like that?”

“It was that bad, huh?” He was blushing. That was so unlike him that I had to smirk. “Can’t keep down your sausage now?”

“Exactly. Yes. That’s exactly fucking it.” He reached between his legs and adjusted something. “I can’t keep my sausage down at all.”

“So, you...liked it, then?” I suggested.

“What the hell kind of question is that? Did I like it?” he scoffed. “Did you leave half your brain cells on the couch or something?”

“Maybe.” My smirk widened. “You made me come pretty hard.”

“Mm.” Xander nodded, looking pleased with himself. “I thought you might have. I was up most of the night thinking about it, you know.” He gestured between us with his knife. “You. Me. Us.”

“A woman might ask what kind of conclusions you came to.”

“Well. We can’t just forget it.”

I arched a brow. “Do you want to?”

“Fuck, no. But if this doesn’t work out...”

“Planning on dumping me already, huh?”

“Can you be serious for one goddamn minute?” he growled, golden yolk smeared across his lower lip.

“It might be easier if you didn’t have egg on your face.”

Xander scowled, then licked his lips clean. “Better?”

“Much. Proceed.”

“It’s like this, I guess,” he mused. “I don’t want to lose you, and the game we’re playing right now...well, if fifty percent of marriages end in divorce, I don’t want to know what the stats on relationships look like. So, the way I see it, if things start to go south—”

“We’ll be mature about it like grown-ass adults,” I suggested. “Which, might I remind you, we are. Sound good?”

“Grown-ass adults.” Xander nodded, apparently accepting this plan of action. “Yeah. Alright. Okay.”

He reached across the table to grab the morning paper, which was folded neatly and still radiated the scent of fresh ink.

This could be so easy, I found myself thinking as he unfolded it and began to read. Movies and orgasms at night. Breakfast in the morning. Xander reads the paper. I pretend there's no chance this could fall apart.

It felt a little like playing house, but what was so bad about that? It was no different than how things had been between us when we were just friends—except, notably, the sex. And as far as sex went...well, I certainly wasn't about to complain.

I'd had sexual relationships before. Never anyone notable, and never more than a few times, but I was no blushing virgin. Before last night, I'd believed I had a relatively comprehensive understanding of what getting down and dirty with a guy entailed.

But no man had ever kissed me the way Xander kissed me. No man had ever held me the way he held me, touched me the way he touched me...

And never in my life had a man made me come that hard. Normally, that was a feat only my trusty vibrator could accomplish.

Xander was *good*. Good enough that, if I had to pretend things going south between us wouldn't bother me, pretend I would.

I'd pretend whatever he wanted, just as long as it meant we could do that again.

"What's your day looking like?" Xander asked over the newspaper. He looked strangely...husband-like as he read it, though I couldn't put my finger on why. Probably some kind of sitcom brain-washing, if I had to guess.

Still, it was a good look on him.

"Work at eight," I reminded him. I checked the clock over his fridge and realized I had twelve blissful hours to go before I had to scrub up and return to Evergreen Hills. "Otherwise, I've got no plans. You?"

Xander folded the newspaper the wrong way and slid it across the table toward me. "I think I've got something in mind."

The Evergreen carnival happened four times each year, once at the start of each season. Sometime in the distant past, I'd heard, it had been a celebration inspired by the Evergreen pack's pagan roots.

Xander and I held hands as we strolled between the stalls and churning crowd. Carnival music mingled with the scent of popcorn in the air. These days, any Old World influences had largely disappeared from the event. It was only a quarterly fundraiser now, run by students and teachers to drum up cash for Evergreen High. The sports teams mostly paid for themselves, but the art, music, and theater departments depended on the carnival to thrive.

"I forgot this was happening today," I admitted. "It was a lucky thing you saw it in the paper. Would've been a shame to miss it this year."

"What, and break our streak?" Xander shook his head, his face a mask of seriousness. "Not on my watch."

It was true. We came to every carnival together, rain or shine. My freshman year, we'd worked the kissing booth together, which had drawn a lot of women, but not a single guy. My senior year, we'd worked it together again—to much greater success, I was pleased to recall.

Even after graduation, we'd never stopped coming. In college, I'd drive up to meet Xander for corn dogs and cotton candy. After I started at Evergreen Hills, I'd always made sure to take these days off.

It was a comfortable old ritual, like making the bed every morning or running outside to catch snowflakes on my tongue during the first snow of the year.

But this time, things were different.

I couldn't believe we'd almost missed our first carnival as something more than friends.

We gorged ourselves on funnel cakes, walking tacos, and deep-fried samosas. When we hopped into the photo booth,

instead of making silly faces and trying to shove each other out of the frame like we usually did, we ended up with a strip of pictures featuring steamy kisses and big, dopey, puppy-love grins. We rode the Ferris wheel and kissed some more, stopping only at the highest point to catch our breaths and admire the view.

“I need a bathroom break,” I confessed as Xander eyed a row of giant, cross-eyed stuffed animals over the bottle toss. I popped up on my tiptoes to kiss his jaw. “Wait for me?”

“Will do, Cheeks.” He grinned, reaching into his back pocket. “By the time you get back, I should have a present for you.”

I left him to throw rings at bottles for me. As I walked away, my stomach fluttered. My face hurt from smiling so much.

So that was what this was supposed to feel like. All the silly little emotions I’d never felt with any other man, I was experiencing with Xander. For the first time in my life, I knew how it felt to really, *really* begin to fall.

Still, being inside a Port-a-Potty took the wind out of my sails a little. By the time I emerged, pinching my nose and feeling a little less certain about all the junk food we’d consumed, those butterflies in my belly had been shot down with splinters of doubt.

Was I actually falling for Xander? Or was this just some screwed-up thrill from finally getting to taste my very own forbidden fruit?

“Lissy!” a shrill voice shrieked across the concourse. “Lissy, oh my god, hey!”

I groaned quietly to myself before turning around. There was only one person who called me Lissy, and she had a well-documented history of making my day difficult.

“Hey, Lexi.” I forced a smile as she ran up to me, her pink hair streaming behind her. “How are you?”

“Curious, mostly. I saw you macking on some guy on the Ferris wheel earlier.” She grabbed my shoulders and squeezed

them tight, making me feel an awful lot like I was being held hostage. “Why didn’t you tell me you had a man?”

“Uh...” I scanned the crowd briefly for Xander. Surely Lexi had heard all the rumors by now. At this point, they were hardly even rumors anymore. Xander and I were cold tea. Old news. “I guess it never came up.”

“Well, it’s up now. Give me details, sister!” She shook me excitedly. “And make ’em *filthy*. Who is he? What’s his deal? Local, or are you outsourcing?”

To my relief, Xander emerged from the crowd with a giant stuffed walrus under his arm. He wrapped his other arm around me, tugging me against him. “Okay, that’s taken care of. You ready to head out?”

He didn’t seem to have noticed Lexi—much to her chagrin.

“Oh my *god*.” Lexi released my shoulders, only to swat my arm a little too hard for my liking. “You and Lieutenant Fire Hazard? You’re joking.” Her eyes darted between us. “Please tell me that you’re joking.”

“If this is a joke, you’d have to explain it to me,” Xander grunted, unamused. He’d never liked Lexi, and her disbelief at our relationship wasn’t winning her points now.

“I mean, I heard the gossip, of course, but I didn’t realize you two had *actually* stepped out of the friend zone.” She focused her gaze on Xander, twirling a lock of her hair around her finger girlishly. “Aren’t you more of a love ’em and leave ’em kind of guy?”

Xander looked confused. “Am I?”

“Well, it’s just, I didn’t think you were the type to settle...”

I waited for her to finish her sentence. *Settle down*. Surely she was going to say *settle down*.

But she didn’t.

A heaping spoonful of awkwardness dumped onto the atmosphere. Along with it came a dash of shame. It wasn’t a nice thing to say. I knew it. Xander knew it.

Lexi, on the other hand, needed the weighty silence to catch on. I couldn't tell if she was oblivious or just used to being pretty enough to get away with being mean.

"Just kidding," Lexi said several beats too late.

"What was the joke?" Xander asked, his arm tightening around me. "Explain it to me."

"Oh my god." Lexi peered up into Xander's eyes, then reeled back again. "You're *so* intense. Are all the Evergreen wolves like that?"

"I'm just asking you a question. If you were kidding, explain the joke."

My cheeks burned. Had I been alone, I would have just laughed it off. It wouldn't have been difficult. I was well accustomed to dealing with Lexi running her mouth so fast that her manners had to sprint to catch up.

She was harmless. Annoying and rude, sure, but harmless. She just didn't think before she spoke.

But Xander wasn't one to let things like that go. He never had been.

And now that he'd called her out on it, it begged the question: did she *actually* think that Xander being with me was some silly joke? A hilarious prank?

"I just didn't think a guy like you would be into...you know, someone like that." She gestured to me with a weak-wristed flap of her hand.

"Like what?" Xander deadpanned. It sounded like a dare.

"You know. Girls like Lissy. She's pretty and everything, but...*curvy girls*? I didn't think that was your type. That's all." She shrugged and smiled, still ignoring me.

My fake smile was quickly fading. It was the way she said it—*girls like Lissy*, as if I wasn't even there—and her tone.

Curvy girls. Like it was a dirty word.

I held my breath as my skin prickled. Xander had always been protective of me. A quarter of the boys from his

graduating class still had crooked noses to this day because of the way they'd treated me during my freshman year of high school, courtesy of Xander's fists.

Please don't start a fight. I willed my thought to reach him as I felt him bristle beside me. Unfortunately, we lacked the ability to communicate telepathically, but if there was ever a time for me to gain that superpower, it was now. Lexi was bone-thin and half his size. If he broke her nose, it'd be a bad look.

To my relief, Xander merely turned to me, his brow deeply furrowed. "Is she drunk?"

I shrugged. With Lexi, sometimes it was hard to tell.

Xander sighed and leveled his gaze at Lexi again. "Right. I've known a lot of girls like you. I know how you are: so caught up in your own insecurities, you've gotta project them onto other people just to get through the day. You might wanna work on that."

Lexi blinked up at him, her face blank. For once, she didn't seem to have anything to say.

Xander craned his neck. "Hey, Robbie!"

Robbie Reed zipped up his coat as he emerged from the bottle-toss booth. He gave Xander and me a respectful nod. "Xander. Felicity. What can I do for you?"

"You mind looking after her?" Xander cocked his head in Lexi's direction. "I think she's been hitting the beer tent a little too hard. Get her some water and make sure she gets home okay, will you?"

"Of course. You got it." Robbie nodded, then placed a protective arm around Lexi, speaking to her like she was a very small toddler who'd gotten into the Halloween candy and ended up with a tummy ache. "Miss? Why don't you come with me, okay? We'll get you a nice drink of water, sober you up a bit. Sound good?"

"I'm *not* drunk!" Lexi insisted, pulling away.

“Ha.” Robbie winked in our direction, then led Lexi toward the medical tent. “Yeah, that’s what they all say.”

I bit my lip as I watched them walk away. Before Lexi’s pink waves were out of sight, Xander guided me in the other direction, tucked safely beneath his arm.

“Fucking Lexi,” he grumbled. “I told you she was bad news.”

“That was really kind of you,” I pointed out. I took my hand out of my pocket to place against his chest and realized I was shaking.

“Was it?” Xander asked obliviously.

“You could’ve ripped into her.”

“Did you want me to?”

“No, of course not!” He couldn’t have handled that situation better than if I’d scripted it for him. “Just...you gave her an excuse. An out. The next time she sees me, she can pretend she was drunk instead of mean—if she even mentions it at all.”

Xander snorted. “And you see that as kind? Because the way I see it, I told a pack member Lexi was drunk off her ass in broad daylight—in public, no less. You know how fast word travels around here. Robbie will get her home, and the pack will make sure she’s not allowed back in. But come tomorrow morning, everyone in town will have heard about Lexi Rose getting so shit-faced at the town carnival, she started making a scene and had to be escorted out.”

Slowly, I smiled. “You grounded her.”

The man was a genius.

“She was acting like a child. Shouldn’t be surprised when people treat her that way.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Are you sure I shouldn’t have told her off properly? We can go back.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s just...funny, I guess.” I shivered and huddled a little closer to Xander. “She and my mom have the same talent.”

“Making asses of themselves in polite company?”

“Knowing exactly what to say that’ll hurt the most. Once the fat girl, always the fat girl, huh?” I laughed, but it sounded hollow. My smile wavered. My sinuses burned. I’d been trying to make a joke—like Lexi, in a way.

Except, my joke wasn’t funny, either.

My joke also hurt.

I squeezed my eyes shut. It was the only way I could think of to fight back the tears. I should have been over this by now. I *was* over it. I’d never be as slender as Lexi, but I loved my body. I always had. These days, most other people were even in agreement: I’d revamped myself into an acceptable size, an acceptable shape.

So why the fuck did her comments still sting?

Above me, I heard a soft chuckle. Laughter. The genuine kind. I whipped my head toward Xander, incredulous.

“Xander Miller, are you seriously laughing at me right now?”

“No!” he said. “Well, maybe a little.”

“I’m glad my misery is so funny to you.” I twisted my knuckle against his ribs, which only made him laugh harder.

“It’s not. Believe me.” He wiped a tear from his eye. A different kind of tear than the ones currently gathering on my lower lashes. “It’s just...have I ever told you what I thought when I first saw you?”

My shoulders stiffened. “I don’t think I want to know.”

Xander stopped walking and turned me to face him. He placed his hands on my shoulders and stooped down so his eyes were level with mine. Those brilliant green eyes sparkled and crinkled around in the corners. His expression confused the hell out of me.

“I thought you were the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen,” he professed. “The most beautiful girl in the entire world.”

Wary, I drew back. “I don’t think so. That would’ve been freshman year for me. I weighed about seventy pounds more than I do now.”

“Exactly,” he said emphatically.

I shook my head. He was fucking with me. Clearly. “You must’ve been looking at someone else.”

“No, Cheeks, I was looking at you. Still am.” His hands stroked down my arms and squeezed my fingers. “I think I’m gonna be looking at you for a long fuckin’ time.”

I stared at him, my eyes wide.

“What?” he demanded.

I couldn’t help myself.

I lost control.

My arms flew up to twine around his neck, clasp and squeezing him tight. My lips crushed against his, pleading silently. *Let it be true. For the love of all that’s good and holy, I’ve never asked for anything in my entire life, but I am asking for this.*

His kiss was the only answer I needed to my prayer. He hooked his hands under my ass and lifted me, his tongue tangling with mine as I wrapped my legs around his waist.

He meant it. Genuinely, honestly, he meant it. And that could only mean one thing.

I was in love with Xander Miller.

I was in love with my best friend.

Chapter 18

Xander

The day ended too soon. Felicity had to get to work, and I had to return to reality. To my life, my pack, and most of all, the pack's problems.

"Everyone here?" I asked as I strode into the pack's lodge. Dad had rallied the pack elders on my behalf to discuss the vandalism of the bank. Between the five of us, we needed to hold an official pack meeting, discuss the damage, and determine our next move.

"We're good to go," Dad said. The chair at the head of the table was empty and waiting for me. He had the chair just to the right.

"Let's get started, then." I nodded to Becca Reed, our pack recorder. "You can begin the record."

At the foot of the table, shy little Becca stared at me like my eyes had just popped out of my head. Her own eyes were bulging enough that they looked ready to do the same.

Nonetheless, she cracked open the heavy tome where the entirety of our pack history had been recorded since Jameson Miller first established it. It would continue in that tome long after I was gone.

Assuming I didn't run the pack into the ground first.

"I call this meeting of the Evergreen pack to order," I announced. "In attendance today are pack elder Connell Huxley—"

Across the table from Dad, Connell raised a hand. He was a handsome older guy, probably around the same age as Felicity's Nana. Like Dylan, he was a sigma: aloof, focused on protection, and a bit of an outsider. In the way of most sigmas, he'd never married, though Dad always joked Connell had left a string of broken hearts wherever he went back in his prime.

Unlike Dylan, Connell could stand to sit in a room with other people for longer than ten minutes without looking for an escape route. He was proof that there was still hope for my kid brother. Sigmas tended to mellow out and come into their own with age.

"Pack elder Ambrose Reed," I continued.

Ambrose sat next to Connell. He paused in cleaning the thick lenses of his eyeglasses to flap his monogrammed handkerchief at me.

"Pack elder Sylvia Abner."

Sylva smiled at me, then patted Dad's shoulder.

"Second-in-command Anthony Miller and Alexander Miller, pack alpha, with Becca Reed recording," I finished. "Today, we're discussing the vandalism of Evergreen Savings Bank, a property owned and run by this pack."

"I'm submitting this for the record," Dad said, sliding a photograph across the table. "And so you all get a chance to look at it. I was lucky to catch the damage while it was still pretty fresh. Xander and I cleaned it up within an hour, but there's a good chance others in town saw it."

Ambrose put his glasses back on and pulled the photograph towards him. He held it an inch away from his face. "Damn. Clear message, at least." He passed the photograph to Connell. "Who would do this?"

"The Carter's Creek pack. Who else?" Connell said.

"They wouldn't dare," Ambrose scoffed. "Those inbred mutts in Carter's Creek are stupid, but they aren't *that* stupid."

"We all heard Quincy Houghton at Macy Miller's mating ceremony. Running his mouth, making threats," said Sylvia.

“Question is, was he *just* running his mouth, or did he mean it?”

“Patsy Spencer turned the security footage over to me,” Dad added as he took out more photographs. These showed a truck pulling up to the bank and two men with cans of spray paint. The license plates were clear. “Those are Carter’s Creek vehicles. It was almost certainly them, and I’m not surprised. I’ve never known Quincy to write a check his ass can’t cash.”

“We gonna talk about why Quincy is writing these checks in the first place?” Connell asked. “That woman of yours, Tony—”

“I warned you about her, remember?” Ambrose added. “Before you were mated, I told you she’d be trouble someday.”

“As if he was gonna listen to some trumped-up beta like you, Ambie.” Sylvia snorted. “Then again, that said... Marianne’s temperament has always left little to be desired. No one can pretend otherwise at this point.”

“My mother has already been reprimanded for her actions,” I reminded them. We didn’t need to discuss Ma. Our focus was on Quincy, not her. “She’s been banned from all pack activities and interactions. You all heard me say so.”

“I know she has, sweetie,” Sylvia said gently. “But that didn’t stop her from coming around my place yesterday. She wanted me to advise you to follow through with the match she made.”

Goddamn it. First, that shit with Quincy Houghton, and now, she was disobeying my direct orders. So much for her banishment.

I clenched my jaw. “She shouldn’t have done that.”

Sylvia held up her hands. “That’s what I told her.”

“I’ll deal with her,” Dad offered.

That was a generous offer since I knew he had to be getting an earful from her at home every day.

Which wasn't to say I wasn't grateful. It was messy work, and someone had to do it. I was just glad that someone wasn't me.

"In the meantime, I want to talk action," I said, trying to veer the conversation back on topic. "Could be, this was a one-time thing. A temper tantrum and nothing more. But if it's not, we need to have a game plan."

"It's obvious, isn't it? We retaliate." Ambrose thumped his fist on the table so hard, his glasses slid down his nose.

"I don't know about that," Connell countered. "We don't want trouble. Or need it."

"Eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind, you old hothead," Sylvia agreed.

"Sylvia's got the right of it." I gave her a nod of appreciation. "If we retaliate, this escalates."

It wasn't always fun being the bigger person, but in this instance, it was a matter of suffering a few immature outbursts to avoid outright war.

"Knowing Quincy, escalation is probably what he's hoping for," Dad mused. He turned to Connell. "Your brother-in-law is on the Carter's Creek council of elders, isn't he?"

"He's a good-for-nothing, but yeah. Should I talk to him?" Connell asked.

"It'd help us get some insight." Dad sighed and massaged his temples. "They'll have more level heads about this than Quincy. Might even be able to talk some sense into him. He's embarrassing their pack. If I were one of their elders, I'd want to put a stop to that."

"And if that doesn't work?" Ambrose huffed.

"If that doesn't work, we'll reconvene." I rose from my seat as happy as could be, current circumstances allowing. "In the meantime, I'm putting extra security on key establishments. The bank, the clinic, the community pantry, and the attorney's office. Am I forgetting anything?"

“I wouldn’t mind some extra muscle around the tax office if there’s some to spare,” said Sylvia. “It’s that time of the year, and we’re filing for over half the town. Can’t afford any interruptions.”

“I’ll talk to Kingston and see what we can do.” I gave them all a nod. “Thank you for coming today. Anything else happens, you let me know. I’ll do the same. Meeting adjourned.”

With pack business wrapped for the time being, I headed to the station for my shift.

The days stretched on for what felt like months. We were on jobs every six hours or so. Some minor, a few big enough that when the truck arrived back at the station, all I wanted to do was shower until I steamed the smoke from my lungs and pass out.

Felicity was working, too. It wasn’t uncommon for us to go a few days without texting or calling when we were both busy like this. But she was in my dreams, sometimes in her human form, sometimes as an auburn wolf running alongside me through the woods. Even when I was awake, she was never far from my mind.

After a particularly rough job on Friday afternoon, I was in the communal showers. Ass on tile, head tilted back against the wall. Breathing in steam and feeling like hell.

In my line of work, we called every fire a “job.” But not all jobs were created equal.

Sometimes, we showed up at an office building in full gear, only to realize that an intern had microwaved their leftovers with the tinfoil still on.

Sometimes, when we showed up, there was nothing we could do but control the blaze.

This last job had been of the latter category. A house fire, twenty miles outside of Evergreen on the far end of Carter’s Creek territory. The Carter’s Creek dispatcher called us in when their department realized they didn’t have the equipment or the manpower to handle it on their own.

The Carter's Creek guys figured it was a woodstove fire. By the time we arrived on scene, the house was engulfed in flames; too far gone to enter. It was still before five, so the homeowners were likely still at work, and I hadn't thought much of it...until a pick-up truck pulled up and a man shot out of it, screaming that we had to go inside.

"You okay?" Brody put his back against the wall and slid onto the floor next to me.

"About as good as I could be right now."

"Yeah, I feel that." Brody shook his head, sending droplets of water flying. "Pisses me off. If we'd known that the guy's wife and newborn were inside—"

"There's nothing we could've done," I said. I had to say it. If I let myself believe anything else, even for a moment, I'd never be able to live with myself. "The roof was gone by the time we got there. Second story, too. Even if we'd known, if we'd tried—"

"We'd be in body bags. I know." Brody stared at the wall ahead of us, dead-eyed.

I joined him in staring. There was nothing else to do.

"You should see Felicity tonight," Brody finally said. "Get out of here. Clear your head."

