



MAVERICK

SHIFTERS OF WOLFWATER BAY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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LIAM: Shifters of Iron Storm Bayou

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CONTENTS

[Newsletter](#)

[Other Paranormal Romance Titles](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Message from Amber Ella Monroe](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Her Broken Beasts

Bride of Monsters

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BOOK SUMMARY

This time, it's all or nothing.

Maverick

My return to Wolfwater comes at a price, but everything is at stake and I can't lose.

I've been delaying the inevitable for years all because of my family's feud.

I'll end it somehow—even if I have to break tradition.

I live my life without my mate beside me even though I know she exists.

This time, it's either all or nothing. *I'll have her soon—exactly how I imagined.*

Courtney

I thought I could defy the Alpha's son without consequences. I was so very wrong.

The beast inside the man wants one thing: *my total submission.*

But the man has his mind set on something else: *revenge.*

Last time I ran into Maverick in Wolfwater Bay, I told him to take a hike. And he did...

Now that he's back in town, I'll do anything to avoid him and the thorough punishment he promised me so long ago.

CHAPTER ONE

Courtney

The hands on the clock in the library slowly crept towards 5pm, and I felt a heavy weight of dread as my shift came to a close. I mechanically reached for the books I had to shelve, but my thoughts kept drifting back to all the unfulfilled dreams and missed opportunities that seemed to have taken over my life. My body felt sluggish, my movements robotic and without purpose, as if I was going through the motions just to get by.

It wasn't like me to feel this way. I loved my job working here surrounded by books. At any point of the day, I could bury myself in some other fantastical world that was not my own. The smell of freshly printed pages enveloped me. The soft tapping of keyboard keys and the murmur of quiet conversations filled the air. With two stories and a basement, I could get lost in my own corner forever.

But I didn't want to be lost anymore.

Maybe I was just trying too hard.

The bad dates I had been going on didn't help either. Each one seemed to be worse than the last, and I was starting to wonder if I was ever going to find someone who truly understood me.

I checked my phone for the umpteenth time, hoping for a message from my best friend or someone else to distract me from my thoughts.

But there was nothing there. Just the same old notifications from social media and work emails that I couldn't bring

myself to care about at this point.

Bad dates. Bad headaches. Bad family drama. There was never a dull moment.

My mind started to wander to thoughts of midnight blue eyes and a roguish face.

I exhaled and grumbled, shaking my head. “I’m not doing this again,” I mumbled to myself.

Why was I thinking about the rakish bad boy from my youth all of a sudden? What we had was a fling. No more. No less.

One fling with a bad boy shifter a few years ago shouldn’t have ruined it for me, but it had. Despite knowing that said bad boy had been trouble, I couldn’t help but think about him and compare him to the guys I had been going out with lately.

Maverick Maisonnat had a name most folks in the town had heard of; his reputation as a ‘rogue’ was not unknown.

I remembered the excitement and danger of being with him, the rush of adrenaline I felt whenever he was near. But I also remembered the chaos and uncertainty that came with it, the constant worry and fear of getting hurt because of all the family drama surrounding him. The memory of our time together was like a drug, addictive and hard to resist. I kept coming back to those memories...knowing what they’d do to me. I let him go a long time ago; told him I never wanted to see him again.

My failed attempt at moving on from my bad boy shifter obsession came in the form of a very popular, very wealthy, very human man—Josh Colvin. I wasn’t the one who pursued him. After all, I was fresh out of a relationship with Maverick. But Josh courted me and chased me until I finally gave in and went out with him. He took my mind off my split for a long time, taking me out of town from coast-to-coast and to international and exotic places and buying me whatever he thought would make me smile.

When he proposed a mere few months into our relationship, the news spread quickly around our small town. My family

was overjoyed that one of us was finally marrying a rich man, and I...took it with a grain of hope.

But...

My heart wasn't in it. I didn't want us to live a lie, so I let him go too.

My best friend and my family called me a fool because of it. I guess they thought I would be happy to marry for money. Josh was a good listener, a friend, but he didn't have my heart.

After that split, I wondered if I was just attracted to males of the shifter variety in general. So, I gave it another go—I went out on a date with the new shifter in town, hoping to give them another chance. I mean, he didn't have bad boy rogue written all over him and it seemed that all he wanted to do was fish and play golf. But nope. He seemed nice enough on a couple dates, but he held a bit of arrogance which I handled quite well, but there was no spark, no chemistry between us. We stayed on a first name basis only. Which I found odd, but I guess it made sense because fate determined he wasn't the one either.

Despite politely declining his requests for more dates, Ian still called me off and on. He'd been doing it for the past four months wondering if anything had changed and if I wanted to hook up again. I felt guilty for not feeling the same way about him, but I just didn't want to draw anything out anymore. And I certainly didn't want to move to the next base like I did with Maverick and Josh and waste anyone's time.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. Maybe it was time to give up on dating altogether and focus on my work and other hobbies. I always wanted to open a small book and souvenir shop, and there were lots of units for sale. All I had to do was raise the cash.

Despite my mom's suggestion to move from here and never look back, I'd never do it. All my memories were here. I wasn't ready to give that up yet.

I sighed and checked the time on my watch. Thirty more minutes to go. My shift was coming to an end.

“Hey, Courtney, how’s it going?” A voice interrupted my thoughts.

I looked up and saw my co-worker, Eleanor, standing at the end of the cataloging station. She had probably just clocked in. A wave of apprehension washed over me as I forced a polite smile.

“Hey, Eleanor,” I said, trying not to let the anxiety in my voice shine through. “It’s been a slow day today.”

“I’m glad to here that. If we get a repeat of all the kids coming in to beat the heat only to run up and down the aisles, I’m going to scream,” she joked.

I chuckled. “Yeah. We had that earlier, but it didn’t bother me.”

“How are you and your boyfriend doing?” Eleanor asked, her eyes glinting with hope. I instantly felt a strange mixture of numbness and annoyance. “You know that new guy who just moved in from the mid-west,” she added.

She was talking about Ian. The only reason she knew about him was that she ran into us at the movies which was the second date and when I realized it just wasn’t going to work out with us.

“Oh, we’re not together anymore,” I said, trying to mask the misery in my voice.

“That was quick.” Eleanor’s face shifted from curiosity to concern. “What happened?”

“It just didn’t work out,” I said, hoping that would be the end of it.

But Eleanor wasn’t done. “Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. My husband and I have been together for ten years now, and we still can’t get enough of each other,” she said, beaming with pride. “Maybe you should give these guys more than one chance.”

I tried to hide my frustration. I just wanted to finish my shift and go home. I didn’t want to talk about my failed relationships with her, which she probably knew all about and

talked about with her little knitting group of town gossipers. They all knew I broke off my engagement to Josh Colvin who some young women in this town had been dying to hook up with. Now, Josh Colvin was a free man and I prayed he found a nice proper woman to settle down with.

“That’s great, Eleanor...about you and your office,” I said, trying to sound sincere. “I’ll find Mr. Right one day.”

Eleanor continued to talk about her marriage, oblivious to my discomfort. I nodded and smiled, pretending to listen while my mind wandered.

Finally, Eleanor said goodbye and walked away. I sighed and went back to my work. I had counted down the minutes until I could go home and be alone with my thoughts, but my thoughts were not alone. They were doubting and frightened, full of questions. Would I ever find someone to love? Would I have to move away like my mom always suggested? Would I spend my life passing through places and never feeling at home? I tried to push these thoughts out of my mind, but they kept flooding back, stronger than ever.

Just as I was about to pack my things up to leave, Eleanor started yelling from the front. “Hey, you can’t go back there!”

I looked up to see my best friend, Adelaide, blazing her way through the back door. Her expression was full of determination and her blonde hair was wild, like a storm itself.

“Ade, what are you doing here? I’m still working. What’s going on?” I asked, confused.

Adelaide’s face was tense. “I saw Maverick. I saw your ex. He’s back in town.”

CHAPTER TWO

Courtney

“Are you sure it was him?” I asked, hoping against hope that it wasn’t true.

“It was Maverick Maisonnat. It was him.”

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of Maverick’s name. It had been nearly a year since I last saw him, and the pain of our breakup still lingered in my heart. I had tried my best to keep my composure and avoid thinking about him, but now that he was back in town, it seemed impossible. How ironic that I was just thinking about him. All that mysterious stuff he fed me about us being fated no matter how far I pushed him away seemed too good to be true. But was it?

“Did you know?” Adelaide pressed.

“N-no,” I mumbled.

“I’m positive. He was walking down the street, and I recognized him from all the pictures you took him.”

I was still in shock, my thoughts a jumble of confusion, until I heard a faint shuffling coming from the opposite corner of the library. Glancing up, I saw Eleanor peering over a thick, leather-bound book, her eyes fixed steadily on us. She was clearly listening in on our conversation. Giving Adelaide a quick nod, I rose from the table and gestured for her to follow as I stepped out into the hallway and we exited the library.

My mind spun with questions. What was Maverick doing back in town? Had he come to pour salt into an open wound and

remind me how much he promised I would miss him? Was it really fate or just coincidence that brought him back here?

Adelaide and I stepped outside the library and into the garden. We parked ourselves on a bench, setting under an old oak tree. The sun was setting, casting a beautiful golden hue over the overgrown grass and the wildflowers. We stood in silence for a few moments, the only sound coming from the crickets chirping and the lull of conversation pouring in from around the corner.

Finally, Adelaide broke the silence. “What do you want to do? Are you going to talk to him?”

I sighed, feeling a mix of emotions. “I’m going to do nothing, Addie,” I said, my voice breaking.

She shook her head. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly as I said. Nothing,” I replied.

“You just don’t want to face him. That’s it, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Maverick still has family here obviously. His return has nothing to do with me.”

“You might be right, but you once told me you were in love with this guy and that he begged you to come with him and you refused.”

“That was a long time ago,” I said.

“It’s only been a year,” she countered.

“A lot has happened in a year.” I rolled my eyes.

“Oh.” She exhaled. “You’re talking about your engagement to Josh, aren’t you?” She leaned forward. “Look, I knew you weren’t all that happy with Josh. I saw it written all over your face. I just didn’t want to bust your bubble.”

I shook my head. “So, you’re busting it now?”

She chuckled. “I just want all of us to be happy.”

I grinned widely, my heart filling with joy for my best friend. I couldn’t help but tease her. “You want me to get pregnant, like you?”

She erupted with laughter, her eyes twinkling with new-found happiness. “You got me. Hey, we were supposed to do this together.” I beamed inwardly, proud of my friend and her new husband and their exciting news.

“As much as I want that, I’m not going to force it.”

Adelaide put a comforting hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to force anything. And I’m here for you, and we can take this one step at a time.”

I smiled weakly, grateful for her support. “Thanks, Addie.”

Maverick was back in town, and I didn’t know what that meant for me and my feelings towards him. All I knew was that I needed time to sort through my emotions and figure out what I wanted.

“Other than the obvious being you, I wonder why else he might be back?” Adelaide asked.

I shrugged. “The Maisonnats have many businesses here. Especially his father Gustave. It can be a number of things.”

Adelaide leaned forward and whispered, “Listen, I know you took your slow time telling me that he’s a full blood shifter... and you told me only after you two broke it up. When I realized that he was Gustave’s son, I knew for sure, he was a shifter. And you confirmed it.”

“There was no denying it once you found it, but please understand it wasn’t my secret to tell.”

Adelaide frowned. “I know, but that whole time I was thinking you were such a dumbass for pushing him so far away when clearly he loves you. After hearing about his family issues, I said it was no wonder you stepped away. Someone in the town square saw him at the same time I did. They were whispering that Gustave might be sick. Do you think that’s it?”

I nervously nibbled on my lip, unsure of what to say. “Hmm, I don’t know. I surely hope not.” Gustave never approved of Maverick’s relationship with me, but I’d never wish any harm or suffering on him either.

Adelaide bit her nails. “Or maybe he and his siblings are fighting over assets again.”

I shook my head. “No. Maverick wanted to make his own way. He didn’t want to compete with his siblings nor did he like the conflict that came with arguing with his father all the time. After awhile, he had enough of butting heads with him.”

“You know so much about him, Courtney,” she said, her voice thick with possibility. “What if...just what if...he actually came back for you?”

“It’s probably just a coincidence,” Courtney said, trying to convince herself as much as Adelaide. “There’s no way he would come back here just to find me. Don’t forget, Addie. They are not humans. Even though they have infiltrated themselves into human society, their pack is governed differently. I think something bad has happened, causing his return.”

CHAPTER THREE

Maverick

One week ago...

I had just completed my run through the bayou with members of the Iron Storm Bayou wolf pack. The scent of the wild, untamed land lingered in the air, and I basked in my frenzy, reveling in the feeling of my body stretched to its limits. I howled and barked in celebration with them, my wolf form rejoicing in the freedom of the run.

They were celebrating a mate union between two of their pack members and had invited me along. I had only gone to the bayou to escape from the craziness of my family and while Alarik, the Cajun Alpha of the bayou pack, had asked me multiple times to join them and pledge my allegiance, I couldn't bring myself to do it. He seemed to understand, probably due to the fact that my father was the Alpha of Wolfwater Bay Pack; pledging myself to another would be like giving up on my own pack, and that wasn't something I wanted to do.

Still Alarik allowed me to seek solace here, setting up a small cabin for me just outside the bayou and even hooked me up with his construction buddies who got me a job at their worksite.

The bayou was my second home away from home...but it wasn't home.

The pain of my past still lingered deep in my soul, the rejection from my ex-girlfriend haunting me. Being away from

her had done nothing but harden my heart. The loneliness of my wolf soul was easier to bear than the pain of heartbreak—and going back knowing she would never accept me as I was.

As I split off from the pack and made my way back to my house, I started to feel the pangs of hunger. My wolf was gnawing at the edges of my mind, reminding me that it was time to hunt and not just run.

As I trotted down the trail, my senses sharpened, and I shifted back into my human form. I felt my bones crack and my muscles stretch, until I was finally standing tall on two feet.

With a sigh, I quickened my pace, the thoughts of a shower and a soft bed calling to me. As I emerged from the dense forest and onto the dirt road that led to the house, I saw nothing but the quiet stillness of the bayou. I was naked as hell, but there was no one around to notice or care. That was the beauty of living on land owned and controlled by shifters. We could be who we wanted when we wanted. It was like that where I grew up too, but I had too much family baggage. Baggage I needed to forget about for a while.

I held my arms extended out from my body. The trees swayed gently in the breeze, the only sound the distant call of a bird and the rustling of the trees as my buddies ran amok. I closed my eyes and breathed in the scent of the wild, letting the peace of the moment wash over me.

I knew that I couldn't keep running from my past forever, but for now, I would revel in the peace of the moment.

The idea of a cold shower and a nap before sunrise was quickly dispelled when the sound of my cell ringing from inside the house jolted me. I rushed for the door, fumbling with the doorknob, my fingers slipping from the cold metal due to their slick sheen of sweat. When I finally opened the door, I kicked it shut with my heel and picked up my phone from the kitchen counter where I left it.

As soon as I checked the caller ID and saw my father's name and number, I grumbled, walked into the living room, and tossed the device down on the sofa.

There was no way I was going to answer that. The last thing I needed was getting an earful of my father telling me how disappointed he was of me.

Screw that. I had work in the morning.

But then my phone rang, shattering the stillness of the room. I ignored it again, slapped together a ham sandwich to appease my wolf and sat down to gobble it down still undressed.

When the cell rang again, I cursed and answered it this time. “What.”

“Maverick, it’s your father,” a gruff voice replied on the other end.

“Yes, I know.” I slouched down on the couch.

“So, why didn’t you answer the first ten times?”

“I was out running. Just got back.”

“Out? Running? With others?”

“Yes, father.”

My father cleared his throat. “You still living there with those Cajun backwoods wolves? That’s who you’re going with on pack runs now?”

“Gustave, if you called me to give me the third degree about being on friendly terms with other packs, I don’t want to hear it.” I put the phone on speaker and put it down on the coffee table while I opened up a bag of greasy chips and started chowing down on it.

“Not what I’m doing, Mave. Quite the opposite. You were always outgoing and an extrovert, unlike me. You’re right to branch out. We need to build a rapport with other groups.”

“We?” I was content to know my father was coming around, but I hadn’t heard from him in weeks. Now it seemed like he wanted something, as if he was trying to win my favor.

“Yes, we. Even though you distance yourself from me and your family, you are still a member of my pack. Don’t forget that. When I am gone...you never forget that.”

His voice sounded odd when he said that last part. There was kind of a sadness to it. That's when I knew. Something wasn't right. There had to be a reason he was calling me past midnight.

"What's going on?" I asked, my heart beginning to race.

"Taylor Brandt came back. His banishment is over. And he's challenged me for the Alpha position again," my father said without preamble.

My eyes widened in shock. Taylor Brandt was a notorious troublemaker, a rogue shifter who had been banished from the Wolfwater Bay pack years ago for his reckless behavior and almost giving us a bad rap with the humans who protected our secret for many decades. Even after our secret was revealed to almost everyone, they still stood up for us. And then Taylor went and organized an attack on a very prominent human that left him paralyzed from the waist down. We made an agreement with the town council. We would either give up our lands or banish Taylor. We all voted for his banishment.

"What? But his banishment period just ended," I said, my mind whirling.

"Yes, he claims his son Shane will be the new Alpha," my father replied, his voice heavy with concern.

"That's a direct challenge," I growled.

My jaw tightened. Shane Brandt was Taylor's son, a shifter with only a bit of the Maisonnat blood running through his veins. He had no right to the title of Alpha, and yet Taylor was using his newfound land in Wolfwater Bay to campaign for his son's ascension.

"I know. It's definitely a challenge neither of us should underestimate."

"It's a ridiculous challenge," I spat. "Shane has no right to the title just because he has Maisonnat blood. It doesn't work like that."

"On the contrary..." my father exhaled harshly into the phone.

"What does that mean?"

“Our laws today say that any wolf can challenge for Alpha,” he replied.”And Taylor and his son, Shane, aren’t about keeping the peace with those who oppose their return. Some of my younger patrol wolves have either been attacked from behind or gotten into some really bad fights with members of Taylor’s group. We need to act fast about what we’re going to do,” my father added, his voice urgent.

I nodded, my determination rising. I had never been interested in taking over our pack, not with my father still strong and capable. And not after he all but disowned me for not conforming to a set of archaic rules written decades ago. But I couldn’t stand by and watch someone like Taylor Brandt take over, especially not with my family and pack at stake.

“Will you come home, Maverick?”

Of course. He wanted me to return. To help him fight to save our leadership position.

