



RUNNING

from the

WOLVES

wolfsbane book 1

LOLA GLASS

Running from the Wolves

By Lola Glass

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To my Chad

Contents

[Running from the Wolves](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

[FIFTEEN](#)

[SIXTEEN](#)

[SEVENTEEN](#)

[EIGHTEEN](#)

[NINETEEN](#)

[TWENTY](#)

[TWENTY-ONE](#)

[TWENTY-TWO](#)

[TWENTY-THREE](#)

[TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[TWENTY-SIX](#)

[TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[TWENTY-EIGHT](#)

[TWENTY-NINE](#)

[THIRTY](#)

[THIRTY-ONE](#)

[THIRTY-TWO](#)

[THIRTY-THREE](#)

[Please Leave a Review](#)

[Afterword](#)

[FREE STUFF](#)

[Acknowledgement](#)

[Connect with Me](#)

[More Books by Lola Glass](#)

[About Lola Glass](#)

ONE

“Put the top on, Henley.” My manager sounded tired. I didn’t blame him; I was tired of this conversation too.

My rag swept over the bar, overhead lights bringing out the sparkle in the expensive ebony stone. Even though it was noon, it was fairly dim inside. Jack Johnson’s voice floated through the air, bouncing off textured black and white walls.

“I’m still not comfortable with the way it flashes my cleavage.” The lie slipped from my lips easily as I continued wiping down the bar.

“You agreed to wear the uniform when you got the job. The owner is coming in and he’ll fire both of us if you don’t comply.” Bodhi walked around to the other side of the bar, folding his skinny little arms over his chest. Coming in at about 5’7” and weighing less than 120, he and his artfully-spiked blue hair were about as scary as a toothpick. “You know you’re my favorite bartender. If you wear the top when our boss is here, I won’t bring up the uniform again.”

Tempting.

Very tempting.

Bodhi shifted his weight to his other foot, and I caught the scent of something surprising. Fear. Bodhi was legitimately afraid of our boss. If his blue hair and our six months working together told me anything it was that nothing really scared Bodhi, so the fact that he was afraid...

Not a great sign.

I crossed to the side of the bar I hadn’t cleaned yet before responding.

“Fine.”

His relief was so strong the scent of it permeated the air. I couldn’t always scent emotions; they had to be really strong for that. Bodhi was practically bleeding feelings.

Was our boss some kind of a mobster?

“Great.” He tried to maintain his sense of authority, but we both knew who had control of the situation. My beastly side kept me asserting my dominance in all sorts of little ways, and Bodhi noticed.

I finished cleaning the bar before striding through the doors that led into the kitchen. Tossing my rag into the sink, I headed for the break room and opened my locker. The day before, I’d finally taped a photo of me and my mom to the inside of the metal box, marking it mine after six months.

My fingertips brushed over the face of the woman in the picture I’d laminated years ago. Cinnamon hair framed pale white skin and hazel eyes that looked more green than brown. She was beautiful, but it was her contagious smile that touched my memories. My throat swelled, and I pulled my gaze from the photo. Scooping up the sleek black tank top that had sat on the floor of the locker since I’d dropped it there on my first day of work, I headed for the bathroom.

I locked the door behind me and then pulled on it to make sure it was truly locked. Like Bodhi, there wasn’t much I was afraid of. Being cornered while changing didn’t make that list. But if I was cornered, there would be no controlling my reaction. Transforming from human to massive wolf just to tear someone’s head off for surprising me in the bathroom wasn’t exactly on my to-do list, so it was best to make sure that door was good and locked.

My eyes swept over my appearance in the mirror. So much of me matched my mother. I had her hazel eyes, though mine never looked very green, and her face and body shape. As far as smiles went, I wasn’t sure how much mine resembled hers. It had been a long time since I smiled.

The only real difference between our appearances was my hair. A jewel-toned reddish color that I refused to admit bordered on pink, it must’ve come from my father.

Whoever and wherever he was.

The back of my thin, long-sleeved black top fell in a large V with a single thin strap holding it together at the shoulder blades, exposing most of my back. My shirt’s front rested at

the base of my neck, covering my chest but more importantly, my collarbone.

With a sigh, I tugged the top over my head and tossed it to the counter beside the sink. The black glitter in the stone matched that of the bartop, contrasting my shirt's faded black fabric. Cream-colored walls made the bathroom feel bigger and more sanitary than the dark interior of the nightclub.

My gaze fell to the marking on my collarbone that I'd spent the past thirteen years trying to ignore. It was always there, a brand that called me out and marked me as different. A three-inch, faded, and stretched black ink tattoo of one word:

WOLFSBANE.

The title I'd been given at eight years old by the dozens of werewolf Alphas who fought over me, passing me back and forth between packs while they tore each other apart. They'd marked me with the word so that no matter where I ran, any other wolf who saw me would know exactly who and what I was.

I'd been terrified of them at the time, and that fear had faded into a fierce hatred.

The air was heavy in my lungs as I tugged on the skin-tight tank. Though it modestly covered my average-sized chest, my tattoo was entirely on display. My chance of running into another werewolf in a nightclub in the middle of New York City was incredibly slim, but there was still a chance.

Shouldn't have given in to Bodhi.

I tugged my hair out of its high ponytail, shaking it out. The strands fell nearly to my ass and luckily hadn't been up long enough to develop that weird indentation a hair tie sometimes left. After arranging the hair to cover my tattoo as well as possible, I left my own top in my locker and went back to the bar.

Bodhi whistled when he saw me.

"I see why you don't like the uniform. You'll get hit on by every straight man comes in."

I rolled my eyes and turned to a set of customers; two men. They looked high-class, like pretty much everyone willing to pay our Manhattan club's outrageous prices.

"Hello, beautiful. I haven't seen you here before." The first man's eyes landed on my hair and then moved to my chest and didn't budge. "Why wolfsbane?"

Yep. It went exactly how I expected it would.

The hair drew their eyes in, the tattoo held their attention, and then the boobs took over.

"I usually work nights, and that's personal. What can I get you?"

I took their orders and then left to get their drinks before they could ask more questions.

"Told you." Bodhi grinned, making one of the drinks while I made the other. He handed it to me, and I brought them back to the men.

The one who hadn't flirted thanked me and went to grab a seat in one of our booths, but the flirty douche canoe wasn't getting the message. He slid me a folded \$100 bill across the bar and the corner of his lips lifted in that practiced smile all conmen have mastered.

Little did he know he wasn't the only one skilled at playing people.

"Tell me the story behind the tattoo?"

I picked up the cash and glanced at it, feigning carelessness, before glancing back to the guy. He was looking at my boobs again. That was annoying. Like most other members of the female gender, I'd much rather be looked in the eyes than the nipples.

"My personal life is worth more than a hundred bucks."

The rich guy took it exactly the way I expected he would: as a challenge.

He slid me another hundred bucks.

I picked it up and tucked both bills into my bra, and then I turned and began walking away.

“You owe me a story, brown-eyes.” The man called out.

“Don’t remember promising one.”

The man paused, and I knew I had him. Walking back to where he sat, I put a little extra swing in my step. Might as well take as much money from this guy as I could.

He took a slow drink of his old-fashioned, then slid two more bills across the counter. I waited for him to lift his fingers from the money, but they didn’t move. This time, he was the one challenging me.

I’d never back down from a challenge.

Well, unless it was to run for my life.

“My mom was murdered a couple months ago. The tattoo reminds me to fight against the big, bad wolves willing to do shit like that.” I lied.

The man’s eyebrows raised as he lifted his fingers from the money. I picked it up and slipped it into my bra with the rest of my tip. I’d pull the bar’s cut out at the end of the day.

“I’m so sorry.”

Bonus: my lie killed his flirty mood.

“Enjoy your drink.” I walked away again, and this time he let me go.

I walked back to Bohdi to help him make drinks for his customers. He stuck his hand out below the bar, where no one would see, and I high-fived him. “This is why you’re my favorite bartender; you’re good at playing rich guys.”

“I have a lot of experience with men who think the world revolves around them.”

“Clearly.”

I served a few more customers, settling into my routine. Every time someone asked about my tattoo, my story changed a little. No one got the truth; it wasn’t theirs to know.

A tall, dark-haired man entered the building early afternoon and caught my attention immediately. His scent filled the air and my mind shifted quickly from human to wolf. I held back a full shift, ready to run out that door like the devil himself was at my heels. Bodhi grabbed my arm before I could escape, and I froze so fur didn't break through my skin at the contact.

I hated being touched.

"I feel sick, I need to go." I tried to gently tug my arm from his grip, but that sucker was stronger than he looked.

The other werewolf approached, and every bit of my willpower went into preventing myself from shifting forms. Escaping was a lost cause. Staying human felt similarly impossible.

"Mr. Martin." Bodhi greeted the werewolf as he slid onto the stool in front of us.

Shit, he was the owner of the nightclub.

Between his 6'3" stature, blue designer suit, and artfully-gelled hair, the man reeked of money and confidence. Bodhi, on the other hand, reeked of fear. I didn't judge him for it. My own experiences with dominant men had me wanting to run for the hills just as badly as he did. Maybe more.

"Bodhi." Mr. Martin didn't nod or smile. His eyes were locked on me. "And who are you?"

I could tell I'd just passed Bodhi on Mr. Martin's scale of who he judged to be important. My scent alone probably did that for me. Folding my arms, my eyes narrowed at the werewolf in front of me. While I couldn't sense if he was an Alpha or not, I could tell he was strong. Stronger than me, at least. Male werewolves had different strengths than females, and if this guy chased me, he would catch me.

But it didn't hurt to *try* to look intimidating.

"This is Henley Clark, our star bartender. I told you about her over the phone." Bodhi seemed uncertain of what he was saying, probably because Mr. Martin had hardly acknowledged him.

“Henley Clark.” Mr. Martin said my name, looking me up and down. My hair only covered the “NE” of my “wolfsbane” tattoo, and of course his eyes caught on that immediately.

“And you are?” I didn’t bother playing nice. I was getting out of New York the second this guy left, so he wouldn’t be my boss much longer.

“Kyler Martin. Bodhi, can I have a minute with our star bartender?” Kyler still didn’t look at Bodhi. It was probably safer for Bodhi not to have the wolf’s attention anyway.

“Sure. I mean, if it’s okay with Henley...” My blue-haired friend trailed off, looking to me.

He was my new favorite person. It had been years since anyone asked if something was okay with me. The fact that Bodhi cared even while terrified of the werewolf in front of us made me feel like the four hundred bucks tucked inside my bra.

“Sure. Can you take care of them for me?” I tilted my head toward the couple waiting on the other end of the bar. Bodhi left me with Kyler.

As the owner, the werewolf obviously knew I’d been working for him for six months. There was no use in saying I was just visiting New York or some other shit like that. I’d need a damn good lie to pull this one off.

“You’ve been intruding on my territory for half of a year. What pack are you from? Wolves are supposed to register with the Alpha as soon as they move to a new area.” Kyler spoke rapidly, too quiet for anyone else to hear.

“My pack is out in Washington. My Alpha said he was going to call you for me.” I lied. Not well enough.

“If he had, you wouldn’t be out here unprotected. This city isn’t a safe place for a woman to walk around alone.” Kyler looked to his left and right. He’d mastered the rich boy façade, looking bored as he assessed the people in the building with us.

Was it his real personality or just a front?

“I’ll register with your pack as soon as I get off work. Where can I find them?”

I’d get as far from their location as possible.

“Close by. I’ll take you to meet the Alpha when I’m done with the manager.” He stepped away from the bar, pulling his phone out of his pocket. His fingers flew across the screen, and I wondered if he was texting his Alpha.

I glanced at the door to the kitchen. My escape route. The hairs on my neck prickled, and I didn’t have to look to know that Kyler was watching me. Running away while he was paying attention wouldn’t be smart. Or even possible. The guy was a wolf, so if I ran he would chase me and have the time of his life doing it.

The feeling of his eyes on me went away as he walked over to Bodhi, but returned a moment later. It seemed like this guy wasn’t going to look away from me for long.

It was time to act normal. I served some more people—played another rich guy to get a fat tip, though this one was only \$150—and heard all about some new boutique that I knew wouldn’t have anything that costed less than the total sum of the money in my bra. Bodhi showed Kyler around the building as they met, but the werewolf never took his attention off me for more than thirty seconds.

Going to Kyler’s pack wasn’t an option. He didn’t seem to know what my tattoo meant, but there was a good chance that someone in his pack would. And that was a risk I couldn’t take.

When Bodhi and Kyler came within earshot, I waved them over.

“I need a quick bathroom break.” I told my manager. Bodhi made his way behind the bar, and I met Kyler’s gaze confidently. If he had any reason to doubt me, he’d follow me to the bathroom. Male wolves were relentless, and when they had their eye on something or someone...

In my experience, they got it.

Kyler nodded and I held back an eye roll.

Like I needed permission to go to the bathroom.

Strolling into the back room, I tried to look confident. I nodded at the bartender who would be taking Bodhi's place when his meeting ended and went straight for my locker, panic finally seeping in. I grabbed my shirt off the bottom, yanked my photo off the inside of the locker door, and tossed my purse over my shoulder.

Then I ran.

Slipping out the back door was easy, but I didn't have a car or anything to cover my scent as I escaped. It was New York, after all. If I could make it to the subway, I'd survive this encounter with my freedom intact. It was only a few blocks away.

I regretted not changing immediately after stepping out. Even though the sun was still high in the sky and there were crowds of people everywhere, it was freezing cold. October weather in New York City wasn't as bad as some other places I'd been, but it was too cold for my tank top and jeans.

I made it the first block without a sign of trouble and found myself relaxing just a tiny bit. Although the humans around me would've hidden Kyler's scent if he was following me, I was certain he would've caught me by now if he knew who I was and where I was going.

The second block passed by, and I was almost giddy.

One more block and I'd be home-free.

After the third block, I let out a pent-up breath of air and almost smiled. Almost.

My foot was dropping toward the first step down toward the trains when a large hand wrapped around my wrist and tugged. I spun backward, my chest slamming into the front of the man who'd grabbed me.

My chin tilted upward to meet a pair of dark blue eyes on a guy with more muscles than anyone I'd ever seen. The feel of his hard chest pressed to my soft curves made the animal in me want to purr like a freaking cat.

What the hell was wrong with me?

“Henley Clark.” His voice was a low, sexy growl. He was young, probably only twenty-three or twenty-four. Being twenty-one myself, that was the perfect age for what had to be the sexiest man I’d ever seen.

Except every fiber of my being told me he was the one in charge of the New York Pack.

And Alphas were assholes. Every single one of them.

I shook myself mentally. Regardless of this dude’s looks or my attraction to him, I needed to get away before he realized what I was and tried to take advantage of me for it.

“Let go of me.” I tried to sound threatening. Next to the Alpha and his six and a half feet of muscle, my skinny 5’8” probably looked about as tough as a pencil. I rated my odds of being let go about -10 to 1.

Surprisingly enough, he released me and stepped back.

“My name is Roman Ellis. I’m the Alpha here.”

Well thanks for stating the obvious, Roman.

“Great. I’m just going to head back to my pack in Washington now, if you don’t mind.” I pointed over my shoulder with my thumb and took a step backward. Somehow, I forgot that stairs were leading down behind me. My ankle twisted as my foot hit the top step, and I fell backward.

Roman caught me around the waist, the muscles on his arm tight against the small of my back. I wouldn’t have believed an arm could be a turn-on up until that moment, but damn.

“I can’t let you leave.” He didn’t sound sorry about it, his eyes falling to the tattoo on my collarbone. Mine narrowed at the gigantic Alpha.

“I don’t remember giving you permission to make decisions for me, *Alpha*.” I stepped away from his grip without thanking him for saving me from a broken ankle.

“Come to my pack’s headquarters. We’ll reach an agreement that works for both of us, *Wolfsbane*.”

He had no problem standing up to me.

Pencil, meet boulder.

I wished I was the boulder.

“Can I get a please, at least?”

The Alpha rolled his eyes and captured my wrist in his hand, pulling me in the direction I’d just come from. His eyes darkened as they fell on the wonky ring and pinky knuckles on my right hand. Like my scars, they were a trophy from surviving hell.

“Please.”

We were already walking when he said it, but for some reason it still satisfied me.

TWO

I'd never heard of a pack having a "headquarters" before, and I'd seen more than my fair share of packs. Sure, most packs had a pack mansion or at least an Alpha House, but a headquarters?

When I saw the place, I knew why they didn't call it their pack mansion. It was a freaking *skyscraper*.

"You own this place?" I looked at the monstrous Alpha with a whole new perspective. He wore a gray hoodie with black joggers and a baseball cap, for crying out loud. No way was he the kind of guy who could own a skyscraper.

"Yup."

Roman nodded at the receptionist on the bottom floor. I followed him past the first elevator, further into the building. When we reached a second elevator, he pressed a button and we waited for it together. The silence wasn't exactly awkward, but it wasn't exactly comfortable either.

And I was still having a really hard time connecting this giant in a hoodie to the kind of rich guys willing to tip me four hundred dollars to hear the story behind my tattoo. Particularly because Roman let go of me when I asked him to earlier.

I'd met more than enough Alphas to know that wasn't something a powerful man would do. He must've been playing me.

The elevator dinged, and we both stepped inside. When I saw that the buttons went all the way to forty-five, my eyebrows shot into my forehead.

Forty...freaking...five...floors.

What could one pack possibly need forty-five floors for? I'd never seen a pack with more than two hundred people. That was only four people per floor, and a floor was what, 10,000 square feet? 20,000? Seemed a bit ridiculous to me, considering I lived in a studio apartment with a grand total of three hundred.

“How many people are in your pack?” I asked. It was better to know than wonder, particularly if I needed to make a run for it.

“Twelve-hundred.” I felt his eyes on me as he said it. Hiding my shock was challenging, but I kept my expression neutral. Escaping twelve-hundred werewolves would be a challenge, to say the least.

We moved slowly from the bottom floor to the very top. People came in and out of the elevator as it rose and stopped and rose some more, shooting me and Roman strange looks. We both ignored them.

When the elevator finally dinged again, I was feeling a little nauseous. A pack with this many people and this much money would be willing to do absolutely anything to force me to join them. I’d finally gotten my freedom, and one single work meeting—one single day shift—was going to cost me everything.

It was just my luck to get a job working for a mother-freaking werewolf.

I followed Roman to a room just outside the elevator. It was a fairly big office, and the fact that it was on the top of the skyscraper told me it belonged to him. No Alpha would have an office below someone else’s.

Two of the walls were made entirely of windows, and the other two were painted a nice neutral gray

Dropping into the sleek black loveseat against the wall, I folded my arms over my chest. The only other furniture in the room was a monster-sized desk and chair that must’ve been custom-made to fit the ginormous Alpha. Werewolves could grow a bit bigger than humans with Alpha power pumping through them like steroids, but he could legitimately pass as a giant.