"Yeah?" My heart stuttered at the thought of her. Felicity was all I wanted right now. Her soft arms. Her warm lips. Her sweet voice, the music of her laughter, the scent of her skin. But... "I don't know that I can dump this on her, man. This is heavy, even for us. For her—"

"You don't have to tell her," Brody assured me. "Not if you don't want to. But I know I'll be spending tonight at the Wily Elephant, knocking back beers and hoping some pretty woman will take pity on me enough that she'll take me home." He clapped me on the shoulder, then rose. "You, you lucky bastard, get to save yourself the trouble. You call her, she'll answer. She'll know what to do."

In the locker room, I trapped my phone between my shoulder and ear as I toweled off.

She answered on the first ring. “Hey, you.” She sounded tired but happy to hear from me.

“Hey, Cheeks. How are you?” I asked tentatively. If she was already wiped, I didn’t want to pile more shit on her. In fact, I didn’t want to pile shit on her at all.

“Right now, I’m a big lump on the couch, staring at the kitchen, trying to get up the courage to make myself a sandwich.” She laughed. “Mostly so I can return to said couch.”

“Don’t move,” I instructed her. I saw a problem there—one that I could easily fix. And I needed something to fix right now. Badly. “I’ll bring you dinner. My treat.”

“My hero,” she purred. I didn’t deserve the compliment. “I’ve missed you, you know. A lot.”

I rubbed my chest. My heart felt so swollen, it was liable to explode.

“I missed you, too,” I rasped. “How’s Chinese sound?”

“Like heaven.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in. Breathed out.

“I’ll see you soon.”

Chapter 19

Felicity

Xander's promise to come over lit a fire under my ass. Suddenly, I wasn't exhausted anymore; I was on the move. My apartment needed to look romantic, and I needed to look fuckable.

Given what a hellish week I'd had, that was no small feat.

Candles flickered from every surface, from the kitchen to the bedroom. I'd dug out every candle in the house, including the emergency tapers from my hurricane kit. A dozen scents mingled in the air as the wax melted: fresh linen, jasmine and rose, sugar cookie, pumpkin pie.

Kind of chaotic, but the effect was pretty enough. Worth it, I decided.

Sultry music flowed from the Bluetooth speakers behind the TV as I quickly showered and shaved. The playlist was something I found on Spotify, titled *Getting Railed Hard in the Dark on a Tuesday*.

Never mind that it was Friday. Getting railed hard in the dark sounded pretty good right now, no matter what day of the week it was. Plus, I was on a time crunch. It'd have to do.

I checked my makeup in the mirror next to the front door. It was heavier than what I normally wore: eyeliner, lipstick, eyeshadow, even a little contour. I was missing the big feathery false eyelashes that Lexi typically wore, but that was probably a good thing. I looked natural but with some added oomph.

It'd been a while since I'd had a chance to feel pretty. I had Xander to thank for more than just the food delivery in that regard. He was giving me the perfect excuse to look like more than an exhausted RN for a change.

When I heard the knock on my door, I jumped, then laughed at myself for being so jumpy.

Was I nervous? Maybe a little. The playlist was sexy enough to give me some courage, but it'd been a long time since I'd been railed with any force, day or night.

I adjusted the top of my matching set one last time, making sure my décolletage was right where I wanted it, then opened the door.

His hair was wet. That was the first thing I noticed. With as long as he kept it, he was usually careful about drying it before he left the station. The days were warming up a little, but not enough.

“Hey, you.” I smiled at him. “Trying to catch a cold?”

He didn't smile back. He merely lifted the twin bags of take-out he held in each hand. “Can I come in?”

I frowned. Okay, that was a little sharp. Something was off.

“Of course.”

I moved aside, and he trudged into my apartment like he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

He'd bought way too much food for just the two of us, but it wasn't heavy enough to make him walk like that.

“Rough day?” I asked, though from the looks of things, rough didn't begin to describe it.

“I'm fine.” Xander put the food on the table and began to unpack it mechanically. “You like General Tso's, right? I ordered half the menu.”

“I'm not worried about the food right now.” Seeing him on edge like this had pushed hunger completely from my mind. I moved to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

He tensed at my touch.

“Hey.” I rubbed his shoulder soothingly. “It’s okay. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

Xander pursed his lips, then shook his head. “It’s nothing. Not anymore. C’mon. Let’s just eat. You said you were hungry, right?”

“Xander...” I let my hand fall as he moved to the kitchen table and started unpacking the food. As I trailed after him, I wilted slightly. “You don’t normally keep secrets from me, you know. What happened to things not changing between us?”

He took a deep breath, then thumped a white waxed paper carton on the table. “Someday, I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you everything, every little rise and fall of my day, every triumph, every defeat. But not today, Cheeks. C’mon. Let’s eat.”

Maybe I should have left it at that. Let it go. Then, we could have eaten in awkward peace, ignoring the black cloud hanging over Xander’s head.

I couldn’t, though. I was part of Xander’s life now. Or I was supposed to be.

“Why not today? Why not now?” The words came out louder than I expected them to.

I wasn’t angry at him—not much, anyway. I was hurt. He was hurting, and he wouldn’t let me help, wouldn’t let me in. After all this time, he was shutting me out.

Being a couple was supposed to bring us together, wasn’t it? Not force us farther apart.

“Cheeks—”

“No,” I said firmly. I grabbed the container of rice from him and put it on the table. “I’m your girlfriend now, aren’t I? Not just a fake one. You wanted this to be real, so act like it. If something happened—something with Quincy, or Carter’s Creek, or the pack—”

“It’s not pack business. If it was that, I’d tell you right away, wouldn’t I?” The muscles of his neck tensed as he clenched his jaw. His lips pulled back in a snarl. “Wouldn’t I?”

His teeth were stark white, with long, sharp canines that reminded me he was an alpha. A wolf.

I took a step back as a shock of fear shuddered through my chest. He looked as if beneath the weight of my questioning, something within him had snapped—a leash he was now straining to keep hold of.

But I'd never backed down during a spat with Xander before, and I sure as shit wasn't about to now.

"I don't know what you would and wouldn't tell me," I said, keeping my voice as level as possible. "I just want to be a part of your life. The good parts and the bad. If you'd just tell me what's wrong, I could—"

He turned around to face me fully, locking his dark gaze on mine.

"Has it ever occurred to you that I might not want to dump every fucked-up aspect of my job, my life, my world on my goddamned mate?"

As he spoke, his eyes flashed red.

That should have scared me more than anything. But I was too stunned by his words to feel fear.

"I'm...your mate?" I blinked in stunned surprise.

"What else would you be? When I'm alone, all I can think about is your voice, the sound of your laughter, the smell of your shampoo. And when I'm with you—" Xander clenched his fists, turned away, and began to pace. "All I wanted to do tonight was come back here and be close to you, so I could get this god-awful, piece-of-shit day out of my head and be around something pretty and soft and mine. Was that so much to ask?"

"N-no," I stammered, still processing. His mate. I was his mate. "I didn't realize that I'm your...I mean, Xander, it's been eighteen years. Why now? How?"

"I had the dream," he scoffed, like it was obvious. Like I had the ability to crack his skull open at night and watch his REM cycle hallucinations in UltraHD. "Finally."

"The dream?"

“The only one that matters,” he snapped, and it clicked into place. The wolf-dream. The moon dream. The dream that meant I belonged to him...and that he belonged to me. Forever. For good. “Should’ve had it years ago. Funny joke, isn’t it? My wolf waited until now to realize it. All it’s cost us is so much fucking time.”

Time wasn’t my concern right now. I was no wolf, no shifter. I’d written off any possibility of being Xander’s mate long ago. I had no mystical dreams telling me who to spend the rest of my life with. The magic that flowed through Xander, illuminating his path in life, was absent in my veins. All I could do was fumble around in the dark, hoping I’d find my way home.

But his wolf had guided him to me. Finally. Eighteen years after it should have, maybe—but better late than never, right?

“I’m glad,” I said, my voice suddenly small and soft. “It’s good, right?”

“It’s good,” he agreed tonelessly. His shoulders rose and fell heavily as his pacing came to a stop at the front door.

“Are you leaving?” If he left now, I didn’t know what I’d do. Worry myself sick over him, I supposed.

This moment should have been a celebration. Instead, it felt like a message pinned to my chest by a knife.

“I don’t know.”

He didn’t leave, only dragged his fingers through his hair in a quick, sharp movement, like he was considering tearing it out at the roots. The agitation that had been wound up inside him when he came in was quickly unraveling.

I still didn’t know what was hurting him. But now, at least, I knew how to help.

“What are you doing?” His back tensed as I pressed my body against him from behind, wrapping my arms around his waist and squeezing tight.

“You wanted to be close to me. Here I am.”

He shook his head quickly, peeling my hands away from his lower ribs. “No. You shouldn’t do that. Not now.”

“Why not?”

He didn’t seem to have an answer. He parted our bodies, turning and placing my hands back at my sides. The anger was gone from his eyes. There was something broken in his greens now, like fractured glass.

I moved back in and hugged him again, even tighter this time. His body was firm beneath my arms but not steady. He seemed to vibrate, like that thing inside him he was trying to keep a handle on was struggling to break free.

“Cheeks—” He retreated backward, dragging me with him.

“Tell me what’s bothering you, or don’t. I don’t care about that now.” I looked up at him with resolute insubordination. “But if you really mean it, and you honestly had the dream, and I’m truly your mate? Alexander Miller, don’t you dare push me away.”

He made a small noise of annoyance. “The food—”

“Ugh, forget about the food.” I locked my fingers around my arms and pressed my cheek to his chest. His heart was thundering. Beneath the lingering scent of Chinese food and the cheap soap they used at the firehouse, he smelled like smoke.

“Cheeks...” He dipped his head down, the tip of his nose nestling in my hair. His chest swelled as he took a long, deep breath. For a blissful moment, I felt the tension in his muscles begin to melt away.

In the next second, the reprieve was gone. He tensed again and pried himself free of my grip, keeping my wrists captured in his hands. I tried to twist them out from beneath his fingers, but he held firm.

“Felicity. Listen to me.” There was a new look in his eyes now. Less fragile. More dangerous. “You can’t be this close to me. No matter how bad I want you to be. Not now.”

“Why not?” I shot back at him. He’d come here for me. For this. He’d said so himself. What had changed?

Xander closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. “Because,” he said, “I’m not myself right now. I don’t want to hurt you. And after the day I’ve had, I’m half a second away from sinking my teeth into your neck and fucking you on the floor and another half a second away from falling apart.”

Oh.

For a moment, I couldn’t move at all. Couldn’t speak. Couldn’t even think.

When words finally found me again, I was surprised by my boldness. “I’m not so easy to hurt.”

“No?” He arched a brow, sounding dubious.

I licked my lips, tentatively putting a hand on his chest. “No.”

His eyes narrowed, his gaze growing sharp and dark. He took hold of my jaw, turning my face toward his, and hunched down until his lips were so close to mine that I could feel the heat of his breath.

“Then get your fucking clothes off.”

With fumbling fingers, almost drunken in their urgency, I grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head. By the time I had it off, Xander was already tossing his own shirt on the floor.

Xander’s eyes raked up and down my body with hunger. He took a step closer to me, and I took a step back, leading him out of the kitchen and into the living room. It was almost like we were dancing, though it was a dance unlike any I’d ever known.

When I reached behind my back to unclasp my bra, Xander caught my wrist and pulled me against him.

“No,” he growled. “Let me.”

He tugged at the back of my bra, then twisted it. Effortlessly, it came free. As the cups slipped downward, his

lips crashed against mine. His kiss was hard, rough and insistent. I kissed him back just as hard, absorbing his intensity and returning it. The moment was only broken when he bit my lip, sending a dull throb of pain through me that traveled down through my body and echoed with a needy, clenching pang in my core, then in my clit.

I whimpered against him, and abruptly, he pulled away. His eyes were full of questions and concern.

“Don’t stop. I’m okay,” I breathed, drawing him back in. With more seriousness, I said it again. “Don’t stop.”

His lips descended on me once more, claiming my mouth, then my jaw, then my neck. Our dance quickened as he backed me into the wall, pinning my hips beneath his. He hooked his fingers into the waistband of my pants, shoving them down. I braced myself against him as I kicked them off, leaving me only in my panties.

Even those I wanted to be rid of. I didn’t want anything between my body and his but sweat and skin.

He slid his hands up my body, roughly outlining my curves with his touch. I whimpered again as he palmed my breasts, kneading them like an artist kneading clay.

This time, he didn’t pull back. He teased my nipples, rolling them against the sides of his knuckles with his thumbs. Distantly, I was aware that the music from my playlist was still thrumming in the background, like a soundtrack. If this was a movie, we were nearing the part where the scene would fade to black.

I didn’t want that. I wanted every moment of this to play out indefinitely, visceral and present and real.

With a low growl, Xander released my breasts and found new things to hold. In one hand, my wrist, trapped over my head. In his other hand, he cupped my pussy. His fingers pressed firm against the slip of fabric. My panties were thin and sheer, permeable. I could feel my wetness soaking into them.

Which meant, so could he.

Xander made a half moan, half growl as he raised his fingers to his lips and sucked them into his mouth.

His next order was a simple one.

“Bed,” he rasped. “Now.”

With an unnerving strength, he grabbed my panties in his hands. A ripping sound followed as he tore them apart. The twin scraps of fabric fluttered to the floor as his red eyes met mine.

“Run.”

He didn't have to ask me twice. I fled like a terrified little rabbit, shooting down the hall. My heart was all rabbit, too, pounding in quick bursts. Xander was predator. I was prey.

There was just one notable difference between the rabbit and me within that dynamic.

I was begging to be caught.

I'd nearly made it to the bed when he tackled me, arms wrapping around my waist and chest hard against my back. All my breath left my lungs as we fell onto the mattress.

I let out a sharp yelp of surprise as his teeth found my neck.

He bit down gently enough at first, tugging on the skin. It stung deliciously. Just enough to make my heart race but not enough to make me scream. His bite tightened as his tongue lapped against my skin. Tasting me. *Relishing* me. The sensation panged sharp with electricity up and down my body.

He only released my neck to lift my hips with a quick, forceful tug and put me on all fours. I could feel him staring at me as he stroked a hand down my spine. Unbidden, I shivered. Completely nude. Totally on display.

Meanwhile, he still had all his clothes on.

I tried to roll over, reaching for him. I wanted to undress him now. Level the playing field. Strip him down. Xander had a gorgeous body. In all our years of friendship, I hadn't failed to notice that.

Lately, I'd been noticing it a lot more.

"No." Xander placed a hand between my shoulder blades, pushing me back down. He folded his body over mine, a hand sliding up my inner thigh. "You stay where I put you. You do as you're told."

Bossy. I was tempted to tell him so, but I could read the vibes.

Xander was a leader. A natural-born commander. He wasn't used to being questioned or called out. He was used to being obeyed. Making a smart remark about his attitude right now was liable to earn me a smack across the ass.

My knees went weak at the thought of Xander's big, rough hand coming down hard against my backside. Hard enough to sear all the way through me. Hard enough to leave a mark.

I gulped as he slid his hand higher up my inner thigh.

Oh no.

"And if I don't want to do as I'm told?" I asked, arching my back and pressing my ass out against him. Prime spanking position.

Butterflies exploded in my ribcage as I held my breath, awaiting his response.

Very, very slowly and very, very gently, he drew his hand back.

I was so, so fucked.

My breath hitched in my throat as I braced for impact—and the burst of pleasure that would follow.

But the blow never came.

"No. You're no brat, Felicity. You're a good girl, and you're going to act like one." The smack of his palm against my ass was barely a love tap. A soft, patronizing pat. Still, it reverberated through my entire body like he'd spanked me hard enough to shatter my soul. "Understood?"

"I could be a good girl," I whispered, already enthralled. This was new. Different. A song on the radio I didn't know

yet, but one I immediately liked.

“Good.” He lowered his mouth to my pussy, his hot breath lapping against my folds. “I thought you might say that.”

He licked me, his tongue pressed flat, starting at my clit and swiping up. A high, breathy sound left my lips—a sound I’d never heard myself make before.

It was a noise I’d heard in porn. Not the overwrought, melodramatic kind that was just begging for parody. This was...genuine. Passionate. Darkly feminine, like crushed rose petals and blood-red lips.

He went in for seconds, and it happened again. His tongue slicked against my clit, coating it with warmth, then a flick as he moved upward that left my heart breaking with the need for more—and I moaned for him like a sacred whore.

“You taste so fucking sweet,” he growled. My head went dizzy. My vision blurred. The flickering lights of the candles around us made the room feel otherworldly.

If it hadn’t been for the familiar feel of my sheets clutched in my fingers, the fragrant scents of a dozen different candles purchased in a modern shopping mall, I might have believed he’d transported me back in place and time. His mouth locked onto my clit, and I imagined us in a cave by the firelight, soft furs under my palms, sheltered from the elements and no words between us but the subtle language of mutual desire.

I blinked, and the vision was gone. My clit ached with the need for release, sending sharp, urgent pangs of pleasure up through my core.

I was panting.

Just like a wolf.

He pulled back too soon, releasing my clit with a soft *pop!*

I whimpered, arching my back pathetically. I didn’t want him to stop. I wanted more. *Needed* more.

“Poor thing,” Xander growled darkly. He gripped my inner thigh so hard, I suspected I’d find bruises there in the morning. “Don’t worry. I’m not done with you yet.”

Abruptly, his hand shifted upward. He stroked my clit between two fingers, then pinned it down and rolled it firmly.

“You’re so fucking wet for me.” His fingers slipped from my clit and slid inside me, two thick digits that probed my channel with a slow, sensual command. “Do you like that?”

“You know I do,” I hissed, squirming.

“Do you want me?” He pressed his lips to my ass, kissing it sweetly.

“Yes!” The word burst from me, just short of a scream.

“Ask.” His teeth scraped against my skin. “Nicely.”

He pumped his fingers into me even faster. Just barely, I could feel his other arm moving at exactly the same speed.

He was jerking off. To me. To the feel of my cunt wrapped around his fingers. To the thought of replacing them with his cock.

“Please, God,” I whimpered.

He sank his teeth into the meat of my ass, and I hissed in ecstasy.

“Not nice enough.” He smiled against the place where he’d just bitten. “And God’s not my name.”

“Please, Xander. I want it. Give it to me.”

“That’s a demand.” He *tsked* at me. “Fucking *beg*.”

“Please,” I panted. “Please, please, please. Fuck me, Xander.” I paused, desperately trying to catch my breath as he pushed me closer and closer to the orgasm I so desperately craved. “I need your cock. I need *you*. Give it to me...and I’ll do anything you want. Anything at all. *Please!*”

He slid his fingers out of me. It felt like a punishment. Then I felt something even thicker press against my pussy.

My breath hitched. He wasn’t even inside me yet, and already, I could tell he was huge.

Like heavenly bodies aligning in cosmic perfection, his cock slipped into me. The friction was palpable; he’d left me

dripping wet, but he was thick enough that I could still feel the stretch of my pussy struggling to accommodate him, the exquisite give and take.

My lower body trembled as he pressed deeper into me. I had to bite down to stop myself from crying out. My world shattered and remade itself, and shattered all over again. Every inch of his cock was a new revelation: heights of pleasure, valleys of need, flames of desire I couldn't even begin to put out.

He wrapped his arms around me, folding his body over mine and holding me tight as he thrust into me from behind. His snarls joined the chorus of my moans, each sound from his lips so low and feral that I didn't know which Xander was in control anymore: man or wolf.

It all came crashing to a climax when he sank his teeth into my neck, latching on viciously as his hand curled around my throat. He held my body tight to his like a possession. Like something hard-won, prized. Sacred.

The room was so dark, but as the orgasm hit, I finally understood what people meant when they said they saw fireworks.

In a beautiful, perfect instant, radiant bursts of light ignited my entire world.

Chapter 20

Xander

When we finally collapsed onto the mattress, breathing hard and clinging to each other even harder, the candles had all burned out. The room was completely dark, but behind my eyes, I saw fireworks of light.

“Do you feel better now?” she whispered sleepily, tucked perfectly against my chest. Her lips slid against my collarbone as she spoke in clumsy half-kisses.

“As good as I can feel,” I promised. The pain in my chest was still there, but now I had a name for it. It stayed there, a definable bruise shaped like my greatest fear.

I could never lose her. Never. Especially not now that she was mine.

“Did you mean it?” she whispered, even quieter. “When you said I was your mate? That was real?”

I smiled and squeezed her tighter. “It was real. All of it. Very, very real. I don’t know why it took me so long...why it didn’t happen sooner...”

“It doesn’t matter,” she murmured. “I’m yours. It happened now.”

I rested more soundly that night than I had in years. In my dreams, Felicity and I were wolves again, running together through the forest beneath the full moon. I rushed up ahead of her, taking the trail in leaps and bounds. When I turned back to see if she would follow, she only hesitated for a moment. Then, she galloped toward me, and we raced each other to the

edge of the ridge, heads tilted back, howling together in a wordless song that was only ours.

The next morning, I woke up first, my cock so stiff that I spent several minutes kissing her face, hoping she would stir so I could have her all over again.

No such luck. She was utterly blissed out, too exhausted to do anything but dream.

Felicity didn't emerge from her bedroom until I had breakfast well underway. She had better stuff in her fridge than I did mine. I wasn't much of a cook, but I could do bacon and eggs. With a little effort, I could even manage toast.

"Hey." She sidled into the room shyly, chin tucked, eyes lowered, fingers pushing a lock of auburn hair behind her ear.

I grinned, turned the frying pan over, and missed the plate I was holding by a solid foot. The yolks of the two eggs I'd just fried up broke against the floor.

"Hey," I said back, still grinning.

"God, you're useless." She laughed, rushing across the kitchen to grab paper towels. She shoved the roll against my chest, hazel eyes sparkling. "I'll fry up some more. *You* get to clean that up."

After the breakfast dishes were done, I drew her to me and kissed her neck. She melted against me, a moan escaping her as my damp hands roamed greedily over her body.

This. This was what I'd been waiting for, wanting, needing without knowing. Just being able to reach out and touch her when I wanted, let my hands wander without worrying if they'd gone too far astray...

Yesterday's tragedy still pierced my heart, but now it felt less like a knife. She'd reduced it to a thorn. A push pin.

I reached between her thighs, grabbing her there as if to say *this is mine*.

It was. *She* was.

"Xander," she breathed against my ear.

“Yes?” Her hips were fucking gorgeous. I squeezed one with my free hand, my mouth watering as I considered how nice it would be to bite.

“You have to stop now.” She laughed, pushing me away. Half-heartedly, I noticed. “I’ve gotta get ready for work.”

I narrowed my eyes and cocked my head to the side. “No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.” She reached down, grabbing my cock and giving it a firm squeeze that ended far too soon.

Then, she twirled away from me, but not fast enough or far enough out of reach.

“Come on. Play hooky.” I caught her wrist, reeling her back in. “Spend the day with me instead.”