“What about Melody? My sister can handle them. She may be small but she packs a vicious bite,” I said.

“No, goddamn it, Mave. Your sister is not cut out to be the Alpha, and not because she’s a girl. She’s just...not Alpha material. Neither is your older brother Mason or your younger brother, Martin. And do not even suggest Melody’s twin sister, Marisol, for she would drop a man just for looking at her the wrong way and she’s off to law enforcement school. It has to be you. I have always chosen you.”

“I never said I wanted it,” I rasped between clenched teeth.

“Then I might as well just lay down like a bitch, then, huh? And let Taylor take over our land. Well, you listen to me son, it’s not going to happen. I’m going to go out fighting and if you don’t come back, the next time you see me will be to burn my damn carcass.”

I sighed and picked up the phone then quickly set it back down. “You know me, father. I cannot reason with them. If I come, things will end in violence. Nothing will be certain.”

“But we don’t have to take that route.”

I threw up a hand. “What other routes are there?”

“Your mere presence here will deter them.”

“We don’t know that. The Brandts themselves are violent individuals and you know this. To get what they want, they’ll take by force.” I slammed my fist on the table to prove a point.

My father’s silence told me he knew I was right.

“And you know this, father. That’s why you want me home. You know I’ll do whatever is necessary.”

“Then why are you still sitting on your ass? Why are you not in Wolfwater Bay?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Courtney

One year ago...

While cupping a steaming mug of coffee between my hands, I sat at the Leestead corner café, looking at the help wanted section in the newspaper. This was a small town—the town I grew up in—and my best bet at finding a job was the local ads versus internet. My college roommates were all headed to bigger cities to find work or internships, but I came back home knowing that fast city life wasn't for me.

My mom always persuaded me to get away from Wolfwater Bay where we were considered the poorest, least unfortunate citizens here living on literally the wrong side of the tracks. I was no longer bothered by people calling me a trailer park bay kid. I had lived in the trailer park all my life and never once wished to go anywhere else until my mom pushed me out the door and drove me three hundred miles away to the college she selected for me.

Now at twenty-one years old I was back, had saved up enough money to buy my own townhouse near the bay, but now I needed to find a job.

A light breeze blew past, ruffling my hair, and I tilted my face skyward to take a breath of fresh air. My eyes were drawn to a figure standing across the street: a tall man with wide shoulders, shrouded in the morning fog, with a fixed, intense gaze beamed at me. I squinted, but his features were blurred in

the distance and I couldn't quite place him. All I knew was that he was...shirtless.

The man's physique was truly a sight to behold and I couldn't help but admire the perfection of it. His toned muscles flexed as he moved, and his abs were like a sculpture crafted by the hands of some ancient gods. His skin glowed in the foggy morning light, and even from afar, I could tell that he had an aura of confidence that radiated from him like a beacon. His chiseled jawline and tousled hair only added to his handsome look, making me feel as if I'd been caught in a trance-like state just admiring him. As my gaze lingered on him, I felt something stirring inside of me—a pull so strong I couldn't shake it off—and at that moment, I knew why I had come back home after all.

My breath hitched in my throat and my heart beats sped up as I looked around, checking to see if I was the only one to notice him or if it was just a figment of my imagination.

No one else seemed to see him, but he was in a very obscure place, standing right in front of a wood area as if he'd just come from out of the forest.

Without warning, he pulled something off his back and shook it out. It was his shirt, and as he put it on, his toned torso disappeared from sight.

My cheeks grew hot as his eyes caught mine in the distance. He fingered his chin as if in thought, and with a determined gait, he prowled toward me.

He hadn't even gotten within six feet of me and I knew immediately who the man was.

Dirty-blond hair. Piercing blue eyes. Towering over everyone he met. Close to seven-feet tall. Muscles like iron. And a body of steel that had everyone and their mom swooning over him.

"Oh God," I mumbled to myself and brought the newspaper closer to my face to hide my flustered face.

Maverick Maisonnat was a bad boy, a master of hearts—I heard he broke them too—and he held the attention of those around him like it was his birthright.

Still, I couldn't deny the thrill that ran through me as I watched him take off his hat and run a hand through his short hair. He had an almost animalistic grace about him, and I could feel my heart racing as he slowly crossed the sidewalk towards me.

I pretended not to notice him, sipping my coffee, and circling some rubbish on the page I didn't even read.

He cleared his throat and I looked up, squinting to make out his face through the haze.

A lazy smirk crossed his lips as he took a few steps closer. "Good morning," he said in a deep, sultry voice. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Oh fuck. He had the perfect smile. Pearly white teeth and a dimple that was just too damned cute.

My stomach tied itself in knots, and all I could do was nod my head and hope that he didn't notice the flush in my cheeks. He chuckled as if he knew exactly what I was thinking, and it only made me more nervous.

"I don't mind," I said, my breath catching in my throat.

He pulled out a chair and sat down across from me, pushing his hat back further on his head. His blue eyes seemed to sparkle with mischief as he smiled at me again before leaning forward on the table.

He produced a beautiful bunch of lavender and sage from behind him and passed them to me over the tabletop. It was a surprise, as I hadn't seen the bouquet until he pulled it out from his back pocket.

I took the flowers, inhaling their delightful aroma. It was clear that the blossoms had been recently picked, as the smell was so sweet and vibrant.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

I looked around. "Did you know I was here before bringing these?"

“I saw you through the trees.” He tilted his chin in the direction of the woods.

I swallowed. “You came from out of the woods?”

“I did.”

The woods he emerged from were off-limits, private property that trespassers were either fined for entering or met with hostile encounters from the guards patrolling the area. He obviously didn’t care or maybe he had a right to be there.

“So,” he said after an awkward silence, “Are you looking for a job?”

My eyes snapped up to meet his. How did he know? I realized the paper was open to the help wanted section, but he couldn’t have seen those small details on the paper.

“H-how did you know?” I stuttered and stumbled over my words and he laughed softly, obviously amused by my flustered state.

“I saw you at the mill the other day talking to Raymond about the clerk position. That was you, wasn’t it?”

I swallowed down a small gasp of shock. “It was. And I am. I...” I folded the paper, not knowing what to say.

This guy was a stranger, but then he wasn’t. I knew of him. I just didn’t know him.

Maverick chuckled, his deep laughter rumbling through the air. “You don’t seem like the type to be stuck in a factory all day.”

I squinted. “Well, what type do you think I am?”

“You seem more like the type to be looking for adventure.”

“Excuse me?”

“How come I’ve never seen you before? Are you a new Bay area resident?” he asked, dismissing my question.

“I’ve been here all my life.”

He looked shocked. “Oh. Hmmm...that’s interesting.”

“Yeah. I keep to myself. I live in Richards, just south of Leestead.” I thought for sure he’d get up and walk off when I gave him the name of my community. In fact, I was betting on it. I was looking for a job, not a bad boy.

A mischievous smile curved his lips as his eyes sparkled. He ran his tongue over his lips and asked, “Is that right?”

“Yes. In a trailer.” Thinking that would make him back off, I tucked away a wisp of hair behind my ear and refocused my attention back to my job hunting.

“Well, I live in the woods,” he stated flatly.

I flashed him a look of skepticism. “Try again. I know who you are.”

“Do you?” He leaned back in the chair and folded his arms across his chest.

“Yes. I mean everyone talks about you. I know who your dad is and I know you’re rich as fuck, so don’t even lie to me about living in the woods.”

“But it’s the truth. Where do you think I got the flowers?”

I glanced at him dubiously. “You race around the Bay on your dirt bike scaring off the ducks, you and your friends crash every party in town where you’re not invited, and you have girls that have never even spoken to you competing for your attention.” I nodded. “That’s you, right?”

A slight blush crept up his face. His scent was overpowering, more so than the flowers he brought me. He smelled of the pine bark from trees and the air after a downpour.

“Wow,” he said. “That is quite the rumor.”

“Rumor?”

“My dad has two other sons. Are you sure you’re talking about me? I’m Mav—”

“Maverick Maisonnat. I know who you are.”

He licked his lips. “And you’re Courtney Stewart.”

“Considering that I don’t have a reputation that proceeds me like you do, how do you know that?”

“I just asked. My dad has percentage ownership in the factory where you applied. I needed to know who you were. I was impressed by your beauty. The way you carried yourself. Your smile.”

I couldn’t help but smile. His grin was becoming contagious and it seemed that he knew exactly what to say to get on a woman’s good side.

“So, am I right about you?” he asked.

“About what?”

“You like adventure.”

I blushed, hiding my face partially behind my collar. “Maybe,” I whispered.

“If you like dirt bikes...and ducks, I can take you for a spin around the Bay.”

“I...”

This wasn’t happening. Maverick M. wasn’t asking me to join him on his dirt bike.

“I just don’t have time. I really need a job and...I just don’t have time for fun.”

He frowned. Maybe he’d never been rejected before. That was most likely the case given his reputation.

“I can wait. When will you have time?”

I started gathering my things, stuffing my pens and newspapers back into my bag. “Look, Maverick, forget what I said. Despite all those rumors, I know you’re probably a nice guy, but I don’t want to waste your time. You’re a Maisonnat and I’m...Courtney. So, um...let’s leave it that.”

Right after picking up the bouquet of flowers, I walked off, leaving him there with his lips parted. I knew it was a mistake to glance back at him, but I couldn’t help it. He stood by the table, his arms resting by his sides. Contrary to my expectations, he didn’t look disappointed—he looked

determined. The thought struck me that I would eventually cross paths with Maverick again.

CHAPTER FIVE

Courtney

The light of the early morning sun shone in my eyes, momentarily blinding me as I stepped out onto the sidewalk from the coffee shop. I glanced into my purse briefly to make sure I hadn't left my cell behind like last time, and then my gaze drifted up and bam—.

I ran into solid chest muscles of steel that took my breath away. "Oh, sorry," I mumbled, my vision still not adjusted to the sun enough to make out a face. I smelled pine bark from trees and fresh rain, but I wasn't in the forest and it had not rained in days. Recognition set in. My hand went up like a visor to hood my eyes and my heart raced as his face came into focus and my eyes widened in surprise.

"Maverick." My voice was barely above a whisper.

"Courtney."

He stepped away after steadying me, but kept his hands on my arms for a few moments longer than necessary before dropping them back down by his side. But then someone else pushed their way out of the coffee shop, and the door knocked against my arm as they passed by.

The cup of coffee in my hands nearly dropped to the ground, my fingers too stunned to move. The cup shifted before I could correct it, and the hot liquid spilling onto my wrists and down to the ground. A few drops had made it onto his black boots.

A low, "Ouch!" escaped my lips.

He reacted quickly and grabbed my wrist, then used the tail of his shirt to dab away the spilled liquid.

“Sorry lady!” I heard a guy yell.

Maverick, who had been mopping up the coffee, suddenly stopped and glared upward. An intimidating growl rumbled in his chest. “Where are your manners?” he shouted after the guy.

“It’s okay. I was in front of the door.”

“It’s my fault. I ran into you first. I should’ve slowed down. Are you sure it’s okay?” He looked down at the red spot on my wrist.

“Yeah, it’s not bad.” I slipped my hand away from his, but the connection I felt never left. Just one touch and my heart began to beat sporadically. “I should’ve watched where I was going. I was sort of in a rush.”

He squinted. “Catch you at a bad time?”

“I’m on break. Just needed some fresh air.”

“Still work at the library?” he asked.

I nodded. “Still there.”

He stood there, magnificently tall and well-built. His intense eyes pierced through me, as if he had been waiting for me for an eternity. His expression was a curious mix of knowing and surprise as the corners of his lips rose slightly. Despite all these years, I still found myself captivated by him, my heart beating a little faster.

I blushed, taking in his familiar features; tanned skin stretched over high cheekbones and a strong jawline, with wisps of dirty-blond hair framing it all. He’d grown more than a five o’ clock shadow. Despite the time that past away from each other, my heart still raced when his lips quirked into a small smile. He looked even better than I remembered.

“First of all...hi,” he said, chuckled.

“Uh, hi,” I said, smiling shyly.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” he asked, his eyes still fixed on mine.

“Yeah,” I nodded, my mind racing with the possibilities of what this sudden meeting could mean.

He stepped forward, closing the gap between us. His tall frame hovered against mine as he looked down at me, and for a moment all I could think about was how his lips had felt against mine almost a year ago. My breath quickened as I remembered the warmth of his skin, and my heart beat faster with each second we stood there together.

Steps away from him, yet still so close, I was nervous and still attracted to him. He seemed to sense it too; a knowing glint in his eyes that made me feel more exposed than ever before. Yet despite my nerves, I still couldn't seem to find words.

Until, at last, I managed to force out the words: “I heard you were back in town.”

He nodded, his lips pressed into a thin line as he processed my words. A few long seconds passed before he finally spoke.

“Yes,” he said, his voice low and heavy with emotion.

At those words, I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks as a wave of emotions flooded through me. I couldn't deny that somewhere deep inside me, I still wanted him; yet at the same time I knew that we had to move on from our past.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped back and looked away from him, choosing my words carefully before speaking again.

“I didn't think I would run into you so soon,” I said quietly, aware that there was so much more left unsaid between us.

“I think it was bound to happen.” He winked.

“Yeah.”

“How's married life?” he asked. I didn't miss how his gaze dropped to my ring finger. To ring that was there.

His inquiry made me suddenly aware that he still didn't know that the wedding had been called off. My heart skipped a beat as I realized how little he understood of what was going on in my life now—a reminder of how much had changed since we last saw each other.

“I never got married. I called it off.”

His eyes widened slightly as he searched for understanding in mine, and it was in that moment that I knew this conversation was far from over. Yet, I wasn't in the mood to rehash heartbreak after heartbreak, especially not with him.

I backed away. “I...have to go. It was nice seeing you again, Maverick.”

“Wait...”

I spun around and walked off before he could continue. I had no idea why, but I recalled some of the very last words he said to me a year ago when I told him it was over between us and that I wanted him to stay very far away from me.

You'll never be satisfied with anyone but me, Courtney. Eventually, you'll come to understand how right I am about this. And when you do, I'll be there. I promise.

He watched me go, and I could feel his gaze on my back as I walked away. The sun was just beginning to peak through the gray clouds, and the street seemed filled with possibility. Pausing my steps, I looked back at him one last time before turning away again. He stood there in the same spot, watching me as if he wanted to join me but struggled with the idea of following after me.

Gathering my courage, I turned the corner, this time more slowly than before, as if I knew walking away wasn't right. It didn't even feel right.

A few moments later I heard his footsteps behind me; cautious yet determined as he followed me down the street.

“Courtney...please stop.”

I stopped in my tracks, turning around to look at him.

“We should talk,” he said simply, his gaze intense yet steady. “I...uh...I really need someone to talk to. I missed that with you.”

For a moment I wasn't sure what to say; all this time had passed us by and suddenly here we were again face-to-face. A million questions raced through my mind as my eyes searched

his for answers; this was it, our chance for closure and understanding.

“Fine,” I said, solemnly. “As long as it’s not about relationships.”

“Doesn’t have to be about that,” he said, glancing at me with hopeful eyes.

I bit my lip, peering around and realizing that we were in the middle of busy sidewalk. The streets of Leestead were flooded with people as the afternoon rush hour set in. Everyone was trying to get to their destinations before closing time arrived and shops, banks, and other businesses shut down for the day.

“There’s a bench.” I pointed.

We began to walk with me leading the way mostly. We found our way to an old, weather-beaten park bench tucked away in the corner of the park.

I sighed. “How’s your family?” I hoped like hell he didn’t tell me something awful. Other than that, why else would he come back here after he stayed away for so long.

“Everyone’s well.”

I smiled. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“What about yours? I mean, how’s your mom?”

“My mom’s good. Dating again. Not anyone from Leestead, but she’s happy,” I said, knowing that I was probably divulging too much.

“What about you, Courtney? Are you happy?”

I swallowed and pushed out a smile. “Of course I am.”

He squinted. “Courtney, my inner lie detector hasn’t gone away. I’m still a shifter. Going away didn’t change that.”

“Okay, you got me. Maybe I’m not happy today. I’ve just been thinking about a lot.”

“A lot? Like about what?”

I didn’t want to tell him that I’d been seriously considering moving away from Wolfwater Bay and Leestead altogether,

but I just didn't feel like having that conversation with anyone right now, especially with me being still on the fence.

"Where I go from here." I sighed, and took a sip of my coffee.

Maverick leaned in. "Listen Courtney. I called you many times and—"

"I know you did. And I didn't answer. I thought it was best. No sense in starting something we weren't going to finish." I tensed, almost sorry I said that.

"That's not how this goes, Court," he said.

At that instant, I wanted to speak my mind. That was the power Maverick had over me. I could never resist him. When I saw him again, I knew that I would never be able to stay away.

"I thought we wouldn't talk about relationships," I noted. "Everyone's been talking about your return. You're a really big deal here, even to the ones who don't know your secret. So, tell me about the real reason you came back to Wolfwater Bay."

"There's a situation going on that needs immediate attention. My father asked me to come," he said.

"What kind of situation?" I asked, anxiety coiling in my heart.

"Attacks from an outsider. We're going to handle it."

"We? As in..."

Maverick nodded. "Yes. As in my pack. It's a pack situation."

My stomach lurched. It had been a long time since I'd heard about issues with the town's shifter pack, but then again, why would I be privy to that information anymore? I wasn't dating the town's one and only shifter bad boy.

"Why now?" I asked. "Why are they causing problems?"

Maverick sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "Someone has their eyes set on our pack. Someone that became our enemy not too long ago."

"What do you mean? Set on your pack? As in they want to join you?"

He grimaced. “Join? No. Take over? Yes.”

I looked around, lowered my voice, and said, “Your dad, Gustave, is still the Alpha, right?”

He nodded. “And it’s going to stay that way.”

“That’s the pack situation. Someone has challenged your dad.”

“And that means they’ve also challenged me. I know my dad is a fucking pain in the ass, Courtney, but he’s still my father. I protect my family.”

“I understand. Everything comes down to family. Family first.”

Maverick reached across my lap and took my hand. I didn’t stop him.

“And pack is family. I have to do what’s right for my pack,” he said.

“You don’t have to explain anymore. They’re your blood.”

“Family means more than just linked by blood.”

“You’ve said this before....” I whispered.

“And I meant every word I said.”

His words brought us closer. I felt the warmth radiating from his body and before I could stop myself, I reached out and touched his face. He gently brushed a stray strand of hair from my face and put it behind my ears. He leaned in closer, and I could feel the heat radiating off his body. His touch sent tingles down my spine. His gaze was intense and I felt a warmth wash over me like a summer tide. I knew he wanted to kiss me, but at the same time, it felt like he was asking permission first with his intense stare glaring into mine.