“What do you want from me?”

Roman’s gaze did things to me that I refused to acknowledge. My attraction to him didn’t matter; he was an Alpha.

“What do you think I want?”

“I think I’ve been controlled by enough men to know when someone is trying to get information from me. Tell me what you want or let me go. Either way, let’s not bother with the bullshit.”

Beating around the bush was a pointless pastime. Swearing at the Alpha, pissing him off, that was what would get me somewhere.

Roman stayed on his feet, leaning up against the wall. He didn’t need to sit down behind that gigantic desk to look like he was in charge; the guy radiated strength and authority. Not Alpha power though, which was actually a bit impressive.

Most Alphas had a hard time keeping the power they used to control their wolves from spilling out constantly. If Roman Ellis was really the Alpha over twelve-hundred wolves and he was staying in control of his power, he had some serious willpower.

“People call you ‘Wolfsbane’.” I managed not to flinch at the title.

That name was the excuse people had used to abuse and mistreat me for years, and I still wasn’t used to hearing it. I doubted I’d ever be used to it.

“They say that whichever pack you belong to is immune to the nightly pull of their wolves.”

Werewolf legend had some things right, but humans were missing a huge chunk of being one of us. Some called it the curse of our kind, others just thought of it as the shit that came with being a werewolf.

Every evening around ten or eleven, werewolves lost control of their ability to choose their form. They shifted into a wolf and stayed that way until sometime early in the morning. That loss of control happened to every werewolf.

Except me. And whatever pack I was a part of.

“So?”

I neither confirmed nor denied his statement. I was a pretty good liar, but the word had been tattooed across my collarbone for a reason. Lying seemed like a waste of effort at that point.

“Is it true?”

“What does it matter? You’re going to force me to join you regardless.”

Following my lead, Roman also didn’t confirm or deny the statement. Any sane Alpha would want my gift for his pack, and I understood that. I just wasn’t willing to trade my freedom and happiness for them to have it.

“Why did you get the word tattooed on your skin if you don’t like it?” He asked, instead. My eyebrows lifted.

“You think I tattooed this on myself?” I gestured to my collarbone.

I could usually keep my emotions somewhat neutral, but I got really heated when it came to my past.

“I was eight years old when an Alpha murdered my mother and pack right in front of me and then pinned me down while some lady tattooed me. I’d never write this on my body.”

He went eerily still for a moment. I got the sense he was warring with his beastly side, though I didn’t know why. When he finally relaxed just a bit, it was to leave the room. The door slammed so hard it shook the frame.

“Now you’ve done it.” I muttered to myself, leaning back into the leathery couch cushions and closing my eyes. The furniture was softer than it looked.

I would’ve tried to escape if it was possible, but I had enough of a brain to know I’d never escape forty-five floors of shifters to do it. The human self-defense classes and YouTube videos I’d watched hadn’t taught me how to disable twelve-hundred of anything.

Pulling out my phone, I scrolled through Pinterest for a few minutes and then was overtaken by a yawn that stretched my whole face. It had been an eventful day. A few minutes passed, and then I yawned again.

If I was going to be waiting a while, I might as well get comfortable. The modern couch didn't have any pillows or anything to cuddle up with, but I was a stomach sleeper anyway. I rolled to my belly and propped my shins up against the armrest to fit lengthwise. Lifting my head up on my arm, I scrolled for a few more minutes until my eyelids got too heavy to hold up any longer.

"You have to admit it's impressive that she managed to fall asleep in the Alpha Male's office." An unfamiliar female voice mused.

A male voice rumbled a response that sounded suspiciously like,

"Everything about her is impressive."

But that couldn't have been right, so I forced my eyes open, tilting my head to see who was speaking. Roman stood in front of his desk beside an effortlessly pretty girl with large round glasses and dark hair pulled up in a messy ponytail.

Was that his mate?

Humans could get married on a whim, but when werewolves chose our life-partners, it was permanent.

Part of me hated the idea of the monstrous man being mated to someone who wasn't me, but I smothered that instantly.

Why the hell should I care if he was taken?

"Hi, Henley. I'm Arla, the Alpha Female." She gave a tentative smile.

I didn't return her greeting. I was basically a prisoner, after all, about to be forced to join their pack. Roman probably only brought his mate in to try to soften the blow. It wouldn't work; there were nearly as many cruel women as men. They were just hurtful in different ways.

"Roman told me you've been forced to join other packs so they can use your unique ability." Arla studied me. I ignored her curious gaze.

"Ability? I'd call it a curse." There was no point in denying it anymore. None of us were questioning whether or not I was

who they thought.

“Well, it would be great for our pack.” Arla paused. “We’ll let you walk out of here right now if you want.”

Did she just...

What?

All I could do was blink at her for like a solid thirteen seconds.

“Just like that?”

It was way too good to be true.

“Sure.” Arla shrugged. “You’re a person. We’re people. You haven’t done anything wrong, and you’ve been in our territory for what, six months now?”

I wasn’t going to confirm or deny that either in case it was part of the ‘but’ I knew was coming. There was always a ‘but’.

“I can leave?” I checked again, looking to the male Alpha.

“You can.” He confirmed. “But we’re prepared to offer you a deal that you might want to stay for.”

Were the leaders of this pack actually being nice to me?

What in the actual hell?

“I’m just going to go. Thanks, guys.” I saluted the Alphas, grabbing the doorknob. As I swung the door open, Arla called out,

“Three hundred thousand dollars.”

I paused, door open and face turned to the elevator. My chance at freedom.

“You join our pack for one year and we pay you three hundred thousand dollars. That’s the offer we came up with in twenty minutes. Give us a little more time and I’m sure we’ll be able to shake the pack down for at least twice that much.” She paused. “Plus, you can live for free in our skyscraper, with security better than anything on the market and a thousand werewolves willing to give just about anything to keep you in the pack.”

I stared out into the hallway.

It would be so easy to go. They told me they wouldn't stop me, and didn't seem like they were messing with me.

But no one had ever offered me anything to be a part of their pack. They always forced me, sometimes in cruel and painful ways.

There was no way my old Alpha had given up on looking for me. I knew he'd find me eventually, but if he found me while I was in this pack's headquarters I'd at least have a fighting chance of retaining some semblance of freedom

On top of the safety, I didn't have much as far as savings went. New York was expensive. If I stayed for the year, the pack's money would go a long way toward securing my freedom permanently.

"What's the catch?" I finally turned back to face the Alphas. Roman was stood so stiffly you would've thought the guy was carved from wood. Arla just looked relaxed and confident. She knew she was offering me something I'd have a hard time turning down.

"The people putting the money out want to make sure their investment is safe, so you wouldn't be able to leave the skyscraper without an enforcer."

Enforcers were the Alpha Pair's right-hand men and women, usually trained to fight at least somewhat well.

Well... one guard wasn't so bad. I could always throw him between myself and Ledger when the Colorado Alpha showed his demonic face. Having some buff dude or chick at my back wouldn't kill me.

"Fine. Deal." I paused. "I want the six hundred thousand though."

Arla grinned.

"I knew you weren't an idiot. Take your shirt off and let's add you to the pack."

Most Alphas would induct someone new into their pack with a swipe of their claws across the werewolf's back. Backs

were the easiest because people didn't tend to show them that often, and the scars left by an Alpha mark weren't pretty.

When I'd gotten away from my last Alpha, I'd started wearing tops designed to show off my back as a symbol of my freedom. The scars that crisscrossed over my skin made me feel more beautiful, not less.

An idea occurred to me. It was a little crazy, but there were worse things than crazy.

"I want you to mark me on my arm." I announced.

Both Alphas stared at me like I was insane. They waited for my reasoning, but I wasn't about to bear my soul to these strangers. It'd be better if they believed I didn't have a soul. Maybe that would keep them from trying to take advantage of me.

Wearing this Alpha mark on my arm would be a constant reminder that I was still somewhat free. I was choosing to be a part of their pack. That may have been a minor detail, but it felt like a large step forward for me.

"You do know Alpha markings are permanent, right?" Arla checked.

I rolled my eyes, certain I was better acquainted with that fact than just about anyone else on the entire planet. Most werewolves never switched packs, but if they did, they'd do it once or twice in their lifetime. I'd been in 38 different packs in my twenty-one years of life.

"Yep. Let's get going." I tugged my top over my head, feeling Roman's eyes on me as I did so. I wore a simple but cute black sports bra with thin overlapping straps, but still felt a bit weird standing in front of the couple in my bra and jeans. Particularly because there was money sticking out of my bra like I was a freakin stripper.

For a mated guy, Roman sure stared at me a lot. I hoped he'd stop because I didn't feel like getting in a catfight. Female werewolves were the most possessive beasts in the world.

After male werewolves, that is.

Arla walked around to my back and I pulled my hair up in a quick bun at the nape of my neck with the hair-tie on my wrist.

“Whoa.” She gaped at the skin. My whole back was pretty much one massive scar at that point. 38 Alphas meant 76 markings—77 if you counted the one I’d given myself when I escaped Ledger’s pack. Which I did, because that son of a bitch hurt like hell.

“I’ve been a hot commodity since eight years old. Alphas kill for hot commodities.” I forced my tone to stay flat. I was adept at shoving my emotions away and locking the box up tight instead. A life like mine didn’t have room for feelings.

“Which Alpha should we pay off for taking you?” Roman asked.

“You’re looking at her.”

“Wait, you removed yourself from your pack? Isn’t that supposed to be the most painful thing ever? And can’t it kill you?” Arla shot rapid-fire questions at me.

“Well it wasn’t pleasant, if that’s what you’re asking. Wasn’t as bad as staying in the pack would’ve been.”

I didn’t have to look over my shoulder to sense the silent conversation going on between the two Alphas. Alphas were connected enough to speak into each other’s minds when they wanted to, especially when they were mated.

“Let’s get this over with already.” I broke the tense silence. There was a long pause before Arla sighed heavily.

“Alright.”

The Alpha marking from a werewolf’s current pack had power behind it, so I knew Arla would have no problem finding the scar I’d personally added to the masterpiece of bad memories on my back. It was worse than a lot of the other ones since slicing your own back in a certain position wasn’t easy.

“Are you ready?”

“Go for it.”

I felt the air around me charge with the energy that accompanied a werewolf's shift. It was much less strong than it would've been had Arla shifted her entire body into wolf form, so I knew she'd only shifted her hand. My fists clenched as I waited for the pain, and sure enough, it erupted like fire as her claws met my skin.

Lightning fast, Roman grabbed my uniform tank top off the couch and ripped it in two, tossing the first half to Arla. She pressed it up against the mark, putting pressure on the wound to stop the blood flow. No Alpha had ever cared enough to do that before, but then again, most Alphas didn't have six hundred thousand dollars to bribe me with.

"Roman." She commanded the male Alpha with a single word. I held out my arm, wrist up, and tapped the delicate skin where my hand met my arm.

"I'm not slicing your wrist." He growled in response, his fist clenching around the fabric in his hand. His midnight eyes had darkened to black. I rolled my own hazels and turned my hand, pointing to the top of my wrist. His growl was a bit softer, but he didn't argue with that.

Roman's mark was quicker than Arla's. He didn't warn me or ask for permission, he just went for it. His claws descended from his fingertips and swiped across my wrist. He had the fabric from my ruined uniform pressed tightly to my skin so fast I didn't even see any blood.

"Thanks." I pushed his hand away with my own, holding the fabric down on my burning skin as I pulled the limb to my chest. The action seemed to frustrate him, but I wasn't about to concern myself with an Alpha's feelings. Most didn't have any.

"Alright, we'll have an apartment cleaned and ready for you by this evening. Do you need to go get your things from somewhere?" Arla checked.

"Yeah." I turned to my purse, letting go of the fabric on my wrist for a second to grab my top out of the bag. I'd be fine to take the subway to the Bronx in just a sports bra and jeans, but

it was freaking cold outside. Roman's hand closed around the fabric on my wrist, holding it down tightly. I glared up at him.

"You need to stop the bleeding." He glared back, not releasing me. Tension sprang back up between us, and I fought to stop myself from shifting and making a show of dominance of my own.

I was waiting for the shoe to drop, for Arla to jump into action and tackle me for being the subject of so much of her mate's attention. Instead she said,

"Roman will go with you." And stepped out of the room, leaving me alone with the Alpha Male.

"I've never seen a female so okay with her mate touching another woman, even on the arm like this." I tried to push Roman's hand away again but this time he wouldn't let go.

His lips lifted in a smirk.

"Arla's my twin sister. She couldn't care less what women I touch."

Oh.

"You still need to learn to keep your hands to yourself." I pulled my wrist away from him and he finally let me go. "You can send an enforcer with me. None of the other packs know I'm here, I don't need an Alpha's protection."

"I'm going." Roman didn't seem willing to discuss it.

I let him win this one, since I'd won with the Alpha mark. And, the protection wasn't entirely unwelcome.

"Alright, let's go." I tugged my top over my head and left the room, expecting he would follow me. He did.

THREE

I'd planned on taking the subway to my apartment, but there was a fancy sports car waiting outside the skyscraper when we finally made it to the ground level.

"This is us." Roman gestured to the fancy black truck. I knew next to nothing about trucks or vehicles in general, but even I could tell this was an expensive one. He pulled the passenger door open for me and didn't acknowledge the look I shot his way, which said something along the lines of,

What the hell kind of alien planet is your pack from?

Roman pulled onto the road, handing me his phone so I could program my address into it. When I did it connected to the big screen in the center console with a larger version of the map. Rock music started playing from the stereo, and even I could appreciate the way the bass shook the car.

"So who'd you punch?" he nodded at my wonky fingers. I dropped my hand to the side and looked away.

"A wall."

Lie.

"You don't seem like the type to struggle with anger issues." He said.

"I've got plenty to be angry about."

Truth.

"Like what?"

This guy wasn't giving up. I'd have to give him something to shut him up.

"My life experiences can be described with the phrases 'power-hungry men' and 'asshole Alphas' so like I said, plenty."

I thought that would sway him, but I was wrong.

"So it was an Alpha you punched."

I wanted to strangle him.

“Why didn’t he get you medical attention for your hand?”

Maybe I didn’t have anger issues, but this guy was going to give me them.

If he could assault me with questions that pissed me off, I could sure as hell do the same.

“Why did you feel the need to kill someone else so you could have power over your pack?” I shot back.

“I walked in on him abusing his daughter and it hit home a little too hard.” Roman didn’t take his eyes off the shitty New York City traffic, but his fingers did tighten on the steering wheel. Maybe that would’ve pleased me if I wasn’t too busy reeling at his words. “An Alpha protects his pack. Why didn’t yours protect you?”

I ignored the question, eyes pointed to the world outside the window. I’d taken a lot of abuse from the Alphas in my life, and I’d never had the impression they were made to protect.

Roman waited for my response with more patience than I’d attributed to him.

“I’ve never seen an Alpha protect anything but his mate and his own ass.” It wasn’t an answer to his question, but he’d have to get over that.

“Your ass matters a hell of a lot more to me than mine. So who did you punch and why did you have to do it?”

He was relentless, but not in a bad way. It was almost as attractive a quality as it was infuriating.

“An Alpha told me I would mate with him. When he didn’t take no for an answer, I slugged him in the face. He didn’t think I deserved medical attention so the fingers healed weird. End of the story, don’t ask again.”

It was far from the end of the story, but that was a hell of a lot more information than I’d planned on giving him before we had this conversation.

“Which Alpha?”

He thought I didn't notice his fingers clenching the steering wheel. He was wrong.

"Don't worry about it." I looked out the window. If I didn't change the subject, he'd keep questioning me. "You ever feel weird wearing sweats and a t-shirt in a pack full of rich people?"

"No. They know me well enough to be surprised if I showed up in a suit." Roman apparently didn't have the same hang-ups about answering questions as I did. "Does it make you feel weird?"

He glanced at me in the rearview mirror, and I met his gaze. It may as well have been a challenge for dominance, but rather than pissing him off it made his lips tilt upward.

What the hell kind of Alpha was this guy?

"It makes me feel more comfortable with you than I should." I broke eye contact. He didn't comment on that but said,

"You can trust me, Henley."

I snorted.

"I haven't trusted anyone since I was eight. Not about to start now."

"I'll convince you."

The confidence oozing off of him pissed me off. Partially because it was so attractive, and I refused to be coerced by his sex appeal.

"Good luck with that."

Roman turned up the volume on his music. I'd never been into rock, but it filled the air and managed to relax me a bit.

It was nearly forty minutes to my studio apartment, but the time passed quickly. We got out of the car and started hiking up the three floors of stairs without exchanging words. The place always reeked of weed and stale smoke mixed with the scent of whatever fruity thing my downstairs neighbor was vaping at the time. That day, it was watermelon.

“You lived here?” Roman broke the silence as he eyed a particularly large chunk of missing wall. If you poked a fork into it, you could probably peek into that person’s apartment. They might kill you then, though. The place was full of questionable humans.

“Yep.”

He glanced at the steak knife stuck nearly handle-deep in my neighbor’s door. That had been there since a few days after I moved in six months earlier. I could feel him judging me and got a little defensive. It wasn’t nice, but it was my own place and it meant a lot to me.

“You weren’t scared?”

“I’m scarier than anyone here.” I stuck the key in knob and turned it, considering the statement. “Well, at least ninety percent of them.”

“You’re tiny.” Roman scoffed.

I flipped him off and swept my hair to the side to show him the scars covering my skin. Arla was the only one who’d seen them earlier, and I wanted him to realize the shit I’d survived. He swore when he saw the skin, his fists clenching and arms growing hairy. I ignored the loss of control, mostly because I wasn’t sure what to say about it. Instead, I said,

“Most people won’t mess with a girl who wears this many scars with pride, regardless of her size.”

“Those are all Alpha marks.” His voice went growly. I cursed myself for liking it.

“Yup.”

I headed over to the metal clothing rack on wheels I’d purchased when I realized my studio didn’t have a closet. Grabbing the duffel bag beneath it, I started tossing clothes in the bag.

“What can I do?” Roman shut the door behind us. Whatever his judgment of the place, luckily for him he didn’t mention it. The studio was the first place that had ever really been mine, and I loved it.

“If you’re not afraid of a few tampons, you can grab the stuff from my bathroom.”

He went. Without comment, too. It was a bit of a test, to be honest. Most women of our kind only had periods during werewolf mating season, which went the end of December to the end of March. Male werewolves extra hormonal and possessive during that time so they were weird about tampons and pads when it wasn’t the season. My period was irregular but I had one at least every other month.

For unknown reasons, my body didn’t believe in mating season.

Roman came back with a grocery bag full of toiletries and tucked it in the side of the duffel bag. I was always careful to keep my number of possessions small enough to fit in one bag so I could be ready to leave at any moment. Losing all my shit had happened more than I cared to remember as I’d been passed from pack to pack, and it sucked.