“If I don’t go to work, I’ll get fired.”

I shrugged. “Quit your job.”

“If I don’t have a job, I won’t have any money,” she reminded me.

“I have money,” I said, as if the thought had just occurred to me. “You can just spend mine.”

“I have patients who need me, Xander.” She flipped her hair, a swish of shiny auburn, as she tugged her wrist from my grasp and turned away again. “And I make my own money, thank you very much.”

I ambled after her, cutting her off in the hallway before she could get any farther. I placed my hands against the wall, blocking her path.

“Why won’t you just let me take care of you?” I looked her up and down, then gave her my most charming smirk. “I was pretty good at taking care of you last night.”

“I’ve been taking care of myself for a very long time, Mr. Miller.” She tickled beneath my chin with the tip of her index finger, and I suppressed the urge to stomp my foot. “If I need help on that front, I’ll let you know.”

I relented. “Please do.”

Stubborn. Eventually, I'd find a way to fix that. She was my mate. It was my responsibility to provide for her. Once I had it my way, she'd never have to work again.

My gaze wandered to her neck, where several bite-sized purple bruises had bloomed on her skin. Frowning, I brushed my fingertips against the largest one. "Ah, sorry about these."

"What?" Felicity gave me a puzzled look, then ducked beneath my arm and darted into the bathroom. I followed her to the mirror, mapping out every hickey with her fingertips. "Oh. Wow. You really did a number on me, huh?"

"The urge to, ah...sink my teeth in you and claim you as my mate was pretty strong," I admitted. "I'll be better next time."

She smirked and reached for her toothbrush. "No need. I know how you wolves feel about marking your territory. Plus, the residents will love them. I think they have a betting pool going over when I'll next get laid."

She didn't kick me out when she got into the shower. The urge to jump in with her was strong, but I knew better than to give in. She'd made it clear that for whatever asininely noble reason, she was going to work.

Once I had her pinned against the tile beneath the hot water, we wouldn't be done for hours. I was a greedy bastard, but not an inconsiderate one.

The shower sex, unfortunately, would have to wait.

Instead, I busied myself by picking up around the house. Sniffing the Chinese food I'd brought over last night, which we'd promptly forgotten, I put it by the door. There were some stray dogs by the reservoir that would be thrilled to eat the chicken. The rest, I could compost.

I made coffee on autopilot, adding cream and sugar into her mug just the way she liked it.

There were more benefits to being mated to my best friend than I'd previously realized. For example, I'd never get her coffee order wrong. I already knew it by heart.

“Oh, God,” she moaned—a little *too* deliciously, in my cock’s opinion—as she emerged from the bedroom and found me waiting for her, coffee at ready. She took her mug in both hands and scrunched up her nose in adorable delight as she breathed in its steam, her shoulders slumping with relief. “You’re a lifesaver.”

I continued admiring her. Everything about her. She was a lot to look at. An intricate piece of artwork you had to zoom in on, enjoying its every detail, square inch by square inch. “You look good.”

“In these?” She stared down at her work clothes: a loosely fitted sunflower yellow top with matching pants. “They’re just scrubs.”

“Nothing is just anything when you’re wearing it,” I assured her. Those hips of hers...Christ. The desire to sink my teeth into them wouldn’t leave my mind, nor would the yearning to fill her with my cock again. To claim her cunt with my dick, her lips with my mouth, her womb with my seed. Pump her full of cubs and parade her around town so that everyone knew how lucky a man I was. Then...

“Do I have something on my face?” she asked, and I realized I’d been staring. From the sound of it, I’d been staring for an awfully long time.

I gritted my teeth and had to physically shake the lust out of my head.

“No,” I assured her, moving closer. Less like a half-brained dog in search of a leg to hump this time, thankfully. “But you’re about to.”

I could still taste the coffee on her lips ten minutes later as I headed to Dad’s place to start my day.

I’d gotten a text from Dad just after seeing Felicity off. Connell Huxley had spoken to his brother-in-law, and their talk had gone better than expected.

We had an audience with the council of elders for the Carter’s Creek pack.

* * *

Wolf shifters were particular creatures. Every type of shifter had their own hierarchy, their own culture and values. Wolves were less solitary than polar bears, less human-shy than snow leopards, and more patriarchal than hyenas. More monogamous, too, for that matter.

Unlike cat shifters, who were selective and aloof but tended to slink into the lives of humans as if they were entitled to being fed and pampered for nothing in exchange, we liked to earn our keep when we entered a human's life.

And unlike many humans, we respected our elders. It was a holdover from the days when we'd all been starving or at war. The oldest members of a pack held more than just the wisdom of their life experience. They knew how to survive, period. Even as an alpha, I heeded their advice.

With any luck, Quincy Houghton would do the same.

We met at The Nook, a dingy diner in Carter's Creek. Normally, I would have been uneasy about setting foot in Quincy's territory, but he had never banned us from Carter's Creek, and today, we were here on their invitation.

If things went well, this spat between our packs wouldn't continue for much longer, and the Carter's Creek wolves would be welcome again in Evergreen.

The Nook was dark as Dad and I walked in. At first, I wasn't sure if it was open yet, but then the lights flickered on and off.

Faulty wiring. Much like the rest of the town, this place was going to shit.

Three women and one man waited for us in the only occupied booth.

"Sorry about the ambiance," one of the women said as she stood. She shook my hand, then Dad's. "Doris Houghton. You must be the Miller boys."

“You must be Quincy’s mother,” I replied. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, you sweet, sweet man.” Doris laughed. “We both know that this visit is no pleasure at all.”

Doris introduced us to the rest of the elders: Elaine Sullivan, Ruth Walsh, and Tommy Morgan, a widower who had been married to Connell Huxley’s sister. They assured us they’d be paying for our meals today, and no matter how Dad and I protested, they wouldn’t take no for an answer.

It was a shame. Given the run-down state of the diner, I would’ve liked to spare no expense to put some money into the place. But with the Carter’s Creek elders picking up the tab, Dad and I were careful to order on the cheaper side: simple cheeseburgers, no bacon, sides of fries, just water to drink.

I’d make up for it by leaving a fat cash tip.

“Cheeseburgers.” Doris Houghton chuckled. “That’s apt. From the sounds of things, our packs have fresh beef.”

“I hope they’re smashburgers, in that case,” I joked. Best if we kept things light. People were more willing to work with you if they weren’t afraid you were about to walk out and snap their son’s neck. “It’s a beef I’m eager to quash. I never meant any insult to your pack—or to your son or your granddaughter.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice,” Doris scoffed. “Frankly, when Connell reached out to Tommy, we were all pretty shocked. For years, I’ve been telling Quincy to get his daughter on that Growlr app and meet someone from the city. A sigma with no pack of his own is what Carter’s Creek needs right now, not a goddamned turf war.”

“You didn’t know Quincy was trying to set Melony up with Xander?” Dad asked, discomfort clear in his voice.

“If I’d known, I would’ve put a stop to it. Which is probably why he didn’t mention it.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Dad said with a sigh. He was right. So far, Ma had been pretending that she was sticking to the old

ways—matchmaking out of necessity.

But if she'd gone by the old ways, Doris Houghton should have been her first stop. Not an afterthought or someone she didn't bother following up with at all.

“My son tries his best, of course, but he's got a streak of nasty pride in him,” Doris continued. “It's his father's fault, God rest his soul. We're a failing pack, boys. Even if we were spoiling for a war with you, we simply don't have the juice.”

“Your son seems to think otherwise,” I pointed out.

Doris snorted. “My son is the last alpha born in this pack in two generations. Once he's gone, we won't have an alpha. Town's dying, pack's dying...a few months ago, we did suggest that he might reach out to Evergreen for assistance. Seems he spoke to your mother instead.”

“He did. She shouldn't have encouraged him,” I grumbled. If Ma and Quincy had been a little quicker on the uptake—and a little less ham-fisted in their approach—I might have actually taken Melony out on a date or two.

Thank fuck they'd bumbled it from the get-go. I had a mate now—a real one. And she outshone Melony Houghton by an infinite mile.

“My wife was out of line.” Dad shook his head. “If there was any misunderstanding about how Xander would take to Melony...she forgets sometimes that she's not the alpha's wife anymore. It wasn't her place.”

“I understand that better than you'd think,” Doris said. “Quincy's father died when Quincy was just a cub. Shot dead by a hunter when Quincy was about a year old.”

I lowered my eyes respectfully. Next to me, I sensed Dad doing the same. “I'm sorry to hear that, Ms. Houghton.”

“Don't be,” Doris scoffed. “Elias was asking for it. He liked to stay in his wolf form for too long. Days at a time, if he could manage it. It wasn't good for his head. The hunter was cleared of murder in court. Judge ruled it self-defense. I didn't bother contesting it. Quincy wasn't even ready to wear big-

boy underwear at the time. He certainly wasn't ready to lead. I'm an alpha myself, so I stepped up to the plate."

I glanced up at her.

She was smiling wistfully. "It's not easy, giving up the reins."

"I can imagine," Dad said.

"If you're lucky, imagining's the worst you'll ever have to do." Doris dabbed at her lips with a paper cocktail napkin. "Still, having been in similar shoes to your mother...I don't know what to tell you. I always had my doubts about Quincy taking over the pack. Like I said, he's too much like his father. Headstrong. Stubborn. Not good with constructive criticism. The boy's got too much wolf in him. It's not healthy. You, though..." She stared at me for a long moment. I tried to guess what was going through her head, but she had an excellent poker face. "It's a shame you didn't warm up to Melony. Wouldn't have minded you mating into our line. If I were your mother, I'd be proud."

I laughed a little too loud and very much by accident. "Next time you see her, you be sure to let her know."

We finished the meal with casual conversation. Nothing too heavy. We talked about the weather, the local high school sports teams, whether winter would come back to kick us in the teeth again before Easter or if we'd have a nice, warm spring.

When our plates were clean, Doris waved to the waitress for the check.

"Let's settle this up now," she suggested while she waited. "Whatever damages were done to your bank, we'll pay them. That's fair, isn't it?"

"That's not necessary, Ms. Houghton," I informed her. From what I knew of Carter's Creek, covering our meal would already be a strain on their finances. We didn't need to add more to it. "Dad and I already took care of the damage. Wasn't extensive. An easy fix."

“Don’t patronize me, boy. I insist. Have your accountant send us an invoice.” Doris nodded to herself, as if it was already decided. Yeah, she was definitely an alpha, through and through. “In addition, we’ll be speaking to my son about his actions and the actions of the men he leads. Being the alpha is not an easy task. It’s not meant to be. He needs to learn that. The hard way, if necessary.”

Dad and I left The Nook in good spirits. I tucked a hundred-dollar bill under my plate as thanks to our waitress and as a sign of goodwill.

Speaking to Doris Houghton had been illuminating, if nothing else. I wasn’t sure how much power she had to change Quincy’s mind, but she was willing to try. That went a long way in my book.

* * *

Ma’s car wasn’t in the drive when I dropped Dad off back at their house. I was a little concerned that she was making her rounds again, harassing the pack elders and anyone else who would listen.

But when I pulled up to my house, I saw her car parked where my truck normally went. So, she wasn’t on the campaign trail. To her credit, she’d even shown a modicum of restraint and avoided barging into my house, though that was more likely because I’d started locking my doors.

As I got out of the truck, she exited her car as well.

“You here to tell me off again?” I asked as she jogged up to walk alongside me. “Didn’t work last time. Won’t work this time.”

“It’s Dylan.” A question, not an order. She laid a hand on my arm. It was better manners than she’d shown in a while, so I slowed to a stop to hear her out. “I haven’t heard from him since Macy’s mating ceremony. And even then, he didn’t seem excited to see me.”

“Wonder why. You’re not very nice to the kid.”

“I’m worried about him,” she said, and for a moment, the look in her eyes was so pure that I almost believed it.

“Dylan’s been ready to jump ship since he was eighteen, Ma. He’s a sigma. If you want him to call you just to chat, you’ll have to wait until he hits his golden years.”

I headed for my door again. Ma’s concern was heartbreaking—if you were a sucker for that kind of thing. This was the same routine she always pulled when she perceived she was losing power. Kingston and I called it the three Cs: cleave, connive, conquer. If she could get us each on our own, she could spin her stories whichever way she liked, then try to sic us on each other. Dylan was just her latest focal point. In a few days, she’d be banging down his door to express all her worries about me.

“He’s my *son!* What if he’s hurt? What if, God forbid—”

“He’s a sigma, Ma,” I said again. “He doesn’t like pack activities, he doesn’t like big crowds, he doesn’t even like family functions—and he’s very capable of taking care of himself. Your little boy is a lone wolf. You should be used to that by now.”

“He’s never fallen off the face of the earth like this before,” Ma insisted. “He doesn’t even post on Facebook anymore.”

“Few guys our age do,” I pointed out.

“Will you check in with him for me? Please.” She grabbed my arm, tugging at it this time. “Please, Alexander. I want him to come to Easter dinner. The family should all be together again, just for one day. It’s important.”

“Getting lonely without making social calls to the pack?” I hadn’t forgotten the way she’d tried to skirt her punishment. Far from it. “Or are you circling the wagons after Sylvia Abner told you to leave her alone?”

She drew back, eyes narrowed. “I was only looking out for the pack’s best interests.”

“Yeah, you’ve been doing that a lot lately.” I fished my house keys out of my pocket. “To limited results.”

“Will you ask him, at least?” Ma pleaded as I slipped the key into the door. “About dinner?”

“I’ll ask,” I relented. At least it would give me a chance to hear Dylan’s side of the story. If he was blanking her, there was sure to be a good reason. “I can’t guarantee he’ll be there, though.”

“*You’ll* be there, though. Won’t you?”

“Depends.” I paused before opening the door. Dealing with Ma when she was in the middle of one of her blatant manipulation campaigns was kind of like navigating a horror movie villain: lock the doors, give no purchase. I had to operate on vampire rules: string up the garlic and don’t invite them in. “Is Felicity invited?”

Ma tensed. “She’s not family.”

“She’s my mate.”

“Stop calling her that. She isn’t your mate. Melony Houghton is your mate.”

Ah. And there it was.

She was back on *that* shit again.

“You keep telling yourself that, Ma. You see how far it gets you. Whether you like it or not, Felicity’s it for me.” I smiled and shrugged. “I had the dream.”

Her jaw dropped. “You did not.”

“I did,” I assured her. “She’s mine. I’m hers. So I’m telling you now—not as your son, but as your alpha—cut the crap. No more sniping, no more snide little remarks. My wolf chose, and he chose *her*.”

“I didn’t realize I’d raised such a *liar*.”

“You didn’t. Felicity is part of my life now. If you keep trying to fight that fact, I won’t be able to say the same about you.”

“You would disown your own mother? Over a woman? A *human*?”

“If you force my hand, you’ll leave me no choice. My children might be born human. My *cubs*. I love you, Ma, but you’re barking at cars here. Keep chasing this, you’ll only end up hurt.”

“You’d put your half-breed children over your own mother?” She smacked my chest with the back of her hand. “I raised you better than that. I know I did.”

I grabbed her wrist and moved it out of my personal space. “I’d put my cubs before anything. Especially before people who don’t think they should exist.”

“On second thought, don’t bother showing up for Easter dinner.” She recoiled from me like my touch had burned her. I suspected she’d feel the same way if she touched a crucifix or set foot in a church. “You won’t be welcome, anyway.”

She stared at me expectantly, waiting for a reaction. That was all this had been, really. A series of tests. An exercise to get a rise out of me and make me feel guilty. Make me do what she wanted me to do. Sometimes, I was certain her only goal was to make me feel like trash.

Back when I’d been a kid, it had worked. *Sorry, Ma. I’ll be better.*

But I wasn’t a kid anymore. I gave her nothing. Just a blank-faced stare.

“You’ve changed, Alexander,” she snarled when she realized she wasn’t getting anything more out of me. “And not for the better.”

She stormed off, jumping into her car and slamming the door behind her. Even the way she turned the ignition on broadcasted anger.

Her tires screeched, billowing black smoke and burned rubber as she backed out of my drive and tore away.

Chapter 21

Felicity

Another Friday at Evergreen Hills. Another day of too much to do and not enough time to do it. Roger had been in first thing to let us know we were invited to a little work party in the break room over lunch. It seemed his new strategy for dealing with the staffing issues was token gestures. As if a sub and a few cookies could smooth over the fact that some of the aides had started whispering about striking.

With the week I'd had, Xander's offer to let me spend his money was becoming disconcertingly tantalizing. After setting up a dozen IV drips on tired, cranky, already dehydrated patients with a dozen more to go, I would have liked nothing more than to walk out, crawl into his bed, and sleep my troubles away while waiting for him to return from his own shifts.

I was his mate now, after all. By wolf standards, I should be lying around and waiting for him to come fuck a baby into me.

Instead, I got to deal with Lexi.

We'd been scheduled to work together several times since the incident at the carnival. She hadn't shown up for a single one—until today. Lexi was always trading shifts with the other RNs, but after the third or fourth time someone else arrived to work in her place, I began to get the sense that she was avoiding me.

Even today, she didn't let me get anywhere near her. As soon as I walked into a room, she found an excuse to leave it.

Discussing residents or workloads with her was impossible. It was like I had the plague. When we filed in for Roger's lunch party, she made sure to be on the opposite side of the room.

"We've been without charge nurses for too long," Roger announced. "So, it's my immense pleasure to announce that I'm promoting someone to help fill in the gaps."

He opened the cake box. There, written in royal blue icing, were the words *Congratulations, Felicity!*

I blinked at it, trying to decide if this was good news or not.

"Well, come on!" Roger urged, waving me over. "Cut the cake, and let's eat."

I shuffled through the politely applauding crowd, grabbed a butter knife from the silverware drawer of the kitchenette, and started slicing the cake as Roger had asked. It seemed a little wrong to cut into my name, but at least it gave me a chance to consider what this meant.

Normally, I was pretty sure there would have been a meeting. A one-on-one with Roger where he offered me the position, and I accepted it. But standard management practice wasn't Roger's style. By cutting the cake, I guessed I was accepting the job.

It would probably mean more money. Scratch that—I would track Roger down and make *sure* this meant more money. Taking over the charge nurse duties was a big responsibility and more work. But it was also a major step up in my career.

Nothing I couldn't handle. A good thing, actually.

"Congrats, Felicity!" Gena appeared at my side once the cake-eating had commenced. The cake itself was a little on the rough side—it was mostly frosting—but seeing Gena was always a good surprise.

"You're working today?" I asked. "I didn't think you were scheduled."

“Roger let it slip during my shift earlier. I just popped in for moral support.” She nodded toward Lexi, who was glaring at me from across the room. “Everyone’s saying your name has been in her mouth an awful lot lately. When I saw she was scheduled with you today, I doubted she was going to take this news well.”

“Yeah, I think our friendship is very much over. If you could even call it a friendship in the first place.” I smiled at Gena with gratitude. “Thanks for coming. I’ll take whatever moral support I can get.”

“What’s her problem? You’re nicer to her than I am, though I don’t know why.” Gena smirked wickedly. “Did you hear she was escorted out of the carnival? I heard she was drunk as a skunk, and they had to make her leave.”

“That’s probably why she’s not my biggest fan right now.” Quickly, I gave her the run-down of the encounter with Lexi at the carnival. The part where Xander told her off and got her thrown out was the crown jewel of the highlight reel.

“That’s incredible. I didn’t think Xander could get any hotter.” Gena fanned herself. “And yet...”

“It was good of him, yeah.” Across the room, Lexi had drawn a small audience. She threw her head back in a pointed swish of cotton candy hair, laughing like she was in a Dove commercial. I didn’t know why, but I had the strangest sense that I was the butt of the joke that had prompted her cackling. “Looks like I’ll be paying for it for a while, though.”

“Oh, please.” Gena rolled her eyes. “This is Lexi we’re talking about. Her disliking you is practically a compliment. Enjoy your win, and forget about her.”

* * *

Following Gena’s advice was surprisingly easy, what with Lexi avoiding me and my thoughts being elsewhere. When I got a moment to take Roger aside, we discussed my new schedule—three twelve-hour shifts a week, minimal overtime

—and nailed down my salary increase, which was enough to make my eyes turn greener than Xander’s.

Even though my official start date wasn’t until next week, I spent the rest of my shift thinking about how I’d tell Xander the good news. He would be proud of me; I was sure of it.

There was a fresh spring in my step when I went out to the Flamingo after my step. I was pretty proud of me, too.

Before I headed home, I stopped off at the Hannaford for groceries. I shot a text to Xander as I headed inside.

Dinner tonight? I’ll cook.

He answered so quickly, it made me laugh.

Good God, woman. Is that even a question?

The Hannaford was busy tonight. Its brightly lit aisles were bustling with shoppers, their perfumes and colognes mingling with the scent of fresh bread from the bakery and bouquets of flowers by the door. As I moved into the flow of shuffling bodies and squeaky shopping carts, I felt their eyes on me. It made me tense for just a moment, then I let it go.

I needed to get used to attracting more attention. I was Xander’s mate now, a thought that still made my heart flutter. Wherever Xander went, he was a magnet for their stares of interest. That extended to me now—whether he was with me or not.

If we ever got married, or had kids...

Well, it wouldn’t get any *better*.

As I finished my shopping, I noticed fewer people in the store. Normally, that would have pleased me. Fewer people to gawk at me, shorter lines at check-out. But even with fewer eyes on me, my skin prickled strangely. The muscles in my shoulders tensed.

If anything, I felt even *more* watched now.

Something wasn’t adding up.

Getting a weird feeling here, I texted Xander while I waited in line. I felt silly even admitting it, but Xander’s inner

wolf operated almost exclusively on vibes. I knew he'd understand.

Where are you? Hannaford still?

I sent back an affirmative and shifted my weight from one foot to the other as the line crept forward. The sense of wrongness clung to me like a bad smell even after I finished checking out and started walking to the Flamingo.

I put my groceries in the trunk in double time.

Shifters were known for their heightened senses. I believed that in certain circumstances, humans possessed them, too. You heard about it on the news. The skydiver who survived an impossible fall when his parachute failed to deploy. The mother who developed super strength when her baby was trapped in a burning car. A woman who would avoid a certain man for years without quite knowing why, other than that eerie gut feeling that told her something wasn't quite right, until one day, the police called to let her know he'd been arrested for speeding three blocks away from her apartment with a handgun in his glove compartment, rope in his trunk, and a shrine to her in his basement constructed out of personal items he'd stolen from her trash.

As I hurried to put my cart away, my every sense overwhelmed me. The crunch of late winter snow melt and dirty sand beneath my shoes. The smooth plastic of the cart's handle, suddenly sweaty beneath my palms. The scent of burned oil from the old beater parked near the cart return.

The pounding in my heart, fast and hard like a little bunny's while a hawk circled it from above.