Maverick leaned in further, so close that his lips were almost touching mine. In that moment, all the walls between us broke down and I didn’t resist him this time. I closed my eyes and finally allowed myself to surrender to my desire for him; all the months of missing him coming together in that single moment.

He kissed me gently at first, then more passionately as he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me even closer to him on the bench. His lips were soft and tender against mine, as if we'd only just remembered how beautiful it felt when we kissed each other.

Our kiss was filled with longing for what could have been but also a gratitude for what we still had—a connection we both had never expected to find again but were so glad it resurfaced. We held onto each other tightly while our lips touched with an intensity that kept us both lost in the moment until finally breaking away breathless.

We looked at each other, eyes wide, both of us understanding what this meant. Maverick had already told me that the pack was his priority now and that he had to do what was right for them, and I knew the same. I couldn't deny it any longer; Maverick and I could never be together again. But if his path was going to eventually lead him away from me, then why did I take the bait?

I broke away from the embrace and scrambled to my feet. "We shouldn't have done that."

Maverick tried to reach for me as I started walking away, but I kept moving away from him.

"I should go or I'm gonna be late getting back to work."

Maverick called out after me as I walked away, "Courtney...I can't keep my feelings for you buried any longer. I'm still in love with you."

My feet came to a halt on the uneven pavement, but I made no move to look back. I exhaled with a force as I uttered a single sentence: "Maverick, go handle your pack situation."

"And then?" he quipped, eagerly.

I paused for a moment before replying, "I'm not sure yet."

CHAPTER SIX

Maverick

Family picnics and pack feuds.

Where the Maisonnats were concerned, the two went hand in hand. And it just so happened that Taylor's challenge and my return coincided with the birthday week of one of our elders.

Our whole pack was in attendance, gathered on the sprawling grounds of the Maisonnat estate near the river, enjoying the balmy summer day. The pastures were dotted with colorful blankets and baskets filled with homemade goodies. Children chased each other around the courtyard and dove into piles of water balloons on the ground. Tents had been erected for those seeking respite from the heat. Everywhere you looked, people were laughing and talking. Little wolf cubs ran up to me, nipping at my ankles and tugging on my sleeves, begging for my attention.

I laughed and plucked one of them from the ground by the back of his neck with my hand. In what seemed like a seconds, the little wolf cub shifter from a pup into a adolescent little boy.

"Maverick!" he exclaimed as I put him down on his feet. "You're back. Can we play kickball?"

"That's right, Chuck, I'm back." I ruffled his hair. "We can play kickball before I leave, but I have to talk to my dad." I pointed at the porch where my dad sat looking out at the activities. "You see him sitting there, don't you?"

“Yeah, you better go, or your daddy’s gonna pull your ears off,” Chuck laughed.

I chuckled. “I’m too old for that now, Chuck.”

Chuck stepped back, grinning. “I don’t know about that. I saw him do it to Martin just last week.”

“That’s because Martin is still under his roof.”

Chuck nodded. “Are you going to be our next Alpha?”

I rubbed my chin. By that time, the other pups now in human form had gathered around me, putting me on the spot, but I expected to be put on the spot a lot now that I was back. I couldn’t hide and sleep out in the woods anymore to avoid them.

“My father’s Alpha now. I don’t want to jinx anything, Chuck.”

“Well, I hope you are,” he said, and then ran off with his friends.

As Chuck disappeared, I caught wisps of conversations through the trees. A sense of unease that hung in the air like a fog. People speculated about my return to claim my birthright as Alpha, and what Taylor’s challenge would mean for the pack’s future. They thought they had it all figured out. Whispers circulated amongst them - some fearful, others hopeful - but everyone seemed to agree that no matter what happened, things were never going to be the same again...

Someone with strong hands nudged me in the back just as I started walking up the courtyard again to greet my father. I turned around and was shocked to see Messiah standing right beside me.

“Hey! Where’d the fuck did you come from?” I laughed and threw my arms around him.

Just like most everyone else here, I hadn’t seen Messiah in over a year.

“I just got back from up north. Dude? What are you growing a beard or something?” he asked.

I rubbed my chin. “Just didn’t bother to shave before Gustave begged me to come.”

“Everyone’s here. And those who aren’t, are on their way.” Messiah frowned.

Messiah, just like most pack messengers, traveled around a lot. His travels took him as far west as Colorado and as far south as Florida.

“How’s it been?” I asked.

“There’s trouble in paradise everywhere, man. Not just our pack. In Denver, the Darkhide Pack is in the middle of a territory war with cattle ranchers. In Northwest Florida, I met the leader of a group who claimed they were driven out years ago by tourism and greedy land developers and they’re in the middle of a fight to take back their land rights. Everyone’s got their own issues, but when Gustave called me back saying he might need reinforcements, I came without hesitation.”

“I’m glad you’re loyal to the pack, Messiah, but it does sound as if our issues is much more civil and more pressing than the ones you’ve dealt with while on the road,” I said.

“Yeah, well if Taylor and Shane succeed, I won’t have much of a pack to come back to next time, will I?” Messiah challenged.

I felt my heart sink as I placed a hand on his shoulder. “That can’t happen,” I said desperately. “I won’t let it happen.”

Messiah nodded. “Good. I talked to Liam. He says you’re pretty worked up about all of this, but he could tell you were on the fence about something.” He looked straight into my eyes. “What is it?”

I sighed. “I’m always on the fence.”

He nudged me. “Well get off of it before someone pushes you off.”

“Seriously. It’s just something I want that stays out of reach.”

Messiah’s eyes narrowed. “Nothing’s out of reach for you, man.”

“You’d be surprised, but no matter what happens, I won’t let our pack get taken down.” But deep in my heart, I knew that things could go either way.

As they all chatted and laughed, Maverick couldn’t help but feel grateful for the pack he had grown up with. Even with all the complicated relationships and politics, there was still a sense of community and belonging. He knew deep down that he couldn’t turn his back on them, not when they needed him the most.

Knowing that my father eagerly awaited me on the porch, Messiah and I split ways with the understanding that we’d hook back up later tonight with the other guys and go for a run. A much needed run with my pack mates that I needed desperately now that we were all here and together.

My father stood from his seat and met me at the midpoint of the porch. As soon as he did, the elders who were seated next to him moved off the porch, leaving us alone. I knew then that it was time for us to have a long and difficult conversation about our plans.

His brow furrowed. “You knew there was a room for you here. Where have you been these last couple of nights?”

“Thinking, father,” I said, sliding a stool across porch and sitting down.

“You took two nights to think? Then where have you been sleeping?”

Even when we were pups my father had always been overbearing and overprotective. He was that way with everything, even his pack. And it was that overprotective nature that made him the best candidate for Alpha when he was chosen by grandfather decades earlier.

“Where do you think, father? You know I built my own place in the woods when you used to harass me all the time,” I said, flatly.

“That little cabin in the woods is shack,” he said.

“It’s comfy,” I replied. “Either way, someone was keeping it up while I was gone. Someone even installed new roof and a

water heater.”

My father scratched his head. “Probably Lucas, our scout-in-training. He’s gone now. Probably won’t be back until fall.”

“Good, because that’s where I’m staying until I leave.”

“Until you leave...?”

“Yes. I’m going to help with this mess and then I’m gone again,” I said.

“I beg to differ...” He sighed.

“Oh, I know.”

“Your return has caused quite a stir, Maverick. The elders are happy. Taylor’s followers are not. The townsfolk are wondering if you’re going to stir up trouble.”

“Let ‘em wonder.”

“I, on the other hand, won’t wonder about your intentions anymore.” My father sat down in the Adirondack chair facing me. “I was never supposed to remain in power this long. You’re twenty-five. That is the age when your grandfather first led this pack.”

“Father—”

“On top of that, you are unmated with no suitable prospects lined up. As an Alpha’s son you are expected to meet certain standards in the eyes of our pack.”

“I don’t give a shit about pack standards and you know that. I’m not standard or basic and you know this because you raised me, father. If the pack cannot accept me as I am, then you might as well forget about your little picture perfect plan for me because it ain’t happening.” I got up, folded my arms across my chest, and leaned against the banister.

Gustave waved his hand out at the crowd by the lake enjoying the picnic. “Many love you and you know that. When you left, it was a blow to us, a step back. The humans—the ones in this town that matter—they love you too. You lead well and no one can ever say that you led our pack to hate those around us because we are different or can’t have our way all the time.”

“They only love me because I bring jobs to the community. When I lived here, how many developers have I gotten to come out here and fix up the town’s infrastructure, including bridges and all those unpaved roads?” I asked.

“Too many to name. Mave, I’m not trying to discredit you. I only want you to see how to solidify your position with the pack in other ways, sooner rather than later. Sooner matters now. You can sort out the rest later.”

I shook my head. “What the fuck does that mean, father?”

“You know what it means.” He stared at me, his expression hardened and his eyes bored an intensive hole into my soul.

My jaw tightened. “Elaborate.”

I already knew what Gustave was asking of me—to become the next Alpha under his terms. But I had other plans.

Gustave leaned forward and hissed, “Why do you pretend not to know?”

I leaned back in the chair. “I won’t lead this pack under someone else’s rules. If I’m going to be the Alpha, it has to be on my own terms.”

Gustave’s expression turned cold. “And what terms are those? Running off with a human girl who has no understanding of our pack and abandoning your responsibilities?”

My fists clenched at the mention of Courtney, because I knew that was exactly who he was talking about, but I refused to let my father’s words get to me.

“You’re wrong. That human girl, who I fully intend to make my wife, knows me more than anyone else ever will.”

“She’s already rejected you once and married that fluke whose father wouldn’t lend us the capital we needed to secure our businesses,” Gustave spat. “Why do you run after her over and over again?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” I felt my face grow heated. “She’s not even married.”

“Well, that’s what the rumors said. It was all in the goddamned newspapers and shit. Anyway, I don’t care about that. You and I both know I have groomed you for this position since you were born. Your siblings know that and none of them will ever challenge you. They want you to take my place.”

“I know that,” I replied, his voice calm but resolute.

“You and I are full-blooded, Mave. Never forget that. My father was full-blooded,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “I know where this is going. You think my sons will be full-blooded shifters...”

“They don’t all have to be.”

“Fuck that, father. I told you that I could never take another woman after what I found out.” My fists clenched and my fingers dug into my palm.

“You are mistaken and she is not marked!” He slammed his fist down on the arm chair.

I turned my back. He was right. I had not marked Courtney in any way, shape, or form. And the mate mark I told her about many times while I was with her had never revealed itself. Still, I knew she was mine. I didn’t need the mate mark to tell me that.

My father got up and joined me near the railing. “I’ve never met my match and look at me. I’m happy. We have to accept that sometimes there is no perfect match.”

“I’m aware, father, that not all wolves will find a true mate pairing,” I said.

“Then why force one?” he challenged. “Why not create the perfect pairing? It would be easy. Dozens of young ladies have asked about you.”

“And I don’t care about dozens. I only care about one. You don’t understand. Times are different now, father. Back when grandfather was in charge, the humans didn’t know about us. We kept our secret to ourselves. We kept away from humans. We only made deals and mate unions with neighboring groups,

therefore, we did not find mates outside of our pack,” I exclaimed.

“Even so, the fates still blessed me with many offspring. They blessed me with you who I’m proud to call my son. Don’t under-estimate the power of our blood.”

“I’m not, but I want to be the Alpha on my own terms, not on yours. Who I love has nothing to do with how I rule. I won’t be a puppet, blindly following your orders or living a false life just because. I want to lead with my own convictions and beliefs.”

His eyes narrowed. “And what makes you think you’re ready to lead with those beliefs? You’ve been away for a year, living with some Cajun backwoods thugs, and now you come back thinking you know what’s best for our pack?”

“They’re not thugs. They’re very well organized and led, and quite frankly, they don’t have the kind of problems we have.”

“That’s because they kill anyone who crosses them,” Gustave hissed under his breath. “They can do that. Kill people. Hide the bodies. Because they live in the swamps.”

I rubbed my palms on my jeans and shook my head. “I may have been away, but I have learned a lot. I have seen things from a different perspective.”

Gustave shook his head, clearly unconvinced. “You have a lot to prove, son. You can’t just waltz back in here and expect to change things just because I ask for your help with a simple matter.”

“It’s not quite a simple matter, is it, father? Or you wouldn’t need my help,” I replied.

There was a tense silence between us as we stared at each other, each trying to read the other’s thoughts. He was angry and at wit’s end. And I was aggravated and ready to face Taylor and his son Shane.

Finally I sighed. “Whether it’s as Alpha or the rogue son of the Alpha, I’m ready to do what it takes to make this pack stronger. And I will send Taylor and his son packing.”

Gustave's expression softened slightly, and he sighed heavily. "You always were a stubborn one, Maverick. But I see your point. I have one more ace up my sleeve before we call this an all-out war."

I leaned in. "And what's that, father?"

"I'm going to call on Taylor myself. Face him man to man, shifter to shifter."

"And if he doesn't want to listen, then what?" I asked.

"Then we'll pack his bags for him the hard way and kick his ass out of town."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Courtney

That weekend, I found myself in my mother's vegetable and herb garden. Due to her obligations as a camp counselor, she had been too busy to tend to it over the last few weeks. I hadn't come out to visit in over a week and she had reached out to me asking if I could come by and catch up. Since I spent most of my time indoors now at the library with the new expansion, I couldn't resist being outside in the fresh breeze and summer warmth. The sun was shining with a cool gust of wind in the air, but I still felt anxious about Maverick's pack feud he'd informed me about.

"I heard one of your exes is back in town," my mom said casually, as she plucked a few stray stems from a tomato plant.

I had come to help my mother clean up the garden, but I knew it was only a matter of time before she started prying into my personal life.

I tried to remain nonchalant, but I could feel the tension rising in my shoulders. "Yeah, he is," I said, trying to keep my voice even.

My mother didn't seem to notice the strain in my voice. "Maverick Maisonnet, isn't it? He always treated you like queen. I remember that first time you brought him here to meet me and he insisted on helping me with all the repairs," she said, her eyes misting over with nostalgia.

"Yeah. His family owns a construction business, along with a lot of others. He's like a jack of all trades," I said.

“Remember that time he brought you all those flowers on Valentine’s Day? Remember...not from the shop in town. He actually picked them all. I swear, I thought he was going to be the one.”

I blushed. My mom was bringing back memories I thought I was the only one who retaining them. My mom had always been a romantic, but she didn’t know the whole story.

Maverick and I had been through a lot, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to revisit those memories. She didn’t even know his secret—at least that’s what I thought. And if my mom had discovered that he was shifter, she never said anything about it. Listening to her now, it didn’t seem that it would bother her all that much if he wasn’t entirely human. Unlike Maverick’s father who preferred Maverick be with a woman who shared his unique ability.

I got it. I really did. His father’s message was crystal clear. Pack and family over everything else. That’s why I had to let him go before we got too serious. Before he broke my heart.

As if sensing my discomfort, my mother changed the subject. “So, how was your date with that other guy? The one who was new and town and said he was an outdoorsy type too. What was his name again?”

I knew exactly who my mom was talking about. Ian, the shifter guy, I decided to give a chance just to see if I just had a thing for...well, shifters. “His name was Ian. And the date was fine,” I said dismissively. “We didn’t really hit it off.”

My mother looked at me knowingly. “Courtney, you can’t keep running away from relationships just because they might not work out. You have to put yourself out there. Have you given anyone a chance past the first few dates?”

I sighed, feeling the weight of her words. I knew she was right, but it was easier said than done. “I know,” I said quietly. “It’s just hard, you know? Trying to figure out if these guys are sincere.”

My mom put a comforting hand on my shoulder. Her warmth and understanding made me feel vulnerable yet comforted.

“I do know, sweetheart,” she said kindly. “I understand more than you know. Although it broke my heart when you called off the engagement with Josh, I just had this feeling that things were not quite right between you two. Like you were just going through the motions without really being connected.”

She paused to let me ponder her words, and I sighed deeply. A lump formed in my throat as I realized how true her observations were.

As if reading my thoughts, my mother said, “Just remember, Courtney, you can’t let fear hold you back from what could be the best thing that ever happened to you.”

“Mom, please,” I plead, trying to avoid the conversation. “Can we just enjoy the sunshine and work on the garden?”

There was only a moment of silence before my mom picked up a trowel, starting to dig into the dirt, and began talking again. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I am happy. Besides, no man can give me happiness. They can only heighten or dampen it.”

“So true. But I could tell you were happy with that Maisonnnet kid.”

“Mom, Maverick and I broke up a long time ago. It’s been a year. He’s just a friend now.”

“Well, do you know why Maverick came back to town?”

“To handle some family matters,” I say reluctantly.

She gave me a knowing glance and said, “I’m hoping his family can sort out whatever they’re going through.”

“I’m sure they will. They’re strong enough to fight it,” I said.

My mom turned, giving me her full attention. “I’ve never seen the other side of those Maisonnets.”

I almost choked on dry air. “W-what?”

“They had me fooled for a very long time.” She slipped off her gloves and gave me a pat on the shoulder before rising. “I made some lemonade. I’ll bring some back for you.”

Wide-eyed, I looked after her.

Did she know? Did she know that Maverick and the other
Maisonnet men were shifters?

It was a secret I never wanted to keep from her, but it wasn't
my secret to tell. Not yet.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Courtney

It was book sale day and I marveled at how the community came together to support the cause. In this small town, we liked to support our own and this time we were raising funds for the fire department's new truck.

The event also kept my mind of things. The morning air was crisp and the sun was shining brightly, reflecting off of the freshly cut grass. As I walked around the grounds, I took in the fresh air. There were tents set up all around, with volunteers selling books from their tables as well as offering information about local charities and organizations. Everywhere you looked, there was something new to explore.

The smell of cotton candy and food from the food trucks wafted through the air and I could hear laughter coming from all directions. Kids ran around in excitement while their parents browsed through the selection of books on offer. Every few minutes someone would make an announcement over a loudspeaker, either to introduce an upcoming speaker or to let everyone know that more books were being added to the selection.

I took my place behind one of the tables and got to work helping customers find what they were looking for. It felt good to be part of something bigger than myself and it made me feel like I was making a difference in my community.

Just as I was about to assist the next customer, I heard the hum of a motorcycle engine. Turning around, I saw Maverick's

black Harley pull up into the parking lot. He pulled off his helmet and I almost lost my breath. As if connected by some magnetic force, our eyes locked on each other instantly. He stepped off the bike and gave me a quick wave before heading into the park.

I couldn't help but feel my heart skip a beat at his presence. It had been almost a week since we ran into each other, and it felt like no time had passed between us at all.