“Will the apartment have furniture in it?” I glanced around my tiny studio. A mattress and the metal clothing rack made up the entirety of my furniture collection. I might need an advance on a little of that bribe money if apartments in the ‘scrapper weren’t furnished.

“Yeah.” Roman didn’t hesitate. He glanced over at my pitifully small kitchen. Cooking on a hot plate was almost as much of a joke as my mini-fridge and the single cabinet that functioned as my pantry. “Dishes too.”

Phew.

He whipped his phone out of his pocket and his fingers flew across the keyboard. “What else do we need to grab?” he’d put his phone away as quickly as he pulled it out.

“That’s it.” I zipped the duffel bag and threw the strap over my shoulder. Roman crossed the room in a grand total of two large strides. He grabbed the duffel bag strap and lifted it over my head in one smooth motion, pulling it over his own shoulder.

“I can carry my bag.” I protested.

“So can I.” He shot me a grin. “Let’s go grab some food.”

My stomach growled at the mention of food. Had I eaten that day? It growled again, louder, and I suddenly felt like my body was consuming itself.

Nope, hadn’t eaten.

“If it’s pizza, I’m in.”

We trucked down the million stairs, and Roman somehow managed to fit my duffel bag in the tiny trunk of his fancy car. After a heated discussion about which pizza place was the best and whether or not pineapple belonged on pizza, we made it to the food.

We’d only just stepped inside the restaurant when Roman’s phone rang. I glanced at the screen and saw that it was Arla calling, then decided not to comment.

Cream and red contrasted each other on the place’s walls and tables, creating an antique-feeling restaurant. It was one I’d eaten at a dozen times because I swore their crusts were concocted entirely of magic and unicorns.

“Order whatever you want.” Roman handed me a black credit card and stepped outside to take a call. I already knew he wanted an abomination with pineapple, a shitload of meat, and a wheat crust, so I got in line. It felt weird to order for Roman and weirder to pay with a card that had his name on it.

What kind of Alpha handed his credit card to some chick who’d just joined the pack?

Not the kind I’d ever met.

Pride had me wanting to whip out the money in my bra to pay for myself, but Roman could clearly afford it easier than I could, and I needed to save up for the inevitable moment another pack caught up to me so I could run.

He came back in as I sat down to wait for the pizzas. The place wasn’t busy seeing as it was the middle of the afternoon, and the music playing from the speakers gave it a chill vibe I liked.

“Everything okay?” I asked Roman.

Why did I care?

“Yeah. Just pack drama.” He sprawled out in the chair, looking like he owned the place.

“So you’re not mated?”

Why the hell had that just come out of my mouth?

“No. Is that an offer?”

I rolled my eyes and his lips twitched.

“Yeah, right. What about Arla?”

“Not mated either. She’s too busy with school to pay attention to men.”

“Really? What’s she studying?”

College had never been an option for me, but even if it had been, I wouldn’t have had a clue what I wanted to get my degree in.

“Physics.”

“Oh, geez. She’s smart, then.” I grabbed a napkin and wiped my hands, just the tiniest bit self-conscious. There I was, a bartender who didn’t even have a high school diploma thanks to asshole Alphas dragging me from state to state without a shred of care for my future. I was lucky one of the douchebags had even thought to grab me a photo of my own mother before burning my childhood home to the ground.

“Smarter than me.” Roman’s shoulders lifted in a shrug.

We finished eating and headed out. The drive back was even more laid back than the drive there. I’d half-convinced myself I was in some kind of a dream, because I hadn’t imagined I’d ever feel even somewhat comfortable with an Alpha, let alone sort of like one.

“Your apartment is 4406.” Roman said as the elevator went up.

“Thanks. I’ll find it myself.” I held my hand out for the duffel bag. I could see his reluctance, but he handed it over.

The doors opened on the 44th floor, and I exited the elevator. Roman's gaze lingered on me until it closed and began moving again. I didn't let myself wonder why or feel the interest growing within me.

My eyes scanned the numbers on the doors. Odds were on the right, evens on the left, so I started down the hall with my focus on the left.

4402...

4404...

4406. Third door on the left, fire extinguisher beside it.

The door was unlocked, so I went right in. I'd expected something decent considering the size of the building, but not what I found.

Coffee-colored wood met floor-to-ceiling windows in place of the wall that spanned the length of the living room, giving me a beautiful view of the sun that was currently setting over the city. The other walls were painted a pretty dove gray color. Elegant white cabinets lined the large kitchen to my right, and black, veined countertops rested on top of them.

I slipped my shoes off beside the door, walking into the space reverently. I'd never lived anywhere nice, spending most of my life as a glorified—or unglorified—prisoner. My feet carried me into the living room that spanned out to the left of the kitchen, sinking into the dark blue rug over the floor. I trailed my hand over the back of a smooth white sectional occupied by a horde of pillows ranging from light to dark blue in a variety of patterns.

The whole place smelled weirdly pleasant. Not like cleaning supplies or air freshener, but like... something else? Common sense told me that it had to be the smell of fresh paint or new furniture, something I'd never smelled before.

My body seemed to grow lighter as I walked through the rest of the apartment. Three large bedrooms occupied the space though one was clear of furniture, a blank canvas. The biggest bedroom was connected to a huge bathroom with a walk-in shower that had three huge showerheads. The bed was

a monstrosity too, covered in a white duvet and pillows that matched those decorating the couch.

I touched everything. It was all soft and clean, smelling fresh and new. A lump built up in my throat, and I headed back into the kitchen. Sitting down in one of the fancy kitchen chairs, I pulled my knees up to my chest and leaned my head down on them.

My heart pounded quickly in my chest as panic began to set in.

How was I supposed to live in this apartment? To survive among the rich and elite?

I'd walked through more hellish situations than most people could imagine, but this was something else entirely. The world of money and power and skyscrapers full of werewolves...

I had no idea how to deal with that.

I wouldn't cry. I'd learned not to do that a long time ago. But I wasn't sure I'd be okay, either.

Two knocks sounded on the front door, and then it opened.

I definitely should've locked it behind me. What the hell was this place doing to me?

"Henley?" A male rumble gave away the culprit.

That damn Alpha.

I swiped my fingers under my eyes to make sure there was nothing there and then stood quickly. He stood in the doorway, looking a bit uncertain about entering my apartment without permission.

Why did I find his hesitation so damn sexy?

I opened my mouth to lay into him when I noticed the device in his hand, a phone the same model as the one he'd had earlier but with a hot pink case. Much fancier than the crappy phone I'd bought to maintain contact with Bodhi and rarely took out of my apartment. Had I even remembered to bring it?

Shit. No. It was still plugged in on the side of my mattress.

“I noticed you didn’t have a phone. Thought it might come in handy.” Roman held it out.

“Thanks.” I nodded but made no move to go grab it. Roman leaned up against the doorway, his uncertainty seemingly gone now that I’d thanked him for the phone.

“What do you think of the apartment?” He nodded toward the couch.

“It’s beautiful.”

He waited for me to say more, but I didn’t open my mouth.

“But…” He trailed off, prompting me to keep talking. I knew I should keep my trap shut and tell him to go home, but I wanted to talk to him. It had been a long time since I actually *wanted* to talk to someone. So I talked.

“It’s too perfect. I’ll ruin it.”

“Ah.” Roman took a step in and paused like he was waiting for me to kick him out. I wouldn’t do that, though. Not when I still wanted to talk to him. He took another few steps in and shut the door behind him. “Change bothers most people.”

“I should be used to it by now.” I’d definitely been through enough of it.

“You can’t get used to things changing. Everyone wants stability, at least to an extent.” Roman countered.

“Even if that’s true, it’s useless.” I leaned against the table and folded my arms.

“Not useless. Accepting that change is going to suck allows you to prevent it from screwing with you.”

“Then what does a big, bad Alpha like yourself do to deal with change?” I challenged. Roman’s eyes glinted and he moved further into the apartment, covering some of the distance between us.

“I’ll do something unexpected. Like tonight, I’m thinking I’ll spend the whole evening naked just to take the focus off the fact I won’t be shifting for the first time in my life.”

I bit back a grin. The corners of his lips tilted upward like he'd noticed the expression I held back. Which was impossible, because I was a master at concealing my emotions.

Roman looked around the room. "If everything seems too perfect, why don't we just screw it up?" He grabbed a pillow and tossed it across the room. My eyes followed it across the floor, stopping when it hit the window-wall.

When I didn't respond, he grabbed another pillow and threw it at me. I caught it instinctively and then threw it right back. He dodged. Rapid-fire, he shot three more pillows my way. I spun behind the countertop and the pillows thudded into the cabinets behind my head.

"Come on Henley, it's just a house full of stuff. Stuff is meant to be used." Roman tossed another pillow just as I stepped out of the kitchen. It hit me square in the face.

"This is war." I grabbed the pillow off the floor and threw it back, aiming for his face. He ducked and launched another pillow my way.

I grabbed another one from the ground and used it as a shield, blocking the one flying at me. Another pair of pillows sailed my direction, and I shielded against them too.

"Surrender or die." Roman's rumble made me laugh. The sound surprised me. It had been ages since I laughed.

"Hell no," I yelled back

The pillows collided with my shield rapidly, harder and faster than before. I stumbled backward with a shout after a particularly powerful hit and barely managed to catch myself. When I righted, I found Roman stalking toward me. He'd run out of pillows.

If I was going to win, it was time for action.

I charged toward him, throwing all my weight behind my shoulder and ramming him hard. Because I caught him off guard, he lost his balance and fell backward. Roman grabbed my hip and ass and held my body against his, Roman crashing into the floor while I crashed into him.

“You’re heavier than you look.” He grunted.

I held the pillow to his throat and said, “I win.”

His eyes gleamed, and he had me on my back in an instant, pinning me to the floor with his body. Every part of me flushed.

“Now I win.”

“It ended when I won.” I countered. “You already lost.”

“I never lose.”

“You do now.”

Our faces were inches apart, bodies tight against each other. I’d never felt so *alive*.

“If this is what losing to you feels like, next time I’ll surrender.” His low growl practically caught me on fire.

“Who says there’ll be a next time?” My voice was breathier than intended. Shit.

Instead of answering, Roman caught a strand of my hair and lifted it to his nose, maintaining eye contact as he inhaled deeply. His eyes shifted, fangs elongating as he took in the scent of me. “Mine.” The low growl gave me goosebumps all over, but the possessiveness was a red flag I sure as hell wasn’t ready to deal with.

“Get off.” I pushed at his arm and he lifted his weight from me instantly.

Why did that turn me on so much?

“It’s getting late. You should go.” I stood abruptly. Roman looked like he was going to argue. “Now.” The word came out sharper than intended.

He nodded once and left the apartment, shutting the door tightly behind himself. The apartment suddenly felt far too big and far too empty.

FOUR

I was up late messing up my apartment after calling in sick to work. While I wasn't physically ill, my interaction with my new Alpha had me feeling all out of whack.

By the time I was done my sheets and blankets were wrinkled, pillows strewn everywhere like they'd been caught up in Hurricane Henley. Throw blankets were spread at random, kitchen chairs deposited without pattern. Clean dishes sat in the sink and on the counters, and bathroom towels in the shower and on the floor.

I knew it was silly, but Roman was right. Messing up the perfection made me feel better. I'd clean it up in a few days when I didn't feel so out of place.

Sleep didn't come to me easily that night. I dreamt of being chained and trapped and entirely helpless. It was the one feeling I hadn't managed to get past; the feeling of being completely and utterly out of control.

By the time I finally pulled my exhausted ass out of bed, it was 3 PM and I was somehow even more tired than I'd been when I fell asleep. After showering in that fancy, glorious shower, I called Bodhi at the nightclub to let him know I was feeling better and would be at my shift that evening. Kyler had already told him I might be in and out for a few weeks, so that was sort of cool.

Also sort of weird.

But what wasn't weird about my life at the moment?

My shift started at five, so I texted Arla the time I was leaving so an enforcer would be ready and then got dressed.

Two girls and a guy waited for me outside my apartment. One was a petite brunette with olive skin who looked so perfect she resembled a marble statue, the other a tall blonde with giant blue eyes. The girls chatted while the guy—tall with light hair, like the girl—was on his phone. A quick sniff of the

air told me the statue and the guy were mated; they smelled the same.

“I’m Lilac. Ready?” the blonde girl chirped.

“I thought I only had to take one person with me.” I told the three of them. Three people wasn’t anywhere near one; it was like having a set of bodyguards with me instead of an unwanted friend.

“The Alphas disagreed about how to keep you safe. This is their compromise.” The statue explained. “I’m Jamie.” She held out her hand. I shook it awkwardly. “My mate’s name is Oliver.” She gestured to the guy on his phone. He hadn’t looked up when I came out of my room. Most mated couples would touch as they met new people, marking one another as their territory. Jamie and Oliver didn’t touch.

Odd.

Not odd enough to distract me from the obvious contradiction to the deal I’d made with the Alphas.

We headed to the elevator together.

“It was amazing not having to shift last night, Henley. Thank you.” Jamie gave me a small but genuine smile, and I nodded. What was I supposed to say to that?

We stepped inside when it arrived and I hit the button for the forty-fifth floor.

“What are you doing?” The blonde chick asked.

Lilac. Her name was Lilac.

“Having a word with the male Alpha.”

The elevator rose a bit and opened up to the hallway. I strode right into the Alpha’s office with hell on my heels. He was in the middle of a meeting with a couple other guys, and they all paused to look at me when I threw the door open and stalked inside.

“Who do you think you are?” I crossed the room to slam my hands down on his desk. He didn’t flinch, meeting my eyes head-on. “I gave you an out. I told you I expected you to force

me to join your pack and treat me the same way all the other Alphas did. Instead of taking me up on it, you lied to me. You told me I'd still be free, you offered me money, you conned me into feeling just the tiniest bit of hope. You're not the same as the other Alphas; you're worse."

With that, I spun around and blazed out of the room. The enforcers stood just outside the elevator, eyes big and round.

"We're not done." Roman stepped between me and the enforcers, his gigantic frame blocking me from their view. His eyes were dark and angry, fists clenched at his sides.

"Yeah, we are." I tried to step around him and he blocked me again.

"Give me one minute." He stared me down, daring me to disagree. For that reason alone, I nearly did.

"One." I snapped.

He strode into his office, growling for everyone to get out. I followed him in, glowering at him as he slammed the door behind the guys.

"I got a call from the Alpha of Colorado. Ledger King."

My body went rigid.

"That name means something to you."

I swallowed hard but said nothing. Whatever anger I'd been feeling? Gone. Long gone. Replaced solely with fear.

"According to Ledger, the two of you were moments away from mating when another Alpha stole you away six months ago."

I folded my arms over my chest. It could've been an attempt to make myself look bigger and tougher, but I folded inward and it made me feel smaller and weaker.

"He lied."

"What did he do to you?" Roman's gaze was gentle. Too gentle. It made me want to spill the truth, which was dangerous.

“Nothing.” *Lie.* “You should’ve told me the second he called.”

“I handled it.”

“What if you hadn’t? Don’t you think I deserve to know when I’m in danger?”

“I think you deserve to feel safe.”

“I feel safe when I know what’s going on.” I shot back.

“What did Ledger do to you?” Roman brought us back to that topic.

“If it were your business, you’d already know.”

He grabbed my wrist as I went to leave again. The gesture could’ve been threatening, but his fingers were gentle on my skin. Turning me around, he lifted my hand between us and gestured to my ugly knuckles.

“Is he the one you punched?”

I pulled myself from his grip and stepped back, away from the Alpha and his barrage of questions I wasn’t ready or willing to answer.

“Why does he think you’re his?” Roman prodded. I wanted to punch *him* in the face at that point.

“The question you should be asking yourself is why you think I’m yours.”

“He’s the one you came here hiding from.” Roman gave up on the questions. “He hurt you.”

“Drop it.” My voice was sharp. Roman ran a hand over his head. He was hatless now, so I could see he wore his dark hair buzzed close to his scalp. Not a look many men could pull off, but he wore it well. “The enforcers can come with me, but you call me if you even *think* he’s considering coming to New York.”

I walked out of the door, heart thumping wildly in my chest.

“Why?” Roman’s breath tickled my neck. I hadn’t heard him following me, but he was a predator.

So I can run again.

“None of your damn business, Alpha.”

That tag on the end was to remind me exactly who he was.

An Alpha. Someone I couldn't trust.

The trip down the elevator and walk to the nightclub was a bit awkward, but it could've been worse. When we made it there, the bouncer let us in ahead of the waiting crowds. My babysitters split up, Jamie (the statue) taking the only open seat at the bar while Oliver, her mate, found a spot leaning against the wall. Lilac, the tall blonde, hit the dance floor.

It was a weekend and the place was packed. It was always packed, but weekends were the worst.

I mixed and served drinks, ignoring the strobe lights flashing over the dance floor to my right and only making conversation when it was required. Last call wouldn't be until 4, but typically the crowd thinned significantly between 2 and 3.

The guy sitting next to Jamie left his seat, and Lilac hurried to claim it after hours and hours of dancing. Her hair was up in a ponytail, her face flushed and chest rising and falling quickly.

“This place is awesome. I can't believe we haven't been here before.” She exclaimed.

Considering she'd shifted every night until I joined the pack the day before, I believed it.

Jamie yawned and nodded, leaning forward in her chair. She'd sipped one drink for ages, and I think she'd only done it to fit in with the crowds. At some point Oliver had moved to a small booth, his forehead wrinkling as he focused on his phone. He had yet to look up for more than half a second. From what I'd seen, he seemed like a fairly boring guy.

Someone flagged me down and I refilled his drink, grabbing the cash he slid across the bar.

“Did you smell the way Roman's scent changed?” I heard Lilac laughing. Jamie's eyes drifted over to me, and I walked

back to them. I wouldn't admit it out loud, but I wanted to know more about the Alpha. Lilac giggled like a maniac.

She'd had an impressive number of drinks. At least, impressive for a rich girl who clearly didn't drink often. She'd have one hell of a headache when she stopped. "He smells so good."

"He smells like he's chasing someone." Jamie agreed.

I swallowed, hard.

I'd heard a man's scent changed when he was pursuing a woman; it got earthier, more animalistic as he tuned into the hunter within. I'd never spent enough time around a guy before and during that time of his life to smell the change for myself.

Lilac leaned forward on the bar, her arms resting on the cool countertops. "He's finally ready. I've waited ten years for this day." She wore an almost-creepy smile. Chick seriously needed to stop drinking. "I'd give my left boob to mate with that man."

Trading an entire boob for a mate seemed a bit drastic to me, but hey. To each their own.

Jamie gently bit down on her bottom lip, shooting me a glance I couldn't read. I'd never been great at reading people.