The cart return was tucked along the side of the building in a tiny alcove created by the massive metal outdoor recycling station and Hannaford's outer wall. Behind it, a stretch of dead grass mottled with clumps of snow sprawled back into the thick line of narrow pine trees. No sign of danger, though the sense that *something* was coming was inescapable.

I shoved my cart between the metal rails. Nothing jumped out to grab me. No gunman placed their pistol on the back of

my head.

Maybe I was just being paranoid.

I turned back to the parking lot, breathing a sigh of relief.

The sigh never made it all the way out of my lungs.

It happened the way all terrible things do: much too fast. A body shifted out from behind the recycling station. Fingers closed around my neck. An arm wrapped across my body, dragging me back.

A voice hissed in my ear. “Move, and I’ll claw your throat out.”

Fear consumed me. My hands trembled. My breath hitched.

Whatever bad thing I’d sensed coming back in the store was here.

“I said *don’t move*,” he growled again as the shaking in my hands overtook the rest of my body.

It was then that I recognized his voice. My attacker wasn’t some mystery man. It was Quincy Houghton. Quincy’s fingers squeezing around my windpipe. Quincy’s words in my ear. I’d only heard him speak once before—at Macy’s mating ceremony—but he’d had that same inflection when he confronted Xander. Crazy fury baked into every syllable.

I was fucked.

“Okay. Okay, I’m not moving,” I lied as I slowly slipped my hand into my coat pocket.

My phone was in there, with my messages to Xander still open. If I could hit the call button in the upper right corner, he’d answer.

If this went south, he might be able to get to me before I bled out.

“I want you to deliver a little message to the alpha for me.” Almost affectionately, Quincy smoothed down my hair with his free hand. “Can you do that?”

“Of course.” It was in my best interests to be agreeable right now. If he wanted me to deliver a message, it meant he planned on letting me live.

Inside my pocket, I tapped at my phone screen with my thumb. I couldn’t hear whether the call went through, but I trusted my muscle memory.

If he wanted Xander to get his message, he’d get his wish.

“Tell him that his reign will soon be over. Tell him that I’m coming for what’s his.” Quincy lowered his speech to a hiss, but Xander had better hearing than me. If he’d answered my call, he’d hear Quincy’s every word. “Tell him he turned my pack against me, so I intend to return the favor.”

“Okay,” I replied, my voice wavering despite using my best customer service tone. “I’ll let him know. Anything else?”

Quincy’s chuckle was harsh and cruel. “Tell him that if he really thinks his pack will suffer a human weakling as his mate, he’s wrong. You’re a pathetic match for him. If you’re smarter than you look, you’ll get out while you still can.”

The screeching of tires tore across the parking lot. Behind me, Quincy flinched.

“Bitch. You tipped him off.” It wasn’t a question. His fingers tightened around my throat as something warm and slick moved against my ear.

He’s licking me. I recoiled with disgust, but I couldn’t flee.

Quincy let go of my neck and shoved me forward. I stumbled and slammed against the cart return. Behind me, I heard him spit.

“You taste like fucking *dirt*.”

I turned just in time to see him run.

I thought about chasing after him, but my legs were frozen in place. Even if I could move, I wasn’t sure what I could have done. Even in human form, Quincy could easily overpower me—as he’d just proved.

If I followed him, and he decided to shift, I was as good as dead.

Boots thundered against the pavement behind me. Xander's, I thought. Must have been. I should have felt relieved about that, but my consciousness seemed to have separated from the rest of me. I sensed my knees go weak, but I couldn't do anything to stop them from giving out. I was outside of myself: my body, right where Quincy had left it; my mind, three feet to the left.

"Felicity. Cheeks. Come on, talk to me. Did that fucker hurt you?"

I opened my eyes, back in my body—and in Xander's arms. His hands roamed my body frantically, searching for wounds. A furious scowl marred his brow. His pupils were pinpricks in raging seas of green.

"He went for the trees." I brushed my fingers against my throat and felt the sting of developing bruises. "He's getting away. If you go now—"

Xander glanced to the trees, then shook his head. "No. You're more important. Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so." I could breathe. I wasn't bleeding. Save for the bruising on my neck, the worst hurt I had was my sense of shame. "I just...I froze. I knew something was wrong, but I needed to put my cart back, and when I came back here, he grabbed me and...and I'm so sorry, Xander, I—"

"Stop." He scooped me into his arms and cradled me against his chest. "You're not hurt. You're not dead. That's all that matters. We're gonna get you somewhere safe. Okay?"

Weakly, I nodded. "But—"

"Cheeks, leave it," he snapped.

"Where's safe?" I asked, my voice breaking into a sob.

He'd gotten me while I was buying groceries. Here in Evergreen, where most people didn't lock their front doors.

"I'll call Brody or Dad and have them pick up your car," Xander said, ignoring me. "You got your keys?"

I thought hard, blinking back tears. “In my pocket. With my phone. I called you—”

“I know. I heard. Was already on my way.” He kissed my temple hard as he carried me back to his truck. “You did right, sweetheart. Okay? You did everything right. Nothing’s wrong.”

“But where—”

“Home, Felicity,” he finally answered. “I’m taking you home.”

Home, as it turned out, was Xander’s place, not mine. I didn’t even have the courage to argue. What I wanted was to be in my own bed, shut in my own room, to nurse my own fucking shame—but Xander had saved me, Quincy was still out there somewhere, and even once we were safely inside Xander’s house with the doors locked, I could barely speak. All my body seemed capable of was trembling and producing silent tears.

Xander gently settled me on the couch and kissed my cheek. I stared straight ahead at a blank space on the wall.

“He had a message for you. He said to tell you—” I finally worked up the guts to say, but Xander cut me off.

“I don’t care what the fuck he has to say. Quincy was never known for his fuckin’ oratory skills.” Xander crouched down in front of me and took my face in his hands. “Are you sure you’re okay? He didn’t hurt you? He didn’t—”

“I’m fine,” I said tonelessly, unable to meet his eyes. My vision lost focus as I stared past his ear. “Really. I am.”

The silence that followed told me he didn’t buy it, but eventually, he sighed and nodded.

“Alright. I’m gonna go make some calls. I’ll be right back. Sound good?”

He took a blanket from the back of the couch and wrapped it around me. It was only then that I realized how cold I was. Like all the warmth had fled my body the second Quincy

released me. Like he'd drained it from my jugular with that swipe of his tongue.

Chapter 22

Xander

Quincy Houghton was a dead man. I was going to fucking kill him.

Sink my claws into his chest and turn him to ribbons. Bash his head against the earth until his skull cracked like an egg. Clamp my jaws onto his neck and tear out his throat. I mulled over my options as I made my calls. Right now, imagining all the different ways I could commit murder was all that calmed me down.

My first call was to my father. I explained the situation and let him handle the rest. We needed pack members in the woods to hunt Quincy down, and more vulnerable members on lockdown. Quincy may have targeted Felicity first, but that didn't mean she was the only name on his list.

"We'll find him," Dad promised. "I'm so sorry, son. I know how scared you must be right now."

"I'm not scared. I'm fucking furious." I glanced back into the living room, where Felicity was still staring at the wall. She hadn't moved since I tucked the blanket around her. "I need you to call Dr. Garcia at the clinic. Get him over here as soon as he's able."

"I thought you said she wasn't hurt."

"I want to make sure." That band of purple bruises blooming on her neck needed tending to, if only to ensure that there wasn't more damage underneath. I turned away and lowered my voice, adding, "I think she's in shock."

“I see.” Through the receiver, Dad sighed. “She’s not from our world, Xander. You need to remember that. She’s never been attacked before, let alone by someone like Quincy. Be kind to her, be there for her, and give her time. She might need a while before she’s processed this.”

Kind wouldn’t be the half of it. I’d shower her in kisses, presents, tubs of Ben and Jerry’s—anything she needed. Anything to bring her back to me. Right now, she looked like a ghost of herself. If she grew any paler, she would turn transparent and dissolve into the couch.

After I got off the phone with my dad, my next call was a mere formality.

“Xander?” Doris Houghton answered her phone the second time I tried her number.

“Did you know about this?” I demanded in a ragged snarl.

“Apparently not. What happened?”

“Your son happened. He jumped my mate in a grocery store parking lot about twenty minutes ago. My *mate*, Doris.” I paused, letting that sink in. “I want him dead.”

Her silence went on for long enough, I started to consider telling her exactly how I planned to kill him. *Cut off his fingers one by one and see how much he enjoys being choked by them himself. Hog-tie him and drag him through Carter’s Creek hitched to the back of my truck.*

“I’m sorry, Xander,” Doris finally said. Her voice was hoarse, like she was trying not to cry. “No. I didn’t know.”

“When was the last time you heard from him?” I wanted to believe that Doris had nothing to do with this. I truly did. It would give me no pleasure to end her life along with her son’s. “Did you tell him to back down like you said?”

“Five days ago. All the pack elders confronted him with me. We told him to knock off the vandalism, the dirty deals he was trying to cut—and I made a point of explaining to him that you were in no way beholden to honoring the agreement he made with your mother.”

“How’d he take it?”

Doris sighed. “He didn’t. He said you’d disrespected him, insisted that you needed to pay—”

“And you didn’t think to send a warning our way?”

“I hoped he was only blowing off steam,” Doris confessed. “Naively, it seems. I told him if he didn’t back down, we’d hold a vote of no confidence. He was behaving erratically. I thought the possibility of losing the pack might put the fear of God in him, calm him down.”

“Didn’t work, did it?” And now, Felicity had paid the price.

“He stormed out and took off. No one in the pack has seen him since.”

“My mate was *attacked*, Doris.” *Dig my thumbs into his eyes until they popped. Tear him limb from limb and beat him to death with his own appendages. Light him on fire and watch him burn.*

“And I’m sorry for that. Truly, Xander. Is she alright?”

I glanced back at Felicity. She still hadn’t moved.

“She will be,” I assured her, then ended the call.

It tore me apart to see Felicity like this. If she’d only cried, I could have dried her tears. If she’d screamed at me, thrown shit, told me what a bastard I was for putting her on Quincy’s radar, I would have taken it all. I would have absorbed all her rage until she tired herself out.

I would have liked nothing more than to spend the rest of the night alone with her, cuddling her up, watching that *Pride and Prejudice* movie she liked so much, and waiting for her to come back to herself.

But Felicity and I weren’t an island. We couldn’t just shut ourselves away. I was part of a pack. Now, by extension, so was she.

We’d barely been home for half an hour when they started to arrive.

Brody stopped by first to grab Felicity's keys. She handed them over to him, her face expressionless, without reacting to any of the jokes he was cracking to try to make her smile. When he returned with the Flamingo, he brought in the groceries she'd bought and put them in the fridge. Brody and I debated for a while about whipping up a dinner, but as it turned out, there was no need.

Mandy Spencer showed up with her famous lobster mac-and-cheese and a bottle of wine. Katie Graves arrived shortly after with a mess of piping hot French fries and onion rings from The Farmer's Wife, a telltale sign that she was courting the waitress there again.

They both dumped the food off on Brody and me, then settled in on the couch with Felicity. They didn't coddle her, didn't ask her about what had happened. Katie signed into her Hulu account on my television while Mandy settled Felicity's blanket across all three of their laps. Before I knew it, they were all settled comfortably, watching a period comedy about Catherine the Great.

Brody and I barely had time to fix up plates for them and pour the wine before the next wave of food arrived. Racks of ribs, mashed potatoes, cheddar biscuits, and chocolate chip cookies were deposited on the kitchen table with factory-like efficiency. Paper plates and plastic cutlery were produced as if by magic. Some pack members stayed, filling plates for others or eating a little themselves. Others placed their food on the table like offerings and left immediately to join the search for Quincy.

I was tempted to join them. Felicity still looked shell-shocked, but she seemed comfortable enough on the couch with Mandy and Katie. They'd take care of her in ways I couldn't right now. But as much as I wanted to be the one to bring Quincy in, I didn't dare leave Felicity. Until Quincy was dead, I didn't want her out of my sight.

Quincy had gone rogue. He'd shirked the advice of his elders and abandoned his pack. He was a man with nothing left to lose, and that made him dangerous.

If he was this far off the rails already, there was no telling what he'd do next.

I wanted to kill him, yes. But killing him meant leaving her, and stepping outside would have meant losing even more. I would have missed the moment she snorted at a joke in the show she was watching and the look of surprise that followed. I would have missed watching her eat a bowl of Mandy's macaroni, picking out the noodles first and leaving all the lobster bits for last to savor like a special treat.

I would have missed the moment when Brody and the other pack members finally called it a night, shuffling off to their own homes and lives, leaving the food behind. Only Katie Graves remained, fast asleep on the couch. Mandy hugged Felicity and left to check on Luke, who was out on the hunt with Dad and Kingston.

In the quiet, after I locked the door behind them all, I turned to find Felicity standing in the kitchen, holding a red-tinged wine glass and an empty bowl.

We stared at each other for a long while, like two cowboys at high noon.

Then, she dumped the dishes on the table and rushed to me. I caught her in my arms and held her like I'd never held another woman, like I'd never held anything I'd ever known.

"I'm going to be okay," she whispered against my chest.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Soon," she promised. "I need to get to the okay part first."

* * *

It took a week. I was surprised that it didn't take longer. Humans, as the wisdom went, healed slower than shifters. I expected months to crawl by with little victories and losses, two steps forward, one step back. Felicity took off work, and so did I. There was no need to cook—the pack provided more food than I could ever eat. We watched movies, drank wine, and fell back into each other. Sometimes she flinched when I

touched her. Other times, she grabbed my hands and pressed them hard to her neck like she was trying to leave my mark on her skin.

Imagine my surprise when one morning, I woke to the sound of singing coming from the kitchen. Off-kilter and off-key, sure, and with half the lyrics mumbled and the other half made up, but singing, nonetheless.

I walked in on her dancing wildly with a pair of headphones on, belting out a terrible version of Springsteen's "Jungleland." She twirled and clapped like she was at a ball in *Pride and Prejudice*, a movie she'd committed to memory, then boogied like Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*, a movie I was pretty sure she'd never watched.

Other than the headphones, all she wore was one of my ratty old work T-shirts and a pair of blue panties.

She'd never looked sexier.

I stood in the doorway, unwilling to enter the scene.

"In the parking garage, the pigeons barely mmmmbmbmm the greatest cage," she howled, head thrown back, eyes closed. "Nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh backstreet boys romancing girls with cabbages at TJ's place."

A tiny snort left my nose, though I'd tried to stifle it, and she turned. Lifted a headphone from her ear. Froze.

My smile widened, and she blushed like she'd been caught adding water to her nana's secret vodka bottle.

"You don't have to stop," I assured her. "I'd love to hear more about those cabbages. Sounded pretty serious."

She giggled shyly, pulling the headphones off. "I'm pretty sure those aren't the real words."

"Oh, I know they're not." I gave her a subtle tilt of my chin. An acknowledgment. "Welcome back."

"Well. Had to end it some time, didn't it?" She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Even I knew I was being kind of a bummer."

“You were never a bumner.”

I watched her body language carefully, taking stock of all her little tells. When we were younger, I’d fully believed she was a force of nature. Capable of controlling her temper and holding her tongue effortlessly—two of the things I’d desperately needed as an alpha and two that had never come naturally to me.

Now, I knew better. Felicity had a way of feeling things without admitting she felt them. She buried her emotions so deep that a thousand years from now, alien archaeologists would be the first ones to dig them back up. It was her mother’s fault, if I had to take a wild guess. Eliza Jordan had never been good at letting anyone else’s feelings take up space.

Once I realized how Felicity dealt with her reactions to things, I’d had to get pretty clever at noticing when she was hurt, embarrassed, or ashamed.

She was dancing again, and that was a good sign. But her cheeks were still flushed with shame over it. She still held herself like a spring that had been coiled too tight. She was improving but not fully healed.

“It’s okay, you know. Not being okay,” I said.

“It’s not, though,” she immediately countered.

This fucking woman. Infinitely patient with me. Infinitely impatient with herself.

“Everyone’s been so kind to me. You, especially. But if I’m part of the pack now...I can’t keep dragging everyone down like this. You, *especially*.” She shrugged and forced a smile. “Stuff like dealing with Quincy is just the price of being in your world, right?”

The smile on my lips died. My heart might as well have stopped. “No. Wrong.”

I moved to her slowly, like she was a stray cat that might startle. She stared at me quizzically but didn’t back away.

“What are you doing?” she asked as I gripped her hips and dropped to my knees.

“Asking for your forgiveness.” I pressed my forehead to her stomach, closing my eyes and breathing her in.

“You don’t need my forgiveness.”

“I do. Quincy never should have gotten anywhere near you. This should have been taken care of long ago. That night he showed up at Macy’s mating ceremony...that should have been the end of it. I failed you as an alpha, Felicity. I failed you as a mate.”

“Xander—”

“No. It’s not even right of me, asking this of you now.” I opened my eyes and looked up at her. “Quincy Houghton attacked you. He struck a fear in you so deep, you won’t even speak of it. I’m not asking you to get over it. I’m not asking you to pick up the broken pieces and plaster them back together.” I could feel my eyes changing, flashing red. “I’m asking you to forgive me. When—and only when—I’ve brought you that fucker’s head, or died trying.”

Her mouth fell open as her eyes grew wide. “I never asked you to kill for me, Xander.” She shook her head in defiance. “I definitely never asked you to die for me.”

“Oh, Cheeks.” I smiled, wistful. “You never had to ask.”

Her headphones hit the floor first. Then, she followed, dropping down onto her knees as well. She flung her arms around my neck and tugged me close to her until I couldn’t help but hug her back.

“You don’t need to go to war for me,” she whispered. “This? You, me, here? It’s enough.”

I nuzzled her collarbone, gently avoiding the fading bruises on her neck.

In my heart, I knew it wasn’t true. Quincy wouldn’t stop until he was put down. It was my duty to end him. To Evergreen, to my pack, and most of all, to her.

But when she cupped my jaw with her hand and pressed her lips to mine, for a blissful infinity, duty melted away until she was all that was left.

My need to touch her, smell her, taste her—it was almost too much to bear.

“I want you,” I rasped, roughly tracing the curves of her body with my hands. “Need you, maybe.”

She breathed a laugh. “Only maybe?”

Chuckling, I rolled my eyes. “Bitch.”

Without another word, I moved against her, folding her into my arms and tackling her to the kitchen floor.

“Resorting to name-calling, now are we?” She giggled softly, squirming as I covered her face with kisses.

She shouldn’t have been so surprised. She’d known for a long time that I had a dirty mouth.

“I could call you nicer things.” I pried her knees apart and dropped onto an elbow as I settled between them. Frustratedly, I fumbled with my pants. I couldn’t pull my cock out fast enough.

“Like what?”

“Princess.” I took the shirt she wore in my teeth, yanking it upward to reveal the soft curves of her stomach. Her body was shaped like a pillowy hourglass. There was nothing sharp about her. Everything about Felicity begged to be caressed and worshipped. “Goddess.”

“Goddess, huh?” Her hips rolled up, pressing to mine. “What does that make you?”

“Horny, Cheeks,” I panted, freeing my cock and pulling her panties aside with a growl. “It makes me horny. So, are you gonna help me undress you, or are you gonna watch me tear our clothes off?”

She smirked, so fucking impish and cute that it made my heart melt. “I like it when you tear my clothes off.”

I neglected to remind her that she was wearing *my* shirt. If all her pleasure cost me was a shirt, it was a small price to pay.

I could hardly deny her anything when she smirked at me like that.

She squealed with delight as I ripped the shirt in half. Her breasts jiggled as she laughed. It was mesmerizing.

It took me a moment to remind myself that I could do more than just look. Her whole body was on display for me. She was mine to touch. Mine to use.

Mine to claim and own as I liked.

I took the peachy peaks of her nipples into my mouth, first one, then the other. She mewled for me as I sucked them until they were nice and stiff. My cock throbbed at the taste of her skin.

“You have no business being so damned fuckable,” I swore, pushing her panties aside. There was no time to even rip them apart. I needed her urgently, completely, and *now*.

I guided my cock up and down her slit. Her honey clung hot and sticky to my tip, coating me with her slickness. I entered her with a desperate thrust of my hips, greedy and half-feral.

She wound her arms around my neck, fingertips pressing hard into the base of my skull. I took one of her breasts in my hand as my hips moved against her, sinking my cock deeper and deeper into her wet heat.

“Xander!” she cried out.

That was all it took for me to lose myself in her. My name on her lips. I may have been a wolf, but she was a witch, surely. No woman should have been able to unmake a man just by calling his name. And yet, she could.

I kissed her deeply, savoring the sweetness of her lips. Beneath me, she felt so small, so delicate—and despite that, my body screamed at me to wreck her, ruin her, *destroy* her.

I’d never known anything like this in all my life.

As her back arched and her cries grew sharper, I picked up the pace, pinning her wrists to the kitchen floor. She looked like she would come for me any minute now. I was dangerously close myself.

My balls tensed, eager to empty into her. But no, I couldn't. That was a bad idea. Even in my sex-crazed state, I knew I couldn't. Shouldn't.

But wouldn't it feel so good?

I pushed myself right to the edge, where madness met need. Just a little longer inside her. Just a little more. Her pussy clenched around me in long, intense spasms. Her body didn't want me to pull out, either. It wanted me deeper. It wanted me to find my release while wrapped in her perfect heat.

Roaring, I forced myself to pull out. I rose to my knees and took my cock in my fist. Her eyes were wide as I jerked it a single time. Ropes of pearly liquid shot from my tip, shooting all the way up to her jawline and falling across her breasts, belly, and hips.

"Oh my god," she gasped, sticking her tongue out.

My cock twitched almost painfully as she slicked her tongue down over her lower lip to her chin, lapping up a stray bead of cum that had landed there.

"Fuck." I stared at her for a long moment, dazed by her beauty. Helplessly, I rolled from between her thighs and slumped on the floor next to her. "That was close."

"But no cigar, right?" She peered down her body, fingers brushing against the streams of my seed across her skin. "God, that's a lot."

"Sorry," I panted, and she laughed.

"Of all the things you could apologize for, Xander...not that." She sucked her fingers clean, then rolled over and kissed me. Her tongue flicked against mine, tasting of salt. The kiss was long and lazy and sweet, the kind a man could get lost in—and I did. When she finally pulled back, eyes heavy-lidded,

smiling dreamily, my heart melted into a fucking puddle.
“Never apologize for that.”

Chapter 23

Felicity

We woke in a tangle of limbs in Xander's bed early in the morning. The first wan streaks of sunrise filtering through the curtains across the room tinged Xander's pale gold hair and tan skin with the faintest kiss of orange and pink.

I was careful not to move as I woke up. Lately, the slightest shift of my body in Xander's arms had sent him springing awake and ready to fight, as if assassins had snuck into the room while we slept.