I followed him with my eyes until he disappeared from view and then I quickly returned to the stack of books on the table.

Maverick, who was extremely well known in this town either for his charisma or his roguish behavior, was busy talking with some of the other vendors when our eyes met again across the park, sending sparks through me that made me feel alive again after being so numb for so long.

I tried to focus on helping the customer in front of me, but my mind kept drifting back to Maverick. I wondered what he was doing here, and if he had come to see me even though I ran off the first time. The thought made my heart race with excitement, and I knew that was bad. I couldn't let myself be lured by him.

He moved through the crowd with ease, his tall, muscular frame attracting attention from every direction. Women stared at him as he passed by, but he barely seemed to notice. His eyes were always scanning the crowd, as if looking for something.

Finally, as the sun began to set and the crowds started to thin out, Maverick approached my table. "Hey there," he said, his voice low and smooth.

I tried to keep my cool, but my heart was racing as he leaned against the table, his body so close to mine that I could feel the heat radiating off of him. I could feel his animal awakening.

"What brings you here?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"Just passing through," he said with a shrug. "I heard about the book sale and I thought I'd stop by and see how you're doing. And support, of course."

I couldn't help but feel a flutter in my chest at his words. He was here for me.

"I'm doing well," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "The adult section is behind you." I smiled. "This is the kid section.

Maverick glanced at the stacks of books on the table. "Then I'm in the right place," he said with a smirk.

My face flushed. "Okay."

He glanced across my shoulder where I knew there was a clear view of the forest and whistled. Even before I could fully turn around, out of the corner of my eyes, I spotted a group of kids rushing out through the trees and bushes. They were Maverick's people—kids from his pack. And surprising—they were my people too from the trailer park.

Over a dozen kids surrounded Maverick and they were excited about the books. He was talking comic books with them and the kids had taken to him immediately. I found myself smiling as I watched him interact with them and saw how comfortable he was in that situation. His ability to connect with people of all ages was one of the things that had drawn me to him all those years ago, and it seemed like it hadn't changed at all.

The kids were enthralled by his stories, their eyes wide as he described some of his favorite superheroes and battles. He even got some of them involved in an intense debate about which superhero would win in a fight between Superman and Batman.

As I watched them, I couldn't help but feel my heart swell with pride for Maverick—not only for his kindness towards these children, but also for the fact that he hadn't changed at all since we'd last seen each other. His personality was still magnetic, still captivating—and it made me remember why I'd fallen in love with him in the first place.

I was falling for him all over again. *Crap.*

Suddenly, Maverick turned to me and smiled. "I'll take all of these," he said, gesturing towards the books.

He pulled out his wallet and began to purchase a handful of books for each kid. He had enough money to buy them all

something they wanted, as well as some he thought they should read. I was floored by his generosity and couldn't help but smile at the sight. I always knew Maverick had a big heart and the kids warming up to him was proof. Not to mention, I knew some of the kids from my poor neighbor would have never been able to afford any of the books.

The kids were ecstatic with their purchases and thanked Maverick before running off into the woods again with their new treasures in hand.

Maverick turned back towards me after they'd gone and smiled sheepishly as if embarrassed by his own generosity.

I smiled. "You've always had a soft spot for kids."

He gave me a knowing nod. "Everyone says that; they joke that I'll have a dozen children one day."

I laughed. "Best of luck with all that and to the woman who'll be giving birth to them."

Maverick winked. "Let's hope she's up for the challenge."

"You can be a handful," I said, trying not to think about the prospect of someone taking on the challenge of having Maverick's children. Someone that wasn't me.

"Courtney...I wanted...I want us to..." His voice was heavy with disappointment, but I could hear the pain in his words. I knew what he was asking me before he finished his sentence, and I felt my heart sink. Deep down, I wanted nothing more than to say yes; but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"Don't, Maverick," I whispered.

"We don't have to dwell on what happened before...." He tried to sound firm as he spoke, his face etched with a serious yet sorrowful look.

"Maverick." I sighed.

"We can start over."

Before I could respond, a loud cheer erupted from the direction of the boarding school across the street. We both looked up to see a crowd of teenagers swarming out of the

building and into the parking lot. It was time to get back to work. I gave Maverick an apologetic look before turning my attention back to my customers.

I was busy ringing them up for the next few minutes, but when I looked up again, Maverick had already gone. He'd vanished as quickly as he had appeared and all that remained was his lingering scent in the air around me—a reminder of our brief but intense encounter.

Monique, a co-worker, joined me at the table and said, “Hey, I saw Maverick over here. Didn't you used to date him?”

“Yeah, yeah I did,” I nervously replied, hoping she didn't ask any other probing questions.

She laughed and added, “Well don't worry, he's still as handsome as ever!” She bit her fingernails. “I wonder who he's dating now.”

“I don't know. I don't care,” I lied, fumbling with some papers on the table.

It was hard not to think about what could have been had we stayed together, but at the same time, I knew dwelling on the past wouldn't change the fact that we were never meant to be despite what he claimed to have envisioned.

“I saw him buy a stack of comics for those kids. He's always had a way with youth.” Monique mentioned, sipping her coffee.

I nodded.

“Yeah, it made me think of when he applied to teach at the middle school where my aunt works,” Monique reminisced. “He would have been amazing in that role.”

“He would have.”

“Yeah, but then they rescinded that employment offer. Sucks. I don't know who spread that nasty rumor, but it was awful,” Monique mumbled.

I knew exactly the rumor she was talking about. In fact, Maverick and I had just started dating when it all happened.

Someone had called in a tip that he used a false identification to try to secure the position. It wasn't totally a lie. As a shifter, Maverick and his people had always had to jump through hopes to get what they wanted. And the Maisonnets had never really divulged their shifter nature to the public. Those who knew, already knew. And those who didn't, could only speculate.

In order to protect his family from scrutiny and ridicule, Maverick accepted the fact that he may never be able to teach in a public school.

I tried to act indifferent, but I couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness knowing that Maverick was still haunted by his mistakes from years ago. Even so, I couldn't deny that there was something admirable about his persistence in the things he knew he could accomplish.

"Monique, could you do me a favor?" I asked.

"Sure," she replied with a smile.

"Could you stay here for a few minutes and watch the table? I need to go to storage and grab more books," I explained.

"No problem," Monique said as she nodded her head.

I thanked her before heading back to the library.

In the library's basement, I found an extra box of books and started to pile the books into a wagon. Something crashed to the floor behind me and I stood swiftly and looked around.

"Hello!" I called out.

I sensed that someone else is in the basement with me. I didn't have to speculate anymore when I scented someone very familiar.

Maverick's scent invaded my senses like a wild storm, evoking the rich aroma of newly cracked pine bark mixed with rain-drenched blades of grass. Whenever he was around, an intense jolt of electricity surged through me, sparking a feeling that I could not contain.

"Maverick," I whispered. My heart raced and heat flooded my veins, intensifying until I felt a deep connection to him.

He stood in the corner, illuminated by a single lightbulb and wearing his signature leather jacket. His eyes are bright and intense as they meet mine, and my heart skips a beat.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him, my voice barely louder than a whisper.

“You know why I’m here.” Maverick’s voice was low and husky, sending shivers down my spine. I took a step closer to him, drawn by the magnetic pull that always seemed to exist between us.

“I thought we agreed to keep our distance and not dwell on the past,” I said, trying to sound firm but failing miserably as my voice came out as a breathless whisper.

Maverick took a step closer to me, his eyes never leaving mine. “I know what we agreed upon, but I can’t stay away from you, Court,” he said, his voice filled with raw emotion.

Before I could respond, Maverick closed the distance between us and I fell into his embrace. He captured my lips in a searing kiss. All rational thought left my mind as I melted into his embrace, my body responding to his touch as if it had a mind of its own.

We broke apart, gasping for breath, and I looked up at Maverick, my heart racing. “What are we doing?” I asked, my voice trembling.

Maverick took my hand in his, his grip firm and reassuring. “I don’t know, but I do know that I don’t want to stay away from you anymore,” he said, his eyes filled with a fierce determination. “I’ll do whatever you tell me. I know what I want and I want you.”

I felt a surge of hope and excitement rush through me as I looked at him. Maybe, just maybe, we could make this work. But deep down, I knew that there were still obstacles that we would have to overcome if we wanted to be together. Obstacles that might be too difficult to overcome.

But for now, I pushed those thoughts aside and let myself get lost in the moment.

Maverick's gaze was intense as he looked down at me. "I came back because I need you, Court," he said softly, his voice filled with emotion. "I feel selfish in saying that coming here to end a fedd which I know will end in violence is the only reason. It's not. You're my reason."

"You can't just show up and do this to me and then leave again."

His presence tightly coiled my stomach and my breath quickened. I shot daggers at him and clenched my fists against his chest.

"Who said I was leaving?"

I stepped closer to him, my throat tightening with the surge of emotion I'd felt since he arrived. "You must know what you're doing to me," I said in a voice that was barely above a whisper. "Tell me you feel it too."

He murmured against my neck, "I do. My feelings for you started the minute we met and they've only grown stronger - even when you asked me to go away. His teeth lightly grazed my throat as he spoke."

I quivered against him. "Then do something. I feel like I'm going to die if you don't do something."

"I told you, Courtney, and you didn't listen. I told you it would hurt if you were away from me."

I nodded, pressing my lips into the groove of his neck. "It hurt like hell for months after you left and then I just lived with it. I...I moved on, Maverick. I had to. And only helped a little, but..."

"Shhh. You did what you had to do. Don't talk about that. When I took you that first time, I made you this way. My essence is still inside you. It will never leave. It's the same for me. I'll always crave you."

"But does it still mean...?"

"Yes, it means that if we do this, you'll crave me even more. This isn't just a casual attraction: it's much more than that. I needed you to understand that no matter how much time

passes and no matter who else you think might make a better option, it won't work. You're mine, Courtney."

Maverick pulled me against him, pressing his body against mine as his lips descended upon mine. His kiss was passionate and urgent, a deep hunger that I felt in every fiber of my being. My heart raced as he pressed his hands into my back, pushing our bodies even closer together until we were flush against each other.

He broke away from the kiss and moved his lips to my neck, sending shivers down my spine as he lightly kissed my skin. His hands ran up and down my body before coming to rest on either side of my face as he looked deeply into my eyes.

"I want you," he breathed out before taking possession of my mouth again with an intensity that left me gasping for air when we finally broke apart again.

"I want you too."

He lifted his shirt and threw it aside. My gaze instantly dropped to the mate mark he showed me the first time we were together. It wasn't a tattoo or ink of any kind. Shifters like Maverick were born with it. He didn't even regard it was a birthmark; it was a mate mark. His was a maverick bird. His pack maintained that the mavericks were the wolves of the sky; the watchers of the pack, which was why they thought it fitting for Maverick to have this mark. They all anticipated he'd one day take on the mantle of Alpha.

Without thinking, I ran my fingers along the mystery mark on his skin. His breathing grew shallow as soon as my fingertips made contact with his flesh and a strange sensation traveled through my fingertips.

Maverick lifted me off the ground, and I wrapped my legs around his waist as he carried me over to the wall next to the stacks of books.

"Someone will come inside," I panted as his lips kissed along my jawline.

"The door is closed. I locked it," he moaned against my lips. "And you know me, Courtney. I'll take you any place. Any

time. *Any where.*”

My hands were clasped around his neck, my fingertips caressing the soft stubble on his cheeks, and our eyes met. His were gentle yet strong with desire as he laid me against the cool surface of the bricks and pinned me in place with his powerful body.

Maverick’s hands explored my body, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me as he touched me in all the right places. His fingers were gentle yet firm as he moved them across my skin, tracing circles and patterns that made me quiver with anticipation. He kissed down my neck and chest, nipping at my collarbone before traveling lower to pay special attention to my breasts. His lips sought out my secret spots as he pushed aside the soft fabric of my yellow sundress. The dress was light and supple, allowing him to find me with ease. His tongue circled around each nipple until I was moaning out his name and arching against him in response.

He continued his journey down, kissing and licking along the soft curves of my hips before settling between my legs. His strength was insurmountable, with the power of a raging bull. He lifted my legs with relative ease over his shoulders until my most intimate area was exposed, apart from the thin layer of fabric that were my panties. His gaze caused my arousal to intensify.

“Fuck, I missed this,” he murmured kissing my inner thighs. “The heat of you. The sight of you soaking wet for me. The sweet taste of you.”

He used his teeth to pulled the fabric aside and I yelped as his tongue teased and tantalized as he licked up every inch of me until I was writhing beneath him in ecstasy.

He moved his mouth away and looked up at me. His eyes were blazing with desire as he slowly licked his lips, savoring the taste of me. I could feel my arousal reaching a fever pitch as he continued to tease and tantalize, driving me to the brink of madness before finally pushing me over the edge with his tongue. I bit my lip to keep myself from screaming out as

wave after wave of pleasure washed over me, leaving me in a blissful state of pure satisfaction.

When I could take no more, Maverick rose back up and wrapped my thighs around his waist, and then met me with a hungry kiss that seemed to last forever. I was super wet from his tongue teasing me and the head of his cock found my opening with ease.

“Damn it, Courtney,” he groaned.

He held me against the wall, his hands firmly grasping my hips as he thrust deeply into me—all twelve inches of him. I thought he was seated to the hilt, but then he penetrated deeper still. I felt impaled to the wall as pleasure-pain ripped through me. I had never forgotten how well-endowed he was. No one ever fit me the way Maverick did.

As if to demonstrate his unique equipment, he pulled all the way out and slammed in again.

“Maverick!”

“I missed the way you scream my name.”

His movements were urgent and powerful, and I felt myself reaching the peak of pleasure once more. His grip on me was strong and forceful as he pounded away, pushing deeper with each stroke until I could no longer contain my desire. I bit down on his shoulder to keep from screaming out as I reached climax again. The intensity of the moment was hot and passionate, leaving us both trembling in its wake.

It wasn't over yet, though. He grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head, pressing me against the wall as he thrust deep into me. His movements were frenzied and powerful, and I could feel every inch of him as he drove me to heights I had never experienced before. He moved faster and faster, his body taking over as we both raced towards our climax.

I gasped out his name one last time as I reached the peak of pleasure, biting down on his shoulder to keep myself from screaming out loud in pure bliss. Maverick followed soon after with a low growl of satisfaction, holding me close until our breathing returned to normal.

I felt his body relax against me, and I opened my eyes just in time to hear talking above us on the next level. I quickly lowered my feet to the ground and rushed to straighten my dress before anyone noticed us. Maverick chuckled at the sight of me, a satisfied grin still plastered across his face.

I blushed. “Why are you laughing? I could be fired.”

“Maybe I should make that my goal. I don’t want you working for anyone. I want you every minute of the day.”

I rolled my eyes playfully. “That’s not how the world works.”

He gave me a sly smile. “Maybe not, but it’s how I want it to be.”

I couldn’t help but smile back at him. I felt like my heart was going to burst with happiness. We both knew it wasn’t possible, but the idea of being together all the time was too tempting to ignore.

Before I could think too much about it, though, I remembered that I was still at work and I had to get back to my table. I stepped back and checked to make sure I had put myself together and that I didn’t look like I was just properly fucked before looking back at Maverick.

“Don’t worry. You look beautiful,” Maverick remarked.

“Thanks, but wait here for a moment and then you can leave,” I instructed.

He chuckled deeply, stroking his jaw. “You still want to hide me, Courtney? That’s how it started, remember? You didn’t want anyone to know you were fucking the bad boy from the other side of the Bay.”

I blushed, recalling our past escapades which were a lot like this. Frenzied. Rough. In hidden corners on every surface but a bed.

I shook my head. “That’s not what this is.”

He held his arms out to the side. “Then what is it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

I grabbed the wagon and started pulling it towards the door leading out onto the grounds. Maverick stood there watching me go, and just before exiting, I looked back one last time with a secretive smile on my lips. He returned my smile.

“Come to the Bay this weekend, Courtney. I’ll be out on my boat.”

I paused for what seemed like an eternity before turning around to leave without giving an answer only to realize when I was halfway to the table that it wasn’t a question or an invitation at all; it was an expectation.

CHAPTER NINE

Courtney

I awoke the next morning with a start, momentarily disoriented as I tried to remember where I was and what had happened the day before. It took me a few seconds to fully wake up, but when it hit me, my cheeks flushed from embarrassment.

The memory of Maverick's touch came flooding back, and I could still feel his lips on mine as if it had just happened. His voice echoed in my head as he whispered naughty things that made my body tingle with pleasure.

I couldn't help but smile at the thought of it, feeling like I was floating on air as I remembered how we lost ourselves in each other's arms until all that was left was blissful satisfaction. Even though it felt like a dream, I knew it was real because the evidence of our passion still lingered on my skin.

My heart raced as I remembered our first time together and the way we explored each other with reckless abandon until we were both exhausted yet still wanting more.

I'd given Maverick my innocence when we first met. He was my first and he always told me he'd be my last. I never believed in fairytales back then, and I supposed I didn't believe in them now either. But we had created something special between us, something that could never be replaced or forgotten.

I had been nervous, but Maverick was gentle and patient with me as he guided my body through the motions. It was the best

night of my life.

Then came the part of him telling me that he knew I was his fated mate. It was wolf thing, he said. But I wasn't wolf. He claimed it didn't matter and that I was marked for him. The mark he carried on his abdomen of the maverick bird never appeared on me. I had no birthmarks to speak of, so I always expected that Maverick was mistaken and allowing his lust for me guide him. As a human female, I could never have possessed a mate mark as flawless as the one he bore on his flesh.

I had given Maverick my virginity and he'd given me something even more valuable in return: his trust, his devotion, and an unforgettable experience that would stay with me forever. But then bad shit started happening and I found out what his father, a pillar of their pack, truly wanted for him.

The lack of a mate mark matching his was one of the things that ultimately dissuaded me from further seeing Mavericks. I didn't want to waste his time. I didn't want to waste my time or anyone else's time, so I cut my ties before it was too late. When I broke it off with him, Maverick's reaction was to express his regret in ever telling me about the mark and wishing we could just stay together.

After a failed engagement and no other man or shifter measuring up to Maverick, I was starting to wonder. Was Maverick right? Had he spoiled me to the point that nothing else compared to what we had? Had he made me unable to accept any other men?

I already knew the answer to that. I knew it when I picked up a bathing suit, dress, and cute sandals, knowing exactly where I'd end up.

CHAPTER TEN

Courtney

When I finally arrived at the bay, my heart skipped a beat as I saw Maverick and one of his pack mates, Liam, fishing on the shoreline. As they cast their lines into the water and talked in low voices, it seemed like nothing had changed since about this place at all.