"Why the left one?" I wondered.

Someone else waved at me before Lilac could answer, and I stepped away from the enforcers to mix a quick drink before going back to the girls.

"What could have set off his beastly bits?" Lilac mused. I choked on a laugh at her description of his wolf side. "Because we know there's no woman in his life. Other than me. Maybe the last time I was waiting naked and ready for him on his desk triggered him. That was what, three days ago? He's totally going to show up with flowers at my door."

Jamie shot me another look I couldn't read.

"What do you think?" Lilac looked up at me.

“Me?” I checked. Because I sure as hell didn’t want to get anywhere near that question. Roman’s scent hadn’t changed since the moment I met him, which meant he’d either wanted me before I scented him or he was already chasing some other girl. Seemed like Lilac might be a good candidate.

“Yeah.” She nodded at least six more times than necessary.

Crazy-ass drunk.

“Well, it’s possible. I’ve heard men respond well to nudity.” I offered. Part of me was hurt by the idea of Roman chasing after another girl, but I shunned the emotion.

Jamie’s eyebrows lifted.

“Well, he didn’t before. I’ve made sure he catches me naked and horny at least once a week for the past year and a half. But last time, I wore red nail polish. That could’ve been it.”

I choked. Hard. That laugh wasn’t easy to swallow.

“Whatever you say.” It wasn’t worth arguing over or even upsetting her.

A few customers pulled me away, and it was twenty minutes before I was beside the girls again. Lilac had moved from exhilarated and giggly to tired and forlorn, her head resting on her arms as she stared moodily at one of the chandeliers over the bar.

“You should probably get her home before she starts crying.” I told Jamie, who grimaced and shook her head.

“We have to stay with you.”

“Sucks to be you.” I glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was 2:45, so I still had an hour and fifteen minutes until last call came around and I could go home.

“I kind of like it here.” Jamie admitted. “It’s so loud I can’t really think.” She paused for a second. “That probably makes me sound insane.

“I get it.” I told her. And I did. Bars and clubs hadn’t been my happy place since I lost my mom, but I could understand

why they were some people's thing. To me, it was just my workplace.

"I'm going to tell Roman I'm in love with him." Lilac announced, sitting up straight and determined. The alcohol was speaking through her, so I didn't put much credit into what she said.

"You did that three days ago." Jamie met my gaze and rolled her eyes. The corner of my lips quirked upward. "Roman made it clear he's not interested in a future as your mate."

Ouch. I mean, this chick seriously needed a dose of reality but still... Ouch.

"He's coming around." Lilac insisted. "He asked me to go buy a phone for Henley yesterday when his assistant could've done it. He's realizing how perfect we'd be together."

"You are so drunk." Jamie sighed and grabbed her phone. "I'm calling London to pick you up."

Lilac's face contorted as she held back tears.

"No, I like it here." Her lips wobbled. I bit back a snort, my eyes catching on someone's hand waving a bit down the bar

I took care of them, mixing drinks like I'd been doing it forever. Which I had. Some four-year-olds start cheerleading or softball; I started mixing drinks. My mom had been raising me alone and running a struggling bar so she couldn't afford to send me to daycare. When I showed interest in learning, she taught me.

Jamie was still trying to talk sense into Lilac when I made it back to them.

"He told you the animal in him sees you as an inferior. No male werewolf could ever mate with someone he didn't feel equal to." The brunette snapped.

She wasn't much of a statue anymore.

"That would change if we started dating." Lilac sighed dreamily. Jamie's argument was going nowhere.

“Don’t bother.” I grabbed a large clean glass and filled it to the brim with water, setting it down in front of Lilac. “Drink this or we’re sending you home.”

Lilac grabbed the drink and threw it back like it was a shot. She came up for air coughing on the mass amount of water she’d swallowed in a single breath.

“That wasn’t a margarita.” She sputtered.

“You clearly don’t need more alcohol.” Jamie’s voice was hard.

I grabbed the cup and refilled it with water before handing it back. Lilac glared at the cup.

“Drink the water or go home.” I told her. “I’ll call the bouncer over here if I have to.”

She groaned but drained the glass. Hopefully it’d help.

“Did you notice Roman’s smell change, Henley?” Jamie was prodding very obviously.

Avoiding her question, I grabbed the scrunchie off my wrist and used it to throw my hair up in a quick bun. My eyes caught on my newest Alpha mark, already healed thanks to whatever magical DNA werewolves sported.

Most of our injuries didn’t heal any faster than humans would, but Alpha marks always did for some reason. I sure as hell wouldn’t complain about it.

“Can’t say I did.”

Not that I didn’t like the way he smelled. A girl could get high off that man’s scent. Lilac had proved it.

Lilac giggled, and the giggle turned into a full-on laugh. The laugh morphed into a hilariously horrifying snort-littered cackle.

“Of course she didn’t, Jamie. His scent changed when he started chasing me, not Henley.” Her laughter turned into body-shaking sobs. “I’ve waited for this day my whole life. He finally wants me.”

“That’s why I hate drinking.” Jamie gestured to the enforcer. I changed the subject, grabbing the ingredients to make a drink for the sober enforcer.

“My mom liked to say that when people drink they either forget themselves or find themselves.”

“I don’t fit in either of those categories.” Jamie rested her forearms on the bar.

“Don’t you?” I slid her the drink I’d just made her, looking pointedly across the room at Oliver, still sitting in a booth all alone. Her gaze followed mine and her cheeks reddened. “Try this.”

She picked it up and sniffed it, then lifted it to her lips and took a tiny sip. Perfectly-shaped dark eyebrows lifted together.

“That’s really good. What is it?”

“A sidecar. I’ve got a talent for knowing people’s favorite drinks.” Someone waved me down, and I left Jamie with her drink and the mess of a girl beside her.

I made a few drinks and accepted the payment. Luckily, we were long past the time of night where people would try to make small-talk. At this point they’d talk regardless of whether I paid attention, which made my life much easier.

Jamie was staring down into her nearly-empty glass when I went back around. She swirled what was left of the drink around the bottom of the glass, seemingly deep in thought.

“You’ve been in a lot of packs.” She stated.

“Yep.”

“Have you ever seen a political mating before? Where people mate for status, or because their family members push them into it?”

“Sure.”

Werewolves were old fashioned in some ways. A few of those ways were wired into our minds and bodies, but strategic mating was purely based on power. Werewolves cared more

about power than most humans, so we still did the arranged marriage thing sometimes.

It looked like Jamie and Oliver fit into that category.

“Have you ever seen the couple actually fall in love in that kind of relationship?”

I considered it but didn't come up with anything she'd want to hear.

“I've never really been exposed to happy couples. Have you?” I wasn't one to lie for the sake of giving someone hope. In my experience, hope had a way of destroying a person more painfully than any truth.

“No.” She sighed heavily and tossed back the rest of her drink. “I should've said no.”

“Regret will get you nowhere. Get over it and make the best with what you've got.”

A group of drunkards rushed the bar, and I glanced at the clock. Five minutes before four.

These sons of bitches always did this to me. Hadn't they ever heard of human decency?

Last call took about ten minutes to finish up with, and when it was finally over I felt like my stomach was going to eat itself I was so hungry. Dinner hadn't exactly been a priority. So, ten minutes later I was practically dragging my entourage into McDonald's.

“I didn't know people actually ate here. I thought it was just a big joke.” Lilac had graduated from crying to bitchy. I snorted.

“I didn't know people actually lived in skyscrapers.” I countered. “McDoubles are life-changing. I'll buy you one.”

Jamie and Oliver were studiously looking away from me.

“You haven't eaten here either, have you?”

Their lack of response and sheepish expressions said enough.

“Prepare to be introduced to the world of the average person’s fast food, folks.” I stepped up to the counter and ordered a crapload of burgers, chicken nuggets, and yogurt parfaits. Because everybody loves parfaits, right?

The four of us sat down in a booth and I took the seat next to Lilac so Jamie and Oliver would have to sit together. Something told me they didn’t do that often.

“Tell me you’ve at least been to Dairy Queen. No one should survive without having tried an Oreo Blizzard.”

They grimaced and I groaned.

“How am I supposed to spend the next year of my life with you people?”

Jamie laughed, though Oliver looked a bit miffed.

The guy at the register called my number. I assumed it was my number anyway, considering we were the only people in the dining room at 4:15 in the morning and I’d already tossed my receipt in the trash.

“I’ve got it.” Oliver slid out of the booth before I could stand up, striding toward the guy holding our trays of food.

“Didn’t know chivalry was still a thing.” I said.

“Roman’s got all of his enforcers working on it. I think they have some sort of competition going on.” Jamie yawned. “It’s kind of nice.”

“Why is that man so perfect?” Lilac groaned and dropped her face to the table, arms wrapped around her head. “I’d kill to mate with him.”

“He’s an Alpha. They’re controlling assholes by nature.” I scoffed.

“Agree to disagree.” Her voice was muffled by the table and her arms.

Oliver sat down with the food.

“You didn’t grab ketchup packets, did you?” I checked. His eyebrows wrinkled and I shook my head. “Amateur.”

Everyone picked up a McDouble at my orders while I grabbed some ketchup, tossing the handful of packets into the middle of the table.

“Prepare to have your minds blown, people.” I unwrapped my own burger and took a massive bite. Everyone else followed suit. Lilac swallowed her bite and dropped the burger back on the table.

“I’ll stick to real food.” She dropped her head back on the table and covered it with her arms.

“Not bad.” Oliver shrugged, demolishing the burger almost as fast as I did. Jamie nodded as I grabbed Lilac’s burger to take care of hers too.

“What do people do for fun in the skyscraper?” I asked, hoping they were going to tell me there were big movie theater rooms and bowling alleys and shit like that on one of the floors.

“The same things they do for fun outside of it.” Oliver popped a nugget in his mouth whole. I didn’t point out the glorious sweet and sour sauce he was missing out on; I’d eat all of that myself. I guess giving him food had flipped his talking switch because he hadn’t said a word up until then. “Most of our extra space is made up of shifting areas so we’re safe when our wolves take over at night. Maybe we’ll convert some of it into movie theaters or something now that we have you.”

“Sounds good to me.” I agreed.

Oliver, Jamie, and I talked as we whittled away at the pile of food. I was surprised by how much I started to like the two of them, especially considering she was the daughter of two politicians and he was planning on running for office in a few years.

The number of people I’d really and truly liked since I lost my mom could fit on a single hand, but I was getting close to doubling that number in just the last two days.

Only time would tell if that was good or bad.

FIVE

I slept in until noon the next day, though I wasn't sure if repeated nightmares that left me drenched in sweat and terror really counted as sleep. Ledger would've been thrilled to know that he was haunting me even six months after I'd escaped him.

When I'd showered and thrown on a comfortable pair of lounge shorts and my favorite high-necked sports bra, hair up in a ponytail on top of my head, I was itching to be in my furry form. Oliver mentioned shifting areas the night before, so I abandoned my phone on the floor and went to go find one. I left the apartment without bothering to change or bring anything.

Purpose filled my footsteps as I blazed down the hallway. I'd run into other werewolves every time I left my apartment, so I planned on asking the first person I saw where to find the shifting area. As I'd expected, someone I'd never met was in the elevator when the doors opened. They directed me to the fourth floor, and we rode the rest of the way in silence.

When I stepped off the elevator, an indoor forest stretched as far as I could see in every direction. The trees weren't as tall as they'd be in a natural forest, the ceiling prevented that, but the space called to my beastly side anyway.

I stepped behind a large bush with a few piles of clothes around it and stripped, dropping my comfy shorts and sports bra on the dirt floor. I shut my eyes and willed my body to shift forms. A quick flash of pain was followed by relief and an overwhelming sense of freedom.

In wolf form, I was fearless. I picked a direction and ran, the movement burning through energy and anxiety. Only a moment in, I caught a scent that I determined was irresistible and barreled toward it.

Moss?

Trees?

Rain?

I couldn't place the scent, but I wanted it more than I'd ever wanted anything.

Something about it was slightly familiar but I couldn't place it and wasn't willing to stop and try to sort through human memories. Trees blurred past me, paws pounding dirt. I was focused solely on the glorious scent.

When I finally caught the giant black wolf who smelled so heavenly, he was lying on his belly between two trees. Without hesitation, I pounced on him.

A female werewolf showed her interest in wolf form by playing with the male she wanted, fake fighting and wrestling and running with him. Female wolves understood a male's need for physical play, and a male wolf wouldn't waste the time on a female he wasn't also interested in.

My smaller frame didn't budge him, but he growled playfully at me. I growled back and pounced again, and he head-butted my side in response. When I snapped at him, he licked my face.

He wasn't getting the message that I was interested in him. From my animal perspective, his heavenly scent marked him as the perfect mate and I needed to do whatever it took to catch his interest. Though I'd never be so forward or certain about a guy in human form, wolves saw things in black and white.

So I turned tail and ran.

No male wolf would be able to resist a game of chase if he was even slightly attracted to the female.

My paws flew over the ground, exhilaration filling me as I heard the male crashing through the forest behind me. He was making as much noise as possible on purpose to be sure I could hear him gaining on me. With his size, it wasn't a matter of if he'd catch me but when.

Heart beating rapidly, I lowered my head so my position was more streamlined and pushed my body harder. The scent

of his desire hit me as he gained ground, and my excitement mixed with pride.

The black wolf caught me moments later, tackling me to the dirt. Because the fall didn't hurt I knew he'd been careful to protect me from injury.

A noble male.

Between that and his scent, I was convinced he was perfect. At least, the wolf side of me was. Human Henley wasn't so easily convinced.

He pinned me down with a paw to my chest and buried his nose in my neck, checking to see if my scent held as much appeal to him as his did to me. I growled at him, and he lifted his nose from my neck to my face and nuzzled me. More pride swelled in me.

He felt the same.

When he released me, I stood and shook the dirt from my fur. The black wolf snorted, bopping me on the shoulder with his nose and gesturing back in the direction we'd come from. Content to follow the male I'd deemed perfect, I trotted at his side. He led me back to the spot he'd been sleeping in, beneath a few trees, and gestured for me to lay where he'd been earlier.

I plopped down on my belly in the dirt that radiated his scent and he followed suit, laying with his side pressed into mine. I rumbled my happiness and dropped my head on top of my front legs. Wolf logic urged me to shift and seduce him into having sex with me so we'd be mated, but I had enough connection to my humanity not to act on the urge.

Instead, the black wolf and I napped together.

While I was awake in my fur, human nightmares were far from my mind. But a sleeping werewolf dreamt human and wolf dreams interchangeably no matter which form we were in.

Ledger's smirk and hands haunted me. He'd push me around, demanding things from me and punishing me when I didn't meet the demands. Namely, the one to give myself to him.

Forced mating was impossible, thankfully. Sex was the one area in which a werewolf's beast always ruled the human, and our beasts were both crazy monogamous. We could only have sex with someone we were willing to mate with—and it would only ever be physically possible for us to be with one person. The first person we slept with was the one we'd spend our life with, for the worse or better.

Because it wasn't possible, Ledger hadn't forced himself on me. Instead, he'd hurt me in an attempt to achieve the same thing.

The day I realized I was willing to mate with him to avoid more pain was the day I'd sliced through his Alpha mark myself, becoming a lone wolf, and ran as far away from him as fast as I possibly could.

Large hands wrapped around my neck, cutting off my airway as Ledger held me to the wall. My lungs burned for air, vision spotting. Kicking legs slowed as I lost consciousness.

A scream broke through my lips as I passed out in the dream. It tore me from the nightmare, triggering a shift from fur to skin. My hands lifted to my throat as I gasped for air like a fish out of water.

“Henley? What happened?” Dark blue eyes bore into my hazels, Roman's hands cupping my face before moving down to my neck and bare shoulders as if he was checking me for injuries.

“Don't touch me.” My voice shook, my gaze jerking around in search of my black wolf. Had Roman sent him away? Or...

Oh shit.

My eyes landed back on the Alpha. The ridiculously attractive and very naked Alpha. I took a sharp breath in and sure enough, the black wolf with the perfect scent was the mother-freaking Alpha.

Shoot me.

Shoot me now.

I stood quickly, covering my boobs with my arm and booking it toward the elevator. I'd have shifted and run back in wolf form, but I was fairly confident that if I did I'd end up panting at Roman's feet, begging him to mate with me.

Damn wolf nose and hormones.

"What happened?" The volume of his voice told me he was right behind me, probably enjoying the white moons he was getting an eyeful of. When I didn't reply he caught my wrist and pulled me to a stop, turning me to face him. His eyes dipped to the skin spilling over my arm for just a second before meeting mine. "Tell me what's wrong."

I glared, anger and attraction heating me from the inside out.

Did he have to be so fricking huge?

Why the hell did I want an Alpha?

"I have nightmares about the Alphas who've owned me." I ripped my wrist from his grasp and started back toward the elevator. After a pause, he followed behind me again.

"None of them owned you." His voice was nearly a growl and gave me more damn goosebumps.

"Walk away, Roman. I have enough bad memories, no need to make more."

He stepped around to the front of me. Keeping my eyes focused on his face was proving challenging with all those muscles he had on display right in front of my face. He could use those suckers to catch women like fish on a freaking pole. Probably did it regularly, too.

"You sniffed me out and tracked me down, Hen, not the other way around. None of what happened out there was a bad memory." He gestured to the forest.

Shit. He was right.

"I'm not ready to deal with whatever this is." I finally said, gesturing between the two of us with the hand that wasn't hiding my boobs. "And don't call me 'Hen'. I'm a wolf, I eat chicken."

Roman scrubbed his hand over his face.

“Alright. I can be patient.”

I waited for the ‘but’.

“You’re expecting me to say something that pisses you off so you can yell at me again.” He said. It was an accusation, though he seemed almost amused when he made it.

“I’m not entirely unreasonable.” I shot back.

“But you’re confident I’m just like whatever abusive Alphas you’ve known.” He worked his jaw back and forth. “I’ve never used my strength to force anyone to do something. I think the wolf in you knows that, and it’s the reason you want me.”

Roman strode away. If he thought he was going to leave me naked and alone in the man-made indoor forest after a comment like *that*, he was in for a rude awakening.

“I don’t want you.” I snapped, hurrying to catch up with him.

“Liar.” Roman called me out. I smacked him on the arm and his mouth tilted upward.

“You’re too cocky for your own good.”

“Cocky?” the Alpha shot me an amused look. “Nice word choice.”

I can admit my gaze flicked down before I forced my eyes back to his. If my face was hot before, it was legitimately on fire now.

“Would you rather I just straight up tell you you’re a dick?”

“Considering they both refer to the same part of me, I don’t think it really matters.”

When I scoffed, he chuckled.

We approached the clothes bush and I grabbed my shorts and bra off the floor, stepping into a dense patch of trees to pull them back on. Roman had already seen me naked, but letting him watch me get dressed seemed a lot more intimate.