It was a poor way to start the morning, especially after the comforts of the day before.

Yesterday had been a turning point. I'd felt alive again, finally safe and whole inside my skin. Last night, while we finished the last of the food the pack had brought over and watched trashy television, there'd been long moments where I forgot the attack had even happened at all.

Xander's eyelashes fluttered gently as he slept, a sign of easy dreams. His body shifted against mine, arms tightening around me in a luxurious, protective hug. I closed my eyes and reveled in the warmth of his bare chest on my naked skin.

Nestled safely in his soft bed and rumpled sheets, I could almost believe the worst was over. Quincy Houghton was a million miles away. We were a distant afterthought in his mind. The world beyond was safe and kind, and nothing would ever dare to disturb our peace again.

It was a nice delusion. One that I was happy to cling to for as long as I could before reality came rushing back in.

* * *

“What are you smiling about?” Xander asked as we tag-teamed the breakfast dishes. He’d woken up so slowly and calmly, it had taken me nearly half an hour to realize we were doing the same thing: lying still and quiet with our eyes closed in mutually ridiculous attempts to preserve each other’s peaceful rest. “You look like a woman with a secret.”

“I never got a chance to tell you. I got promoted.” I gestured down my body with a wave of my yellow-gloved hands. “You’re looking at Evergreen Hill’s newest charge nurse.”

“Cheeks!” A broad grin crept across Xander’s lips. He stared at me for a moment, eyes sparkling, then pounced and swept me up in his arms. My bare feet dangled in the air as he twirled me around. “You deserve it. Fuck, you deserve everything good and bright in the entire goddamn world.”

“I don’t know about good and bright,” I said with a laugh as he lowered me. “I’ll be management now, in a way. Just like you. The alpha of the nurse pack, retirement home edition.” I bit my lip and sighed. “Assuming I still have a job.”

Recovering from Quincy’s ambush at the grocery store had just about eaten up my stash of vacation days. So far, Roger had been understanding. But as I approached the end of that reserve, I knew I’d be testing the limits of how far Roger’s goodwill could reach in the days ahead.

“Roger wouldn’t dare fire you,” Xander declared confidently. “He can’t afford to lose you.” A wistful look softened those gorgeous green eyes of his. “He’d be better off cutting off his own damn hands.”

“You’re okay with me going back to work, then?” Now that I’d emerged from the chrysalis of my fugue state, I hadn’t been sure how to broach that topic with him. As far as men went, Xander was a reasonable one. It was his snarling, growling inner wolf I worried about.

“Well, I can’t keep you tied to the bed.” His gaze trailed down my body, lingering on my hips. “Can I?”

I laughed. “Not for long, no.”

He shook his head mournfully. “Shame. But if there’s no chance of keeping you under lock and key...of course you can go back to work, Cheeks. We’ll just have to make concessions.”

“Concessions?” I narrowed my eyes. “Such as?”

“Just little things,” Xander promised. “The world’s gonna keep on turning, no matter how I try to slow it down. But from here on out, we need to do whatever we can to keep you safe.”

“Safe sounds good,” I agreed. “I can deal with safe.”

* * *

As fate would have it, there were downsides to being an alpha’s mate who had been targeted by a psychotic rival wolf. I was officially barred from going anywhere near Carter’s Creek, which wouldn’t be a problem. On Xander’s orders, my phone’s location-sharing feature was perpetually on. Had he thought of it, I was pretty sure he would’ve made me swallow an air tag.

Most annoying of all, despite not being a wolf, I had a tail now. Wherever I went, protection followed.

Today, it was Connell Huxley, one of the pack elders. Given that he was a sigma, I wasn’t expecting much small talk.

“Where’re we headed, Miss Felicity?” He lifted his head as I stepped out onto Xander’s front porch, a traveling mug of coffee for each of us in my hands.

Connell was a handsome guy for his age. GILF material, from a purely aesthetic point of view. He’d shown up in his cherry red vintage Chevy first thing this morning to relieve Luke and Mandy Spencer, who’d shared the night shift. Even though I’d told him to come inside where it was a little

warmer, he'd insisted on waiting in his truck. Typical sigma behavior—or so Xander had warned me.

He was tall, even in his old age. His hair was so white, I suspected his wolf's fur was even paler than Xander's when he shifted. He wore a black leather jacket over his crew neck, beneath which I suspected a six-pack was still hiding. His salt-and-pepper beard did little to conceal his strong jawline. Most of all, he had kind eyes, twinkling and icy blue.

"First, coffee." I passed him a tumbler and clinked mine against it. "Then, I'm socializing. Sorry in advance."

I expected him to scowl at that notion. Dylan definitely would have. But he only nodded politely. "No problem at all. Who're we calling on?"

"I wanted to drop in on Nana Jordan for a little while, if that's okay? Her house is about fifteen minutes from here. If you give me your number, I can text you the address."

To my surprise, his face *brightened*.

"Oh, I know where your Nana Jordan lives," he said with a wink. "You just sit back and enjoy the ride."

* * *

Nana Jordan bustled out her front door as we pulled up, still in her pajamas. Her purple-flowered nightgown billowed loose around her stocky body, her pink robe flapping in the breeze.

"You tell that Quincy Houghton if he so much as *thinks* about coming after you again, I'll have him shot, mounted, and hung over my fireplace!" she shouted as she shuffled my way.

I'd only given her a quick rundown of what had happened at the supermarket over the phone, but that had been enough. She wrapped her arms around my waist and hugged me so tight, I struggled to breathe.

"Man outta be ashamed of himself," she grumbled beneath her breath. "Trying to hurt my only granddaughter, I swear to Christ—"

“I’m okay, Nana.” I patted her on the back. “Really. I’m fine.”

“He won’t be. Not when I’m done with him.” Nana pulled back, tears shining in her eyes. She wasn’t just angry, I realized. She was *scared*. Scared for me. “He’s lucky I’m not out there right now, hunting him down myself.”

“Is there room in your hunting party for two?” Connell piped up from behind me. I’d explained to him on the ride over that he didn’t need to come in, but he’d been perfectly enthusiastic about the idea—excited enough that I hadn’t tried to dissuade him.

Nana pulled back slowly, eyes wide as she stared at my guard dog for the day. “Connell?”

She said his name like an accusation. I frowned.

No wonder Connell had been thrilled about seeing Nana. Coupled with that wink from him earlier, I was beginning to get a strong sense that something was going on between the two of them.

Nana, you dog!

“Morning, Caroline,” Connell said pleasantly, looking her up and down. “You mind if we go inside? That bathrobe looks pretty cozy on you, but my old bones wouldn’t mind being out of the cold.”

Oh, so now you want to be out of the cold? I gave Connell a suspicious side-eye as Nana ushered us up the walkway and into the house.

He pretended not to notice.

Inside, Nana relieved us of our coffee tumblers, which she unceremoniously dumped into the sink. She replaced them with real mugs full of nicer coffee still hot from the stove. We settled down at the kitchen table while Connell lurked conspicuously in the background. He had the energy of a guy trying to blend in with a red wall while dressed in a neon green suit.

“Are you spending Easter with Xander’s family, or is he coming here?” Nana asked as the levels in our coffee cups dwindled. “If I’m on my own, I’ll meet up with the girlies for beers and bowling. But if I get you two, I’ll do a rack of lamb.”

“His mother has sort of, um, uninvited him from Easter,” I confessed. “So if you’ll have us, I guess we’ll be here.”

“Uninvited?” Nana scowled. “What the hell did she go and do that for?”

“He wouldn’t say.” I shrugged as guilt twinged in my chest. “Which means it has something to do with me.”

“That woman,” Nana scoffed over her coffee cup. “She’s so much like your mother. If I hadn’t pushed Eliza out myself, I’d be convinced the two had shared a womb.”

“Marianne wouldn’t be happy to hear that. I get the sense she’s got a pretty low opinion of Mom.” And most other people, from the way Xander told it. *Her shit list hits a growth spurt twice a month.*

“Even broken clocks are right every once in a while,” said Nana. “They’re two signs of the same coin, your mother and Marianne Miller. They both think they can engineer their children’s lives without a lick of understanding how either of you tick.” She sighed. “Not that I’m complaining about having you two here for Easter dinner. I’ll whip up a meal fit for an alpha.”

“How about for a sigma?” Connell piped up, apparently reactivated by the mention of being fed.

“Oh, right. We might need a fourth plate,” I told Nana. “Xander has the pack on a strict security rotation. I think poor Connell might have drawn the Easter babysitting shift.”

“If I’m not welcome at the remarkable Caroline Jordan’s table, I can always wait outside while you folks dig in.” Connell winked. I had the strangest feeling that if he wasn’t already signed up for that time slot, he’d be fixing it quickly.

Nana scowled at him for a moment, then nodded. “Four plates, then.”

We finished our coffee, and I turned down Nana's offer of breakfast—much to Connell's disappointment.

"You can always drop me off at Xander's and swing back here, you know," I told him after I clocked him grinding his teeth. I kept my voice low. Nana was in the pantry, searching for a tin so she could send cookies home with me. "Xander never has to know."

Connell snorted. "You're my meal ticket in this house, kid. Just slip me a couple of snickerdoodles in the truck, and we'll call it even."

I wanted to ask him why he was so keen on getting a meal ticket, but Nana reemerged before I had a chance.

"You get home safe," Nana instructed me once the cookies were secure. She gave me a tight, warm hug. Connell moved in like he might get a hug as well, but she only gave him a scathing look.

"Wanna tell me what that was about?" I asked Connell once we were back in the truck.

"Nope." He kept his eyes on the road as he extended his palm to me.

Pouting, I placed a snickerdoodle in his hand.

There was definitely something going on between them. If not currently, then maybe sometime in the past.

I spent the rest of the day in a near-vegetative state. Xander was at work, but my shift didn't start until seven tonight. There was nothing to watch. Nothing to do. Every book I cracked open had some deep, obnoxious flaw that immediately revealed it, rendering it entirely unreadable.

Being alone in Xander's house was strange, like staying in the kind of Airbnb that was clearly someone's home. Xander had told me to help myself to whatever was in the kitchen, but his fridge only contained beer and various forms of fresh meat. His freezer was even worse. I found a rack of ribs, several packages of frozen ground beef, a concerning number of unmarked butcher paper parcels the size of large rabbits, and not a hint of ice cream, fruits, or veggies in sight.

I regretted not staying at Nana's for breakfast.

In the end, I wrote up a list and delivered it to Connell. He promised that one of the pack members would take care of the grocery shopping for me. After the way my last excursion to Hannaford had ended, going back there so soon was decidedly not in the cards for me.

Xander returned home around six to see me off before my shift. I still couldn't get over the way he looked at me, like I was half pin-up girl he wanted to fuck hard against the wall, half-princess he'd been charged to protect from handsy dragons. I didn't know why, honestly. My hair was barely contained in a sloppy bun, and I wasn't exactly dressed to the nines. There was nothing sexy about Crocs and scrubs.

When he kissed me goodbye, his lips were so inviting that I was no longer worried about my clothes—only regretful that I couldn't immediately take it all off.

“You'll have protection there with you all night,” he assured me, cupping my cheeks. “Lloyd Graves and Robbie Reed will be watching out for you. Connell will drop you off, and they'll drive you home. Sound good?”

“Just as long as they stay on the down-low,” I said. “Lexi is scheduled tonight. If she knows I've got my very own shifter bodyguards now, I'll never hear the end of it.”

I couldn't decide what I was dreading more: dealing with Lexi's sour attitude for twelve hours or Quincy potentially showing up to murder me while I was mid-shift.

“They'll behave. As long as everything stays above board, you won't even know they're there,” Xander promised. “But first sign of anything wrong, you call Robbie. Then me. If anything happens, we'll take it from there.”

* * *

My new office was tiny. That was to be expected, of course. Evergreen Hills wasn't exactly the Langham Hotel. It comprised four plain white walls, a metal desk that wobbled

when I pressed on the back right corner, a tiny window with long vertical slatted blinds, and a squeaky chair that looked like it had been pulled straight off the set of *Mad Men*. There was a funky scent in the air, some mixture of overripe brie and stale weed. A sad-looking potted fern, already ringed with shedding leaves, sat in the middle of the desk. The attached card said it was from Roger. Well, it was the thought that counted.

I picked up the fern and gave it a shake to remove as many loose leaves as possible, then carried it to the staff bathroom to give its soil a good soak. With a nice drink of water and some regular misting, I might be able to bring it back to life.

The office was *cozy*, I decided. Not ugly and stinky and small. I could bring in more plants, some scented candles, some nice art for the walls. If the smell prevailed, I could probably rope in one of the pack members to sniff out the source. Maybe one of the residents was hiding their secret stash of drugs and charcuterie in the vents? At the Hills, anything was possible.

The important thing was that the office was real. Real and actually mine. Not bad for ten years of loyal service to this place.

With the plant watered and returned to its place on my desk, I set out again, this time to track down the new day charge. Now that we'd established a proper chain of command, it was almost eerie how orderly everything felt.

"We had a few tiny fires today, but I think we put them out pretty quick," Brenda informed me as she grabbed her coat. "You should be in for a quiet evening."

"Can't complain about that."

"Oh, I should mention, though. Just after lunch, we did have to break up a fight. You might want to watch out for lingering sore feelings."

"A fight?" Of all the problems we normally dealt with here, fights were uncommon. Sex romps, yes. Throwing

hands? Not so much. Most of our residents were of the *make love, not war* era. “Between who?”

“Judith Morgan—one of our new patients—and Lois Havishford. No idea what it was about. We broke it up pretty fast, but there’s going to be some lingering bad blood. Hopefully, it’s all blown over now. Dinner’s over, and Mrs. Morgan is already asleep.”

“Is Mrs. Havishford still awake?” I asked. Mrs. Havishford was a sweetheart. Imagining her getting into a physical altercation with someone was definitely a stretch of the mind—but then again, she *did* have a rascally streak.

“I think so,” Brenda called on her way out the door. “She wouldn’t want to miss *Worst Cooks in America*, would she?”

No, she certainly would not.

Mrs. Havishford’s door was open, and I knocked on the frame as I stepped inside.

“Felicity!” Mrs. Havishford looked up from the armchair in front of her television. Her head was crowned with rows of curlers. On the screen, a woman was trying to mash cherries with a meat tenderizer. “I hear congratulations are in order!”

“Small ones,” I said with a smile. “I got an office. And a raise.”

“You must be within spitting distance of that down payment,” Mrs. Havishford said, turning her eyes back to the TV.

“I am.” My smile broadened. That green door was closer than ever now. “I should have it within the next month or so. Thanks for keeping it off the market for me.”

“Oh, I’m happy to. I wouldn’t want to sell it to anyone who doesn’t love that house as much as I did. Plus...” She beckoned me closer, dropping her voice to a mischievous whisper. “It pisses the kids off something fierce.”

“I hear you’ve been fighting,” I mentioned, giving her a once-over. She didn’t look like she’d been hurt. “Did Judith Morgan try to take your pudding cup?”

“Oh, that nosy old biddy. No, she was just snooping for gossip and getting on my nerves. So I popped her one.” Mrs. Havishford stuck her palm with her fist. “Bap! Right in the kisser.”

“Lois!” I stifled a laugh. I felt bad for poor Mrs. Morgan. Mrs. Havishford showed no signs of remorse.

“Don’t you *Lois* me. She was asking for it. I told her to go kick rocks, and she flashed her eyes at me,” Mrs. Havishford explained. “*Then* I popped her one, and rightfully so.”

I frowned. “Mrs. Morgan is a shifter?”

“I was just as surprised. I thought those shifters usually take care of their own.”

“They do.” Xander would have never allowed one of his pack members to end up in the nursing home. Mrs. Morgan must have been from a different pack. I made a mental note to ask him about it when I got home.

“These are rough days for all of us, I suppose.” Mrs. Havishford shook her head and sighed. “If you’ve come here to convince me to apologize, save it. I’ve already decided that I’ll do it tomorrow. I know what it’s like to be abandoned by your family.”

My heart ached for her. Mrs. Havishford put up a good front, but I knew deep down that the way her children treated her hurt her.

“If I’ve got time when I’m done with rounds, why don’t I come back and sit with you for a little while?” I suggested. “If you’re not asleep already, we can watch *Beat Bobby Flay*.”

“You’re such a sweetie, Felicity.” Mrs. Havishford smiled to herself and shrugged. “If you’ve got time.”

I made time. After finishing my first set of rounds, I checked in with the nurse’s station before heading back to Mrs. Havishford’s room. We sat for a half hour or so, chatting and keeping one eye on the TV. Mrs. Havishford had a number of scathing opinions on Bobby Flay, as it turned out. Before long, she had me in stitches.

“You know they don’t even give the contestants prize money if they win?” Mrs. Havishford informed me. “All they get is bragging rights! Like it’s *hard* to whoop that Flay boy’s candy ass in the kitchen. Stinks like a big old ego trip, if you ask—oh.”

The television turned off abruptly, leaving us in the dark. A second later, the emergency escape lighting kicked in, illuminating Mrs. Havishford’s doorway with a soft white glow.

“Power surge,” I said, rising. “I need to go deal with this. You okay in here?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” she assured me. “It’s nearly my bedtime, anyway.”

On my way out into the hall, I got a text from tonight’s bodyguards. *Lights are out. Everything okay?*

So far, so good, I texted back quickly. I was worried about the residents right now, not myself. Some of them had dementia and wouldn’t fare well in the sudden darkness. *If I need you, I’ll let you know.*

Power surges weren’t uncommon. The Hills’ electrical system worked like it’d been wired by three raccoons on Vyvance. We could count on the lights flickering once or twice with every storm. I was halfway to the nurses’ station when the power kicked back in, lighting up the hall in a sudden burst of fluorescence.

“What was that about?” one of the aides clustered at the station asked me. “I checked the weather. Skies are clear tonight.”

“Not sure,” I admitted. “Can you all do a quick set of rounds for me? Make sure everyone’s got power again, and let me know if there are any problems.”

“Can do.” The aides all rushed away, and I sat at the desk to make a note of the surge in my report. We needed to get an electrician here tomorrow morning to see what had caused it. Hopefully, we’d find someone who didn’t hire raccoons.

I joined the aides in checking on the rooms. Everything seemed to be in working order again. A strange thought hit me then.

Lexi was on the schedule, but I hadn't seen her all night. Not that I was complaining, but she *did* have a job to do. Especially given her history of conveniently forgetting to fill out patient charts, I needed to keep an eye on her.

After all, I was kind of her boss now.

I did a full sweep of each unit without catching a single glimpse of pink hair. Where was she? She'd clocked in, but she seemed to have vanished after that.

A bad feeling simmered in the pit of my stomach. Had something happened to her? When the power went out... could that have been Quincy's doing? Lexi and I were hardly friends anymore, but he didn't know that.

If he'd kidnapped her, I'd never be able to forgive myself.

Relief washed over me as I neared the break room and heard Lexi's laughter.

Of course. I should have checked in there first.

"—and the pack's not happy about it," Lexi was whispering as I neared the breakroom doorway. "You know what they call girls like her. *Tail-chasers*. Apparently, everyone's complaining to Xander about it, but he won't budge. His own mother isn't even talking to him anymore. Honestly, it's so sad."

My mouth filled with the taste of copper. Something sharp and jagged twisted between my ribs.

Lexi had no idea I was overhearing any of this. And if it was true...

Xander hadn't mentioned it to me. But of course, he wouldn't.

I bit my lip, fighting back the urge to go somewhere quiet and cry.

I was an alpha's mate now. I needed to act like one. No crying allowed.

"What's so sad?" I asked as I stepped into the break room.

Lexi's eyes widened as she snapped around to gawk at me. "Oh, uh, nothing. Just the rumor mill."

The black-haired aide she'd been gossiping to made a point of putting her coffee mug in the sink and skittering away.

"You know, it's the strangest thing," I said to Lexi. "It sounded an awful lot like you were talking about me."

Lexi snorted. For a moment, I thought she might try to deny it.

She must have decided that there wasn't any point. "I mean, come on, Lissy. You're dating the biggest catch in town. People are going to talk. Not everyone is going to be happy about Xander being off the market."

"It's a good thing it's not my job to keep other people happy then, isn't it?" I gave her a thin smile. "Don't you have rounds?"

"I'm on my break," she said indignantly. "I'm entitled to my fifteen minutes, just like you are yours."

I glanced between the Coke can in her hand and the fleet of empty ones on the counter next to her. "Four Diet Cokes in fifteen minutes must be a new record." I jerked my thumb, pointing her toward the door. "Finish your rounds. The residents need their meds. You can return to your break when your work is done."

I thought she might argue with me, but with a groan, Lexi put her Diet Coke back in the fridge and dumped the others in the recycling bin.

"You know," she said as she passed me on her way out, "you were a lot more likable before you started letting all this power go to your head. Scratch that." She dropped her gaze to my midsection. "It's clearly going to your waistline."

I watched her go, keeping a stiff upper lip until she was well out of sight.

Did the pack really think I wasn't good for Xander? I was proud of how I'd handled Lexi, but her words had sparked a kindling of doubt in my head. If I was a pack member, I'd be annoyed about being saddled with babysitting duty. But no one had mentioned to me that they hated me for it. Quite the contrary. Everyone had been incredibly understanding and kind.

Could it all be just an act?

I sulked for the rest of my shift. Every time I tried to put Lexi's gossip out of my mind, it came creeping back like a bad cold I just couldn't kick.

When it was finally quitting time, I was relieved to hand things off to Brenda again. Twelve-hour shifts were always exhausting, but all my worrying had sucked the life out of me even faster than usual.

"Hey, Felicity! Wait up!"

I turned to see the black-haired aide that Lexi had gossiped with earlier. She jogged down the hall toward me, two vases of flowers in her arms: red roses in one, orange lilies in the other.

"Lexi told me not to tell you about these, but...that didn't feel right," the aide said. "A delivery guy brought these when the power was out. Lexi's had them in her locker ever since."

I sighed. Classic Lexi.

"Thanks for telling me." I took both vases from her, juggling them into one arm so I could read the cards. The one on the roses was from Xander.

For your office. I kept one back at home, so I'll know when they need to be replaced.

I grinned. It wasn't exactly a sweet nothing, but Xander had never fancied himself a poet. The note was thoughtful and practical. Just like him. The fact that he could make flowers appear for me here at work, even in the middle of the night—also classic Xander. If he'd sent the second arrangement just to make Lexi seethe, I wouldn't have been surprised.

I'd read the other card on the way home, I decided. I was too tired to carry both vases back to my office, and I was eager to end my shift.

Outside, I took my phone from my pocket as I waved at Robbie's truck. The headlights flashed in response.

"On your way home?" Xander asked, picking up on the first ring.