Pack politics structured their whole entire community. Besides a few boats on the water and some kids playing kickball next to the ramp, no one else was around.

I was sure that if anyone spotted me here, word would get around that I was still pining after Maverick. But I wasn't sure if I cared. People were going to talk, either way. They were going to make up lies and stretch truths, so there was no point in worrying about it.

Maverick looked up and smiled when he saw me walking towards them.

He smiled. "Courtney, this is my good friend, Liam. He's a distant cousin of mine too. Remember him?"

I nodded. "I do, actually. He helped bring all those sandbags into Roberts when we had the flood. I can't believe I still remember that. it's been almost a year." I chuckled.

Liam nodded, his eyes twinkling. "Yeah, I haven't seen you in about a year, but I've certainly heard your name in my circles."

I smiled nervously. "Um..."

“Don’t worry. Nothing bad.” Liam continued, “Maverick and I were just talking about our families, how things are going. I was telling Maverick I heard about your engagement and how sorry I am that it didn’t work out.”

So they were talking about me...

Maverick cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“Sorry to pry. It’s just that most of us know that Covin guy because of his contacts at the bank.” Liam said. “That guy doesn’t like my kind at all though.”

I shrugged, not wanting to get into the details. “It’s okay. It wasn’t meant to be, I guess.”

“You two can take the boat if you want. My fiancé’s waiting for me back at the house,” Liam said.

“Well, congrats for you,” I said, sincerely.

Liam grinned from ear to ear. “Yeah. She’s just like you. Human. But she’s new to town.”

“Oh. Maybe I’ll meet her.”

“You will.” He tossed Maverick a knowing look. They exchanged a few words before leaving us alone on the beach.

Maverick’s gaze raked over my body like a predator assessing its prey. A wicked grin split his face. His once tender touch now felt invasive, his fingers leaving trails of fire along my skin. Every inch of me was electrified with an intense desire that I couldn’t ignore. As he looked me up and down, I knew there was no escaping the passion that would soon be unleashed.

“Nice.”

“I’m just a girl in a dress, Maverick,” I joked.

Maverick’s eyes roamed over my body, clearly not convinced. “You’re much more than that, love.”

He leaned in, but I took a step back.

“Okay.” He nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing as he processed our exchange. I could see the gears turning in his mind, likely leading him to thoughts of various outcomes for different scenarios. It only took a moment for that to pass over his face before I spoke again.

“Maverick, I...”

“No need to explain. I’m so glad you came,” he said, taking my hand. “Liam said I could borrow his boat. It’s brand new. Wanna take a look inside?”

I nodded.

Maverick took me to the boat and explained the different parts of it, from the engine to the sails. We spent a few hours out on the bay exploring, with Maverick pointing out various landmarks and giving me a brief history of their pack. He told me about his time living in the swamps with the Iron Storm Bayou Wolf Pack.

Before I know it, it was already evening and both of our stomachs were rumbling before Maverick offered to grill some of the fish for me on the boat.

I didn’t plan on having dinner with him in the middle of the bay on a houseboat, but that’s exactly where we ended up.

“Were you happy, Courtney?” Maverick asked, driving away the silence that swept between us after we finished our meal.

Looking up at the stars on the deck of the boat was peaceful, but so was talking to Maverick.

“Yes, I was.”

“I meant with that guy. What’s his name? The Colvin guy. The one who proposed.”

I sighed and decided not to try to avoid these conversations any longer. If I wanted Maverick’s company, which I missed so much, I knew that sooner or later he’d want to know.

“I was. Josh was a good guy, but...I cared about him, I just wasn’t in love with him.”

“I think that’s a prerequisite for getting married...last time I checked.” Maverick chuckled.

I laughed softly. “Yeah. It is. That’s why I was upfront with him. He deserves a good girl. I couldn’t be that for him.”

“Right, because you’re bad girl and you need a partner in crime.”

I nudged Maverick playfully.

“What? It’s true. You corrupt me,” he joked. “Your library job doesn’t fool me. I know about the kind of books you read.”

I rolled over on my stomach. “It was the other way around. You corrupted me.”

“I just brought out your full potential.” He reached down and grabbed my hand, gliding his fingers between mine. And then he lifted my hand and kissed the back of my hand. “I was jealous. I still am jealous.”

“I wasn’t trying to make you jealous. I wanted you to move on, too, you know, after me,” I said.

He rolled over on his side and propped his head up under his palm. “The only thing I moved on from was my pack. There was no *after you*.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

I stared him straight in the face. “Do you honestly want me to believe that with your libido you didn’t find a Cajun girl to rock your world.”

“No,” he said, flatly.

“Well, what did you do?”

“With an erection the size of Mt. Everest, you mean? I can show you.” He was probably only joking, but he never shied away from discussing his self-pleasuring habits.

“Oh, my God.” I rolled over on my back again. “You were supposed to move on. I told you to.”

“Courtney, I know you did, but I told you. You’re it for me. I wanted you to see that I wasn’t bluffing. We mate for life.”

“But we’re not mated. You said it, I don’t wear your mark.”

“I’ve been talking to a lot of mated wolves while on the road and in the bayou,” he said, his voice low. “When the girl is human, the mark doesn’t always appear right from the start. It can take time, months or even a year, for the bond to fully develop.” He paused. “We were only together a few months, Courtney. Everything happened so quickly and then you dumped me quicker than a flash flood.”

I swallowed. “Well, it doesn’t matter now, does it? I’m still human. You’re still the Alpha’s son. And you’re supposed to have full-blooded heirs just like your father said. You’re a Maisonnet. All the men in your family want full-blooded sons.”

“I don’t give a fuck what my father says or about some age-old tradition that’s full of shit. The mate bond trumps everything. I *know*...Courtney, *I know* we’re supposed to be together.”

I shrugged. “Then what do you do, huh? Have your father hate you all his life and hate me too because I seduced his one and only favored son.”

“Why does anyone else’s opinions matter if I love you?” When I didn’t answer, he continued, “I’m not going to hide you, Courtney, so don’t ask me to do that. I want us to be together. If you want this, and I think you do, I want us to be all in.”

I scooted closer to him and ran my fingers through his hair. “Do you know what I really want you to do, Mave?”

“I want you to win your Pack. I want you to be Alpha, because I know you deserve it and I know that’s what you want. Despite your grumpy old daddy’s old-timey ways, he’s kept the peace between shifters and humans in Wolfwater Bay for a long time. Wolfwater Bay, Leestead, poor old trailer pack city, Richards...this is my home. I don’t want to leave because it all goes to shit when some other Alpha takes over and raises hell. I know you don’t either. If what you say is true about us, it’ll

happen. You have priorities, Mave. You can't turn your back on them."

He sat up and kissed me. "That is precisely why I love you. I never stopped loving you."

Heat rose up my face. "I never stopped loving you either."

Maverick's lips found mine again, kissing me with a passion that made my heart race. His hands roamed over my body, pulling me closer to him until there was no space between us. I moaned as he trailed kisses down my neck, his teeth nipping at my skin.

His hands found their way to my hips as he pulled me closer to him. His lips were rough and demanding as they moved against mine, and I couldn't help but moan into the kiss. It had been too long since I had felt his touch, too long since I had been able to lose myself in his embrace.

As we broke apart, his eyes were dark with desire. "I need you, Courtney. I need to feel you, to be with you."

He scooped me up and whisked me inside the interior of the house boat. We quickly shed our clothes, our bodies entwining as we fell back onto the bed. His hands roamed over my curves, his lips trailing down my neck as I arched into him.

The mate bond was strong between us, stronger than any tradition or expectation. As we moved together, lost in the passion of the moment, I knew that nothing else mattered. We were meant to be together, no matter what anyone else said.

In that moment, all I wanted was to be with Mave, to feel his touch and his love. And as we lay there, our bodies intertwined, I knew that nothing could ever tear us apart.

He leaned down to kiss me again, his hands moving to unbutton my dress. I arched my back as he peeled it off, his fingers trailing over my skin. He cupped my breasts, squeezing them gently as he kissed his way down my body.

I moaned as he reached my panties, his fingers slipping beneath the fabric to tease me. He grinned up at me, his eyes dark with desire.

“You’re so wet for me, Courtney,” he growled.

I whimpered as he removed my panties, spreading my legs wide. He buried his face between my thighs, his tongue flicking over my clit. I cried out in pleasure, my hands tangling in his hair as he brought me to the brink of orgasm.

He pulled away, his eyes blazing with lust and his lips glistening with my essence. “I need to be inside you, Courtney,” he said, his voice rough.

Maverick moved slowly, his body sinking deeper and deeper into mine with each thrust. I clung to him, my eyes closed as I savored the sensation of our bodies moving together. His hands roamed over my curves, cupping my breasts and teasing my nipples as he drove us both towards pleasure.

He kept up the pace, pushing me higher and higher until I was screaming his name. His lips found mine, eagerly searching for every inch of them as we moved closer and closer together towards climax. The sensations were too much for me, and I felt myself beginning to unravel around him.

The sensations were overwhelming, every inch of my body alive with pleasure. My orgasm built steadily, each wave crashing over me harder than the last until I was screaming his name as I came. He followed me over the edge, his body shuddering as he filled me with his warmth, pumping deep inside me until we both lay spent on the bed.

His arms were wrapped around me tightly, our breathing still erratic from the intensity of what we had just shared. We lay there like that for a while before he pulled away slightly to look down at me. His eyes sparkled with emotion, a huge grin appearing on his face as he brushed a stray hair away from my face.

I sighed contentedly, feeling more at peace than I had in a long time. This was what it felt like to belong; this was what it felt like to be loved. And in that moment, nothing else mattered but the two of us, here together on this little boat in the middle of our own paradise.

We stayed that way until the sounds of nightlife started to creep in, neither one of us wanting to break the moment of bliss just yet.

When I started to inch away from him, he buried his face against my chest and mumbled, “Don’t go. Tell me you won’t leave me here.”

“I won’t,” I whispered against the top of his head. “I’ll stay.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Courtney

The next morning, I awoke to find Maverick gone and the sound of a man's voice coming from the upper deck. I quickly got dressed and followed the sound, cautiously peeking up over the railing. To my surprise, it was Maverick talking to someone. As I got closer, I recognized his friend Messiah. They both stopped talking when they saw me.

"Ah, I remember you," Messiah grinned and pointed. "You're the lucky lady who kept Maverick away from us so much last year."

I blushed and smiled, my heart warming at the thought that Maverick had talked about me to his friends. He walked over and wrapped his arm around me, pulling me close to him.

"Yes, she's the one," he said proudly.

Messiah gave me an approving nod before turning back to Maverick.

"So, I'm guessing you two are making it official then?"

Maverick nodded, a huge smile spreading across his face.

"I hope sooner rather than later."

Messiah clapped his hands together and grinned. "Well, then, I always loved a good happy ending. Everyone's getting the old ball and chain, what will I do without you guys as drinking buddies."

Maverick clapped Messiah on the back. “None of that changes, buddy.”

“Messiah and I were just talking about Shane,” Maverick said, sitting on a ledge on the boat and pulling me gently down to sit on his lap.

Messiah took a seat on the other side, taking off his baseball cap and setting it down. I might have been wrong, but except for the fact that they were part of the same pack, Messiah and Maverick didn’t seem related by blood. Messiah’s tanned and copper-toned skin glinted in the sun and his hazel eyes gave off reflections of green. I recalled Maverick telling me that most men in the Maisonet line had blue eyes and he was no exception.

“Shane? The guy who wants to be the next Alpha, right?”

“Right. That guy. Only no one has seen him since I got back,” Maverick said.

“He’s a coward. Probably never thought you’d come back to join your father in running him up out of Wolfwater,” Messiah said.

“Or they could be planning something big. He might be a coward, but they are smart,” Maverick said. “Just look how fast they acquired land here after their exile was up.”

Messiah ran his fingers through his curls. “Yeah, I even heard that they went as far as trying to slide the land right up from under Liam’s new mate.”

Maverick nodded. “That’s what father said. Karina ended up not selling though.”

“Taylor Brandt can go to hell,” Messiah said. “Even if he does manage to manipulate his son into taking the Alpha role, they’ll have no pack to lead in the end.”

“Did you say, Brandt?” I mumbled.

“Yes, Shane’s father is Taylor Brandt,” Maverick offered.

My back stiffened. “So, Taylor has a brother?”

“No. It’s just Shane really. Taylor calls the rest of his children bastards and they’re all spread out.”

Suddenly, I stood up. “How long have they been in town for?”

Maverick shook his head and turned to Messiah for his response. Messiah scratched his head. “Our people are saying that Shane’s been here a good couple months, but that he rented an apartment in the heart of the city. That’s probably where they staked out, making their plans, waiting for the right time to announce that they were back.”

Maverick got up and touched the small of my back. “What’s wrong?”

He must have sensed something was wrong. He was good with that, knowing when anything was bothering me. Shifters were good at reading body language and he always took extra care to take my feelings into consideration.

“Are you two sure he doesn’t have a brother? I dated someone named Ian not too long ago. Nothing serious. We only went on two dates.”

“Ian?” Maverick and Messiah exclaimed at the same time.

“Yes.” I nodded. “And I could’ve sworn I saw the name Brandt somewhere. He was paying for food and I...the name Brandt was on a card in his wallet.”

“Fuck!” Maverick parted from me and started walking back and forth.

“Shane Ian Brandt is his full name.” Messiah said.

My heart dropped to my stomach. “I...oh, my God.” I ran over to the side of the boat thinking I would throw up but nothing came up. I turned around. “I had no idea. I...”

“I’m gonna kill him,” Maverick said between clenched teeth.

“I’m so sorry.” I wrapped my arms around my midsection, still feeling my stomach recoiling in disgust.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” Maverick said, coming to console me wrapping his arm around my waist. “I have a feeling Shane knew about my past relationship with you.”

“Oh God,” I whimpered.

The revelation that Shane was actually Ian—the shifter I’d once dated—was almost too much to take in. Maverick and Messiah looked at me with understanding eyes, but all I felt was confusion and fear. Ian had always been far too eager, even on the first date. The fact that he now might hold some power over Wolfwater Bay and was at the helm of the feud with Maverick’s pack was almost too much to take in.

“I’m so sorry, Maverick,” I said, ashamed beyond reason.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” he said, clenching and unclenching his fists. “But he’s going to pay for touching you.”

“He never touched me.” I shook my head. I didn’t want to rehash the two boring dates we went on where I had to remind Ian or Shane or whatever the heck name he went by to keep his grabby hands to himself. Maverick often encouraged me to not be ashamed of expressing my sexual desires, making me promise that I’d always come to him no matter the time, day, and place if I ever needed him. With Ian, even with our meager two dates, I never would have gone that far. It just never felt right. With hindsight, I knew I never would have slept with him anyway.

Still shocked and ashamed, I hunted frantically for my things. I found my purse and swung it over my shoulder. “Where are my keys?”

Eyes watery, I snatched up my keys from under a pile of ropes and ran off the boat.

“Court!” Maverick yelled behind me.

“Maverick, I can’t. I’m sorry.”

What did Shane hope to gain by pretending to be a different person? Did he think he could trick me into trusting him and then gain access to Maverick and his pack? Or make Maverick jealous altogether. Or worse, just cause a shitstorm of problems?

I drove off in a flurry, wanting to put as much distance between myself and Wolfwater Pack politics as possible.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Maverick

I drove to town with Messiah, determined to find Shane. I knew he must be staying somewhere close if he had an apartment in or near town. After a few minutes of searching, we spotted a sports car with an out of state license plate driving up into one of the apartment complexes. The driver parked in one of the lots and when he opened the door, Shane and another guy got out. Each man had a twelve pack of beer in his arm.

“That’s him,” Messiah said.

My wolf awakened in anger beneath my skin. My eyes burned with red-hot fire, fur along my spine stood on end. I was ready to rumble.

Filled with rage and before Messiah could stop me, I got out of our car and sprinted towards Shane’s car. Without hesitation, I grabbed him by the shoulder and body-slammed him onto the hood of his car and pinned him there with a grip on his neck. Beer cans rolled, splattered, and busted open everywhere on the pavement. The guy with him growled, but Messiah was already at my side as he rammed the dude face first into a nearby tree.

“What the fuck, man?” Shane spat.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I growled as I tightened my grip on Shane’s throat. “You think you can come into my town and start trouble? You’ve been playing games since you

got here. Hiding in town at the first sign of my arrival instead of coming to face me wolf to wolf.”

I growled in his face. I was so angry I could barely contain myself; all I wanted was to rip Shane apart limb from limb for messing with Courtney and causing trouble between the packs.

Shane had clearly underestimated my strength as he tried unsuccessfully to squirm away from me, panic evident in his eyes. “If you want a fucking fight, I’ll give you a fucking fight,” he stammered desperately as his companion looked on in horror.

My canine’s lengthened and I slammed his head back into the car. “You touched my woman!”

“So, this is why you’re coming at me, huh? It’s not about this miserable pack. It’s about that human bitch you pant after all the time.” Shane laughed. “I had her good. I can tell why you fuck her. She’s a screamer, isn’t she?”

“You fucking jerk!” I punched his face and then let him at. He came at me with a punch of his own, but it missed my face.

“You’re right. I am. I was gonna fuck her. I could tell she needed it real bad. You should be ashamed of yourself, half-marking a hot chick like that and then leaving her in town all hot and bothered. Us shifters can smell that shit from a mile away so I’m surprised nobody else from your pack tried to fuck her while you were away. One more date with her and I would’ve had her on her knees taking my dick.”

I rammed him full force, slamming him hard on the ground. We continued to fight, throwing considerable punches at one another until we heard the sound of police sirens in the distance. Immediately, we stopped our brawling and both of us looked at each other with a deep understanding.

I leaned in close and snarled menacingly at him, “Talk like that about her again and I swear I’ll make sure your bones will never be found!”

He chuckled menacingly, backing away and spitting out blood and spit. “Then just bite her, man. That’s all. Take what you want. I know I will.”

I growled and spat blood and spit on the ground. “I’ve warned you once. This isn’t over.”

“I know. I guess we’ll fight head to head very soon,” he said with a casualness that made me shudder in anger.

With a fire burning in my gut, I knew our battle was coming sooner than either of us expected. My insides twisted with rage. I could feel my teeth grinding against each other.

“And we end this by the next full moon,” I said.

The sirens got closer. We knew that it was time for us to part ways or else face serious consequences. Shane quickly ran back to his car, hopped inside and sped away while I watched him go. Messiah came up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Let’s get out of here before they spot us,” he said calmly.