I strode out from the cover of the trees, much more confident while covered. Roman had put a pair of gray sweats on and was pulling a white t-shirt over his head.

“What are you wearing?” Roman tensed like he had in his office before he stormed off and left me napping on his couch. I glanced down at my favorite strappy black sports bra and my floral-print lounge shorts.

“Bra,” I pointed to my chest, “shorts.” My finger dropped down to the waistband.

He growled at me. Why we were growling was beyond me, but I growled back.

“Tell me you haven’t been walking around the building in that.”

I looked down again, checking for boobs or ass cheeks hanging out of the clothes. Nope; I was covered modestly enough. Nothing was see-through, my nipples weren’t sticking out...

Yeah, he had me baffled with that one.

“Why would I need to tell you that?”

“We’ve got more than three hundred single male wolves in this building, Henley.” He took my hand and towed me into the elevator, and I let him because I was still trying to figure out why what I had on was an issue. “You smell like sex on a stick, you can’t just walk around looking like it too.”

I blinked rapidly.

“What?”

He shot me a frustrated glare.

“I have a hard enough time keeping everyone from killing each other without men fighting over you.”

“Rewind back to where you said I smell like—what was it, sex on a stick? What does that even mean?” my nose wrinkled at the man who’d said it. He shoved a hand over his buzzed head.

Why was his lack of hair so attractive to me?

“No one’s ever mentioned the way your smell affects unmated males?”

“Not that I can remember, and I’m pretty sure I’d remember that.”

Roman shoved his hands in his pockets, his face reddening just a little. I liked seeing the big confident Alpha squirm.

“Your scent draws single guys like flies to honey. I’ve had to knock out eight of them when they went on a rampage after catching your scent already.”

His words had me reeling.

Did this have something to do with why I suppressed my pack’s shifting? And why I had a period when it wasn’t mating season?

“My honey-smell works on you too, doesn’t it?”

Was the room spinning? It had to be spinning.

He didn’t deny it. The doors opened on my floor and I stepped out, forcing myself to act normal.

“Thanks for telling me about the scent thing, but if you ever try to tell me I’m not allowed to wear something again I will knee you in the balls so hard you’ll never have kids.”

I left the Alpha in the elevator, strolling down the hallway as if I wasn’t about to spend twenty minutes in my room breathing into a paper bag just to calm myself down.

SIX

I called in sick to work and stayed in my room for an entire week after Roman's revelation about my flies-to-honey smell. No way did I want to start collecting flies, even if they were six-foot-tall men with eight packs and biceps larger than my cat.

Okay, I just made up the cat thing. I don't actually have a cat. But that's beside the point. Regardless of how attractive the men were, I didn't want them near me.

Dodging phone calls and ignoring knocks at the door was a piece of cake. Roman came by a few times, but when I yelled,

"Not home." He got the message that I wanted to be alone.

I could've stayed in my apartment for at least another week, but a slight problem arose.

I ran out of toilet paper.

And food, but that wasn't nearly as important as the toilet paper.

Texting Arla or one of the other enforcers for more was definitely an option, but it felt like admitting defeat. Plus, they might ask me why I was hiding and I didn't want to talk about horny virgin werewolves and smelling like sex on a stick.

So I took the coward's way out. Peeking into the hallway, I made sure the space was single-dude-free before I stepped out to knock on my neighbor's door. Jamie pulled it open and her eyebrows lifted.

"Oh, you live here?" I gave her an awkward tight smile. "Sorry to bug you, but quick question. No one really gave me any instructions when I moved in here, so is there a supply closet with toilet paper and food and stuff, or are we supposed to buy our own? I've been in packs where it's done both ways." My hands fidgeted.

"We take care of our own groceries, household supplies included." Jamie gave me a quick smile. "How are you?"

“Thank you.” I stepped away from her. “I’m okay. Good. Just trying to accept the fact that I make unmated guys horny and whatnot.” I shoved a strand of hair behind my ear.

Awkward. I was too awkward.

Jamie’s expression turned empathetic.

“I get it. Take whatever time you need.”

After a stumbled goodbye I texted Arla, asking for an enforcer to accompany me to the grocery store. She promised someone would be ready in half an hour, so I tossed my phone in my purse and got ready.

Getting dressed was a little worrisome now that I knew werewolf men were drawn to me for my scent. Most of my tops were made to both cover my tattoo and show off my back, accentuating the strappy black bras I preferred and broadcasting the scars that I’d accumulated throughout my life. I didn’t think the scars would attract men, but how was I supposed to know what they considered attractive?

I shoved my hand through my hair, scanning the items in my closet. There really weren’t any other options. With a heavy sigh, I threw on a black top and a pair of dark skinny jeans. At least the jeans covered more skin than my shorts.

A knock at my door had me zipping up my combat boots and grabbing my purse off the kitchen counter. I’d been bored enough the past week to consider cleaning the mess I made with Roman, but decided to leave it until the place started to feel like home.

I half expected to open the door to a giant in joggers and a baseball cap and was relieved to find out Arla hadn’t sent her brother. The girl outside my door had a face you’d see in a magazine, bright blue eyes with chocolate skin and big curls that fell to the middle of her back. Both male enforcers with her looked like they’d rather be anywhere else but there, and I didn’t blame them.

“I’m London.” She gave me a quick smile that didn’t meet her big eyes. I introduced myself too, and we left. A cab was waiting outside the ‘scraper, and London and I slipped into the

back together. The male enforcers followed in a cab of their own.

We'd barely left when London's phone rang. I caught a glimpse of the name on the screen and narrowed my eyes. She answered it with a heavy sigh.

"What, Roman?" She paused. "No, we didn't run into anyone on our way out. Even if we had, we've got two of your guys with us. Don't call me again unless someone is bleeding out on the floor." She hung up and tossed her phone on the seat. "I swear I'll lose it if I hear one more person worrying about your safety."

My lips lifted.

"I have similar feelings."

We chatted a bit on the drive. London was an underwear model, apparently. She worked for Victoria's Secret, which pissed her mate off. I got the vibe that things weren't great between the two of them although she didn't really say anything about it.

We arrived at the grocery store not much later. It was an upscale place where even the generic brand items cost more than the name brand at good ole' Walmart, but I'd take what I could get with these rich people.

London played a game that looked suspiciously like Candy Crush on her phone as we traipsed around the store and I grabbed what looked good. Now that I didn't have to pay rent and had a significantly greater amount of income, I spent the extra buck on the Oreos with red Christmas frosting. The colored frosting was a little silly, but my mom had loved it so buying them reminded me of her.

My cart was nearly full when I caught the scent of a werewolf. My head snapped to the side, checking the aisle entrance and exits to my left and then my right.

"I'm sure it's someone from the pack here to check on us." London waved it off, eyeing a bag of barbecue chips. She snuck it in the cart, and I didn't comment.

“Typically when I catch that scent, I run.” I bit my lip, fighting the urge.

She was most likely right, wasn't she?

“Not anymore, you don't.” London squeezed my shoulder. Then she glanced back at the chip display and grabbed another bag of barbecue chips. “My agent's had me on a diet the past few weeks and I finally got the okay to eat carbs again.” She wore a sheepish expression, her cheeks reddening.

“No judgment here. I eat my weight in Doritos weekly.” I tossed in two bags of my own. It wasn't entirely true, but the relief on London's face told me I'd said the right thing. After a glance back to make sure the male enforcers were still following us—they were—I continued shopping.

The werewolf scent grew stronger, as did my stress. London must've picked up on the emotion because she navigated away from her half-finished round of Candy Crush and pulled up her contacts list.

“I'll check with Roman just to make sure.”

She held the phone to her ear as we headed down to the soda half of the aisle. I grabbed two six-packs of coke—in glass bottles of course. Now that I didn't have to pay rent, I was too classy for cans.

“Are you sure?” London sounded worried. “It could still be someone from the pack just out getting groceries. We would've seen them by now if they were looking for us, it's not like Henley's hard to find with her pink hair and...” she glanced up at me with an apologetic expression, “scent.”

I didn't chastise her for calling my hair pink when it was in fact red or bringing up my stench because I was too worried.

She tilted her head in the direction of the exit. I got the message and steered my cart toward the checkout line. Whatever aisles we hadn't gotten to didn't matter nearly as much as escaping with my life and freedom.

When I noted the male enforcers missing, my heart clenched.

This was it. A week in a half in a pack I actually liked was all I'd get.

"I'll call you when we're in the cab." She hung up but held the phone in her hand. "Let's hurry."

We both glanced over our shoulders just in time to see a large man—who couldn't have looked human if he tried—step out of the soda and chips aisle. His gaze narrowed on us, his lips tilting upward in a cocky smirk.

"He's not from your pack." I didn't bother phrasing it into a question.

"No." London sighed. "Leave the groceries."

She was 100% sighing over the loss of the barbeque chips and not the possibility that I wouldn't be eating—or peeing—tonight. And that was the best possible outcome, assuming I didn't get shoved in someone's trunk duct-taped, bloody, and handcuffed.

We left the cart and walked straight out of the store, ignoring the glares from the upper-class grocery store workers. They could glare all they wanted; putting my groceries back on their shelves was a hell of a lot better than getting between me and a giant wolf.

"I'll distract him. You need to run." London said.

"Running is pointless. They usually don't come alone. Notice the male enforcers missing?"

She looked behind us and turned back pale-faced and disturbed.

"This happens a lot?"

"I prevent werewolves from losing control of their beastly side every night and apparently smell like sex-on-a-stick. What do you think?"

London blinked rapidly before shaking her head and leading me into the covered parking garage. We didn't have a car there, but it was the safest place to confront the dude.

“Now is when we hope Roman was paranoid enough to send extra guys.” She whispered. “I don’t know how to fight.”

“I’ve been taking a self-defense class and watching YouTube videos of fighting tutorials for six months, but haven’t but haven’t gotten to test if the moves work against wolves.” I grimaced. I’d wanted to learn how to fight forever, but hadn’t been able to afford the expensive MMA-style classes I thought might really help me in crisis. “You’re not in any danger, London. They want me. Just let me handle this.”

She didn’t look convinced.

I didn’t feel convinced, so I guess that made us even.

The guy came walking up. He wasn’t as gigantic as Roman—who had somehow become the way I measured the size of men in a matter of ten days. But the guy was still massive, which didn’t bode well for little ole’ me. I was scrappier than I looked, but not *that* scrappy.

“You know it’s kind of creepy to follow two chicks into a parking garage, right?” I turned up my sarcasm as he approached. Because why the hell not? Maybe if I came off cocky, he’d decide I wasn’t worth the fight.

“If you were just women maybe that would matter.” The man’s smirk dialed up a few levels. “You have something I want.”

“You mean she *is* something you want.” London stepped up beside me and put her hands on her hips. “Don’t pretend to be noble.”

“Like your pack is any more honorable than mine.” The guy chuckled. “We all want Wolfsbane.”

And there it was. The reason I hated my nickname. Somehow, it turned me into an object.

“We’re paying Henley to be a part of our pack, not forcing her. Somehow, I think that’s more honorable than sending our biggest guys to kidnap her and drag her across the country.” London’s voice was cold.

The big guy looked a bit taken aback by that.

“Didn’t think anyone could be reasonable when it came to a way to control their wolves, did you?” I drawled.

TBH, I didn’t think so either.

“How much are they paying you?” Big-and-scary asked.

“Six hundred thousand for the year.”

The dude’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. I looked him up and down, analyzing his clothing. I knew a decent amount about most of the packs in the U.S., their lifestyles, and the places they lived. All things considered, I’d say he was either from Maine or Wisconsin. Neither of them had a lot of money but both lived in mid-sized cities so they lived more like humans than some of the more bestial packs.

His eyes changed when he realized his pack couldn’t afford to buy my allegiance. He decided my ability was worth more than I was, and cracked his knuckles.

Sometimes just being willing to throw a punch was enough to buy the time I needed to make a run for it and avoid moving for a few extra days, so I cracked mine too. Minus the wonky ones.

“Come with me and I’ll let her go.” He nodded at the model behind me.

The guy advanced toward us. London glanced over at me, her shoulders tense. I stepped in front of her.

“I’ll pass.” I stalked toward him, hoping it would scare him away.

It didn’t.

The guy grabbed me around the waist. I shoved my elbow into his gut, slammed my knee into his groin, and spun out of his grip. The heel of my hand smashed into his nose, and the crunch of cartilage made me wince even though I knew he’d been planning on abducting me.

He grabbed my wrist as I turned to run. This time, he was expecting me to fight and held tighter. Without surprise on my side, my struggle against his grip was pointless. All the moves

I'd practiced in my self-defense class had been used and the ones from YouTube didn't translate to real life.

Why were male werewolves so freaking much bigger than females?

London shouted and threw herself at the dude, wrapping one arm around his neck and shoving the fingers of her opposite hand into his eyes. Her legs held her to his back while she choked and scratched him.

Another guy appeared out of nowhere, yanking London off the bigger one. Blood dripped down his fingers and face, and I had a sinking feeling it belonged to Roman's enforcers. The new guy launched her away from the three of us and she sailed through the air like a ragdoll, smacking into the concrete wall of the parking garage with an awful thud.

"Let's go." The first guy dragged my flailing body toward a white kidnapper van.

What a shock. White kidnapper van; I'd never been tossed into one of those before.

They had me halfway in the van when a roar echoed through the garage, shaking the ground. I fell three feet and slammed into asphalt hip-first when the douchebags literally dropped me where I was, turning to meet the threat.

Roman stalked forward, chest heaving as his fingernails morphed into claws and fur sprouted from his ears. Jamie was close at his heels, angry but not halfway shifted.

"Go, Henley." Roman's voice was more growl than voice.

Yeah, right. Like I'd leave my babysitter-slash-friend injured on the ground.

While the men faced off, I rushed over to London. My fingers found the pulse on her neck and I leaned forward so my ear hovered over her mouth. When I heard breathing, I finally let out a breath of my own and turned back to the fight.

Jamie was facing off with the bloody guy, Roman against the one who'd cornered us.

Jamie's fist slammed into his stomach and she swerved under his arm, dodging the punch he aimed for her throat. She planted a foot and spun, kicking the place she'd punched. He took two steps backward and she leaped toward him, fingers shifting to claws as she went for his throat.

The man jumped backward, his own claws slashing toward her. Jamie lunged to the side and got the first cut in, her claws slicing over the spot she'd likely bruised on his stomach.

My attention swerved to Roman as thick black fur erupted from his skin. He tackled the man—who was still in the process of shifting—and snarled in his face. The sand-colored wolf snapped at Roman's neck and used the moment the Alpha dodged to escape Roman's grip.

Roman's teeth closed over the other guy's tail and a pained yelp echoed through the parking garage. The scent of blood filled the air as he ripped it right off. The other guy howled, lunging for Roman. His claws caught Roman on the side, but Roman rolled away so fast I didn't think the wound would be deep.

When the guy snapped at Roman again, Roman bit down on the wolf's throat and put an end to the threat.

The sandy wolf shifted back into his human form as he died. Roman stepped off of his body and stretched his neck upward, eyes colliding with mine before he turned to make sure Jamie was alright.

She and the other werewolf seemed evenly matched, trading blow for blow, although Jamie was bleeding a lot less. Roman didn't move to help her, simply watching with his body tense and ready to jump in if necessary.

He trusted her to take care of herself.

With a quick spin, Jamie ducked under the man's arm and slashed her claws across his throat. He reached for her arm before collapsing on the ground, and she dodged deftly.

"Henley?" London groaned, one hand lifting to her head. She wasn't bleeding but was already developing some gnarly bruises.

“I’m alive.” I patted her arm awkwardly. “So are you.”

Roman and Jamie came over, both wearing neutral expressions though Jamie’s chest was still heaving.

“Where was he from?” Jamie crouched beside us, her fingers moving to London’s throat to check her pulse like I had. London swatted her hand away.

“How would I know?” London muttered.

“Wisconsin or Maine.” I said.

Everyone looked at me.

“Probably. There are a couple states I haven’t been to, so it could also be one of those. But Wisconsin and Maine are safe bets.” I explained, stumbling over the words.

“You’re bleeding.” I told Roman when he stepped up to me as Jamie helped London to her feet. The model was unsteady but refused more help than Jamie’s. Blood coated his face and neck, but that happened to people around me often enough not to freak me out.

“I’m fine.” He brushed it off.

The smell of his blood was a metallic and much more potent version of his natural scent. If it hadn’t meant he was injured, it would’ve turned me on.

“In hindsight, you may have been slightly right about needing guards.” I met Roman’s gaze. He lifted an eyebrow.

“Slightly?”

I didn’t mention the blood on his face. It made it easier to fight my attraction to him anyway.

“Slightly.” I nodded my confirmation. His lips twitched. Standing, I brushed my hands off on my pants and examined my arms. Looked like I’d be covered in bruises nearly as gnarly as London’s. “Where are the other enforcers? And how’d you manage to keep this place clear of humans?”

“Kyler and Jett went to find them. I’d have felt it if they died, so they’re fine. And keeping humans out is easy—all it takes is money.” Roman studied my bruises, gently taking one

of my wrists and using it to turn my arm so he could see the evidence of the attack. A growl rumbled his chest, and I felt it through our barely-connected limbs.

“They’re just bruises.” I pulled my wrist from Roman’s grip. “Those guys weren’t the first people to come after me, and they won’t be the last.” I pushed a wild chunk of hair from my eyes. “Let’s go back to the skyscraper. I’m not hungry anymore.”

A glance at the bodies told me that wouldn’t be possible just yet. Nausea turned my stomach at the thought of moving a dead body. Though I wasn’t new to death, I’d never been around for the afterward.

“I’ll take care of them. You can wait in the car.” Roman called over his shoulder as he strolled toward the bodies like he wasn’t still bleeding.

Pride told me to put my big girl panties on and go help, but nausea defeated pride. I slipped into the passenger seat of the kidnapper van, looking out the window. Nothing outside held my attention, but I made it a point not to look into the back of the van. There was no point in dwelling on the pain that I both caused and suffered.

Roman put the bodies in the back—at least, I assumed so based on the sounds—and came around to take the driver’s seat. He’d managed to find the keys, and I chose not to ask questions.

We were pulling into the parking garage before either of us spoke.

“I’m sorry.” Roman said. I didn’t take him for the kind of guy who apologized often.

“If anyone should apologize, it’s me.” I slipped out of the van. “Thanks for saving me from that other pack. There are worse people I could be stuck with.”

I left Roman—and myself—with that.

SEVEN

The next two weeks went by uneventfully. I worked at the club, watched Netflix, and finally got around to reassembling the luxury that was my apartment. After the near-abduction, I texted Arla to ask if the skyscraper had a gym. When she confirmed it, I made it a point to get down there and spend some time on the treadmill every day so I'd be a little more ready for the fight.