"Just heading out now. Thanks for the flowers, by the way. The roses are gorgeous, but the lilies might have been a little too much. Lexi was—"

"Cheeks," Xander interrupted.

"What?"

"I didn't send you any lilies."

"Oh." My heart fell slightly. I'd been hoping the second card contained a message with a little more romance. "Secret admirer, I guess. Hold on. I'll check the card."

"No, don't. Go get in the truck with Robbie and Lloyd and sit tight. I'll be right there."

Xander's truck pulled up just a few minutes later. Either he'd already been close or speeded the entire way here.

"We had eyes on the place all night," Lloyd swore. "The only people in or out were nurses and the flower delivery guy."

Xander narrowed his eyes at Lloyd. "There was only one delivery?"

Lloyd nodded. "Not sure when the lilies arrived, but the roses showed up just like you said they would. I called ahead this morning to make sure our delivery guy could get into the facility since you were sending them over so late. They showed up right before the power went out."

Xander's voice boomed with anger. "The power went out?"

I touched his arm. "Just for a minute. It came back so fast —"

“Not fast enough,” said Xander. “Somehow, Quincy knew I was sending you flowers. When the power went off...I bet that’s when he sent his guy in.”

“We don’t even know they’re from Quincy,” I pointed out.

Xander took the card from the vase of lilies and cracked it open.

“Let’s see.”

His face fell as he read. The air changed so drastically, my ears popped. There was something static around us, making every hair on my body stand a little on end.

Xander’s lips twisted furiously. If bloodlust was a song, it would have been blasting at full volume from every speaker in a twenty-foot radius.

“What does it say?” I asked, terrified of the answer.

“Don’t worry about it.” Xander clenched the card in his fist, crumpling it.

“How can I be anything but worried now?”

I tore the card from his clenched fingers and read it aloud.

“Your wolf won’t always be there to protect you. Humans are such fragile creatures.” I gulped, forcing myself to continue. *“I wonder how quickly I could snap that pretty little neck of yours.”*

Bile bubbled in my stomach. The world went in and out of focus. My brain screamed *run*, but my feet were suddenly made of lead.

“Oh,” I said, too stunned to feel anything but sick. “That’s...not good.”

“No one is going to touch you.” Xander took my face in his hands and pressed his forehead to mine, speaking in a forceful growl. “No one will get anywhere near you, Felicity. Understand?”

His eyes weren’t green anymore. Instead, they were a vibrant yellow, like a neon full moon.

My heart raced, and my words were barely audible when they fell from my lips. “What if they do?”

He gripped me tighter, fingers pressing hard into my skin.

“If they try, they die.”

Chapter 24

Xander

Increased security details. Hourly reports on Felicity's every move. I had a log of everyone she spoke to, complete with time stamps. I approved wherever she went or declined based on calculated risks. A few days after Quincy's flowers arrived at her work, I ordered a package of air tags online. I was still considering asking her to swallow one, but I had a feeling she'd refuse.

Was it too much? I couldn't tell anymore.

His words were what got me. They'd slithered under my skin, burrowed through my muscle, and driven themselves deep into my bones.

I wonder how quickly I could snap that pretty little neck of yours.

I felt like a man obsessed. I was a man obsessed.

Quincy Houghton had threatened my woman. My *mate*.

I wanted nothing more than to lock Felicity in my house like a princess in a tower until he was dead.

She took it all in stride. Every annoyance. Every indignity. She allowed me to monitor her location without complaint. She endured the endless stream of babysitters, trackers, and tails. No more grocery runs. No more drinks at the Wily Elephant after work or casual trips to the coffee shop.

Years ago, Quincy's father had gone rogue, lost all sense of his humanity, and turned into a ferocious, feral wolf who could only be stopped by being put down.

Now Quincy was following suit. I was wholly convinced of it. By targeting Felicity, he'd gone against the wisdom of his pack elders. He'd broken with every tradition our packs held sacred, shattered every semblance of peace. At this point, his intentions reached beyond practicality. This wasn't about making a match between me and his daughter anymore. This was about pure, unadulterated revenge.

He wouldn't rest until he destroyed us.

If he killed her, I didn't know how I'd live with myself.

I didn't know how I'd live at all.

* * *

On a gloomy Thursday a week after Quincy's flower delivery, I found Felicity sitting at the kitchen table in the near-dark. The sun was still flirting with the horizon, casting a fraction of her face in an otherworldly pink-and-orange glow.

Her hair was neatly brushed and pulled back into a sleek bun. She wore no makeup. Normally, that only brought out the natural softness of her features, the heart shape of her face, the entrancing slope of her high cheekbones to the elfin point of her chin. But today, it made her look uncannily severe.

She didn't even look up when I walked in.

"Morning, Cheeks." I dipped down and pressed a kiss to the outer corner of her eye. "How'd you sleep?"

"As well as you did," she said, which was a bad sign. I'd been tossing and turning all night and had hoped she hadn't noticed.

Her coffee cup was near-empty. I moved to the pot on the counter, which was still mostly full. "More coffee?"

"Sure." Her tone was strangely hollow, like she hadn't heard me at all.

I wanted to ask her what was wrong, but was there any point? I already knew the answer. It was etched into every

minute of every day now, our every interaction. Even when I held her at night, all I could think about was losing her.

Most of all, it was written all over her face.

I poured the coffee. Fresh mug for me, refill for her. My next thought was breakfast, but for once in my life, I wasn't hungry. Even my wolf seemed disinterested in food. I grabbed some bread from the cabinet and dragged out the toaster, going over the day's security shifts out loud from memory. The Spencers would hand off the watch to Katie Graves for the day, so Felicity could count on a delivery from *The Farmer's Wife* for lunch if she wanted it. Then, tonight—

She cradled her coffee cup in both hands, but it didn't prevent the foamy surface from trembling. "Am I honestly worth it?"

Her words struck me like a dagger, slicing between my ribs hard and fast.

"You're worth everything." I tried to draw a long, slow breath, but my lungs wouldn't fill up properly. If she had to ask that, I'd failed her. She *was* everything. How hadn't she realized that by now?

"That's not what I asked."

"It's still the answer," I countered. It always would be.

"Okay." She put her cup down with a hard thud and bowed her head. "Let me rephrase, then. Quincy is never going to give up, is he?"

The toaster popped.

"Not until I kill him," I admitted, turning to pull the toast out. It burned my fingers, but I didn't care.

"My place in your life has caused you nothing but trouble," Felicity continued. "Right from the start. We weren't even a fake couple yet when you had me interrupt that date with Melony at *The Farmer's Wife*. And every moment since..."

I tried to smear butter across the surface of the toast, but the butter was too cold and turned to clumps beneath my knife,

tearing the toast's surface.

I froze. "Has it all been so bad?" I couldn't turn to look at her. Not now.

I didn't want to see a *yes* written on her face.

She sighed. "You know that's not what I'm saying."

My grip tightened on the butter knife. "What are you saying, then?"

She took a deep breath. "I'm saying if we keep this up, someone's going to end up dead."

"Nobody's been hurt because of you, Cheeks. Nobody's dead."

"Yet. Nobody's dead *yet*." Her words hit like a hammer on a nail. Like a bullet to the heart. "It's just a matter of waiting now, isn't it? If Quincy dies first, we can pretend this is all over—except it won't be because his brand of batshit seems to be hereditary, and he's got a daughter who hates us just as much as he does. If you kill him, she'll come after us next."

"So, we kill her, too." I didn't even flinch. Melony Houghton might have only been collateral at this point, but Felicity wasn't wrong. If there was ever a woman spoiling for a blood feud, it was her.

"And who will come along after that to avenge her?" Felicity pointed out. "Or maybe it's one of our people who dies first. Connell, or Mandy Spencer, or one of your brothers. Your sister. Your dad. Maybe it's *you* who dies first. What am I supposed to do with myself, then? How am I supposed to live in a world without you in it?"

"That will never happen." I snarled and slammed the knife down as I turned to her. "I swear, Felicity—"

"Or maybe, it's me. I die first." Her lip trembled, but she held her head high. "I know you, Xander. I know you from the top of your stupid golden head to the pit of your soul. Wherever this starts, that won't be where it ends. There's no way around it, and you know that. You have to. This ends in

blood.” Slowly, she shook her head. “More of it than I can take.”

As she spoke, I imagined it all. Shredded necks and lifeless eyes. Broken bodies.

I stopped before I imagined her dead in my arms. It was more than I could bear.

I hated when she was right.

“What do you want to do, then?” The sun was rising now, casting my shadow across the kitchen linoleum. Her face was beautiful and bright, pink and orange with a watercolor of morning light.

Two tears ran down her cheeks, one from each eye.

“We promised, remember? If things go south between us, you said we could call it quits. Clean break. Handle it like adults and go back to being friends.” She forced a thin smile as her tears raced each other down the contours of her perfect face. “Act like nothing has changed.”

“And you think you can manage that?” I fucking couldn’t. Why had I ever agreed to that to begin with? Even back then, I should have known it was a lie. “You think after all of this, you can go back to telling me about your boy problems? Like I’m supposed to be happy about the thought of another man putting his hands on what’s mine? You gonna knock back drinks with me at the Elephant and pretend I’m not thinking about how good it’d be to bring you back home with me and spend the night drunk on your cunt, my head between your thighs?”

“Xander—”

“I’m not finished.” I moved to her in a slow prowl. Inside me, my wolf strained and snarled, desperate to take control. “Tell me how. Explain it to me, real slow, in small words so I can understand.”

She was close enough to touch now. Close enough to pull into my arms and claim with my lips all over again. But when I thought of doing just that, she seemed a lifetime away.

“Tell you what?” Her nose was turning pink now, and not from the sunrise. My shadow stretched over her, shielding her from the light.

“Tell me how I’m supposed to live in a world where you’ll always be my mate, but I’m not even allowed to hold your hand.”

She sniffed, furiously wiping the tears from her eyes. “I’d rather live in a world where we can’t hold hands than a world without you in it.”

She rose abruptly and placed her hand on my chest. Her palm seared as she pushed me back and scurried away.

“So, that’s it, then.” I took another step back for good measure. If I didn’t move back, I would have chased her down the hall.

“What if I fix this?” I called after her. I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t just watch her walk away.

She paused in the doorway, not looking back. “Can you fix it?”

I nodded, mostly to myself. “I can try.”

* * *

There was a box of her things next to my front door, a box I filled as I kept finding the lingering bits and pieces of her. Floral-patterned scrunchies. Stray socks. She’d left that same Thursday, packing her things into the Flamingo and retreating to her apartment. Her security detail had gone with her at my insistence. Even though we were apart, we couldn’t pretend that Quincy Houghton would see it that way.

An entire week had passed when one afternoon, I moved the couch so I could mop the floors and found a pair of her panties, ripped to shreds. A relic of our first time.

I clutched them to my chest, then brought them to my nose. They still smelled like her, soaked with pure desire. A dozen other remembered sensations flooded in with her scent.

The sound she'd made when I tore them off her, that soft, sweet *oh* of desperation and surprise. The tightness of her pussy, the heat of her as I entered her for the first time. The taste of her—strawberry and honey and red wine.

Those, I couldn't bring myself to put in the box. Wasn't like she could wear them again. They were too destroyed to put back together.

Those, I kept with me.

They were in my pocket as Dad and I drove to yet another meeting with the pack elders in Carter's Creek. It was a losing battle. I knew it. Dad knew it. The Carter's Creek elders must have realized it as well.

We'd been expecting all four of the elders, but when we entered The Nook, we found only Doris Houghton waiting for us.

"You boys want burgers?" Her eyes didn't leave her stack of flapjacks as we approached her booth.

Dad and I exchanged a look. "We're good," I said.

She gestured to the seats across from her. "Let's get this over with."

The cracked vinyl rasped beneath us. The booth creaked under our weight. The table was sticky with some ancient residue, too caked-on to wash fully clean. As I folded my hands atop the table, it clung to my skin like it was trying to glue them into place.

I spoke first. "You'd better hope you find your son before I do."

A small sound left her nose—the ghost of a laugh. "Oh, I'm hoping. I'm hoping with everything I've got."

"You know there's no coming back from this," I said. "Not for him."

"I told you how I lost my husband, Mr. Miller. Believe me, I know a thing or two about not coming back." Finally, she met my eyes. It was only then that I realized how tired she

looked. Like she'd been forced to steal every lick of sleep she'd had over the last week. "How long can you give me?"

I shook my head. "Not long."

"I see." Delicately, Doris sliced through her pancakes with the side of her fork. She mopped up a pool of maple syrup with it. Chewed. Swallowed. "You know, I wish I could say he was a good boy once. That would be a nice thing to remember, wouldn't it? He was born on a stormy night in the middle of October. The first time I held him in my arms, I smelled the alpha on him and thought to myself, *This boy is going to be nothing but trouble*. Funny, isn't it? Normally, I love being right."

"We don't need the full David Copperfield, Mrs. Houghton."

"No, I suppose you don't. But I want you to know it, anyway. He wasn't always like this. I did my best to raise him properly. I've spent long nights wide awake, trying to follow the breadcrumbs and trace it all back to the moment when it all went wrong. I haven't been able to find an answer."

Dad's voice was gentle when he spoke. "Sometimes, we have to learn to accept that it's not our fault."

"I'm his mother, Tony. It's always going to be my fault." She turned her gaze back to me. "We're doing our best to find him. When we do, I'll take care of him myself."

Dad frowned. "Doris, you don't have to do that. No one is asking that of you. No mother should ever have to—"

"You're a sweet man, Tony, but don't patronize me. This isn't picture books and apple juice hour anymore." Doris nodded, as if making a silent agreement with herself. "All I ask is that if your people find him first, you bring him to me. Alive. I think you understand it's in all our best interests if you can grant me that wish. Don't you?"

I bit the inside of my cheek. It was a big ask, and not one I would enjoy granting. Quincy was mine by right. He'd threatened Felicity, shaken her faith in us. Now, we were only holding on by threads.

“I can’t guarantee anything,” I warned her. If Quincy found me before she found him...I didn’t know if I could stop myself.

I wanted an end to this, and my wolf wanted his blood.

“But you’ll try?” Doris’s eyes went soft for a moment. Pleading. They were a mother’s eyes, primed to see the best in her child but left with no choice but to accept the worst.

I couldn’t deny her. Not when she looked at me like that.

“We’ll do our best.”

* * *

“Your mother’s been in a mood,” Dad said on the drive back to Evergreen. For the last three miles, I’d watched him out of the corner of my eye, sitting in the passenger seat and trying to find the right moment to bring it up.

“That’s her favorite state of being, isn’t it?” It was shitty how little I cared about Ma and her moods right now. Felicity was gone. Ma and her moods were at least half to blame for that.

“Macy’s spending Easter with Leo’s family in Boston. Kingston’s made up some other excuse.” Dad sighed. “Dylan’s not returning her calls.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Didn’t think you would be. I just...I need you to know, Xander. Every time I touch her, I can feel the guilt pulsing off her. It burns like steam.”

“If she feels guilty, she knows how to apologize.”

“I’m not sure she does. Not at this point. She won’t even talk to me anymore.” Dad rubbed the back of his neck. “Feels like shit.”

“Yeah, I bet.” My scowl softened. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Just...you ever go down a set of stairs in the dark and think you’ve hit the landing, only to realize you’ve

missed the bottom step?”

“Every time I snuck downstairs on Christmas Eve to eat up all the cookies before Santa could get to them.”

“It was you who kept doing that? I always blamed Kingston.”

“You weren’t wrong.” I forced a half-smile. “He usually helped.”

We laughed then, in that quiet way you only could when silence would have been too sad.

“I have that missing-step feeling when I’m around her these days,” Dad muttered, staring out the window. “Every time I think my foot’s going to find solid ground, the world drops out from under me.”

“I can talk to her for you,” I offered, already dreading it. But as someone who’d just had his world yanked out from under him, I empathized. “If you think I might be able to smooth things over, I’ll give it a go. Just—”

My phone buzzed in my pocket insistently.

“Hold on a sec.” I fished the phone out, glanced at the caller ID, and answered. “Connell. Talk to me.”

“We’ve been doing what you asked—getting the word out to the other packs in the area, warning them about Quincy and asking for news,” Connell said. “Stephan Sommers from Pewter Valley just rang me. Quincy Houghton’s in the area, seeking refuge with their pack.”

“Did Stephan give it to him?” I asked.

Connell snorted. “I don’t think he would’ve called me if he had.”

I dropped Dad off in Evergreen. If things between him and Ma were as rough as he said, he needed all the time with her he could get right now. There were always stories about mated pairs who grew apart as the years wore on, but I’d always regarded them for what they were: stories. Tall tales people made up to scare newlyweds. Jokes men made to each other when their wives made them sleep on the couch.

With Dad and Ma, though, things felt different. I was worried for them. Something had changed in her since this whole shitshow started. The more we waited for it to get better, the worse it got. He needed to be with her now, not chasing Quincy Houghton halfway across the state.

“You be safe up there,” Dad said, lingering outside the truck when I dropped him off.

I promised him I would be. He shut the door, then patted the hood. I watched him lingering in the driveway in my rearview mirror as I drove away, turning toward the house only when I turned the corner.

Wisdom might have told me not to go to Pewter Valley alone, but I had my gut to follow. I wanted my best men back in Evergreen, needed them close to Felicity. Should anything go wrong while I was so far out of town, she’d need them far more than I would.

I’d met Stephan Sommers a handful of times. He was in the middling age between Dad and me, the honest, true-blue type of guy who loved his guns, his construction union, his pack, and his Bud Lite. He’d taken over the leadership of the Pewter Valley pack from his uncle Roy, who’d gotten the pack into some major debts about twenty years ago and died shortly after.

Like me, Stephan had come into his role young. He’d pulled Pewter Valley out of his uncle’s debts and turned the town around as if by magic. But it wasn’t magic, of course. We all knew better than that. Just sweat and grit.

I trusted the mutual respect we had for each other. Enough, at least, that I didn’t have to worry about him being swayed by Quincy’s sob story and drawing me out of Evergreen just to stab me in the back.

“Miller!” Stephan met me at my truck as I pulled into his drive. He was about five-ten with auburn hair that kind of reminded me of Felicity’s. He didn’t look happy. “You shoulda drove faster.”

“Yeah?” I matched his scowl. “How do you figure that?”

“Because up until about ten minutes ago, I had Quincy Houghton at my dinner table, eating all my fuckin’ food and raving like Rodney goddamn Dangerfield about how he doesn’t get enough respect.”

“Fuck. Ten minutes?” I shouldn’t have dropped Dad off at home. We could’ve made it. Dammit, we could have had him.

“He stepped out for a smoke before dessert. Someone must’ve tipped him off because the next thing I know, I see the fucker bolting through my backyard like someone’s just stuck a cherry bomb up his ass.”

“Who would’ve tipped him off?” Ten minutes wasn’t much time. Apart from Stephan’s pack, only Dad, Connell, and I knew that Quincy was here at all.

“None of my people,” Stephan assured me. “Quincy owes the pack money. He’s been dodging the notion of repaying it for years. There’s no love there, believe you me.”

“Where’d he go?” I asked, scanning Stephan’s property.

“Into the woods.” Stephan pointed to the trees that extended out behind his house. “You good to hunt?”

“Always.”

We left our clothes on his front porch and shifted. All the better to smell him.

Quincy’s scent was thick in the air all around the property. At the back of the house, a line of it peeled off from the greater miasma, leaving a trail into the woods like Stephan had said. Noses to the ground, we followed it. After ten minutes or so, more wolves joined us: two gray, a black, and a sandy-coated female who shared a little of Stephan’s scent.

Together, we tracked the smell down to a ravine. Water rushed through it. If I had to guess, it was about waist-deep.

Quincy’s scent disappeared there. Though we searched up and down the ravine for another twenty minutes or so, we couldn’t pick it up again.

“He jumped in the water, then,” I grumbled, cursing under my breath on Stephan’s porch as we got dressed again.

“Fucker.”

“The others will keep searching,” Stephan assured me. “We can pick up the scent wherever he came back out. But depending on where he emerged downstream...it’s an awfully long river, kid.”

I gave Stephan my thanks, and he gave me his assurances. Pewter Valley would back us on this. As soon as they had news, I’d be the first to know.

On the ride home, with a case full of Stephan’s homemade pinecone jam clinking in the passenger seat next to me, I got another call. Dad.

“Get back to Evergreen.” He sounded pissed. “Come now.”

My heart dropped into my stomach with a cold, deathly *plunk*.

“What’s happened?”

“Your mother happened. She’s—” Dad’s voice broke, and I heard a heavy thump. If I didn’t know better, he’d just put his fist through the wall. “We’ve been betrayed.”

Chapter 25

Felicity

It gets better. For my entire life, that was the prevailing advice from every self-help guru and armchair therapist. *It gets better.* Easy to say, almost certain to be true. It had worked for me, hadn't it? I'd grown out of my baby fat. Boys had stopped asking me out as a joke and started asking me out for real.

For a few amazing months, I'd been the girlfriend of the most eligible bachelor in town. No, scratch that. I'd been his *mate*.

I supposed I still was.

But now that our romance was on indefinite hold under threat of literal death, *it gets better* was wearing pretty thin. I still had my security detail. Quincy Houghton was still out there somewhere, plotting his next move. I found myself perpetually waiting for the next attack to occur, the next boot to fall. The longer I waited, the more my fear grew.

On the cold nights in my bed without Xander's body generating heat next to mine, I'd been forced to accept an infuriating new mindset. Sometimes, things didn't get better. Sometimes, they got worse.

I may have moved out, but I clearly hadn't moved on.

"You sick or something?" Gena asked as I lurched toward the nurse's station during the middle of my rounds. "You look pale."

"Don't be mean, Gena. Maybe that's just what Felicity's face looks like with no makeup on. You know, haunted," Lexi

quipped as she swooped past like a harpy pushing the med cart. “You can always borrow my bronzer if you want. Just say the word.”

“Gee, thanks, Lexi.” I hugged myself and rubbed my arms fast, hoping to create heat with the friction. My armpits were twin swamps this morning, but the rest of my body felt like it had been left on ice.

To my dismay, Lexi had started warming back up to me since the breakup. I missed the days when she’d avoided me. Things had been so much quieter back then, and now that Lexi had shown me her true colors, it was much harder not to see everything that came out of her mouth as a nasty little jab.

I dipped behind the nurse’s station and grabbed my water bottle. Once the cap was off, I gulped the water down as fast as I could. I knew it wouldn’t do my bladder any favors. My lower abs were aching with a promise that before long, I’d need to take pee-break number nine of the day.

“Woah! Slow down, cowgirl.” Gena took the bottle from me as I inhaled a stream of water down the wrong pipe and began to cough. “Breathe between sips, remember? You’re an RN, not a fish.”