I nodded and followed him back to the car as we drove away from the scene, leaving nothing but broken beer cans scattered around on the pavement.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Maverick

When I arrived back in the Bay, I quickly ran to my father's man cave where he sat in his chair, reading a book. His eyes were like steel daggers, ready to pierce my soul if he had to. I know I looked a mess as I had scraps all over my arms from the fight and I hadn't even taken a shower yet.

"What the hell happened?" he asked, laying the book down and sitting up in his chair.

"I fought Shane," I said.

"What the hell? Who told you to engage him at this point?"

I plopped down in a chair. "I don't need anyone telling me who, what, where, when, and how to engage with anyone. I'm going to kill that bastard if he crosses me again."

"Easy, Maverick. Tell me what happened."

Leaving out the part about how Shane dated Courtney once or twice knowing I had her first, I told him about I hunted the guy down and attempted to punch his lights out.

My father shook his head. "Now I know for sure that Taylor's not gonna make any deals with me."

"Deal time is over. We're going to have to face off soon." I clenched my fists.

My father nodded slowly and then stood up from his chair, walking over to the window and looking out into the night sky

for a few moments before turning back around to face me again.

“I already know about this,” he said gruffly. “I met with Taylor earlier today.”

He paused for a moment allowing the news to sink in before continuing on. “We tried to come up with an amicable solution about the land he’s pursuing and about his claim that it’s now time for a different set of leaders to take over our pack, but neither of us could agree on anything so it ended on a stalemate. I almost fought him myself. One of the elders stopped us, told us we were too old. We’d both kill each other.”

“The elders aren’t wrong, father. Your time for fighting is over.”

“You know I would die for this pack. I’m not afraid to fight him or Shane,” he grumbled.

“I know you’re not. It has to be me.”

My father turned around to look at me. “Is that because you’ve thought about what I said.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What did you say?”

“About your mating.”

Before he could finish, I rose swiftly from the chair, prepared to make my exit.

“Don’t leave this room!” My father boomed.

I spun around. “This conversation is over. Who I love has nothing to do with this petty feud with them.”

My father stepped closer to me. “No, it does not. But what I was about to say is that Shane is set to marry a shifter. His father has heard rumors that Shane has already fathered a child and plans to marry the shifter girl to see himself gain the Alpha position by default with a stronger claim to put to the elders.”

I clenched my jaw tight and my fists shook at my sides as I tried desperately to keep calm.

“Maverick,” my father said softly, “You can’t deny that you’re a strong alpha male and if you have an heir from your true mate, then you would be able to make a strong claim for the alpha position yourself.”

I couldn’t help but think how ironic it was that Shane’s plan of claiming an alpha position through a shifter mating was something I had considered myself—before Courtney. Before she showed me what love truly meant. Before I knew she was mine.

My father sighed again before continuing on. “Taylor Brandt believes if his son can make this mating happen then there will be no doubt in anyone’s mind who should have the Alpha position when it comes time for an election.”

I exhaled roughly. “There will be no election process.”

“Maverick,” My father placed his hand on my shoulder. “You know what you must do.”

“Yes, yes I do.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Courtney

After work I spend the night huddled on the couch with ice cream and cake, expecting nothing. Ever since I left Maverick and Messiah on the boat I had felt nothing but misery and shame.

I know it wasn't my fault and that there was no way I could've known Shane was who he was. After my split with Maverick a year ago, I lost touch with all the other members of his shifter pack.

Why would Maverick want anything to do with me now? Why would anyone want anything to do with me with my freaking commitment issues?

Someone rang the bell on my door and I almost didn't answer. Not many people came to visit me, and even if I did have visitors, they usually called before they just showed up.

Grumbling, I paused the gripping Netflix show and rolled off the couch. I peered into the peephole and there he was, Maverick, standing in front of me.

My heart stopped for a moment and I stood there, unmoving. Forcing myself to move, I opened the door, my gaze never leaving his. His face was drawn with concern and worry.

"Hi," he said softly.

"Maverick."

"I need someone to talk to."

How could I say no to those wolf pup eyes of his? Besides, I wanted that too—to talk. I hadn't told anybody about what happened—not even my mom.

“Come in,” I said.

He stepped inside and immediately I noticed all the scars and bruises on his face. He looked as if he had been in a fight recently. Shifters like Maverick healed faster than most so the cuts weren't as deep.

“Where you working? What happened?” I asked him.

He sighed heavily before speaking. “I was in a fight.”

“What?” I croaked. “I thought you and your packmates didn't fight anymore.”

He shook his head. “Not with my packmates.”

I gestured for him to sit down and he did, sinking into the couch with a weary sigh.

I knew I wanted to talk with him about what happened between us—the past year, the split, my attempts to move one, everything—but I could tell Maverick needed to get something off his chest first so I let him speak without interruption.

I joined him on the couch. “Well, tell me what happened.”

He got distracted, looking around the interior of my apartment. “You changed things around.”

“Yeah. I finally found new furniture that I liked and got rid of some old stuff. No more clutter,” I said.

“I like it, but you know me, all I need is a chair, a table, and a bed.”

I giggled. “I remember. When we first met you told me that you lived in the woods. Quite literally I had no idea that you preferred sleeping outside.”

He slid his arms across my shoulders. “Until I realized that if I wanted to impress you I'd need an actual place of my own, hence, the one-bedroom shack I bought from Liam when he moved out of it.”

I smiled. “We made so many memories there.” And then I frowned, knowing that if Maverick planned to be Alpha we wouldn’t have much time together after all. “Who were you fighting with, Mave?”

“I went after Shane,” he stately flatly.

“What? Why?”

“He knew who you were. Dated you on purpose. Shane and his father have been making plans to cause chaos for months.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t know.”

“I know you didn’t. That’s why it’s not your fault.”

I stroked his face, paying attention to a half an inch scar on his chin. “I don’t want you to fight about me. I don’t want you fighting at all.”

“Sooner or later, I will have to. It’s what we do. It’s who I am. Will you accept that? Will you accept...me?”

My heart raced. I wanted to say yes, but I was scared of the consequences. I wanted to be with him, but I didn’t want him to lose or have to forfeit anything in the in process.

He gently pulled my hand from his face and kissed my palm. The warmth of his lips sent a wave of emotions through me and I knew what I had to do. Without hesitation, I leaned in and kissed him back—a long, passionate kiss that said more than words ever could.

Maverick deepened the kiss, his arms wrapping around my waist, pulling me closer to him. I felt his body heat against mine, and it made me shiver with pleasure. His hands roamed over my back, sending shivers down my spine. I moaned softly into his mouth, unable to resist his touch.

He broke the kiss, his forehead resting against mine. “I love you, Courtney,” he whispered. “Don’t forget that.”

“I love you too,” I replied, my heart pounding in my chest.

He smiled, his eyes shining with happiness. “Then nothing else matters.”

“What about your pack? What about your responsibilities if you’re chosen as Alpha?”

He sighed, his face serious. “I’ve already made it clear that we are a package deal. My father knows that. I’m going to be with you. I won’t stop loving you. He’s never disrespected you. I would never allow that, but he has to accept that I can only be the best Alpha with the woman I choose as mate at my side.”

“Whatever you decide to do, I’ll be by your side.”

He smiled, his hand reaching up to stroke my cheek. “You mean everything to me.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. I wanted him just as badly as he wanted me.

We dropped onto the couch, our lips still locked together. His hands explored my body, creating a fire inside me that I had never felt before. Maverick’s kisses trailed down my neck, sending shivers through my body. I gasped as his lips reached a particularly sensitive spot near my collarbone. I could feel his heart racing against mine, our breathing becoming more and more labored with each passionate kiss.

His hands explored my body hungrily, as if he was trying to memorize every inch of me. I moaned softly, unable to contain the pleasure that filled my entire being. He smiled against my skin, his eyes meeting mine for a split second before his lips moved lower and lower down my body.

My hands fisted in his hair as he kissed me everywhere—my chest, stomach, thighs...My back arched off the couch as he moved lower still and lightly grazed his tongue over one of the most sensitive areas on my body. I cried out in pleasure and he smiled against me before moving back up to capture my lips in another tender kiss.

Maverick slowly removed our clothing until we were both completely bare. His hands moved around my waist and he lifted me up, positioning me on top of him. I gasped as I felt his hardness press against me and my lips parted in anticipation.

My tongue darted out, tasting my lips before I bent down and let it drag across his bare chest. "I miss your taste," I whispered, teasing his nipple with the tip of my tongue.

He gasped, and then grinned knowingly before slowly unbuttoning his jeans and pushing them down to his ankles.

I leaned forward, my lips finding the head of his cock as he moaned in pleasure. I took him into my mouth, teasing him with my tongue until I could feel every inch of him trembling with desire. His fingers tangled in my hair as I increased the intensity of my movements, taking him deeper and deeper into my mouth until he was crying out in pleasure and begging for more.

Maverick's breathing became shallower and shallower as I took him to the back of my throat, increasing the speed and pressure until finally he couldn't take it anymore and let out a guttural cry of pleasure that echoed through the room.

I licked him until the last drop, savoring the salty flavor that was unique to Maverick.

"You're so sexy. So bad ass," he rasped, tangling his fingers with my hair as he watched me pleasure him with my tongue.

"I want you to fuck me now, Maverick."

He flipped us over so that he was on top, his eyes blazing with desire as he entered me in one swift motion. I screamed and wrapped my arms around his neck, our bodies moving together in perfect harmony as we both reached for the ultimate pleasure.

He ran a hand along my body as he picked up the pace. His thrusts were more urgent now, pushing me closer and closer to the edge of pleasure. He pressed against my clit, his breath getting heavier and faster as I felt my own inner walls clamping down around him. His movements became more rapid and urgent, and suddenly our simultaneous cries of pleasure filled the room as we reached an electrifying climax.

He collapsed on top of me, his chest rising and falling rapidly against mine. I closed my eyes and savored the moment, feeling completely contented in his arms. I thought he was

done, but then I felt him harden inside me once more and he began thrusting again. His movements were slow at first but quickly picked up speed as we both pushed towards another round of pleasure.

“Oh, my God! Maverick.” Back arched upward, I cried out as he found my g-spot and plunged against it over and over again.

He buried his face against the curve of my neck. “Don’t ever reject me again, Court. It hurt. I wanted to give you time, but it hurt like hell.”

He slowed down his strokes as if savoring every moment of bliss as he spoke to me.

Tears spilled from my eyes down my cheek, but he kissed them away.

I captured his face in my hands and kissed his lips. “I promise I won’t. I was wrong, Maverick. I was just scared and upset that I might not be able to have all of you. I was wrong...”

He kissed me again. “You’ve always had all of me.”

“And now, I want to give you all of me.” I pulled my hair aside and offered him my neck. “Bite me, Maverick. You wanted total submission. You have it. Bite me now.”

He teased me with his tongue as he moved inside me, causing me to feel sensations I never knew existed. His fangs grazed my neck and I shivered in anticipation of the pleasure that was about to come. He sank his teeth deep into my skin, sending a wave of pleasure through my body that left me trembling and panting in bliss.

I gasped when the crescendo of pleasure broke over us like a wave. We came together in unison, climax taking me by surprise.

We were lost in our own little world, forgetting about everything else around us. All that mattered was this moment—the two of us together as one. Nothing else seemed to exist except for the pleasure we were giving each other.

We rode out our climax together, our bodies shaking from the intensity of it all. As we lay there afterwards, panting for breath, I knew that this was what a true connection felt like—and it was even more amazing than I had ever imagined it could be.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Courtney

The following day, Maverick persuaded me to take a “care day” from work and have an special picnic in the woods over by the hut where he used to live and where we spent most of our time before he left town. It was a perfect day for setting aside responsibilities and simply existing.

I missed coming out here and I loved the woods. I felt safe with Maverick and although I always felt the urge to come back out here, I never did while he was away.

We walked hand in hand through the trees.

“I still don’t understand how you know your way around the woods so well,” I joked. “There are no signs. You don’t have a compass.”

He chuckled. “Let’s put it this way. I have an internal compass, sort of. And I know a lot of landmarks and I’m familiar with many of the old trees here.”

I nodded. “Makes sense.”

“One day, you’ll learn how to do the same.”

I giggled. “I’d probably get lost and end up on the other side of the country.”

He nudged me. “I’ll always find you.” He pointed to his nose. “Besides, when we have a dozen kids, you’ll need to learn how to find them when they run off in the woods.”

I nudged him back. “I told you. No one’s having a dozen kids.”

He laughed. “We’ll see.”

I stole a quick glance at Maverick. Truth was, I’d be honored to have a dozen kids with him. My chest swelled from just thinking about it, the desire to be with him that close for all our lives.

As we walked along the path, I felt as if I was being transported back in time. The sun was shining brightly and there was a gentle breeze blowing through the trees, carrying with it the scent of wildflowers and freshly cut grass. We talked and laughed as we walked, enjoying each other’s company and reveling in the fact that we were back together. I had my best friend. Before he declared me as his, we were friends. *With benefits.*

I giggled again, hiding the laughter behind my hand.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Oh nothing.”

He smiled, his eyes twinkling in the warming sunlight. “I love seeing you happy.” He pointed up again near a hill. “The huts over there.”

When we arrived at his old hut, I couldn’t help but be amazed by its beauty and that Maverick actually built this with his bare hands. It was made of logs and had a thatched roof with vines growing up around it.

I turned to him. “Will we live here with a dozen kids?”

“Ha! Nope. If you promise to have my babies, I’ll build you a mansion.” He winked.

“I’ll hold you to it,” I said, leaning into his chest and pressing a kiss into his lips.

Before I had a chance to protest, his strong arms swept me off my feet and he began striding toward the house. My heart raced as he strode quickly toward the house, pausing only when we had crossed the threshold and were safely inside.

Maverick set me down and I looked around, taking in the cozy interior. There was a small wood burning stove for cooking and heating, a bed in the corner, and a few chairs and tables.

“This is where you’ve been staying?” I asked.

“For the time being. I can’t with my father right now. Sometimes I just need space to think and this place is it for me,” he said.

Maverick motioned to the table and I walked over to it, marveling at how he had made it with his own hands.

“Your family, the Maisonet’s, were the very first woodworkers in Wolfwater Bay back when it was just an annex of Leestead,” I said.

He lifted one eyebrow in disbelief. “How did you know that?” he asked with smirk.

“I do work at the library. Some of the Maisonet family history is there.”

“Oh, yeah...that’s right. We’ve been here a very long time. I believe it was a Maisonet who was on the first committee to get Leestead established and then set up the committee for dividing sections of the bay, thereby creating Wolfwater Bay.”

“I had a feeling it was something like that.”

“Want to take this outside?”

“No, let’s stay inside. We can go out later. Maybe for dessert,” I said, as he pulled out a basket of fruit.

“Sounds good to me,” he said, and then reached into his backpack and took out some bread, cheese, fruits, nuts, and other snacks that he had brought with him. There was even a good-sized square of homemade fudge.

“Where do you get all this fresh stuff?” I asked.

He gently cupped my chin in his hand and tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear. “My people have a farm. You should come see it this weekend.”

With a contented sigh, I smiled up at him. “I love these dates with you,” I said.

He scooped me up into his strong arms, his tender grip making my heart flutter. His deep blue eyes seemed to twinkle with delight as he carefully placed me onto the table. I felt my cheeks flush as he grinned at me mischievously, and whispered “Wait until you see what else I have planned.”

“Mmmm, can’t wait.”

He breathed in deeply, his nose near my collarbone. “You smell incredible,” he murmured appreciatively.

“It’s just my perfume,” I laughed, as the sensation of his nose against my skin tickled me.

“No, it’s not perfume. That is your natural scent. It reminds me of chamomile and honey, but stronger now.” His eyes locked with mine and he said, “I think you’re fertile.”

I started to laugh. “What? There’s no way you could know that!”

His face broke out into a wide, lopsided smile as he leaned closer. “You’d be surprised. And you know what?”

He traced an invisible line along her collarbone with one finger. She felt her heart flutter with anticipation.

“What?” she asked breathlessly.

“Knowing that turns me on.” His voice was low and seductive, and her cheeks flushed.

Without saying a word he stepped closer and I felt his breath on my face as he leaned in for a kiss. His lips were soft against mine as our mouths moved together in perfect synchronization. I felt like I was floating away on a cloud of blissful pleasure as we continued our passionate embrace until finally we pulled apart breathless.

Maverick kissed his way down my body right through my dress, his soft lips barely making contact. His seductive touch sent shivers of pleasure coursing through me, and I felt a deep ache in my core. His hands were gentle as he explored every curve and inch of my body until he reached between my legs.

I pulled down the straps of my dress, inviting him in. His eyes lit up with desire as his lips wrapped around my nipples. His

tongue swirled around them and I moaned out loud at the sensation. He sucked my breasts until they were pink and swollen. He moved lower, trailing kisses across my belly and pausing to tease my sensitive inner thighs. I gasped as he finally reached between my legs, rolling my dress up to the top of my thighs.

As a treat I knew he would appreciate, I didn't wear any panties.

He bit his lips and his breath hitched in hard. "You fucking tease."

I blushed, red hot flames spreading across my chest. "Only for you."

"Look, at your pussy. You're dripping honey." He parted my sex with his fingers. "This is proof of how fertile you are."

His talented hands moved like a maestro, expertly bringing me closer to the edge of bliss. He finger-fucked me and kissed my lips at the same time until I was moaning into his mouth.

Just when I thought I couldn't take anymore pleasure, Maverick spread my legs back and replaced his fingers with his tongue. His fingers teased and tantalized my sensitive areas while his tongue moved in perfect circles around my clit. I felt the pleasure build and rise within me, growing ever stronger until finally it exploded throughout my entire body like wildfire. He filled me with sensations I had never experienced before and I gasped in delight, lost in the moment.

He continued to lap and swirl his tongue around me until I was writhing in pleasure and pushing my sex against his mouth. Finally, he brought me to orgasm as I experienced wave after wave of pleasure that left my body trembling in blissful exhaustion.

Maverick moved back up my body and I could feel his hard length pressing against me. His hands grabbed onto my hips and dragged me to the edge of the table.

"Look at me, Courtney," he demanded, and I obeyed.

He drove inside me, filling me to the brim with pleasure. His thrusts were deep and powerful, pushing me to the brink of

ecstasy. I wrapped my legs around him as his thrusts intensified, taking us both higher and higher until finally we reached a crescendo of pleasure that left us both trembling with delight. I thrust myself up to meet his. His hips moved in perfect time with mine as we both reached our climaxes simultaneously.

When it was done, I felt his smile widen against my lips. I grinned too, snaked my fingers around the back of his neck and kissed him.