I looked up a few gyms that offered MMA classes and judo and stuff, but because we were smack in the middle of the city everything was crazy expensive and entirely full.

Friday, my phone vibrated with a text message while I was doing the dishes and jamming out to some music.

I shook water off my hands and grabbed the phone, sandwiching it between my shoulder and ear.

ARLA: Pack get-together at our upstate neighborhood tonight. You're on the guest list.

ME: Bad idea given my unfortunate smell

ARLA: You smell like sex, Henley. Not garbage.

ME: Think I'd rather smell like a dumpster

ARLA: All the enforcers are needed to keep the peace. You're coming even if I have to hogtie you and throw you in the back of Roman's truck

ME: Doubt you know how to hogtie

ARLA: I'll be at your door in an hour

ARLA: With pizza

ME: Don't put pineapple on it

Sure enough, Arla and her enforcers showed up at my apartment door with two boxes of apology pizza an hour later. One was a pineapple abomination, so they really only brought one pizza.

It was enough to convince me to go, though. On top of the part where I'd be safest wherever the largest number of strong dudes with a reason to protect me were.

The drive upstate was only a few hours, and the scenery was beautiful. Plus, Arla and I drove with the three female enforcers—Jamie, London, and Lilac—so it was kind of a party in the car.

When we got there, the neighborhood was already swarming with werewolves.

Arla parked in front of the house she and Roman shared in the pack's neighborhood, and all of us girls headed inside to meet the male enforcers and Alpha. The house was gigantic, as expected, covered in pretty white siding and big windows as well as a wrap-around porch. Roman was already giving his enforcers instructions on keeping the peace when we walked in.

London and Jamie's mates towed them and the other two female enforcers out of the house, off to their respective lookout positions. That left Arla, Lilac, and me with Roman and Kyler, who were having a conversation on the other side of the room.

Arla's phone rang. The yelling on the other line was an immediate red flag. She grabbed my arm and pulled the phone away from her ear.

"Stay by Roman." She ordered, and then noticed my eyes narrow at her command. "If you don't want a bunch of horny idiots humping you all day, stay by Roman."

When she put it that way, I wanted nothing more than to glue myself to his side.

Arla rushed out the door, waving over her shoulder at us as she went while talking rapidly into her phone.

"I'm so jealous." Lilac muttered as she tugged me toward the men. Her voice lifted as their conversation ended. "You look as hot as ever, Rome. You ready to make this thing official yet?" She winked at him, brushing her hair behind her shoulders to emphasize the cleavage her tight pink shirt

displayed. “You just say the word and I’m up for getting down and dirty up against any random wall.”

My eyebrows lifted.

Girl had balls.

All the wine she’d downed on the way there definitely contributed to her ballsiness, but still.

“Come on, Lilac.” Kyler flung his arm over her shoulder and steered her toward the front door. “Team unmated for the win again.” He dragged her out of there too quickly for her to make another awkward comment.

Roman’s grimace was so deep he could’ve buried a penny in his frown lines.

“You guys make a cute couple.” I joked. It came out sounding more like an accusation.

Curse my wolfy-side for caring about the monster of a man.

His eyes narrowed, and I smirked.

Two steps was all it took for the big bad Alpha to cross the room and step up so close to me our chests would brush if I dared breathe in.

Which I didn’t.

Part of me expected him to jerk me closer or yank me around, like any other Alpha.

Instead, he used one finger to tilt my face up so my gaze met those sexy blue eyes of his.

One.

Damn.

Finger.

Who was this guy and what happened to him being a freaking Alpha?

“There never has been and never will be anything between me and Lilac.” His words caressed my forehead and damn it, it turned me the hell on.

“Your love life—or lack of it—is none of my business.” I smacked his finger away with the back of my hand and stepped away, arms folding over my chest. Whatever was going on between us, I still refused to acknowledge it and/or admit it.

Roman looked like he wanted to say something, but a knock at the door ended the conversation. With one last, long gaze, he strode to the front door and tugged it open.

“Why does your house smell like sex?” a guy in his twenties stepped past Roman, a few other guys with him. Roman wouldn’t have let them past if he didn’t consider them safe, so I didn’t tell them to take a hike.

Five sets of eyes landed on me at once. Plus Roman’s.

“You’re gorgeous.” A blond guy with tattoos on every inch of exposed skin other than his face stated, staring at me unabashedly. I was definitely into the punk-rock vibes he gave off.

“So are you.”

A low growl came from Roman, soft enough I almost convinced myself I hadn’t heard anything at all.

Almost.

The other guys shooting him strange looks gave away the truth I was trying not to acknowledge.

“This is Henley Clark.” Roman stood beside me, hands slipping casually in his pockets. The man made sweat pants and a faded t-shirt look hot. He knew full and well that he was the strongest guy in the room but didn’t feel the need to throw his power around, and damn was that sexy.

“Henley Clark, why does your scent make me even hornier than usual?” Tattoo guy prowled closer. I ignored the feel of Roman’s gaze burning into me like a laser.

“If I knew, I wouldn’t smell like this anymore.”

Roman stepped closer, his arm brushing mine. The barely-there contact was so much hotter than if he’d just grabbed me.

“You’re the girl they call Wolfsbane, aren’t you?” Another guy asked. I shot him a glare and let my voice reflect my hatred for the nickname.

“It’s Henley.”

“We are in the presence of a legend, boys.” The tatted blond reached toward me, and I eyed his hand in warning. If he touched me, he’d get a knee in the balls. Punk rock or not, random people didn’t get to touch me.

“I know you’re here to ask for something. Spit it out, Zack.” Roman knocked the guy’s hand away from me. He’d probably seen the murder threat in my eyes. Or he just didn’t want anyone touching me. The former sounded safer than the latter so I decided it was that one.

“It’s nothing serious,” Another guy spoke up. “We want to set up a few tarps going down the hill and cover them with soap and water so we can slide down.”

Tarps and water going down a hill? Did he mean...

“Like a giant slip n’ slide?” I blurted.

Everyone’s attention focused on me again. I waited for an answer.

“Exactly.” Zack, the blond guy, grinned. My lips curved upward. “You want in?”

“Hell yeah. I saw that in a movie once and have been dying to try it since.”

I hadn’t had many opportunities to do things like that so I had to take advantage of it when I could. Life wouldn’t stop for me, and neither would the many werewolves who wanted my “gift”.

“So what do you say, boss?” the guys looked to Roman, who was looking at me.

Awkward.

“It’s fifty degrees.” Roman pulled his gaze from me, staring daggers at the tatted blond.

“We’ll buy hot chocolate after.” Zack seemed to have been elected spokesman. I wondered why but wasn’t willing to ask.

There was a long moment of silence. I pushed my hair behind my ear just to give my fingers something to do other than fidgeting at my sides.

“Fine.” Roman nodded tersely. His phone rang and he headed out the door with one last look at me, lifting it to his ear much like his sister had done.

I considered following him. Arla had warned me to stay by her brother if I didn’t want a bunch of unmated dudes bothering me, but these guys hadn’t made a move despite my scent.

That was a good sign, right?

Good enough, anyway.

Deciding I could take a little unwanted male attention for the sake of life experiences, I followed Zack and his friends out to the monstrous truck they’d arrived in. My gaze tracked Roman as he sped away from the house in his truck.

The guys introduced themselves to me, but none of their names stuck besides Zack’s. There were too many of them.

We all squished in the truck. After weaving our way through the neighborhood of mansions, we parked on the side of the street at the bottom of a large hill. Mansions dotted the area, but there was a long stretch of grass on either side of the road that would be perfect for our slip n’ slide.

Everyone paired off with one of the massive tarps they’d stacked in the back of the truck, leaving me with Zack.

“So how do you like New York?” he asked as we headed up the hill. I regretted not wearing a coat immediately. Excitement wouldn’t keep me warm, and it definitely wouldn’t keep me from freezing to death.

Oh well. At least there wasn’t snow on the ground yet.

“It’s nice.” I didn’t know him well enough to spill any part of my life’s story. Changing the subject was my best bet. “So where are you from?”

“Born and raised here. What about you?”

“Georgia.” I said.

“Cool. What do you do for work?” We started unfolding the tarp.

Work was a safe topic. Talking about my hometown could quickly go south.

“I’m a bartender.”

“Nice. I’m a tattoo artist.”

“Cool.”

I had no idea what else to say. Awkward.

I grabbed one side of the tarp and walked backward with it, glad the distance between us was ending the uncomfortable get-to-know-you. I wasn’t willing to talk about much other than surface-level shit, but I wasn’t a fan of that either. Which made communicating fairly challenging.

We lined our tarp up with the one above it and held it in place while two of the other guys came in with duct tape and connected the tarps. Apparently even the rich resorted to duct tape as a fix-all.

Ten minutes and twelve bottles of soap later, there were at least thirty new people gathered at the top of the hill with me and the guys. They all wore swimsuits or wetsuits, and I wished I’d been informed this was happening before we got there so I could’ve brought one too.

But a little thing like lack of a swimsuit wasn’t going to keep me from this once in a lifetime experience. I stripped down to my typical black sports bra and cheeky panties, tossing my clothes in a pile off to the side. I noticed a couple of people staring at my tattoo—or my boobs, it was hard to tell which—and glared at them until they looked away.

“Henley,” Zack grabbed my arm. My elbow slammed into his gut, an automatic reflex for being grabbed by someone I didn’t know and couldn’t see. “Oomph.” He’d changed into a swimsuit like the others, so my elbow had collided with abs of steel.

“Sorry.” My apology wasn’t genuine. Protecting myself was an instinct I refused to feel bad for.

“It’s fine. I like a girl with fire.” His lips lifted in a grin. “Want to go first?”

“You know it.” My own lips lifted too. “So I just run and dive?” I checked as we made our way to the top of the tarp-slide.

“Yup. Whenever you’re ready.”

I took a quick breath in before sprinting toward the slide. My bare feet met the icy grass, heartbeat picking up as loud cheers and whooping echoed in the air. I dove headfirst onto the wet and soapy surface, wild red hair flying behind me. My body collided with the tarp and momentum carried me down the slide so quickly it seemed over before it started.

Jumping to my feet at the bottom of the hill, I wore a grin so massive my cheeks hurt. When I noticed the wave of people barreling down the hill right behind me, I barely managed to lunge out of the way in time to avoid getting smashed. Loud laughter, cheering, and hollering filled the air.

My heart felt light and airy.

This was what a pack was supposed to feel like.

Scratch that—this was what life was supposed to feel like.

“Epic, huh?” Zack slicked his soapy hair out of his eyes, still grinning.

“Definitely.”

We headed back up the hill together once, and then again. An hour passed by rapidly, and then a second. People rotated in and out, coming and going as they got tired or froze or heard about the fun, and I just kept going up and down with Zack and the others who’d planned it.

We came down the slide in a particularly soapy and tangled mess of men and women, getting up while laughing so hard my stomach ached.

“Let’s go down standing.” Someone hollered.

The other six of us—two girls and three guys plus me—were quick to agree, and we hiked up the hill. My legs burned and my toes tingled and I knew I'd be sore from the repeated hill-climbing, but it was worth it.

We slid down the slide with a loud battle cry, legs planted in the steadiest positions we could manage. Two of our group fell on their faces immediately, and the rest of us yelled and laughed as we slipped and slid around. One of the girls took out one of the guys, leaving just me, Zack, and another girl on our feet.

We'd nearly made it to the bottom when a black truck parked behind the one we'd arrived in and Roman stepped out of the vehicle. Despite the wet, half-naked men on every side, his scent and presence distracted me.

One of my legs whipped to the side, knocking me off my feet. I whammed into Zack sideways and he grabbed me to keep us both upright. One of his hands landed on my ass as we fell.

Yikes.

We crashed to the grass at the end of the slide together and a loud snarl tore the fun atmosphere. Zack rolled out from under me in an instant, leaving me on my back on the soapy grass. I sat up and my mouth parted as a giant black wolf lunged for a smaller blond one.

Zack rolled to the side, snapping at Roman as he landed on four paws. Roman snarled back. He lunged again, teeth closing over the air where Zack's neck had been less than a second earlier.

I threw myself in between the men before one of them lost their head. Most likely, Zack.

“Calm down, Roman.” I commanded.

The black wolf stilled, though Zack was still tense and waiting for the Alpha's next attack.

I glowered at the Alpha. “Zack caught me when I fell, that's it. Shift back.”

Much to my surprise, he obeyed. An expanse of those distracting muscles filled my view, and I forced myself to focus on his face rather than his junk. With the pride of a naked man who knew just how nice his body was, Roman strode to the back of his trunk and pulled a pair of basketball shorts from his back seat, never moving his eyes from me.

“How did you do that?” Zack whispered, naked as the day he was born. His shredded swim shorts littered the soapy grass.

I shrugged.

Roman came back to me, throwing an extra pair of shorts at Zack’s face a little harder than necessary.

“What did I say about walking around mostly-naked?” He growled, shoving a hand over his head.

“What did I say about telling me what I could wear?” I put my hands on my hips, ready to go to war over this.

“We’ve been keeping guys who can’t control themselves away from her.” Zack joined the conversation, probably sensing it wasn’t heading anywhere beneficial.

I hadn’t realized they were doing that but hid my surprise.

Roman’s gaze snapped to the guy.

Grabbing his arm before another fight could break out, I dragged the Alpha back to his truck and flung the drivers-side door open, climbing inside and pushing the center console up so I could make room for both of us.

He didn’t make a move to get in.

“We need to talk before you kill someone. Get in the damn truck.” I barked.

With a noise of frustration, he slid into the seat. Shutting the door, his eyes meeting mine head-on.

“If I’d have known starting a fight was the way to get you to talk to me I would’ve done it weeks ago.” He said.

Damn the butterflies in my belly. Damn them all.

“I don’t know what there is to talk about. Your scent changed *before* I got here.” I said, turning my back to the truck’s door and lifting my bare legs up on the seat so I could watch for lies as we talked.

Also, Roman radiated warmth and I was freezing.

A man’s scent changed when he was pursuing a woman. Something about the hunt did that to them. The pheromones worked to lure women in, making it easier for a male to convince the woman he wanted to mate with him. Unfortunately, they were getting to me.

He started the truck, turning the music up and blasting the heater. It was still warm from his drive there, so the gloriously hot air made my icy toes tingle. I could’ve done without the music but didn’t say so.

“My scent changed *when* you got here. The moment I caught your scent.”

Blue eyes burned into me.

Of all the things he could’ve said about why he wanted me, he went with the scent thing?

“I don’t want a mate who wants me because I smell like sex, so you can just give the hell up on chasing me. Your scent will go back to normal, and I won’t have to break up another fight when you try to kill someone who accidentally gropes me.”

“Not that part of your scent.” He grabbed a soapy, damp strand of my hair and lifted it to his nose, shutting his eyes and inhaling. “You smell like snow in the forest and cinnamon trees.” His eyes opened, a deep blue that warmed me from within. “You smell like the home I’ve spent my entire life looking for. That’s why my scent changed when I caught yours. Seeing you and being with you only cemented that you’re it for me.”

“You don’t even know me.” I tugged my hair from his grip and he let it go without argument.

“I’m not propositioning you or trying to rush anything, Hen. Just telling you the truth.”

“Sometimes it’s better to lie.” I huffed, leaning my head against the window behind me. Roman chuckled.

“A lie doesn’t change a thing.”

“Maybe not for you.” I noticed someone just outside Roman’s truck’s door and grimaced.

“People are staring at us. We either need to get out or drive away.” My eyes drifted to the slip ‘n slide, which only had a couple people around it now. “Correction: You either need to get out or drive away. I’m going back to the slide.”

With no way to know if I’d ever get to do it again, you’d better believe I was going to keep going until I either lost a toe or got shut down.

“Not with Zack.” Roman’s voice had an edge to it.

“He set up the thing. If you don’t like me near him, come along and keep him away from me.”

“I wasn’t invited.”

Since when did an Alpha care about that?

This guy had so many more boundaries than any leader I’d ever met.

“Invite yourself.”

Leaning away from the door, I grabbed the handle and jumped down, striding around the truck. Roman slid out and caught up to me, walking at my side. The street was packed full of people when it had been empty before, so I was fairly certain they’d all been trying to listen in on our conversation.

Roman’s love for rock music worked in favor of our privacy. No way could they have heard us over the music with the doors shut.

Had he done that on purpose?

“Back for more?” Zack grinned at me. I noticed him avoiding eye contact with Roman.

Why hadn’t they invited him? Sure, he was the Alpha, but he didn’t act like it. At least not like the way my other Alphas had.

“Hell yes. I’ll be cold and dead when you pry me away from this hill.” I declared. Adrenaline surged as we reached the top of the hill. In the excitement of the moment, I stopped overthinking and snagged Roman’s hand. “Come on, it’s better when you get a running start.” I tugged him toward the spot I’d deemed far enough without being overkill. Roman let me lead him, and I ignored all the eyes on us.

“How do we do this?” He lowered his voice. I met his gaze with a mischievous grin.

“Run and dive. Try not to grab my ass on the way down or someone might attack you.”

A self-deprecating laugh slipped from him and warmed me.

“Is that a challenge?”

Was he teasing me?

He was totally teasing me.

Oh hell.

“You wish.”

I sprinted for the tarp. Roman caught up to me, and we dove for the slide together. Our sides bumped as we flew down, and as always it was over far too soon. I jumped to my feet wearing a grin the size of Texas and found Roman with the same expression.

“Want to go again?” I demanded.

“Damn straight.”

Right answer.

He grabbed me around the waist and tossed me over his shoulder, laughing when I yelled and smacked him on the back. Luckily he couldn’t see the grin I was battling. “Don’t you want a ride up the hill?” He teased me.

“You just want to touch me.” I complained.

“So?” he squeezed the back of my thigh and I yelled,

“Bastard!”

Roman set me down on my feet in the place we'd run from the last time. His mouth dropped near my ear as I shook out my icy fingers and jumped around a bit to get the blood flowing back to my toes.

“Run.” His husky whisper was sexy as hell.

“I stand corrected. *Horny* bastard.” I shot him a glare that only made his grin wider.

“You want me to chase you as much as I want to do it.”

I flipped him off.

And then I ran.

EIGHT

When I realized I'd have to lose my toes to keep going, I finally called it quits. Roman drove us back to his place and showed me to a spare room. A quick sniff of the air told me his was across the hall.

I showered and got dressed but left my hair up in a soapy bun on top of my head because I'd be running with the rest of the pack that night. Arla sat alone in the kitchen in front of a computer when I finished.

"I heard Zack and Roman got in a fight over which one loves you more today." She said as she tossed me a sub sandwich from one of my favorite shops. I caught it and crossed the room to sit beside her at the kitchen island.