“Maybe I’m a salmon shifter in disguise.” I gave a final hack into my sleeve, then grabbed the bottle back from her. “I’ve been so thirsty lately, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Dehydrated-from-crying thirsty, or loss-of-premium-dick thirsty?” Gena asked.

“Probably the former.” Though I couldn’t rule the latter out.

My stomach had been in knots since I’d moved out of Xander’s place, and my emotions were shot. I’d burst into tears over a particularly heart-rending arthritis medication advertisement earlier. Gena had been vigilantly sympathetic. After all, she knew what it was like to be broken-hearted over a Miller man. But as much as I appreciated her concern, her doting on me was starting to get under my skin.

Like I said, sometimes things got worse.

“Could be stress,” Gena suggested, rubbing my back in a big circle. Her touch only reminded me how shitty everything felt when all I wanted was Xander’s hands on me. “Want me to run you an IV drip over lunch? You look like you could use one.”

“Maybe.” I glanced at the whiteboard. I still had six patients to check up on before lunch. “I should finish my rounds first.”

“I can do them if you want.” Gena pressed the back of her hand to my forehead, then pulled it away to wipe off the sweat. “You’re super clammy. I really think you need to sit down for a while.”

“Nah. Best if I keep moving,” I assured her. “I’m like a shark right now. If I quit moving, I’ll probably expire.”

To what did I owe this thrilling new state of being? There were two possibilities. Either I’d picked up a bug from one of the residents on top of the breakup, or there was some shifter bullshit going on. I’d known Xander for a long time, but the mysteries of being a shifter’s mate were still unknown to me.

Maybe this was just shifter magic at play. A failsafe in case two mates ever had a falling out: either get back together and do as fate commands, or by God, you *will* feel like dogshit until you start humping each other again.

When I dropped by Mrs. Havishford’s room, she seemed even more worried about me than Gena.

“Did you let Mr. Muller talk you into trying that sauerkraut he’s been fermenting in his sock drawer?” Mrs. Havishford leaned forward in bed as I fluffed her pillows. “You look like you ate something evil.”

“No sauerkraut for me,” I promised her. I really needed to get the cleaning staff to deal with that science experiment Mr. Muller had been working on, come to think. His room was next door, and the scent of funky cabbage mixed with sharp vinegar had turned my stomach so quickly, I suspected it was turning into a biohazard. I was still feeling queasy. “How are you doing today?”

“Better than you are, from the looks of things.” Mrs. Havishford patted the bed next to her. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“Maybe I should.” Rather than squeezing into Mrs. Havishford’s bed with her, I pulled up the visitor’s chair. Her suggestion had been a good one. My stomach still churned, but being off my feet was a massive relief. “While I’m here, why don’t you tell me how your meds are treating you? Are you experiencing any side effects today?”

“Oh, never mind about those.” She waved my question away. “Actually, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about the house.”

I blinked, then rubbed my temples. *Fuck*. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Havishford. Things have been so crazy lately—”

She smiled warmly. “No need to explain, dear. Life happens. It’s alright. I’m not about to harp on you.”

“I appreciate that. But still, you’ve been waiting so long. If you have another buyer—”

“How close are you with the down payment?” she asked.

I did a quick calculation in my head. “Another month or so, and I think I’ll have it. I’m only a couple thousand away, and with my raise—”

Mrs. Havishford snorted. “A couple thousand is nothing. Let’s call it square now. Whatever you’ve got, I’ll drop the price to match.”

“Seriously?”

“My granddaughter called today. Ashley. You remember her?”

“The one in Cambridge with the asshole husband?”

“Not anymore. She threw him out. Now she’s got a big, empty house, a baby on the way, and she’s all on her own. So, she asked me if I might want to move in. I’m taking her up on it.”

“That’s amazing. Congratulations!” I reached over and took her hand, giving it a squeeze. For the first time in several days, I found myself genuinely smiling. “You must be thrilled.”

“Oh, it will be a challenge, I’m sure.” Mrs. Havishford laughed. “But I’ve still got some juice in me yet. I’ve got a meeting with accounting next week to get me all settled up here. Once that’s done, I only have the house left to deal with. You still want it, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” I said immediately. I wanted it more than ever now. After living at Xander’s, my apartment felt ugly and small. Going home to that green door, the cozy foyer, the breakfast nook...maybe it was just the new start I needed. “But you can’t drop the price. You’ll need that money more than ever now.”

“Oh, I don’t think I will. The angry husband punched out a bouncer in Boston last weekend,” Mrs. Havishford revealed. “He’s already on pretty thin ice with his firm, and his reputation can’t afford two messy court cases at once. Ashley and I will have everything we need—and good thing, too. That poor girl is going through three gallons of water a day, can barely cook for herself without turning green, and running for the toilet—”

I blinked. My eyes went wide. “Is she getting shivers and sweating all at once?”

Mrs. Havishford nodded. “Always the nurse, aren’t you? I’ve told her the second trimester gets better. This split is the best thing that could have happened to her, but pregnancy hormones can be so brutal. What she really needs is a nice, strong man to cuddle her up, but...”

Mrs. Havishford kept talking, but my attention was elsewhere. I was doing a new set of calculations, a different type of accounting.

Had it been three weeks, four? The last time Xander and I made love...how long had *that* been?

“Are you sure you’re alright, Felicity?” Mrs. Havishford asked, peering at me, concern knitting her brow. “My goodness, you look like you’re about to be sick!”

I swallowed hard and nodded as I rose. “I think you’re right.”

* * *

When you lived in a small town, there were a few awkward interactions that were purely unavoidable. When everyone knew you, everyone knew your business.

With my security detail in tow, I spent my lunch break driving to the drugstore, where everyone had almost certainly heard about Xander and me splitting up. I swallowed my embarrassment along with my pride, dodged the judgmental stares, and spent twelve dollars on a pregnancy test.

In the staff bathroom back at work fifteen minutes later, I stared at the twin blue lines in shock but not surprise.

I would have loved nothing more than to ask *how the hell did this happen?* But you didn’t exactly have to be a brain surgeon to figure that out. You didn’t even have to be an RN.

Four weeks ago, Xander and I had fucked. No condom.

He’d pulled out. Very gentlemanly of him.

Just not fast enough.

* * *

My heart was still racing at the end of my break. On top of all the now-obvious pregnancy symptoms I was experiencing—the ones I’d written off as signposts of an oncoming cold, stress, or PTSD—a fresh undercurrent of panic had joined the fray.

What the fuck am I going to do?

There was no doubt that I'd be keeping the baby. Not only would they be Xander's much-needed heir on the off chance that they turned out to be an alpha shifter...but I *wanted* this baby, whoever and whatever they were. Already, my body felt like the soft, sturdy thing keeping a little life safe. I couldn't give that up. Not for anything.

Beyond that...

I needed to talk to Xander. *Immediately.*

I made an awkward beeline for the nurse's station to grab my phone. Suddenly, every sharp corner seemed deadly. Every step I took felt strangely perilous. At this rate, I would have to cover myself in bubble wrap for the next nine months. This was all so new, so disorienting...but within that newness lay a fearless certainty.

I'd protect this baby with everything I had. Even with my life, if it came to it.

When I reached for my phone, my fingers were so clumsy that I nearly dropped it. What would Xander say? What would he think? Would he be...happy?

God, I wanted him to be happy.

"Hey! There you are!" Gena rushed over to me, glancing over her shoulder. "I've been looking for you."

"Yeah, sorry. I was on my lunch break." I tried to concentrate on composing a message to Xander, but maybe a text message wasn't right. This seemed like the kind of thing that should be discussed in person, not over a text.

"Um. So. Weird thing." Gena jabbed her thumb over her shoulder, pointing behind her. "Xander's mom is here."

"Marianne?" Frowning, I lowered the phone. "You're right. That *is* weird. Did she say what she wanted?"

"Only that she needs to speak with you. Urgently. I left her in the visitor overflow room." Gena grimaced. "She looked upset."

"Okay. Let me go see what she wants." I pinched the bridge of my nose and set my phone aside. She had some truly

inspired timing, I'd give her that. "Can you cover for me?"

"Sure thing." She smacked me on the butt as I hustled away. "You're the boss."

I found Marianne exactly where Gena had left her. Her hair was disheveled, and her hands were shaking. She paced frantically, pausing only when she turned and saw me standing in the doorway.

"Felicity. I—" She hung her head and wrung her hands. "You must understand that I'm a little uncomfortable being here, but..." She heaved a sigh. "I thought you deserved to know."

"Know what?"

"It's Xander. He's hurt." She rushed to me and took my hands in hers, a heartbreaking look in her eyes. "You need to come with me right away."

My stomach twisted into a Gordian knot. "What happened?"

"Quincy Houghton happened. Xander found him—and paid the price. He's at the hospital now. He..." Marianne's lips twisted. "He asked for you."

"Okay." My lungs burned. I tried to draw a breath but found I couldn't breathe at all. *Xander, lying in a hospital bed, bleeding out. Xander's green eyes, the light fading from them while I was stuck here, half an hour away.*

I could have stayed there all day, glued to that spot and imagining the worst. But then my RN instincts kicked in, freeing me. "Okay. Let me just grab my purse and—"

"We need to go *now*." Marianne tugged at my hands insistently, pulling me toward the door. "I don't know how long we have."

"Okay." I glanced over my shoulder, down the long hallway back to the nurse's station. "Okay, let's go."

Marianne's car was parked illegally right outside the doors, in the spot we usually kept free for ambulances. Normally, that

would have bothered me, but given the circumstances, I couldn't fault her for it.

I threw open the passenger door as Marianne raced around to the driver's seat. We peeled out in a cloud of burning rubber.

"Where's my security detail?" I asked, rubber-necking to scan the parking lot for them. "They need to know where we're going. Have you told them yet? Do they know about Xander?"

She stayed silent.

"Marianne?" I prompted again.

That's when I spotted it: a pair of legs sticking out from beneath a van on the edge of the lot.

"Marianne!" I said, more urgently. "There's someone injured in the parking lot. I don't have my phone, so I need you to call nine-one-one and—"

"I'm sure someone else will come along." Marianne's eyes were fixed on the road ahead. She was hardly blinking. She had a thousand-mile stare, befitting a woman terrified of losing her firstborn son.

I was worried, too. But Xander would never forgive me if I'd let my fear for his life get in the way of helping someone in need.

"I'll call on yours, then." I reached over for her iPhone, which was nestled in the cupholder.

"No," she said firmly, snatching it before I could take it. "No, you will not."

I lowered my hand and sank back in my seat, eyes wide, heart pounding.

Something was wrong.

As she headed out of town, the sense of wrongness only grew.

"Marianne, you missed your turn."

She ignored me, driving past the city-limit sign and onto the open highway.

“The hospital is the other way.” I turned to face her, torn between confusion and outrage. “What are you doing?”

“I know exactly what I’m doing. I’m fixing a problem.”

A chill broke over my skin.

“Xander isn’t really hurt, is he?” My voice trembled like a leaf in a hurricane.

“No,” Marianne said. “No, he’s not.”

* * *

We drove.

Marianne was pushing seventy. Throwing the door open and jumping out wasn’t a possibility. Neither was attacking her. I couldn’t risk a car crash. I couldn’t risk getting hurt.

I had more than myself to think of now.

“Can I ask why?” *Keep her talking.* I was certain I’d heard that somewhere. If I could establish a line of dialogue or even just keep her grounded in reality, maybe she’d change her mind. “Why do you hate me so much? What did I ever do to you?”

“What haven’t you done?” she spat, fingers tightening around the wheel. “You have been nothing but trouble since you entered our lives. You always clung to him like a little parasite, and he was so kind, he let you. But now you’ve gone a little too far, don’t you think?”

“I’m not the one speeding down the highway with a captive woman in my car,” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

“Insolence,” Marianne scoffed. “See? That’s exactly what I mean. This relationship has only emboldened you. You’ve already done enough damage to my family. The longer you remain, the worse it will get.”

It seemed we'd reached an impasse on that line of questioning. She hated me because I was human, because I was dating her son, or because she just hated me. There was no making any headway there.

"If anything happens to me, Xander will never forgive you," I said, changing tactics.

"I'm his mother. He'll always forgive me. Blood is forever, Felicity. You? You're just a flash in the pan."

"I'm his mate." *Call up your connection to the pack. The pack is family. Family means something to shifters. Even to her.* "His wolf chose me."

At that, she laughed. Actually *laughed*. "Sweetheart, you're a filthy human tail-chaser. Nothing more. My son is an alpha of excellent breeding. Men like him don't mate with women like you."

But he did. He did, Marianne. Your son chose me, mated with me—and more.

But mentioning the pregnancy now seemed...unwise. I had no idea how she'd react to that.

"I'm part of your pack," I insisted instead.

She back-handed me hard and quick across the mouth. When the initial burst of pain receded, I tasted blood.

"You're not mated! You've had no ceremony. All of this can still be fixed. When we're done with you, my son won't even be able to find your body," she promised. "You will *never* be part of my pack."

There wasn't much more to say after that.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Marianne pulled the car to the side of a gravel road, opened her door, then walked around to open mine.

"Get out," she commanded.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and got out.

Empty fields stretched in every direction. In the distance, I could hear the sounds of the highway. I kept the details carefully in my mind, remembering which way we came.

I thought about running, taking off to flag down a good Samaritan who might take pity on me, but then I saw the knife in her hand.

“Turn around.” She pointed with the knife. Its long, sharp blade gleamed in the afternoon light.

“Marianne—” A sob left my throat. Only one, but the silent tears that followed were numerous.

“Turn. Around.”

I only had one last bargaining chip. If I didn’t use it now, I wouldn’t live to use it at all.

If I didn’t *say* it now, no one would ever know I carried Xander’s child.

Not even Xander himself.

“I’m pregnant.” The tears streamed down my face, half hormones, half fear. “I’m carrying your grandchild. *Xander’s* child. If you kill me, the baby dies, too.”

Marianne’s eyes widened. She took a step back as the color drained from her face. “You...you’re lying.”

“Do you want to take that chance?”

She hesitated. It was all the go-ahead I needed.

I turned and ran.

I wasn’t insane. I knew I couldn’t even outrun most humans. I certainly couldn’t outrun a wolf.

But I’d be damned if I stuck around for whatever Marianne had planned for me without putting up a fight.

I wasn’t going to freeze again. Not this time.

Not with our baby at stake.

My feet pounded towards the main road. My lungs burned. My heart thundered in my head. Every breath was a short, sharp blade between my ribs. I pushed through it, anyway. Every bound I made put a little more space between Marianne and me.

The road was just up ahead now. Traffic buzzed up and down it like swift-winged mosquitoes, cars and trucks streaming by in droves. I raised my arms over my head, waving at them frantically. If I could get one to stop—only one—I might make it out of this alive.

But just when I thought I was finally free, it happened.

An arm wrapped around my chest. My scream pierced the air like a dagger.

I'd been caught.

Chapter 26

Xander

She screamed like I was trying to kill her and thrashed like a wily, feral cat trapped in a bag.

“Cheeks!” I shouted into her ear. Yelling was the only way she’d possibly hear me over her shrieks. “Calm down! It’s me!”

“Xander?”

Her body instantly went limp. She stopped thrashing, and her legs gave out. I wrapped her up even tighter and lowered her to the ground, sheltering her with my body and murmuring into her ear.

“It’s me. It’s only me.”

She sobbed as she turned in my arms. Her fingers trembled violently as she pressed her hands to my cheeks and raked her nails against my scalp. She touched me like she wasn’t sure I was real.

“Hey, shh. It’s alright. It’s okay.” I rubbed her back and kissed her cheekbones. My lips came away wet from her tears. “I’ve got you. I’m here. No one’s going to hurt you now.”

“Your m-mother...”

“Dad’s dealing with her.” I had to trust that. Right now, he was tracking her. Finding her, incapacitating her, and bringing her in. Felicity needed me now. Dad could deal with the rest. “She can’t hurt you. She’s never going to hurt you again.” I frowned and pulled back, scanning her face. “*Are you hurt?*”

She sniffled, nodding as she raised her fingertips to her mouth. “M-my lip. She hit me. Nothing else.”

Gently, I moved her fingertips away. There was blood. Not much, but enough that my wolf was ready to chew off its proverbial leg for the chance to be set free.

Despite all my mother’s shortcomings, I’d never wanted to hurt the woman who’d birthed me. Until now.

I shoved down my rage and pressed my mouth to Felicity’s, kissing her firmly and smoothing my tongue over her lower lip until the blood was gone.

“I’m going to take you home now,” I told her. “And you’re going to tell me everything that happened. *Everything.*”

She nodded, clinging to me. “Everything,” she echoed. “Just...please, take me home.”

Carefully, I swept her into my arms. There was no question about which home I meant. Not now.

The only home she belonged in was mine.

* * *

She was quiet on the ride back to Evergreen until we drove past the nursing home.

“Xander, my security detail—” She gasped, sitting up rigidly and pressing her face to the window. “When we left, I think something went wrong. I think one of them was hurt.”

“Connell,” I confirmed. I’d driven right to the nursing home after getting back to Evergreen, only to discover that Felicity had already been whisked away. “Someone got the jump on him. Ma, we’re pretty sure.”

Her stink had been all over the place there. Quincy’s had been absent.

“Is Connell okay?” Felicity asked.

“He will be. Nasty bump on the head and a big, fat bruise on his pride, but nothing more. He’s recovering at Dad’s place.

Asked me to tell you that he's sorry."

"He couldn't have done anything. He was unconscious." She shrank into herself, drawing her knees up to her chest. "I'm glad he's alright."

We drove on in silence for a while longer before Felicity piped up again. "How did you find me?" she whispered, as if in disbelief.

"I tracked you." I reached over and placed my hand on her knee. "Followed you by scent."

But Felicity's scent perplexed me all the way home. It was stronger than it had been when she moved out. Sweeter, more intense...and somehow more like my own.

I didn't bother her with my questions, though I had many. I didn't pressure her with them at first. I drew her a hot bath instead, full of foamy bubbles and scented oils. When she struggled with her scrubs, I took her hands and placed them back at her sides. Like a doll, I undressed her, touching her gently and murmuring sweet words.

I helped her into the bath, then washed her.

"I must really stink, huh?" she joked dryly as I lathered up her back. Her hair was tucked over her shoulder, auburn curls damp from the humidity. "If you could track me by my scent alone."

"You smell amazing." This wasn't about getting her clean. It was about comfort, about doing *something*. She needed to be stroked and petted, and I desperately needed to do something with my hands.

I needed to have my skin on her skin, my body as close to hers as I could get.

Even after I'd dried her off and smoothed lotion onto her skin, her scent cut through all the perfumery. The closer I got to her, the harder it was to move away again.

I pressed my nose to her hair and inhaled deeply, relishing how sweet she smelled. How much she smelled like *mine*. I

needed more of her, needed it so bad, it was hard to convince myself to exhale again. All I wanted to do was breathe her in.

Only when she was wrapped in a warm blanket with a mug of hot chocolate in hand did I allow myself to ask her what had happened. Little by little, I coaxed the story out of her. Each tidbit helped me fill in the gaps of what Dad and I had already figured out.

When I left for Pewter Valley, Dad had mentioned to Ma that Quincy was spotted there. Regrettably, he'd also told her that I was on my way to deal with it.

She was the one who'd tipped off Quincy. She was the reason that asshole had been able to get away.

During my drive home, Dad and Ma finally had it out. He'd watched his marriage crumble before his very eyes, and then Ma had taken off.

Right to Evergreen Hills. To Connell, who she'd knocked out with a cheap shot from behind. Then, to Felicity.

If it hadn't been for Felicity's scent, so strong that I'd been able to track her through an entire car ride, I shuddered to think how much worse this all could have been.

Felicity knew that all too well.

"She was going to kill me, Xander. She lured me into her car, and before I knew it, she was talking about how I was ruining your life. She said she'd make it so you never found my b-b-body." The tears started up again, even more furiously this time.

I held her close, willing them away. "I will always find you. I will *never* let you go. I can't lose you, Felicity. By God, if I have to keep you tied to my fucking bed, I'll do it. You understand?"

"You're the one who doesn't understand." She pulled back, staring up at me with pleading eyes brimming with tears. Her mouth opened like she wanted to say more, but no sound came out.

“What don’t I understand?” I cupped her cheeks, wiping the tears away as they fell. “You can talk to me. You can tell me anything.”

Her silence stretched on. My heart panged with a sharp, sudden fear.

“Is it us? You don’t want to be with me anymore?” Slowly, I lowered my hands from her face. “Fuck. That’s it, isn’t it? I didn’t fix things. Not fast enough. Not at all.”

I’d failed her. That was the thing that she couldn’t say. When my wolf had chosen her, I’d put her in danger and failed to keep her safe. Left her open to attack.

“You must hate me.” I stared down at my lap, blinking hard. Self-loathing coiled in my gut like a snake. “I don’t blame you, but—”

Fuck. She was the only one for me. The only woman I’d desire for the rest of my life.

Once, I’d been known as the man who could have any woman he wanted.

But the only woman I wanted didn’t want me back.

“Xander.” She flattened her palm on my chest and stared at me until I met her eyes. “I’m pregnant.”

It was my turn to be stricken by speechlessness. My mouth gaped open. A strangled sound left my throat, but no words.

My brain shut down. My heart stopped.

“Pregnant?” I finally forced the word out. It didn’t sound like a real word. It sounded like gibberish. Like something I’d made up.

“With a baby, yeah.” She nodded, sniffing. “I took the test just before she showed up. I didn’t even have time to tell anyone. She said you were hurt—that you were *dying* and asking for me. I didn’t even have time to get my phone—”

“You’re pregnant.” I moved my hand to her stomach, hovering over her skin without making contact. “You’re *really* pregnant.”

“Well, you can’t be just sort of pregnant, Xander. You either are or you aren’t. And it’d be a weird thing to lie about right now.”

“It’s...mine?” My hands suddenly felt clammy. My mouth was dry.

She shoved me. “Who else’s would it be? What kind of question is that? Are you...*angry* with me?”

“Fuck! No, of course I’m not angry with you! Why the hell would you go and ask me something like that?”

“You *sound* angry.”

“I am in *love* with you. And now, *now* of all times...Jesus, Cheeks, my mother just kidnapped you, she just tried to *kill* you, and you tell me you’re carrying my child, then you ask if I’m *angry*?” Scowling furiously, I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her against me. “I’m angry at an awful lot of people right now. But not you. Never you.”

“You love me?” She stared up, innocent and sweet.

“That’s what I said, didn’t I?” I barked, squeezing her even tighter.

“I...I love you, too,” she rasped against my chest.

“Glad to hear it.” *Pregnant. Mine.* That explained her scent. “You fucking better love me. You’d better love me for the rest of your life.”

“I’ll try. But if you don’t stop squeezing me so hard, it might be a pretty short life.”

A laugh escaped my lips. I released her but kept hold of her arms. I was afraid if I stopped touching her now, she’d disappear. Dissolve away, like a dream.