“What are you smiling for?” I whispered.

“Because I know there’s a good chance that’s baby number one.”

“You would like that, wouldn’t you?”

“One hundred percent I would.” He pressed one more kiss into my lips and then said. “I’m going to grab a few pieces of wood for the stove. I’ll be right back.”

““Kay.”

As soon as Maverick stepped out of the cabin, I grabbed some stuff from the bag and started to clean up. There was a small bathroom stall and shower on the other end which was a nice addition to a small hut out in the woods.

While waiting for him, I poked around at the burnt out logs that were already in the stove, but then I got bored. I pushed myself outside of the hut, hoping to find Maverick right out in the yard nearby but there was no sign of him.

“Maverick!” I called out.

My voice echoed through the trees, but there was no sign of him. I followed a scent trail that I knew well and it led me further away from the hut.

The sun had just begun to set, painting the sky with a beautiful orange and pink hue. The woods were calm and peaceful as I walked through them, my footsteps light against the soft earth below me. I could hear birds singing in the distance and small critters scurrying around in the underbrush nearby.

As I continued walking, I noticed a faint smell on the air that seemed oddly familiar to me. It was like a mix between pine bark and wet grass which made my heart skip a beat when I realized what it was. Maverick!

I followed the scent trail until it led me to a clearing by a stream where there sat a huge light brown wolf sipping from its edge. Beside him were two bundles - one of logs and another of men's clothes. Instantly, I knew it was Maverick in his wolf form.

The wolf lifted its head and turned to look at me, its eyes flashing with recognition.

"Maverick?" I whispered.

As if by command, Maverick shifted back into his human form while I watched, standing in awe of his majestic transformation. He was beautiful in both forms and I couldn't help but feel a wave of love wash over me as he stood there smiling at me. He was completely naked. I blushed.

This wasn't the first time I had seen him shift from wolf to man or from man to wolf, but it sure felt like it.

"Courtney, is something wrong?"

"No," I said, breathlessly. "I just was worried about where you were, that's all."

With those words, I had flashbacks to when I broke up with Maverick and I found out he left. So many times after that, I had wanted to go find him and bring him back to me. Looking back on it, I wish I had. We'd lost so much time.

He closed the gap between us and I wrapped my hands around his strong body as he drew me close. He leaned in and kissed me tenderly, sending waves of heat through my body. His lips were soft and inviting as they moved over mine with a gentle passion. Our kiss lingered on, deepening until we were both breathless and our bodies pressed tightly together.

We pulled away from each other slowly, our eyes locked in a passionate embrace that neither one of us wanted to break.

"Let's never be apart again," he whispered against my lips.

His words were like a balm to my soul and they made me realize just how much he meant to me.

I nodded. “Never again.”

He grinned at me, his teeth bright against sun-tanned skin. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll race you back to the hut,” he said and spread out his arms, reveling in his own suggestion. “In wolf form.”

I felt my eyes spread wide. “What?”

“I’m serious.” He had a mischievous glint in his eye as he repeated his challenge. “If you win, I’ll take you out to the lake and we can watch the sunset from the shore,” he said, and then added, “But time’s a tickin’.”

A chuckle bubbled up out of me. “Oh my gosh, I’m not gonna make it there in time,” I said, eyeing the sun hovering just above the horizon.

He looked skyward for a moment and then back at me, a twinkle of mischief in his eye. “I guess you’ll need a bit of a head start – say, three minutes – since you’re so incredibly slow.”

“You got it!” I replied, ready to take off running. There was no way I was going to miss the chance to see that sunset.

I took off like a shot, my feet pounding against the dirt and grass as I raced for the hut. But soon, I realized I must’ve gone in the wrong direction when I heard cars sprinting by on a road and noise from the town limits. My heart sank. I looked around at my surroundings and didn’t recognize any landmarks from near the hut. *I was lost.*

Suddenly, I heard a howl in the distance. I looked around and saw nothing but trees and bushes. Then I heard it again, closer this time. My heart leaped with joy as Maverick emerged from the forest in his human form, dressed this time, and raced over to me.

He grinned at me and said, “Looks like you found your way back home.”

“And looks like you found your way to me.”

“Look.” He pointed upwards.

We slowly turned to face the horizon, our hands intertwined as the fiery setting sun cast its warm glow upon us. Time seemed to freeze in place as a light, balmy breeze caressed our skin and the glorious tapestry of orange, pink and purple hues saturated the sky. We leaned in for an intimate kiss just as the moment was shattered by three cop cars barreling down the street before coming to an abrupt stop right in front of us.

The squad cars squealed to a stop, and the officers leapt out. Maverick's eyes widened as he recognized the cop bellowing his name. His body froze and he lurched in front of me, shielding me from the cops' line of fire with his own solid frame.

"Maverick Maisonnet! Step away from that grill, hands up, and walk this way!" The cop advanced with guns drawn, his voice hard and menacing.

"What the fuck? I haven't done shit," Maverick hollered back.

"Do as I say or we'll tase your ass, buddy," the cop replied.

"Maverick..." I panted.

"Don't be afraid. Go home. Go home and call my father."

Maverick slowly raised his hands and stepped forward. His eyes darted nervously around the scene as he reluctantly walked towards the cops.

They cuffed him and my heart sank.

"Why am I being arrested?" Maverick demanded.

The officer read off the charges in a stern, clear tone. "Your charges include criminal mischief, disorderly conduct, and the assault and battery of Josh Colvin."

Maverick's jaw clenched tightly as he shouted out an expletive, his face flushed with anger. "What!"

Maverick and I both stared in disbelief. Questions flooded my mind; when had this happened? Josh was no longer in the picture, so why would Maverick feel the need to assault him? It made no sense.

“That is a lie,” Maverick’s voice rang out with conviction. His voice raised in outrage so firmly that no one seemed to believe him.

I believed him—I knew what kind of person Maverick was—but apparently the cops were still suspicious.

My heart sank as I watched them take him away. He turned back to me one last time before they put him in the car, his eyes filled with confusion.

What the hell had just happened? It was like a bad dream.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Courtney

My car skidded up the driveway of Gustave's house, my fingers trembling as I clutched the steering wheel. My heart raced and sweat beaded on my forehead as I approached the cobblestone path like a criminal in a horror movie. I crept forward until I reached the doorstep and paused, feeling like I was standing at the gates of a prison.

I lifted my hand, but my fingers trembled as I paused at the door. I heard a loud thud followed by an eerie creak, and the door swung open to reveal several towering men with matching leather jackets. The pack members exchanged suspicious looks when I stepped inside the house. Eventually, one of them motioned for me to enter the living room.

Gustave was there, stoic in the living room. He looked like an older, wiser version of Maverick. Studious and more serious. His intense blue eyes bore through me, as if he could see into my soul. He had aged well since the last time I saw him, with a distinguished look about his features. His long silvery hair framed his angular face like a crown of snow. It was Gustave, recognizable from the moment I saw him.

Finally Gustave's lips stretched into a meager smile. "Courtney, I'm glad you could come. And thanks for calling me to let me know what happened to my son. I know we didn't hit it off when we first met, but..." He looked to the side and didn't finish his sentence.

“It’s okay. I understand you want what’s best for Gustave,” I said, my arms hanging nervously at my side.

“And you should think about what’s best for you too,” Gustave stated.

“I have.”

Liam and Messiah stood among the other members of Maverick’s Pack, each of them silent in anticipation. Liam stepped forward then, his eyes burning with determination as he pushed himself off the mantle. “So, let’s get down to it. Let’s get my pack brother out of jail,” he declared.

Gustave and the others huddled around me as I recounted my story, of how Maverick and I had been on the town square when the cops descended on him like he was a violent criminal and arrested him.

“Those charges are ludicrous,” Messiah blared out.

“Yes, I know,” I said, wringing my hands in my lap. “Maverick would never do that.”

Liam shook his head. “Oh, he would, but he wouldn’t go about it messy like that. He’d never leave evidence or any trail leading back to him, hence, he wouldn’t even be in jail.”

“He was set up. *My son was set up*,” Gustave said.

“How do you guys know it was a set up?” I asked.

The two men exchanged a glance filled with suspicion, their eyes darting back and forth as if they were debating whether to trust me or not. Messiah finally shifted his weight and broke the tense silence, shuffling his feet and clearing his throat. “Maverick told you about the night we caught up to Shane, right? And beat his ass?”

I nodded. “He did.”

“Well, that’s when Shane must’ve decided to retaliate,” Messiah said. “Probably to either get out of or delay fighting Maverick at the next full moon.”

I nodded slowly, piecing it together. “He retaliated by blaming Josh’s assault on Maverick, but how did he set Shane up

exactly?”

Liam stepped forward, his face grim. “The next day, Maverick had some of his followers kidnap Josh Colvin, your ex, from a parking garage. They dragged him down a dirty alley and unleashed a merciless beating. The kid who witnessed the attack stumbled into the police station the next morning and told the sheriff he saw Maverick beating on Josh like a rabid wolf.”

“Oh God,” I breathed.

“Josh Colvin is your ex, right?” one of them asked.

I averted my gaze and felt a wave of embarrassment wash over me. “He is,” I said, my voice barely audible. I cleared my throat, fighting the lump in it. “That was a while ago. I...we don’t date any more.”

Gustave stood up. “Listen here, lady, if you’re trying to ride roughshod all over my son, I—”

“I’m not.” My voice rose as I all but put my foot down. “I love your son. I love Maverick. You know very well, Mr. Maisonnet, why we split up. The pressure you put on him and me was overwhelming!” My jaw clenched and eyes darting towards him. ” Do I need to repeat that reason?”

Gustave’s cheeks flushed, and he avoided making eye contact. “No need,” he mumbled.

Liam grunted. “Yeah, no need. With all due respect Alpha, you had no faith in Courtney before, but I think she’s earned her place with us—with Maverick.”

“So, Maverick was framed...” I wanted to get back to the issue. “I’ll go to the Sheriff myself. I’ll tell him to let Maverick free.”

Messiah chuckled nervously under his breath. “It’s not that easy. Not with us. You forget. That Sheriff knows about Maverick. Knows what we are. He keeps our secret for good reason. Has never outed us, but he promised us long ago that he would hold us accountable for any problems we cause.”

“But what if I can prove Maverick wasn’t there that night?” I asked.

“How?” Gustave asked. “We have yet to find concrete evidence. Maverick goes and runs off where he wants to run off to without telling a damn soul where he’s going. That’s his problem.”

“He wasn’t there, because we were together,” I said.

“What do you mean, together?” Gustave asked.

“He spent the night with me. In my bed,” I whispered. “That’s his alibi. He was with me. And...he bit me.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Courtney

Gustave and I walked through the entrance of the police station, our steps echoing in the sterile hallways. Desks lined either side of the room, with officers looking up from paperwork as we passed by. A few muttered quiet words to each other while they watched us walk towards the desk in the center of the room. There was a heavy silence that filled my lungs with dread, knowing this would be our last chance to prove Maverick's innocence.

I could feel my heart pounding as we reached the desk, and I nervously looked around for the Sheriff. He was nowhere to be found. I glanced at Gustave out of the corner of my eye, and he gave me a reassuring nod.

"It's okay," he said. "We'll get to the bottom of his. We'll get Maverick out of here. And when we do, we can all have dinner together so I can apologize to the both of you."

I managed a small smile as I nodded. No one needed Gustave's support as much as his son did, but it certainly felt good to know that he was finally looking at things differently.

A massive silhouette appeared in the doorway, fully backlit by the hallway light. As he stepped into the room, I could make out his towering stature and solid frame beneath a starched olive uniform. He stood with rigid confidence, his shoulders pushed back and stern expression fixed on us. His badge sparkled in the fluorescent lighting.

He pushed the chair back and its sturdy wooden legs scraped against the floor. He was an imposing figure, with a broad chest and piercing eyes, yet there was something friendly about his deep, gravelly voice as he asked, “Now, what can I do for you two? Mr. Maissonnet? Ms. Stewart?”

Gustave cleared his throat before speaking up first. “My son Maverick has been falsely accused.” His calloused hands curled into fists as he cleared his throat before speaking up first. “I want him released now.”

The Sheriff leaned back in his chair and sighed. “I’m afraid that’s not possible at this time,” he said, sympathetically. “But if your son is innocent, I assure you, we will release him.” He rested both hands on the desk, looking directly into Gustave’s eyes as if to emphasize his point.

“I have evidence that Maverick wasn’t there during the attack. He didn’t do it. Someone else did,” I said with conviction, scanning his face for any sign of doubt.

The Sheriff stroked the tips of his mustache thoughtfully as he squinted at me. “You sound quite confident about that,” he said, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

“Maverick didn’t do this crime like they say he did—he spent that night with me.”

The Sheriff’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped, while Gustave clasped a hand over his mouth. An oppressive silence settled within the room like a heavy fog.

“Ms. Stewart, with all due respect, I didn’t take you as the type of lady to be involved with...” He stopped short and his eyes switched to Gustave who became tense in his seat.

“Go on and say it!” What did you want to say about my people? Speak up!” Gustave sneered.

The two adversaries stared at each other, their eyes locked and blazing with rage.

“Please...” I said, calmly. “With all due respect, Sheriff, I didn’t take you as the type of man to press false charges on an innocent man.”

“We are all innocent until proven guilty, ma’am,” the Sheriff stated. “But if you’re speaking the truth, we’ll put your statement into evidence. It has to be written.”

“I’ll do it. Write it. Whatever you need to release him,” I said.

The Sheriff tore a piece of paper off a yellow notepad and slid it across the table towards me. As I wrote, Gustave asked, “Now, when will you be releasing my son?”

“We have to make sure everything checks out,” the Sheriff said.

I looked up from my notebook, eyes wide with confusion. “What do you mean *checks out*?” I asked. “I just told you,” I said, my voice suddenly cold and hard. I slammed one of my hands down onto the table, making them both jump. “What do you need? The fucking porno video from that night where you see him inside me?”

I was irate, furious. This was so infuriating.

The Sheriff shifted in his chair, and Gustave moved closer to me. His hand was gentle on my back. “It’s alright, Courtney.” Gustave’s voice was calming and I was surprised he had that effect on me, just like his son did whenever I was angry.

“Ms. Stewart,” the judge began, “as a witness testified that Maverick had been the one to commit the assault against Mr. Colvin, we needed to take all necessary precautions and do our due diligence.”

Gustave’s face was pale, his hands shaking as he pointed to the report the Sheriff was writing. “My son didn’t do this, Sheriff. There’s a rival in town. He did this to end or stop a feud. It was a ploy. The person who did this is a coward. My son isn’t a coward.”

“Give his name,” Sheriff said, picking up a pen. “The coward...”

“The person you need to speak with is Shane Brandt,” Gustave said. “Talk to him. He knows exactly who beat up your guy real bad.”

“Thank you for this information. Ms. Stewart. Mr. Maisonnet. I can’t release Maverick at this time. As you know Mr. Colvin fears for his life and we understand that Courtney Stewart once dated Mr. Colvin, so that is motive enough for Maverick to have carried out the attack on him. You have just confirmed here, Ms. Stewart, that you engaged in sexual relationships with Maverick, so that would indicate some sort of love triangle, no?”

“No! Of course not.” I rose from the chair.

“This meeting is over, Sheriff. Let us out,” Gustave demanded, with a growl.

The Sheriff’s eyes widened. “Very well, but just understand that I can’t have a guilty man roaming the streets until we can prove he’s innocent.”

Gustave pressed a finger on the desktop. “You’re only doing this because Josh Colvin co-owns the only bank in town. The boy’s got clout and influence over you. We understand. But when my son is proven innocent, I expect your apology and reparations unless we unleash hell and uncover all the corruption you’ve been involved in to date.”

With a huff, the Sheriff got up and opened the office door for us and I instantly knew what that meant. He was kicking us out.

As Gustave was walking me back to his car, he said, “Don’t worry, Courtney. We always work things out. It’s not Maverick’s first time in jail and he can handle himself.”

“But I feel like I’m going to collapse without him,” I rasped.

“You can come back with me. With the other wolves. Sometimes that makes the mated woman feel safe when her better half isn’t around. We do it all the time. You’re part of our family now and we protect our family.”

I smiled. “Thanks for the offer, but I’ve taken too many days off. Since I’m in town, I’m gonna swing by the library and see if they need an extra hand today. The books should take my mind of things until tomorrow...maybe.”

“Okay. I can send one of my guys when you get off to get you home. you left your car at my house, remember?”

I shook my head. “No, that’s okay. I can get one of my co-workers to take me home. I’ll catch a ride over there tomorrow and come pick it up.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you to it then.”

Gustave left and I began to walk down the street towards the library, but before I could take two steps, someone grabbed my arm from behind and pulled me backwards.

I spun around and there stood Shane Brandt, surrounded by his pack of wolves.

“You!” My voice rushed out in shock.

“You’re coming with us,” he said in a deep menacing voice.

He sauntered closer to me with a sly smirk on his face and my heart sank as I realized what was about to happen. Before I had time to react, one of his followers stepped forward and pressed a foul smelling cloth over my nose and mouth. My vision blurred and the last thing I remember was the sound of Shane’s menacing laughter echoing through my head as I passed out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Courtney

My eyes slowly fluttered open but everything was still dark. I felt an uncomfortable lumpy surface beneath me, and a chill down my spine. I squinted against the darkness; that's when I saw it - damp concrete walls that stretched on into eternity, and not a single window in sight. There were old rusted pipes snaking along the ceiling, cobwebs hanging from every corner, and thick dust particles coating the floor. Panic began to rise in my chest; what had happened? The last thing I remembered was walking out of the library and then nothing... My wrists were tightly bound, and I couldn't move an inch.

I tugged at the restraints, but the rope was too tight. My heart thumped loudly in my chest as I heard the sound of footsteps coming closer. The door creaked open, and I heard a voice that sent shivers down my spine.

Shane stepped inside, a satisfied smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. "Good morning, Courtney," he said with a false sweetness. "Did you sleep well?"

My heart raced as I struggled to keep my voice steady. I met his gaze squarely, determined not to show my fear. "What do you want from me?"

Shane's chuckle was sinister and cold. He took a step closer to me, his finger coming up to my cheek and sending chills of fear down my spine. I tried to move away, but he grabbed my

chin with a vice-like grip, digging his fingers in my skin as he forced me to meet his gaze.

“Maverick has ruined so much for us,” he sneered, “But now that we have you, we can make him pay for it.” His voice was low and full of malice.

“Why did you kidnap me?” I snapped.