"More like Roman tried to rip Zack's head off when he accidentally grabbed my ass." I unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite. Arla lifted an eyebrow at me and waited for me to explain.

I had nothing to say, so I didn't.

"Who stopped him?" she finally asked

"I did."

"Ah." She looked like she was trying to decide whether or not to tell me something. I wasn't in a hurry though.

Four bites later, she finally asked,

"What explanation did he give for that?"

It was none of her business, so I lied.

"He didn't."

Lilac and Kyler chose that moment to interrupt the conversation, entering the house with a lively argument.

"If they need to throw a couple of punches to work it out, let them throw a couple punches." Lilac tossed her hands up in the air. "So what if they leave with a black eye or missing

tooth? Maybe it will remind them not to be so stupid next time!”

“It’s our job to keep the peace.”

“Arla.” Lilac yanked the Alpha female into the argument, traipsing into the kitchen. “Don’t you think sometimes we just have to let people fight it out?” she shot Kyler a poisonous look.

Arla studied Lilac for a minute and then looked over at me.

“What do you think, Henley?”

I continued chewing. It wasn’t a difficult question; I’d seen a thousand fights as I’d been dragged from pack to pack.

“When two people fight everyone else picks a side. Not good for morale.” My mouth was half-full when I spoke but no one seemed to care.

“Whose side did you pick during the fight today?” Arla’s eyes glittered with mischief.

I stopped chewing, left cheek still full. Did I stop the fight to protect Zack from getting his head ripped off, or to stop Roman’s overreaction?

Great question.

“What fight were you in today?” Lilac frowned at me. I swallowed and then answered both questions with two words.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it?” Arla countered.

“Seriously, what fight are we talking about? I thought you were sticking with Roman all day today.” She sniffed the air. “And why do you smell like dish soap?”

“I was doing a big slip n’ slide all day with some guys in the pack.” I took a huge bite of my sandwich to avoid the other question. Lilac would definitely be hurt if she knew why Roman had attacked Zack. I didn’t know her that well, but she’d always been nice to me and I didn’t want to piss her off over a possible future relationship.

“Roman attacked Zack for grabbing Henley’s ass at the slip n’ slide.” Arla wasn’t on board with keeping the secret, apparently. I tensed, expecting Lilac to go for my throat or something considering how possessive she was over the Alpha.

I worried for nothing. Lilac’s face softened, her lips tilting upward.

“Aww. He’s so sweet, always making sure women are treated with respect.”

I choked on the sandwich. Kyler came over to whack me on the back, and I smacked his hand away.

Lilac crossed the kitchen, pulling open the fridge door and looking over everything inside.

“You have to tell her.” Arla mouthed to me. I jerked my head side to side.

“Nothing is going on.” I mouthed back.

She rolled her eyes.

I flipped her off and stood, bringing the last eighth of my sandwich with me.

“I need some air.”

Slipping out the back door, I crossed to the side of the dark-wood porch and sat down in a hammock that had been strung between the house and porch rail. Soft, navy fabric slid over my skin and surrounded me, blocking my view of the rest of the porch so all I could see was the forest in front of me. A heady masculine smell wafted out of the fabric, telling me the hammock belonged to Roman and had been recently used by him.

My mind wandered to the large Alpha and I steered it away. Whatever feelings I was having for him, I wasn’t ready to deal with them.

Instead, I focused on the guys who had found me in the grocery store with London.

News of me being with the New York pack was rolling out already. It wasn't surprising; werewolves were wired for loyalty. When one switched packs, they tended to keep in contact with their friends. All it would take was one person mentioning to their friend that they weren't shifting every night and the news would spread like a wildfire.

The fact that someone was coming after me to take me back to their pack? Also not surprising. It had happened so many times before I would've been surprised if no one came for me. I'd wondered if the sheer number of people in the New York pack would make other packs think twice about trying to grab me there, but apparently they didn't care.

I swung in the hammock, reflecting for a few more minutes until Lilac came bounding out of the house.

"Time for the run." She sang the words. I slid out of the hammock and Lilac sniffed the air. "Why do you smell like Roman?" She eyed me suspiciously, her gaze borderline threatening. I wasn't about to mention his truck or the slip 'n slide, so I pointed my thumb at the hammock.

"He probably sat in there before me."

She accepted the answer and led me through the house. I followed her, grimacing. It was inevitable. We were going to have issues the next time I had to calm down Roman's animal instincts. After the events of that day I was confident there would be a next time.

We walked through the neighborhood. Kyler, Arla, and Lilac greeted nearly everyone walking the same direction, all headed to the edge of the neighborhood for the pack celebration. When we got to the edge, Arla left me with Kyler and Lilac so she could go stand with Roman at the front of the crowd.

Lilac saw one of her friends and ducked away, and then it was just me and Kyler.

"So the fight earlier?" he asked.

"I swear, I'm going to punch the next person who asks me about it." I glared at him. He laughed and lifted his hands.

“No judgment. I’ve heard about six different versions of what went down and wanted to know the real story.”

With a heavy sigh, I dropped my glare and looked out at the forest.

“If I tell you the real story, can you get everyone else to shut up about it? At least around me?”

He agreed, and I gave him a quick rundown. The falling, the ass-grabbing, and the near-throat-ripping.

“That’s even better than the other versions I heard.” Kyler announced.

“Shut up.” I complained.

Roman yelled for everyone’s attention, stepping up on the back of someone’s truck so everyone could see him. He thanked us all for coming and then Arla made a cute little speech about the ‘pack family’ before announcing that it was time for everyone to shift together.

Most of us ducked behind trees before taking off our clothes and shifting forms. I’d like to say I was immune to Roman’s manly wiles in wolf form, but my baser instincts took over. Namely, the mating instinct.

I followed his scent only to discover an entire crowd of females had done the same.

When I realized I would be only one of many chasing the Alpha, my animalistic mind decided the only two options that made sense were to kill anyone between me and the Alpha or run the opposite way and see if *he* chased *me*. Since the human part of me still insisted that murder was despicable and all, only one option was really valid.

I gave in to my instincts and peed on a tree, leaving my scent to let Roman know where I was headed. Racing in the opposite direction as the she-wolves on his trail, I left more scent markers as I brushed up against trees and peed a few more times.

When I decided I was far enough away, I settled down in a comfortable spot beside a tree whose shape I liked. In human

form the waiting might have bothered me, but I was more patient as a wolf and closed my eyes to take a nap.

My patience was unnecessary. Before I even fell asleep, a large black beast came traipsing into my territory like he owned the place. I stared lazily at him, blinking up at the monster.

He prowled around the area, scenting the air. He'd be checking for evidence of another male, I assumed. In wolf form his protectiveness seemed to make more sense. Hell, I even liked it.

When Roman was satisfied that the area was safe from other interested males, he licked my face. I snapped at his ear, and he growled playfully. I didn't need any more encouragement to tackle him.

We rolled around the forest floor, wrestling and play-fighting. Happiness seemed to lift my shoulders. For some reason, fighting with Roman felt nearly as freeing as escaping from Ledger had. He didn't let me win every time, but he didn't try to dominate me either. It felt like we were equals.

We'd given up fighting and cuddled up in the spot I'd chosen earlier when the cavalry came.

Nineteen she-wolves ran straight for the male at my side. Some snarled and snapped at me while others were solely focused on Roman. I caught Lilac's scent on the blonde beast at the front of the she-pack and knew things were about to go to shit. That chick didn't have a chill bone in her body.

Roman stood tall, lifting his head and stepping in front of me. Though I felt certain the black wolf would protect me, I wasn't about to take a beating on my belly in the dirt. I took my place at his side and growled low at the other bitches. They needed to see that I refused to be walked all over, regardless of whether I was with the Alpha or not.

The she-wolves stopped for the most part, watching the way Roman and I stood together. A few whined at his obvious statement as to which woman his scent had changed for. Four

of them ran back into the woods, nursing broken hearts. A few growled at us, but Roman's snarling response shut them up.

Lilac prowled forward, her nose in the air. I could scent her anger as she looked down on me like the predator she was. She would undoubtedly challenge me for the right to stand by Roman's side.

Regardless of my form, I despised anyone who'd try to force someone to do something. Lilac didn't have any right to claim him, and I wouldn't step aside just because she was a determined bitch.

I strutted past Roman and glared her down, daring her to make a move. Her body tensed a fraction of a second before she lunged for my throat.

I jumped to the side and swiped at her head with my paw, claws leaving bloody trails on her neck as she dodged. She snarled and took a step toward me, but Roman stepped between us with that ginormous body of his in an attempt to end the fight.

"Enough." Roman growled into both of our minds. Alphas had that ability, but it drained them so they tended to communicate without words in wolf form when possible.

"Stay out of this." I threatened, a bit of my humanity seeping back in at the words.

What the hell was I doing?

"Fighting for a mate is our right." Lilac snarled back.

Roman gave a harsh nod. My wolf-mind was certain he'd call it off and protect me if it came to that.

When he stepped back, Lilac launched toward me. My humanity vanished as my beastly side took control and I rolled out of the way. I was back on my feet nearly instantly, dodging her snapping teeth.

We circled each other a moment, and I looked for weaknesses.

Her eyes flicked to Roman, giving away her desire to impress him. She was worried about how this looked. She was

focused on coming off strong and confident, making me look weak.

An idea formed in my mind.

She snapped at my neck and I dodged to the side just before she would've caught me, purposefully slow. When she stalked toward me, I scrambled backward, extra effort going into making myself stumble.

The next few moments were more of the same.

Lilac swung, I dodged. She snapped, I jumped away. She lunged for me, I rolled to the side. It was a dance whose purpose she was blind to.

Confidence oozed off her as she stalked toward me, tail swishing with every step. Pride glittered in her eyes.

It would be her downfall.

She pounced. Instead of dodging again, I lunged for her throat. My teeth collided with her neck, barely breaking the skin. I wasn't there to kill her, just to assert my own dominance. Roman wasn't my territory, but he wasn't hers either. She had no right to start fights over him.

She snapped and snarled, her body jerking to both sides as she fought for a freedom that never came. I waited until she stopped fighting, then lifted my head and loosed a howl of victory. Roman joined in, but the other females just whined.

The moment I released her, Lilac went for the kill. Roman's massive body tackled her from the air, but her claws sliced over my back as he knocked her away. The Alpha's furious snarl shook the ground with the help of the power that slammed through the air, targeted at the honorless blonde wolf.

When Roman finally released her, Lilac stood on shaky paws. Her head bobbed at Roman in a gesture of acceptance and then she turned and ran with her tail between her legs.

The other females echoed her whine and took off in the same direction she'd gone.

Roman nudged me back to the place we'd been lying before the females showed up. I huffed at him, the burning and

bleeding on my back making me want to do anything but move. He bumped and bothered me until I plopped back down on my belly like he wanted.

When he tried to lick the wounds on my back, I snapped at him until he gave it up. My skin had already been touched by far too many men's tongues; the only other person to lick my wounds would be my mate. The injuries would scab overnight and I'd be fine.

My eyes drifted shut. There would be plenty to deal with when I shifted back, but for the moment, all I wanted to do was sleep.

NINE

“Wake up.” A large hand ran over the vibrant strawberry fur on my head. The voice belonging to the hand had quickly become my idea of the sexiest sound on the planet. It was a problem, how much I liked his voice. “I’ve never seen a pink wolf before.” Roman murmured. I shifted back, laying naked on my stomach on the dirt. Though the air was around us was icy cold, Roman and I had warmed the dirt enough that the temperature wasn’t terribly uncomfortable.

“Red.” I mumbled. My whole body hurt too freaking much to move.

Damn Lilac.

Roman chuckled.

“I’ve got to get back to help with breakfast and I won’t leave you here alone.” He was also naked, and obviously checking out my ass. Since I wasn’t in a hurry to get up, that was all he had to look at besides my legs and some side-boob. My hair was plastered to my back, and I winced at the idea of pulling it out of my wounds.

Which still felt wet, if I let myself think about them. They probably should’ve scabbed by then.

Shit.

“How are you feeling?” He reached for my hair, intending to move the tangled mass.

“Don’t.” I bit out the word. His hand paused a few inches from my skin, and his eyes narrowed. “I’m fine. I’ll deal with it.”

Roman leaned toward me, inhaling.

“Damn it, Henley. You’re still bleeding. Let me heal you.” He snarled at me. I glared back.

“I’m fine.”

“If you were fine you would’ve at least *started* recovering by now. You’ve got two options here. I can carry you back to my place or you can let me lick your wounds.”

I’d have protested, but the odds of me being able to walk without assistance were really quite thin. With a long, slow breath out, I finally said,

“You can carry me.”

Roman looked me up and down.

“Stop checking me out while I’m bleeding.” I snapped.

“I’m trying to come up with the best way to avoid hurting you. Although you do have a great ass.” He was quiet a moment. “I think reverse piggy-back might be our best bet.”

“Great.” My words were clipped. Pain made me pissy.

“If you’re not protesting, you must be in a lot of pain.” His expression was tight.

He didn’t want me to hurt.

Roman lifted me like I weighed nothing. The way he maneuvered me in an attempt not to hurt me was awkward and painful, but there really wasn’t a better option. He headed through the forest toward his place, holding me to him with one hand on my thigh and the other on my upper back.

I tried to ignore the way his muscles felt on my curves. The burning in my back made that task much easier. The forest was quiet, but there were likely still wolves scattered through it so we walked in silence for a few minutes. Well, he walked. I held on with my eyes squeezed shut.

“Can’t say this is how I imagined us spending our first hour naked together.” Roman remarked. I snorted.

“How did you imagine it, then?” I paused. “Wait. Don’t answer that. Pretty sure I can guess.”

Roman’s chuckle vibrated both our chests.

He was reluctant to leave me in the room I was using when we got back to his house. I convinced him with a reminder that he was supposed to help with breakfast and a promise that he

could look at my injuries afterward. I'd have a hard time dealing with them myself anyway.

Locking the door behind me, I started the shower and stepped in front of the mirror, staring at my reflection for a long moment.

My pale skin was tinted brown with dirt, strawberry hair crusted to my back with dried soap and blood. Bits of leaves were glued to my skin by all of the above and tangled in my hair so thoroughly I wasn't sure I'd be able to get them out.

Despite all of that, my eyes were brighter than I'd ever seen them. I looked alive—happy, even—and felt it too. The New York pack may have taken my freedom, but I didn't feel trapped. If anything, I felt more capable than ever.

Minus the back wound, of course.

I stepped under the water. It scalded me, and I swore as I cranked the heat down lower.

It took a long while to rinse my hair free of the muck and longer to ease it away from my wounds. The pain worsened the longer I spent on my feet and with every drop of water that hit my back. I should've let Roman bandage me before breakfast.

When I finally got out of the shower, my back hurt like a mother and I had a tension headache from the pain. On top of the Band-Aids and Neosporin, I needed ibuprofen badly.

As I slowly pulled on underwear, leggings, and a big black sweatshirt that hopefully wouldn't touch my back, I began down the stairs. The sweatshirt was already assaulting my wounds by the time I made it down, but a slow and painful search of the kitchen revealed the glorious medication I needed. After taking twice the recommended dose of ibuprofen and a little Tylenol too, I shuffled out to breakfast.

People chatted and grabbed food, sitting on blankets and camping chairs scattered all over the street. Everything looked quieter and more laid back than yesterday.

When I stepped outside the house, a few people stared at me. I heard someone say my name from somewhere in the

crowd, and when everyone started talking louder, discomfort rose within me. I steeled myself against it and scanned the people. Arla was the nearest one I recognized, so I made my way to her.

“How are the battle wounds?” Arla’s expression was somewhere between a smile and grimace as she twirled her spatula in the air. My sweatshirt was sticking to my weeping wounds, so I carefully tugged it away from my skin with a nearly-hidden wince. Arla pulled my heavy, wet braid to the side, tugged the neckline, and peeked inside. “Shit.” She let go and flipped a pancake. “We need to get you to a doctor.”

“Eh. I’ve had worse.” It was and wasn’t a lie. I’d been tortured; I knew pain well. I’d just never walked around with the injuries. Most of the time, part of the torture was having my wounds licked by whatever disturbed maniac was hurting me. “How’s Lilac?”

“Physically fine. You obviously weren’t out for blood, though I can’t say the same about her.” She glanced back in my direction with a look of pity on her face.

Man, I hated pity.

“I’m sure she just got caught up in the heat of the moment.”

Another lie.

Lilac had wanted me dead and Arla and I both knew it. For whatever reason, the chick had decided that despite Roman’s repeated rejection he was hers and she was willing to do anything to claim him.

Including kill me.

No point in dwelling on it.

My stomach growled, so I glanced at the start of the food line.

Too far to walk. Not worth it.

“Go sit down. I’ll bring you food.” Arla ordered.

Normally I would’ve argued, but the help was welcome this time.

“Thanks.”

Lilac sat in a group of she-wolves. At least a few of them had been among the girl pack that chased Roman the night before. I wasn't one to hide from my problems with other women, so I shuffled to them before finding a seat. Lilac wore a stony expression, swollen eyes shimmering with unshed tears and fury. She was one of the few others who had clearly showered before coming.

“You had no right to challenge me for a man who didn't want you.” I glowered at her, daring her to disagree.

“His scent changed for me.” She snapped. I'd planned on being civil, but she pissed me off.

“No, it changed for *me*.” My fists clenched at her total lack of apology. “You attacked me after I kicked your ass. It was a move without honor, respect, or loyalty, and the only man who would want a bitch willing to do something like that is an abusive douchebag who would make your life a living hell. I hope you rot in—“

“You made your point.” Roman's giant hand landed on my lower back, below the injuries, and steered me away.

I flipped her off over his shoulder, then shot him a heated glare.

“What are you doing?” I snapped.

“Preventing you from starting a war in my pack.”

I scoffed as he helped lower me to the grass off to the side of everyone else, but noticed the loaded plate in his other hand and my eyes locked on the food. He balanced the plate on my legs and his eyes swept up and down my figure.

“Do you own anything that isn't skin-tight?” he changed the subject, but the new subject pissed me off almost as much as the old one.

That sexy drawl would be the death of me.

“Do you ever listen to me when I tell you what I wear is none of your business?” I shot back.

“Listening and agreeing are two entirely separate beings.”

“You are infuriating.”

“So are you.”

Roman and I agreed on one thing, it seemed.

“You were supposed to wait for me in your room.” He dared me to argue.

Should've known I'd never backed down from a dare.

“So you could get out of letting people know you're into me?” I accused. He met my narrowed eyes with the same expression.

“So you wouldn't hurt yourself on the way here.”

“Liar.” I lifted a grape to my lips. Roman's eyes tracked my fingers. Icy wetness seeped into my leggings from the freezing grass beneath me but I didn't have the energy to care.

“Your hand is shaking.”