“I’m going to be a father,” I breathed, resting my forehead against hers. “It’s not a joke?”

“What do you think?”

I kissed her. Gently at first, then harder. I kissed her cheeks, her eyelids, her jaw, the tip of her nose.

What did I think?

I thought if my heart swelled any bigger, it was going to burst.

Chapter 27

Felicity

Nothing had been normal since Xander and I had decided to fake a relationship. Not my life. Not his. It was incredible to consider how two people pretending to be in love, then falling in love for real, could turn a town the size of Evergreen completely upside down.

But things here had never been crazier than they were the week after Quincy Houghton and Xander's mother disappeared.

Xander had the entire pack hunting for them. Even the pack elders and Carter's Creek wolves joined in. Every lupine nose in the area was pressed to the ground in search of their scent. Nana and I baked, cooked, passed out water, and did laundry relentlessly. There were plenty of mouths to feed and dirty clothes to wash while the wolves were preoccupied with their hunt, and Roger had been generous with my recovery leave.

I used every day of it doing whatever I could to help Xander and his people in their pursuit.

Kingston and Dylan discovered Marianne's car abandoned on a back road a few miles outside town. Their reports suggested Quincy's stink was all over it as well. That meant the two of them were likely traveling together.

At this point, very little surprised me, least of all Xander's mother and Quincy Houghton being in cahoots. But in the absence of surprise, there was a world of heartache and hurt.

Xander felt it and told me so openly. His siblings felt the same way.

But no one was taking it worse than Xander's father. He hadn't just lost a wife, a life partner, and the mother of his children.

He'd lost his mate.

"You think you know someone," he murmured one day on Xander's front porch. He'd led the grid search for Quincy and Marianne's trail, and his face was smeared with dirt. He looked like he hadn't slept in days.

"Here." I offered him a water bottle and a plate of Nana's cookies. They were fresh, still warm and gooey in the middle. "You look like you could use a bite to eat."

Tony took the offerings with a grim, tight-lipped smile, then patted the step next to him.

I sat down. He looked like he could use some company, too.

"You think you know someone," he said again, twisting the cap off the water. "Your wolf says they're the one for you, so you build a life with them. You pool your dreams together and fight like hell to make them come true. But one day, you go back to the pool, and it's run dry. Completely empty. And you've gotta ask yourself...where'd all those dreams go? When she left, did she take yours with her, or were they all hers from the start?"

"I'm sorry," I said. It seemed like the only thing to say. I stared at my apron and brushed off the stray cookie crumbs. "Really. That sucks. It's not fair."

"Don't be sorry," Tony scoffed. "None of this was your fault."

"You sure about that?" Guilt pinged in my chest like a nasty email. Everyone had been repeating that line all week, but the fact was, this *was* my fault.

"I'm sure," Tony said with grim confidence. "If it was your fault, we'd all have found a way to hate you for it

already.” I snorted, and he added, “Not meaning to offend, Felicity, but wolves know all about holding grudges and placing blame.”

I wasn’t offended. There was something oddly comforting about his honesty, about the simple cause and effect.

For half my childhood, I’d been raised by my mother, who found little ways to blame me and shame me and despise me while cloaking it all in syrupy professions of love. For the other half, I’d been raised by Nana, who hated people plenty but seemed incapable of believing I’d ever done a single thing wrong.

“If it was your fault, this would hurt less, I think,” Tony admitted, staring at the horizon as the sun sank beneath the shadowed tree line. “Fact is, Marianne’s choices were her own. They were hers, and they were wrong.” He laughed, short and bitter. “Makes a man wonder what that says about him.”

“If it’s not my fault, it’s not yours, either,” I pointed out. “Humans fall in love with the wrong people all the time. You wolves might think you’re superior, with your mating ceremonies and your sense of fate...”

He cracked a weary smile. “Aren’t we?”

“I’ve seen an awful lot of fate in my life. At the nursing home, sweet old ladies die in their sleep without even one of their children there to hold their hands. One day, a resident will be telling jokes and laughing like they’re young again. The next, they’ll come out of a visit with their doctor asking you for paperwork so they can sign a DNR.” I nudged him with my shoulder. “Sometimes, fate’s just cruel.”

“Maybe so. But you and Xander...” He stared at my hand for a long moment, then folded his on top of it. “What I had with Marianne doesn’t hold a candle to what the two of you are building. I can see it in his eyes when he talks about you, you know. Always have.”

“And what is it that you see in Xander’s eyes?” I asked, curious.

“A future,” Tony said. “One worth fighting for.”

* * *

That night after I got out of the shower, I found Xander in the living room, sitting in an armchair. When he saw me, he looked me up and down approvingly, then patted his thigh.

“Come here,” he said. “You can leave the towel where you stand.”

The blinds were drawn. My security detail, doubtlessly watching the house with care, wouldn’t be able to see inside.

I shrugged and dropped the towel, enjoying the way Xander watched my hips sway as I walked over to him. Delicately, I settled on his lap.

He wrapped an arm around me, tugging me deeper into his embrace. His other hand rested between my thighs, though not in the way it usually did when he was feeling frisky.

“What’s this?” I asked, peering down at the blue velvet box he’d placed in my lap. It was too big to be a ring, but it looked distinctly like jewelry.

“The last time I tried to beg your forgiveness for putting you in danger, you ignored me,” he explained. “Then, you went and got yourself pregnant.”

I snorted and reached back to swat him. “I got *myself* pregnant, huh?”

“I might’ve helped a little,” he added sheepishly. “So I guess this is a different kind of apology.”

“I’d rather have a gift,” I informed him, lifting the box. The velvet was soft against my fingertips. Its hinges were silver, tight enough that it would only open with a little force.

I opened it to find a beautiful silver necklace inside. Hanging from it was a red pendant, just big enough that it was almost gauche—almost, but not quite.

“Xander...” I breathed, already entranced. “It’s *beautiful*.”

“It’s yours by right.” Xander plucked the necklace from its box and wrapped it around me, clasping it behind my neck. “Every alpha’s mate of our pack has worn one of these. The garnet was mined right here in Evergreen.”

“This wasn’t your mother’s, was it?” I wasn’t sure how I felt about wearing Marianne Miller’s secondhand jewelry. It seemed about as lucky as wearing the Hope Diamond around my neck.

“It was my grandma’s.” He kissed my bare shoulder, adding a delicious flick of his tongue. “It suits you.”

I smiled as I toyed with the pendant between my fingertips. “Maybe it does.”

I relaxed against Xander, letting him run his hands over my body to his pleasure. Maybe this was why my mother always dated wealthy men. Sitting naked on Xander’s lap, being showered with jewels...

I could definitely get used to this.

“Let’s have Easter with your family,” I said, closing my eyes and giving myself over to the luxury of his touch.

He pinched my nipple playfully, making me gasp. “We already have plans.”

“We’ll combine them. After everything, we need to keep family close. It wouldn’t be a big deal.”

“No?” His hand strayed to my stomach. He stroked it in little circles. Already, I could imagine the way he’d pet me when my belly grew into a proper baby bump. “Alright, then. I’ll let Dad know. He’ll be thrilled. It’s just...”

“Oh, come on,” I groaned, turning my head to nuzzle his jaw with the tip of my nose. “It’s only dinner. What could possibly go wrong?”

“I’m just not sure about having it at Ma and Dad’s house,” he admitted. “It feels...haunted somehow.”

“Ah.” I turned on his lap, wrapping my arms around his neck and slinging my legs across his thighs. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“My place, yours, Nana Jordan’s...if Macy and Leo come, we’ll need more room,” Xander went on, ever the alpha. Logistics were always the first thing on his mind. “We could have it at the lodge, I guess—”

“No, I think I have the perfect place for it.” I grinned. “You’ll love it.”

“Where?”

I tucked my head under his chin and snuggled close to him. “I’m going to buy a house.”

* * *

On a cloudy Sunday, the green door of the Havishford house swung open. But this time, I wasn’t watching it from the street.

This time, I was on the other side.

Mrs. Havishford had made good on her offer, lowering the price enough that I could make the down payment with my savings. It would need some TLC, sure. Like any old house, there were imperfections. But the inspector had assured me that the foundations were solid. The bones were good. The contractor concurred. In just a few months, the place would be fully refurbished and move-in ready. A house fit for raising a family in, just like Mrs. Havishford had wanted.

In a truly Xander-esque move, Xander put his own home on the market as soon as the papers were signed.

“It’s not like we need two houses,” he reasoned. “And if we’re both paying the mortgage, we’ll save a shitload in interest.”

We’d argued over that point for a whole evening before I finally relented. Xander had started the renovations on our new house the very next day.

Unsurprisingly, he’d installed a security system first.

Apart from Nana and Tony, who were staying with us for a while, Kingston was the first to show up for Easter dinner. He

appeared on our doorstep, bearing two hefty cases of craft beer.

“Nice place.” Kingston craned his neck, peering around—and not, I noted, at the wall art, since there wasn’t any. The house was still largely unfurnished save for the kitchen, which Xander had outfitted with new appliances, and the dining room, which now contained a massive, beautiful oak table with matching chairs. Xander’s grandfather had built the set with his own hands.

“Looking for something? Or someone?” I asked, arching a brow.

“Your friend Gena wouldn’t happen to be here today, would she?” he asked hopefully.

I laughed. “No such luck. She drew the short straw and is at work. Should I pass on a message for you?”

“Nah.” Kingston grimaced, visibly deflating. “She wouldn’t want to hear it, anyway.”

Macy and Leo arrived next, looking flushed enough that I suspected they might have pulled over to do something distinctly un-Christian on the drive over. Married life—or was it only mated life?—clearly suited them.

Connell came in a clean suit, looking especially spiffy, with a bottle of wine in one hand and a bouquet of flowers in the other. I showed him straight to the kitchen, where Nana promptly handed him an apron and put him to work.

Dylan was the last to show. He slunk in right before we sat down, so quietly that I almost missed his arrival. When I met his eyes, he gave me a small smile, then stole a dinner roll while Xander said grace.

As we finished dessert, Xander squeezed my hand and set aside his napkin.

That was the signal.

It was finally time.

“We have some news,” Xander and Macy said in unison, rising simultaneously. They turned to each other, looking both

confused and annoyed.

“Wanna go first?” Xander offered.

“No, you go ahead,” she urged him. “Ours can wait.”

“Felicity’s pregnant,” Xander announced. He smiled down at me. “We’re having a baby.”

“Uh...shit.” Macy glanced at Leo and laughed. “I mean, congratulations, of course. It’s just, I guess we should have gone first.” She pressed her hand over her stomach. “We’re going to have a baby, too.”

“Oh, fuck it all,” Nana swore, throwing down her napkin. “And I’m pregnant, too! How about that?”

Connell choked so hard on a slice of pie, I wondered if I would need to give him the Heimlich.

“She’s kidding,” I assured him, patting him on the arm.

“Sounds like our family is getting a little bigger,” Tony said slowly. He looked around the table with a wariness, as if he still wasn’t sure this could possibly be true.

Xander wrapped an arm around me and squeezed me tight, covering his face with his hand. It took me a second to realize he was laughing.

“Yeah,” he choked out. His entire body shook so hard, I couldn’t help but join in. “That sounds about right.”

Chapter 28

Xander

Two Weeks Later

The wheels of the truck rumbled over a pothole. Squeaking, Felicity clapped her hand over her mouth and turned green.

“Can you not do that?” she pleaded, hand scrambling to find the lip of the empty ice cream bucket we’d brought along for exactly this reason.

“Sorry, Cheeks. I can’t fill in the road.” I handed her the bucket, and she hunched over it, whimpering. “Well. At least, not right now. I can see about it later, though.”

A little blacktop repair, tamped down and leveled off, was all it needed. Wouldn’t be hard. If Felicity wanted me to, I’d fill in every damn pothole in town—then head to the county office to raise hell about why *I* was the only one tending to Evergreen’s roads.

We were on our way to the Evergreen General, where we had our first appointment with Felicity’s new obstetrician. Felicity’s morning sickness was still going strong. Hopefully, he’d be able to prescribe her something for it.

“You know what Ma always said—” I began but cut myself off. A frown creased my brow. “Ah, shit.”

Delicately, Felicity spat in the bucket. “It’s okay. She’s still your mother.”

“Not by choice.” Ma’s betrayal cut deep enough that I would have been happy to write her out of our lives completely. But Felicity was right—she was the woman who’d raised me, for better or worse. Now that we were expecting a child of our own, her presence would especially linger.

It was annoying how much Ma would love that.

“What did she always say?” Felicity prompted.

“Ah, it’s probably just an old wives’ tale. Shifter babies, they’re supposed to cause worse morning sickness.” I glanced over and winked at her. “On account of all the fur.”

She clutched her stomach in horror. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

I smirked. “Don’t worry. I am.”

“How do you know?” she asked. “Whether the baby will be a shifter or not?”

“It’s pretty hard to miss. Shifter babies grow faster than human ones. They’ll make you hungrier, too. You’ll need all the extra calories you can get.”

“So, that’s why you said yes to donuts this morning.” She pouted as she stared down into the bucket. “Though now I’m kind of wishing I said no.”

“Just hold on,” I encouraged her. Reaching over, I squeezed her knee. “We’re almost there.”

“How much faster are we talking, though? If I’m gonna be in and out of maternity clothes within a couple of weeks, I could just save myself the effort and raid your closet instead.”

“It’ll take more than weeks. If you’re having a shifter, that bun in your oven will need about four months to bake.”

“So...four months or nine? What do you think?” she asked.

I smiled. “We’ll see.”

The truth was, I didn’t want to freak her out. Already, her scent was wolfish—and not just my own. Beneath her perfume and natural musk, there was the scent of earth and petrichor, pine forests, and winter winds. She smelled like things I had no name for, only half-baked poetic notions: untamed freedom, fierce loyalty, unshakable resilience, an unwillingness to back down.

If our baby wasn’t a wolf, I’d eat my boots.

* * *

“According to your last period, you should be measuring about six weeks,” Dr. Garcia announced, already smirking.

Felicity lifted her head as the doctor ran the wand across her belly. She was lying on the exam table while Raul hid behind the screen, studying the results. Her feet fluttered anxiously. “And?”

“You’re closer to eight or nine.” He clapped me on the shoulder and broke into a full-faced grin. “Based on your rate of gestation, I’d say your babies are both shifters.”

Felicity stared up at me with wide, sparkling eyes.

That was when the words finally kicked in.

“*Babies?*” she asked, blinking quickly.

“As in...plural?” I added, certain that this had to be a joke.

Dr. Garcia sure laughed like it was one. “Let’s just say that you’ll need to double whatever supplies you’ve started gathering.”

He turned the screen toward us so we could see it.

It was an ultrasound, alright. I looked at Dr. Garcia with narrowed eyes. “Explain how.”

Dr. Garcia laughed again. “Right. So here, and here.” He pointed to two pale shapes in the blackness on the screen, both the size and shape of fat kidneys. “Two amniotic sacs. That means two babies. Twins, they call them. You might be familiar with the concept?”

I scowled at him. “I know what twins are. But...”

I leaned across Felicity, getting the screen as close to my face as I could. I peered at the shapes Dr. Garcia had pointed out with supreme suspicion.

He was right. There were two.

“Twins?” I murmured.

“Twins,” Felicity repeated, reaching for my hand.

“Twins,” Dr. Garcia agreed pleasantly. “There, now we’ve all said it. It’s still too early to know their genders, but I’ll see you again in three weeks. We should be ready to find out then.”

* * *

We drove home in a charged silence. I don't think either of us wanted to speak. The reality of our lives felt too precious, too fragile. The kind of thing that might shatter with little more than a whisper.

When I got out of the truck to open her door for her, she was still staring at the ultrasound picture.

"Hey." I touched my fingers to her wrist. "You okay?"

She turned to me. Her lips trembled, just for a second.

Then, the waterworks started.

"Hey, hey. You're alright. Everything's okay." I wrapped her up in a hug and held her tight, blocking out the rest of the world.

"I *know* I'm okay," she insisted through a sob. "I'm just... I'm *happy*, Xander. I'm the happiest I've been in such a long time."

I chuckled, amazed by her. "If you're so happy, you can stop crying, you know."

"No. I can't." She pulled back, eyes glistening, lips curled into a beautiful smile. "I really can't."

"You're going to be an amazing mother, Cheeks." I put my hands on either side of her face and swiped my thumbs under her eyes, wiping away her tears. "I already know you will be."

"You bet your ass I will." Half-heartedly, she shoved me away. "So try and keep up, okay?"

I grinned. My own eyes were feeling a little misty, come to think. "I'll do my best."

* * *

Later that night, I left Felicity with the security detail and drove to Dad's house. Our big news could have been relayed

over the phone, but I wanted to tell him in person. I wanted to see the look on his face.

Most of all, I wanted to make sure he was okay.

The house was cleaner than I'd expected. Ma had always insisted she was the only one who knew how to clean the place right. I'd often gotten the impression she only did it so she could hold it over our heads. Now I knew it wasn't true. Dad had answered the door wearing a pair of yellow rubber gloves and an old toothbrush in hand.

"So that's where I got it from." I nodded to the toothbrush's frayed bristles, tinged pink from whatever cleaning supplies he was using. He'd scrubbed them almost completely flat.

Dad stared at the brush and sighed. "Yeah. Had to do something. Suppose that's the alpha in us. You coming in or just stopping by?"

"Coming in if you've got the time."

"I've got nothing but time right now, kid. Leave your boots at the door."

In socked feet, I followed him into the kitchen.

"Don't have much to drink in here," he said, rifling around in the fridge. "I've got a root beer, a Bud Light—though that may be skunked, it's from last Fourth of July—or there's iced tea."

"Iced tea is fine, Dad." I grabbed a couple glasses from the cabinet while he pulled out the pitcher. "Come sit down, will ya?"

Dad moved slowly to the table. For the first time in my life, I heard the age crack in his bones as he lowered himself into the chair across from me.

"I remember when this house was full." The iced tea sloshed into the glasses, one for him, one for me. "Wolf cubs and chaos, day in, day out. Used to be, your ma and I couldn't get food on the table fast enough." He coughed a laugh. "We'd set a plate of bacon down on the table, turn around to grab the

eggs, turn back, and you'd be sitting there licking the plate clean."

"I was a hungry kid. And you made good bacon."

"Yeah, maybe I did. Your ma used to joke that some days you kids were so noisy, she'd hear you arguing in her dreams. It was when it got quiet that we had to worry. That's when we knew something was wrong." He pulled his lips tight like he was trying to smile and raised his head, looking around. "Awfully quiet now."

"It won't stay that way for long." I reached into my back pocket and pulled out the ultrasound picture. Carefully, I slid it across the table to him. "Take a look at that."

With narrowed eyes, Dad lifted the picture. He blinked, moved it closer to his face, then blinked again and moved it closer still.

"Two?" He looked at me, brow furrowed.

I nodded, cracking a smile. "No pretending Felicity's anything but efficient."

"Two," he whispered to himself. "Two babies."

"Two cubs," I corrected. "They're both shifters. No idea about the genders yet, but—"

"That doesn't matter." He shook his head and held the picture out, still staring at it. "Not to me."

I'd only seen my father cry a handful of times. Once, when he'd smashed off the tip of his littlest finger while unhitching something from the back of his truck. Again, when Macy was born. Kingston and I had made fun of him relentlessly for it, but he'd taken it in stride.

You boys just wait until you've got babies of your own, he'd warned us. You see how easy it is to fight back tears then.

It was hard to say which one of us broke first.

"I'm proud of you, son," he finally choked out. He laughed, rubbing his eyes, then lunged across the table to envelop me in a hug. "Prouder than you'll ever know."

After telling Dad, somehow Ma's absence in all of this felt all the more palpable.

All the trouble Ma had gone through was out of fear, or so she'd claimed. She never believed I'd become a father without her help, let alone father to an heir for our pack.

Worst of all, she'd never believed in me.

Now, she'd miss all of this. The thrill of a new life entering our world. The beauty of our family growing larger. The promise of a tomorrow full of baby buggies and milk burps, first shiftings, first howls, first full moons.

Then again, maybe that was for the best.

She'd never been the most generous of mothers, nor the kindest, the most patient, the warmest of heart.

But Felicity would be. I didn't have a single doubt in my mind.

It didn't matter if our children were humans or shifters—alpha, beta, or otherwise. They'd be raised with love.

The buck stopped with us.

* * *

A few days later, I got home from work to find an Amazon package on our porch, tilted back to rest against the front door.

I hadn't placed any orders lately. Anything we needed for the new house, we had sent there.

I chuckled gently to myself as my chest flooded with warmth. Felicity must've done it. She was having packages delivered to my place now, which could only mean one thing.

She was finally beginning to feel like my house was her home, just when it was about time to move out of it.

I jogged up to the porch, feeling lighter than I had in a long time. The package was near-weightless in my hand. It was soft, like a package of socks. Grinning, I turned it over. I

wanted to see her name on the label, perched on top of our address.

A cold cup of unease tipped over and spilled through me as I turned the package over again.

No address label. No return address, either.

This was no Amazon order. This package had been placed here. Deliberately.

I glanced to the driveway. The Flamingo was absent. So was Connell's truck. She and her security detail were probably over at the new place—or, since it was Connell's shift, maybe at Nana Jordan's.

The street was empty.

I unlocked the door and stepped inside, taking the package with me. Before I opened it, I gave it a sniff.

It smelled benign, like laundry detergent and packing tape.

I tore at the plastic. Two soft shapes slipped out of it and fell to the floor: stuffed bunny rabbits.

I almost breathed a sigh of relief. Almost.

But when I stooped to pick them up, I found a note attached to one, tied around its neck with twine.

The precise, looping cursive blurred as I read the words over and over.

Congratulations on your bundles of joy. You took our alpha. You owe us a replacement. We'll be watching. We'll be waiting.

And when they're born, we'll claim what's ours.

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A mate is forever. Until they reject you...

Luna is sick of being an outcast. As the illegitimate daughter of a high-ranking official and her mother gone, she's never felt wanted.

Finding her fated mate was supposed to change everything. She's known for six years that she and Marnet are mates, and tonight at the MoonMate ceremony, it's time for him to stop acting like a playboy alpha and claim her as his.

Only he does the exact opposite and humiliates her publicly with his brutal rejection. Then Luna is taken by Remus, another alpha whose clan launches a surprise attack during the ceremony. He's captured all the other alphas except one—Marnet.

Now Luna has a choice. Lead the enemy to Marnet or protect her mate. Remus treats her better than Marnet ever did, but

Luna is convinced Remus is only using her to get what he wants. Marnet is still her mate.

Although it wouldn't be the first time she's been wrong about love...

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Her Fake Wolf Daddy

Alpha Wolf Bachelor: Book 1

Skye Wilson

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