Shane’s smirk widened. “Gustave and his son has gained a lot of power in this town... too much power. We want to take it away from him. We can use you as leverage to get him to do our bidding. If he doesn’t, then we’ll make sure that you suffer the consequences.”

He released my chin, and I felt my skin burning from his grip. I wanted to scream, to break free from my bonds and run, but I knew that it was impossible. I was completely and utterly helpless in his hands.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Shane purred. “I have business to attend to. I suggest you get comfortable. You’ll be staying with us for a while seeing as how your convict boyfriend is now in jail. Don’t bother trying to escape, Courtney. You’re not going anywhere.”

“You fucking piece of dog shit!” I hollered at him.

“Hm, but I was so close to getting you to fuck me,” he snapped.

“That’s a lie. You disgust me. I didn’t even give you the time of day.”

“Whatever,” Shane sneered.

He stepped out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him. I heard the sound of a key turning in the lock and I knew I was truly trapped. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I realized that I was in trouble. This was not going to end well...

My heart sank at the mention of Maverick. What did they plan to do to him? I had to find a way to escape and warn him. But he probably already knew how wicked Shane was. That’s why they exiled Shane and his father in the first place.

As he turned to leave, I caught a glimpse of my feet. They were bare. My socks and shoes were gone. Shane had probably done it so it would be difficult for me to run fast.

I rubbed some mud away from my feet, and that's when I saw it—the mate mark Maverick had told me about. It was on the left side of the arc in my right foot. A maverick, about ten times darker than the skin on my flesh, wings spread tall and graceful. It was small. Maybe about two inches on all sides. Easy to miss. But how could I miss this? It was plain as day.

At the same time, the mark where Maverick bit me tingled and I made the connection. Maverick had marked me after my total submission. So much had happened between then and now that I had easily missed the mark.

Despite the squalor and rough predicament I was in now, I grinned widely. A surge of hope filled me. If I could just get free, I could prove Maverick's innocence and expose Shane for the criminal he was. I had to stay strong and keep fighting, no matter what Shane and his followers had planned for me.

I had something to fight for. *Something to live for.*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Maverick

I stood in the dark, dank holding cell where I was trapped for more than a day powerless to do anything but plead my innocence. I heard the jangle of keys as the guard approached from down the corridor. The rattle of metal echoed around me as he slid a key into the lock and twisted it open with a click. I felt a wave of euphoria as he abruptly opened the door. That's when I saw Eric, family lawyer whom I had spoken to yesterday.

"Maverick," he said with an air of anticipation, "I have good news." He paused and looked around cautiously before continuing.

"It seems you're off the hook—for now." His face was illuminated by a faint smile but something darker lurked beneath it. "Take this as a lesson: come see me before things get this bad."

My shoulders drooped with relief when he said, "Thanks, Eric."

He opened the door and I walked out into the narrow hallway which reeked of stale sweat and disinfectant. He followed me to the open doorway and said in a stern voice, "You'll be on probation until your hearing. No trouble until then. You hear me?"

"Yeah. I'll call you about that fee later."

Eric shook his head. "Already taken care of. Go see your father before he starts puking furballs."

“I will.”

As I walked through the prison corridors, I couldn't help but feel a sense of urgency. But not to get to my father. Courtney was the first thing on my mind, and I knew that I had to see her as soon as possible. I ran out of the prison gates and raced like a mad man down busy streets and sidewalks all the way to her apartment.

When I arrived, I pounded on the door, but there was no answer. My heart sank as I realized that she wasn't there. I tried to call her, but her phone was off. I paced back and forth, trying to figure out where she could be.

I rung up Messiah. He answered immediately, saying, “Hey Dude. I was waiting for you at the jail in my car. I came to pick your ass up. Where are you?”

“I'm out of jail. I'm okay. I just got to Courtney's. Have you seen her?”

“Ah, fuck, man, I could've told you. No one's seen Courtney since yesterday. Her car's been sitting out in front of your dad's front yard since last evening.”

“Fuck!” I barked out.

“If—” I hung up the phone on him as I felt panic rise in me. What if something had happened to her? What if she was hurt or in trouble? I couldn't bear the thought of losing her again.

I circled back around into the town limits, this time in wolf form, and caught her scent from there in a dark alley. I also caught someone else's scent—Shane's.

I was in a state of pure panic. I had no idea what I was going to do when I got there. The only thing that I did know was that I had to save Courtney from Shane and his followers.

I ran as fast as my legs would take me, weaving through the streets and dodging people who seemed to be getting in my way. When I finally arrived at Leestead's border, the smell of Shane and Courtney filled my nose.

Shane was standing on top of a boulder, with all of his followers circled around him. Courtney stood off to the side,

looking pale and scared but also determined not to show it. My heart ached for her and how scared she must have been—alone in this strange place with a bunch of strangers who were obviously up to no good.

I growled and stepped out from behind some trees into the clearing where they were all gathered. They all gasped and took several steps back as one body, eyes wide with shock at seeing a large wolf among them.

The growl had come out before I could stop it, but when it did, something inside me shifted; something primal awoke within me and suddenly my senses were heightened, my instincts ready for battle if need be.

“What do we have here?” Shane asked menacingly as he stepped forward towards me slowly while eyeing me up suspiciously. He waved his hand towards his followers who quickly stepped forward, barring their canines. I wasn’t the least bit afraid of them. I would kill all of them for Courtney.

I growled and stepped forward, ready to take on Shane’s wolf followers. In twos and threes, they came at me with ferocity and I was forced to square off against them all. I fought hard, using my size and strength to fend them off as they tried to circle around me. I was like a wild animal, lashing out at whatever came near me in an attempt to protect Courtney.

Shane had just begun to back away with Courtney in tow when a chorus of engine noises echoed from the trees. Six pickup trucks rounded the corner and my pack members, led by my father, disembarked from their vehicles. On the other side of the clearing Shane and Taylor emerged from the shadows. As they did, Shane’s followers limped back or slunk away, resigning themselves to defeat.

My body convulsed with raw energy as I shifted at lightning speed, my bones crackling and splintering, my skin realigning until I was thrust back into human form with an overwhelming surge of power that shook me to the core.

“Where’s Courtney?!” I screamed, my voice echoing off the walls of the dusty warehouse.

Shane stood a few feet away, his arms crossed. “Fight me, Maverick, and then we’ll see if you’re strong enough to save her.”

It was typical of him to torment me like this, using his wolves to exhaust me before he challenged me to a fight.

I ran as fast as I could towards the two figures, my heart pounding in my chest. Suddenly, two strong hands were on my shoulders, pulling me back.

“Not now,” Gustave said sternly, “We got a tip from the station that Shane’s already called the Sheriff out here and if you get caught here, your bail conditions will be violated.”

“I don’t give a fuck about my bail, father. This is Courtney we’re talking about here and that cowardly prick has her.”

The sound of my racing heart filled my ears as I charged forward, driven by blind fury. In a single bound, I closed the gap between Shane and I and we collided with a deafening crash. The fight was on.

We clashed with a fury, slashing, pounding and battering each other until our limbs were slick with sweat. I could feel my strength fading as shards of pain shot through my body, but in a final surge of power my fist connected and Shane was driven back, his anguish echoing across the ring. With one last shove I pinned him down by the neck to the ground, immobilizing his struggling body beneath me.

With a firm grip, Shane clasps my fingers as I brazenly wrap them around his neck. His eyes widen in terror and he chokes out a moan of fear, “Stop!” - but I keep pressing, determined to not let go until I have seen my retribution fulfilled.

“What’s that?” I taunted him with canines extended past my human lips. “Stop? I’m not going to stop because you should’ve thought about the ass-whopping you’d get long before you came back here. Now you’re going to suffer through a beating that you’ll never forget.”

“Maverick!” My father barked. “You’re killing him! The cops are on the way.”

He was right. A faint, high-pitched whine grew slowly louder as it moved closer and closer until it filled the air, drowning out all other sound. The sirens were coming straight for us.

I released Shane and he lurched up, then lunged back at me. We sprang off the ground, and before I could react Shane was on me with a vicious right hook across my nose. Blood flew from my face as I staggered backwards and we hurled ourselves into a brutal fist fight.

That bastard.

I threw every ounce of strength I had into my punches, and with each strike Shane's head bounced off the concrete harder. His face was beginning to swell, his eyes were locked in a daze, and a trickle of blood escaped from his split lip. Because I knew this might be my only chance before getting put away for a long time, I reached down and clawed Shane in the chest.

"Don't kill me!" Shane begged, spitting up blood.

I glanced down in horror to find my claws had plunged into his chest and sank deep within. He let out a pained gasp at the vice-like grip I had on him.

"I want you gone from Wolfwater Bay and Leestead never to return. This is my town. This is my pack!"

"Fine," he croaked.

"Never."

I cautiously pulled back, watching as the tips of my claws began to resurface from his flesh and then retract back. The penetrating gash would leave a mark on him even after he healed. Every time he saw it, he would think of the time I almost shredded his lungs and then granted him mercy. In the distance, I could hear the loud sirens of police cars coming closer.

The cops jumped out of their cars and came running towards us, ready to break up our fight.

"Alright, you freaks of nature," the Sheriff pushed through the crowd. "Knock it off."

“You want the true attacker, Sheriff. There he is!” Gustave pointed.

“My son is innocent,” Taylor challenged.

“I’ve heard enough,” the Sheriff said. “Both of your sons are going to jail tonight.”

I was shocked when I felt cold metal on my wrists as they cuffed me—*again*—and read me my rights—*again*. The realization of what had just happened started to set in. I was being arrested—*again*. But that was the price I paid to hand it to the coward who threatened my mate.

“Father!” I yelled, as they walked me towards the car.

My father came running. “Get Courtney. Please. Take care of her.”

“I will, Maverick,” he said.

I didn’t get the chance to see what ensued next, but I heard another fight broke out and a series of growls. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Taylor on the ground, pleading for his life.

The cops also had their guns drawn on members of my pack. Taylor lifted his arms in a sigh of defeat the got to his feet.

Taylor then stepped toward Gustave, his face pale but unwavering as he held out a key dangling from his fingers. “This unlocks the truck that Courtney is being held in.” He took a fraction of a second’s pause before spinning back around and sprinting into the woods, his loyal entourage close behind.

“Fucking bastards! Good riddance to them,” Gustave mumbled under his breath.

The police officer grabbed my arm and steered me away from the gathering crowd. His grip was cold, his voice gruff as he said, “No more gawking. Get in the cruiser, Mave.” He opened the back door and motioned for me to get in.

As the voice called my name, I reluctantly turned around and our gazes met. His stern face stirred memories of the past; we had gone to the same high school, and I had even helped him

get a job at my father's mill. I looked him in the eye, trying not to betray any emotion.

"Dobson?" I whispered under my breath.

Dobson grinned. "That's Officer Dobson to you. Don't say another word, Mave. You cause too much trouble and quite frankly, I've gotten tired of helping to clean up your shit."

My heart sank. I thought he had already taken the other side, but then he gruffly said, "Look, get in the car and just go with it. Don't say anything and you'll be outta there by morning."

I reluctantly nodded my head, letting him know that I understood. Deep down inside, I was grinning, because I knew everything was going to be okay.

Yeah, this was my town. I was exactly where I needed to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Maverick

Just as Dobson said, I walked out of the town's jail the very next morning without a single charge. On top of that, Shane and his father, Taylor had gone. They simply vanished from Wolfwater Bay sometime in the night. Josh Colvin was already at the police station trying to raise bloody hell, but what could he do? I had influence here too because this was my town too. I just had this odd feeling that we'd have problems with Colvin in the future.

Now if I could just get my father to stop calling me leaving messages about the elders wanting to meet with me, things would be much better.

I would take my place as Alpha soon. But it wouldn't be on anyone's terms or time. Besides, my father was a great Alpha. I wasn't ready to take his mantle just yet.

I was ready for something else though.

I pulled the car into the parking lot of Courtney's apartment complex, grinning. I knew she waited for me.

I rushed up the stairs, taking them two-at-a-time, and stopped in front of her door. Taking a deep breath, I knocked softly.

The door opened, and I saw Courtney standing in the doorway with a huge smile on her face.

"Hey," she said, her voice soft and inviting.

"Hey," I replied, stepping into the apartment and wrapping my arms around her.

I just couldn't take it anymore. Despite my soreness, I had to touch her. My hands moved to her face, my fingertips softly tracing her jawline as I looked into her eyes.

"I'm ready for this," I said, and I meant it.

"Me too," she whispered, pulling me inside.

We'd both been through so much, and we were both ready to move on. I was ready to be the man she deserved and to lead my pack with honor and strength when the time came.

I inhaled her sweet scent, and my heart felt so full and my love so strong.

This was just the beginning.

She blushed. "I have something to show you."

She took me by the hand and led me to her living room. She sat down on the couch, and I watched as she took off her sandals. I couldn't help but smile at the sight of her mate mark inside the arch of her tiny foot. The maverick—she was carrying my mark.

"When...when did this happen?" I asked.

"I don't know. It wasn't there before. At least I don't think. After we...uh...after you bit me...I felt something tingling there. I looked down and there it was." She stroked my face. "What an odd place for a birthmark to be?"

I chuckled. "I agree, but you have to remember, love. It's not a birthmark. It's a mate mark. Truly something unique and special and it only reveals itself when it wants to."

She smiled the brightest smile and I vowed I would be making her smile like that for the rest of our lives together.

I lifted her foot in my hands, feeling its softness and warmth, before placing a gentle kiss on it.

We both knew that no matter what happened next, we'd be okay because we had each other now. Our bond was strong and unbreakable. We'd get through anything together, just like we always did.

"You're hurt, Maverick" she whispered.

I looked up into her eyes, and as my gaze lingered a moment too long I felt a stirring deep within me. “Not anymore,” I muttered, barely audible in the silence between us. “We heal quickly. What you see is nothing. They are merely traces of the aftermath. But what you don’t see is how intensely my heart still beats for you.”

My hands moved up her calf, and I kissed each of her ankles. Her skin was so soft and inviting that I couldn’t resist. I worked my way up her legs, kissing and caressing every inch of her smooth skin. She moaned softly as I moved closer to the inner thighs. My fingers trailed along the inside of her thighs as my lips followed closely behind, leaving a trail of desire in their wake. Every touch heightened our arousal until we were both consumed by passion and need for one another.

We fell back onto the couch, and the world faded away as we lost ourselves in each other. Our bodies moved in perfect harmony, lost in the moment, lost in each other. The only thing that mattered was the feeling of our skin touching and the sounds of our moans and gasps.

I kissed her neck, nipping at her earlobe before trailing my lips lower down her body. My hands roamed over her curves with a newfound appreciation for what she had given me—this newfound connection to each other.

I explored every inch of her beneath me. I could feel her heart racing against mine as I moved between her legs, pushing myself deep inside her until my shaft was completely buried into her warmth.

I watched her face as she came apart, trembling in my arms.

“I’ll never leave you again, Courtney,” I said.

“And I’ll never ask you to.” She kissed me.

“You’re mine.”

The intensity of our lovemaking was unlike anything I had ever felt before. It was passionate, wild and free yet deeply intimate all at once. We moved together perfectly, never losing that perfect rhythm that kept us both connected in the moment.

“I love you, Court.”

“I love you, Mave.”

As we both reached the peak of pleasure, I thought my heart would burst with ecstasy. Our bodies shook and quivered as wave after wave of euphoria crashed over us, drowning out all thought until there was nothing left but pure bliss.

Afterwards we lay there together, exhausted but completely fulfilled. In that moment all I wanted was to lay here with her forever—enjoying this perfect peace and connection between us for eternity.

EPILOGUE

Courtney

Two months later...

I settled into the plush, cream-colored chair by the bay windows with my journal in hand and eyed the vivid oranges, pinks and deep blues of the sunset. I could hear the muted thuds and clangs of Maverick and his workmen hammering away at our new house outside, and a feeling of warmth and contentment spread over me as I realized that this was the start of a new chapter of our lives.

Not only that, Maverick had big plans for the pack. There would be lots of pack and family gatherings, he said. Just like his father, Gustave, had when he was Alpha.

Yeah, Maverick's finally transitioned into the Alpha position. It only took a few years, a ton of family fights, a feud with a distant cousin, and my promise to give him a dozen children. I wasn't sure I would keep that promise, but I would try. I deserved it, and so did Maverick.

Maverick wasn't just a leader, he was businessman, and if he wanted to keep his influence in Wolfwater Bay and Leestead, he had to make power moves.

Maverick had been busy securing a land rights deal that would allow our pack to roam freely without any restrictions. He had worked tirelessly for weeks to get this deal in place, and it was finally happening. It was a huge relief to know that our pack would have a safe and secure place to call home.

I was proud to stand by his side as his mate, and we declared our love for each other in front of our pack. There would be wedding right on our new property, as soon as we it was complete, of course. I couldn't wait. I had always wished for a fall wedding by the bay.

Just then, the door opened and Maverick stepped inside. He was covered in sawdust and his hands were calloused from all the hard work he had been putting in, but his eyes still sparkled with love as he walked towards me. Without a word, he leaned down over me and kissed me in an upside down position softly on the lips.

I giggled.

“Mmmm, you taste good.” He licked his lips.

“I had lemonade.” I held up my glass and he grabbed it and took a sip.

“Mmmm, nice,” he replied. “You made this?”

I nodded.

“I'm done for the day,” he said. We changed up a few things in the floor plan that I think you might like.

“Tell me about it.”

“It's a surprise,” he teased.

“I can't wait. I was just watching the sun go down. Join me. We can watch it together.”

He eased himself down onto the sofa, resting his head lightly against my stomach. I felt a momentary wave of contentment wash over me as his breathing evened out and he sighed. His hand moved slowly up and down my expanding midsection as he muttered something against my skin.

“I can hear the heartbeat. It's a boy,” he whispered, and for that moment, I shared in the joy of possibility, imagining what our future held if it was true.

I smiled and replied softly, “Maybe.”

I was overjoyed when I discovered that I was pregnant with Maverick's child. We had been through so much together, and

the thought of having a big family with him filled me with happiness.

I kneaded my fingers through his strands, stroking his head, just the way he liked.

He looked up into my eyes, his own misty with emotion, and said, “No matter what it is, this child will be the beginning of something better.”

MESSAGE FROM AMBER ELLA MONROE

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If you enjoyed the story, don't forget to leave a review and tell others what you loved about it. Even a couple sentences about what you liked can say a lot.

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USA Today Bestselling Author Amber Ella Monroe pens seductive tales of paranormal romance. She also writes contemporary romance as Ambrielle Kirk. As a child, she never really dreamed of being an author. It was a destined path that chose her. Now she writes with her readers in mind, but the characters, of course, dictate the outcome.

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