I dropped the grape back on the plate and set it on the grass. I needed a break from him, and the pack, and everything else. My body freaking hurt and I just wanted to be alone.

“Can I see your back?” he asked, before I could get up and leave.

“No.”

My sweatshirt was already stuck to my wounds again and I was too exhausted to keep sitting up, so I slowly lowered my back to the grass. A quiet hiss escaped me as the cold wetness began to soak through to my back. Roman's growl of frustration was so quiet I wondered if I imagined it.

“You sincerely think I wanted you to wait in your room so the pack wouldn't know I was into you.” He said.

The last time a guy other than Ledger had been into me I was nineteen. His dad was an enforcer, and when he found out his son liked me he'd convinced the Alpha to lock me in my apartment for three months straight. I'd survived on canned food and willpower, and when I finally emerged, the guy

who'd been into me beat me so bloody I couldn't get out of bed for days.

So yeah. I didn't think he'd want his pack to know he wanted me, and I didn't deny it. Probably couldn't pull off that lie.

Roman stood up, walking to the nearest picnic table. He stepped up onto the bench and then to the tabletop. He had everyone's attention before he called out,

"Everyone, listen up."

The neighborhood went silent. Wind in the trees was the only sound.

"I'm chasing Henley Clark. Gossip about it to your heart's desire because she's it for me. End of story." He stepped off the table and strode back to my side. I threw my arm over my face, still laying on the grass. Looking him in the eyes after that announcement would make me blush, and I hated blushing.

"Seriously?" I muttered as he sat down beside me.

"You can feel whatever you want for me, but I sure as hell won't let you believe I don't want you." He gently caught my wrist and used the grip to pull my arm off my face. "Now, show me your back."

"No." He looked like he was going to argue. "I'm not wearing a bra and don't feel like flashing my boobs at the pack." I clarified. Why I felt the need to do so was beyond me.

Roman leaned over me to grab my shoulder and hip and then carefully rolled me so the front of my body was propped up on his leg. He tugged my freezing braid over my shoulder and went silent for a minute when he saw the way my sweatshirt was plastered to my back.

He slipped those giant fingers of his under the bottom hem of the sweatshirt and carefully tried to pull the fabric from my back. I breathed in sharply at the red-hot pain and his thigh tensed under me.

“If I’d realized how badly she hurt you while we were in the forest, I would’ve ended her.” His voice was low and deadly, his thumb gently trailing over the injury-free portion of my lower back. Luckily he spoke quiet enough that no one else could hear because I was already alienated enough.

“Hurt people tend to hurt other people.” It was a line my mom used to explain to her eight-year-old why her father wasn’t around. One I’d learned was a fact when I watched the life drain from my mother’s eyes at the hands of Alpha who’d lost his mind when he lost his mate.

“That’s not an excuse.”

“It’s an explanation.”

“That doesn’t make it right.” His frustration was building.

“No, it doesn’t.” On that, we agreed. “But it doesn’t always mean they need to die either.”

“Most people have a hard time making me angry, Henley. You’ve got a knack for it.”

“Most people must be boring.” I tried to roll off of him and bit back a cry of pain.

That wasn’t happening.

Roman gently rolled me back to my back. I tried not to show my surprise at how well he prevented the movement from hurting me.

“Alpha!” a little kid came running up to Roman. “Can you show us how to fast you shift?” the little guy had bright eyes and an excited smile.

“Sure.” Roman stood. Our eyes met for a long moment. “I’ll be back in ten minutes to disinfect and bandage your back. Wait here and I’ll help you up the stairs too.”

“I’m fine.” I protested. Another lie.

I moved to get up and Roman lifted me to my feet as easily as if I was a stuffed animal. It didn’t hurt even a little.

“Ten minutes.” He warned.

The little boy pulled on Roman's hand then, and the two of them left. I may or may not have stared at Roman's ass as he walked away. I'll admit to nothing.

For a few minutes, I just stood there and people-watched. The crowds had thinned, and based on all the yawning I'd seen I assumed a bunch of the people left to take naps. That sounded great to me too, so I slowly made my way back to the Alpha's house. Getting up the stairs without Roman would be a real bitch, but I'd survive.

The sound of a knock on my door jerked me out of sleep. My heartbeat quickened, and I clutched the blanket in my fists.

"It's me." Roman's rumbly voice halted my panic.

"Come in." I lifted my head without moving the rest of me. Roman opened the door and stepped inside, still dirty but holding a grocery bag. "Hi." He closed the door behind himself.

"I told you to wait for me to help you up." He said.

"I'm not into following orders."

The corner of his lips tilted upward.

"How are you feeling?"

"I've been better. What did you bring?"

Please say stronger painkillers.

"Antibiotic ointment and Band-Aids." He lifted the grocery bag and came into the room. Between the grocery bag, his dirty sweatpants and baseball cap, and the streaks of dried mud on various parts of his bare chest and back, the dude looked more homeless than wealthy.

Why did I like that so much?

He came over and lifted me off the bed like I was a little kid, flipping on the light with his elbow before setting me down on the counter and putting the bag down by the sink.

"Don't remember inviting you to manhandle me." I muttered, wincing as I moved a bit.

Roman inhaled deeply and his eyebrows wrinkled together.

“Are you *still* bleeding?” He looked concerned.

“I don’t really want to know.”

If I knew, I’d have to acknowledge how bad the injury was. If the options were going to the hospital or letting Roman lick my wounds, I’d have to suck it up and choose the latter. The hospital would ask questions I couldn’t answer and send bills my uninsured ass couldn’t pay.

“We need to get this off.” When Roman gestured to my sweatshirt, I grimaced. Not only was it crusted to my skin, but I was still braless. Being half-naked in a room with Roman didn’t sound like the safest plan if I wanted to avoid mating.

“No thanks.”

“That wasn’t a question.”

“Yeah, because I’m not taking it off.” I was ready to go to war over this.

Roman leaned toward me.

“I smell fresh blood, Hen. If you’re still bleeding you probably won’t stop, so one way or another I’m getting this sweatshirt off of you.”

His arms moved to rest on either side of me, our chests barely an inch apart.

I didn’t let myself breathe deeply.

“Get me a towel.” I said, lifting my hand to give his chest a little push. He didn’t move away from me, but reached over to the hook on the wall and tugged one of the towels off. When he handed it to me, I held it to my lap.

“Are you comfortable with me helping you myself or should I call Arla?” he checked. The fact that he’d asked made me feel all warm and weird.

Worry that she was with Lilac or judging me for my fight over Roman had me saying,

“Don’t call Arla.”

Roman helped me turn so I faced the mirror, giving him better access to my back. His fingers were soft and careful as he began pulling the sweater away from my injuries.

“Does that hurt?”

“It’s fine.” My hands clenched and my eyes shut tightly. “I shouldn’t have put anything on.”

“You didn’t have much of a choice. If you’d come out of my house topless, I’d have killed the male half of my pack.”

I only half-believed him.

Another gentle tug of the fabric had me wheezing,

“Holy shit. Distract me.”

“How many guys have you kissed?” He asked.

That was his way to distract me? Seriously?

“New distraction.” I changed the subject. No need to rehash our pasts. Particularly because the answer would make him want to kill things.

“Answer the question.” His tugging at the fabric made *me* want to kill things.

“It doesn’t matter.” I snapped.

“It does.”

“Fine. I’ve kissed six guys, but I was only willing and eager for two of them.” I glared at the Alpha in the mirror as he hid his emotions fairly well. “Why? Does that make me less pure or some shit? Regret announcing your interest to the pack already?”

Roman let go of my sweatshirt and slid up onto the countertop, his legs facing the opposite direction of mine so our eyes met. I waited for him to yell at me.

“I’m trying to get to know you.” He said it so calmly it threw me off-kilter.

“Then stop.”

“Not happening.” He caught my hand off the counter and lifted it to his lips, pressing a kiss to my wonky knuckles. “I’ll

win you over eventually.”

Why the hell did a kiss to my fingers turn me on so much?

“You have issues.” I shut my eyes and gritted my teeth again as he went back to work on the fabric. He finished tugging the sweatshirt off my wounds and then eased it off my arms and over my head. I pulled the towel over my chest so I wasn’t sitting there entirely topless.

Roman lifted my braid away from my back and his eyes raked over my injuries. He slid the braid over my shoulder, and the grocery bag ruffled.

“It might sting.”

His fingers brushed the gel-like substance onto my wounds. Surprisingly enough, it didn’t hurt at all. The light pressure of his giant fingers was sort of nice. When he was done, he capped the tube and grabbed the bandages. I missed the contact immediately.

“You should probably have a doctor look at this.” He told me.

“And tell him that I got in a fight with a wolf?”

“We’ve got a surgeon in the pack. He’s a good guy, Takes care of our people when they’re seriously injured, and is usually willing to give medical advice.”

“Why didn’t you start with that?”

Roman’s poker face was strong. I struggled to come up with a reason he wouldn’t want me to meet the doctor, and then it hit me.

“He’s not mated.”

Yeah, Roman’s grudging expression told me that was definitely it. I rolled my eyes.

“He can keep it in his pants long enough to make sure I don’t need stitches. Hold off on the bandages and call him.”

Though he didn’t look thrilled about it, Roman left me on the counter and went outside to call the doctor. A few minutes later, he came back in with a Grey’s-Anatomy-level doctor—

attractive and young with great hair. Roman scowled at me, probably noticing the way I'd checked out the doctor. Who, I realized, was staring at me with a stunned expression on his face that far outweighed my own slight interest.

"Henley, this is Grant Parsen." Roman crossed the bathroom to stand beside me, eyeing the doctor with suspicion. "Grant, this is Henley Clark."

"Hello." Grant's gaze was intense as he held out his hand. Did I want to shake it? Not at all. But he was my best chance at getting my back fixed without letting Roman heal me, so a handshake was a worthwhile sacrifice.

"I know I smell weird. Try breathing through your mouth." I recommended as I shook his hand. He held on longer than was normal, and I pulled my fingers from his grip.

Roman made a noise of disagreement and Grant's face morphed into a dazzling smile.

"There are many words to describe your scent, but weird is not one of them. You smell like everything I never knew I wanted."

Holy flowery compliment, Batman.

I'd rather be gagged with a toothpick than try to respond to that. Unfortunately, there wasn't one around.

Roman stepped closer to me, his hand landing on my thigh as he shot Grant a look that practically dared him to hit on me again. After he'd announced to the pack that he was chasing me, it was pretty surprising that Grant was willing to declare his interest so openly. Males were territorial bastards, and Alphas were worse than most males.

I'd have pushed his hand off my thigh if Grant hadn't been there. But letting Roman mark me as his territory could prevent the doctor from doing something I'd have to punch him in the face for, so I left it.

"My back looks pretty bad." I changed the subject, trying to get him out of there as fast as possible.

“Let me see.” Grant leaned his face so close the tip of his nose literally touched my wounds, and I jumped a bit. Roman’s fingers dug into my thigh and he growled, his tone warning the doctor. I shot him a warning look of his own in the mirror.

“You definitely need stitches.” Grant announced, straightening but not stepping away from me. His close proximity was crazy uncomfortable. “Unless you’ll let me lick your wounds.”

“Stitches it is.” I said.

If someone was licking my wounds, it sure as hell wasn’t him.

“Hmm.” Grant ran his finger down my spine. I jumped away again, further this time. The movement hurt but I’d take pain over uninvited touching.

“Don’t—“

“If you touch her again you’ll leave here in a body bag.” Roman interrupted my request that he not touch me. His eyes were wolfy and there was a gravel to his voice that said he was close to shifting. The doctor acted as if the Alpha hadn’t said a thing.

“I’ll be back with my medical kit.” Grant gave me a smile that was probably supposed to be calming, but the dude had started to creep me out so it had the opposite effect. He left me and Roman alone in the bathroom, and Roman snarled.

“Grant will attack you if he catches the scent of your blood. He’s barely managing to stay human.”

“I’m still bleeding, remember? He’s already smelled my blood. It’ll be fine. It’s not like we have another option.”

“Let me lick your wounds.” Roman’s eyes burned into me. “Stitches will take weeks, if not months to heal. I can take care of you right now.”

“I’m getting the stitches.” I adjusted the towel covering my chest. “If it bothers you too much to be in here while Grant is,

you can leave. I'm sure Arla or one of the female enforcers have a few minutes to sit with me."

His jaw clenched.

"I'm ready." Grant announced, coming back inside the bathroom before Roman had a chance to respond.

I noticed Roman's eyes had shifted again and realized there was a slight chance he could be right. And if Grant *did* lose control somehow and wolfed out in my bathroom, we'd have serious issues. To be safe, I said,

"Let's do it in the kitchen. I'd rather sit in a chair."

"Good call." Grant nodded his approval, pride emanating from the man.

I was officially disgusted with him.

Roman lifted me off the counter and hauled me down the stairs, careful not to jostle me. All signs of his anger were gone, replaced with a stiff expression and a clenched jaw.

Was he nervous?

Arla, Jamie, and London were all in the kitchen washing dishes when Roman and I finally made it there. I'm sure we were quite the sight. Roman lifting me like a doll, me topless beside the towel keeping me modest, and Grant hauling his big-ass doctor bag.

"What's going on?" Arla looked between us.

"He's giving me stitches," I gestured to the doctor, and then to Roman. "He's the moral support."

Arla shot a questioning look at her brother, whose stony expression gave nothing away.

Roman set me down on a barstool and I leaned forward, wincing as the movement felt like it was tearing my skin even with the stuff Roman put on it. One of my arms held up my towel, the other rested on the cold granite countertop.

Grant chatted with the Alpha female and her enforcers while he got his supplies out. My eyes met Roman's again, the blue orbs as dark as I'd ever seen them before. I got the feeling he

was worried, though the emotion didn't seem to fit the big bad wolf.

"I have to clean your injuries. It's going to hurt." Grant warned only a moment before searing pain assaulted me. My vision blurred, and I began to sway. Roman snapped something, and Grant snapped back.

A small, soft hand took one of mine and squeezed.

"We've got you." Jamie promised as London grabbed my other hand. My teeth clenched but I tried to smile anyway. I'm sure it was adorable.

"Alright, I'm ready to start stitching. What kind of alcohol are you going to numb yourself with?"

"I don't drink with other people." My eyes stayed shut tight. That was a personal rule of mine I'd instated after getting drunk in Kyler's nightclub and being such a bitch to one of the other bartenders that he'd filed a restraining order.

"You'll want to make an exception for this." The doctor warned.

"Just do it."

I waited for the pain.

With a heavy sigh, he warned Arla and Jamie to hold me down and reached for his tools. I assumed it was a needle but didn't want to see what would be sewing my skin together.

The first stitch was the worst pain I'd ever felt, but the second quickly outdid it. Three stitches in, I was about to stop Grant and beg for vodka but he paused.

"Back up." Roman's voice was deadly.

"What's wrong?" I demanded, teeth clenched and eyes squeezed shut.

"He's struggling not to shift." One of the girls said.

My head spun.

"I'm fine." Grant cleared his throat. It was thick with his wolf.

The entourage argued for a minute before the needle broke my skin once more. It stopped again just before the sound of a tool clanging on the ground. The thin, curved side of the needle collided painlessly with my lower back.

A crash sounded behind me and I nearly fell off as I turned my chair. Jamie and London kept me upright.

Roman was in human form, wrestling the massive brown wolf that had to be Grant. The Alpha's arms wrapped around the wolf's neck and his snarl rivaled that of the giant wolf even with a human throat. The Alpha power radiating from him was almost enough to suffocate me from across the room; I couldn't imagine what it felt like to be in actual physical contact with all that power.

"Submit." Roman demanded, pinning the wolf to the floor with brute strength. Grant shifted back into a man for just long enough to yell,

"She's mine." And then he shifted back, snapping at the Alpha.

Roman's elbow came around and whipped him in the nose. Grant's wolf head snapped backward and then rolled from one side to the other as he attempted to regain his bearings.

With the wolf subdued for a moment, Roman tossed the furry beast over his shoulder and charged out the back door, slamming it behind him. The house shook with the impact. Arla hauled out of the house behind her brother.

I tried to get off the chair, and the girls caught me before I could face-plant. I wobbled a bit and the needle swung away from my skin before making its way back to hit me lightly. When I realized it was still hanging off my back, nausea rolled through me. I lunged for the sink just in time to puke out the contents of my stomach.

Jamie snipped the needle from whatever it hung off while London held my braid away from my torn skin.

"What happened?" I slid down the cabinets, fighting not to pass out as I sat on the floor.

“Grant lost control when he smelled your blood. I think the stuff he cleaned off before trying to stitch you had been blocking the scent.” Jamie said.

“None of the other guys have lost control because of my scent.” I protested weakly. “None of them even followed me while I was in wolf form last night.”

The girls were silent, so I lifted my head to see them locked in what looked like a silent argument.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Roman fought two guys who followed you last night. The other twenty-eight ran away after watching.” London spilled the beans. “He’s had to subdue nine others who went into a frenzy the first time they caught your scent, and at least fifty besides them have come to him asking to meet you. None have gotten permission, obviously.”

I stared at her, stunned into silence.

“He ordered us not to tell you any of that.” Jamie shot London an exasperated stare.

“But Arla is our Alpha first, and she thinks you deserve to know.” London challenged.

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes.

My scent had never affected people like this before, at least not that I’d ever been told. Most packs were very small, with only a few unmated males at the most. Maybe that was why the impact of my scent seemed so much greater.

“I need some air.” I struggled with my wobbling legs, still in more pain than I’d like to admit. The girls helped me to my feet and I murmured my thanks.

“There’s a path out in the backyard. Everyone pretty much steers clear of it because they know it’s Roman’s.” Jamie was a lifesaver.

“Thanks. Both of you.” I shuffled out into the forest.

TEN

The icy air outside was refreshing against my clammy skin. Sunlight shone through the branches of trees overhead, warming the parts of my skin it touched. It was sometime in the early afternoon; I was too out of it to pay close attention.

Birds flew away as I passed their trees, sensing me as a predator and chirping warnings to their friends. I'd always envied the freedom of their wings. My paws felt like chains on occasion.

I only wandered the forest for a few minutes before my body ached too much. Sitting down on the trunk of a fallen tree, I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sky.

What was going on between Roman and me? Based on everything going on it didn't seem like I could keep ignoring it.

In wolf form, we'd practically claimed each other. I'd fought for him and he'd fought for me. Plus, he was just as possessive and protective of me in human form.

Even if I was interested in Roman, I wasn't ready for a relationship. I'd only been free from Ledger for what, eight months? The horrible memories from my time with the Colorado pack hadn't gone anywhere, and I wasn't sure they ever would.

Maybe when a year had gone by I'd feel differently.

But maybe not.

My nose twitched. A sharp smell hit me; that of a werewolf I didn't know.

Roman's pack stayed away from this path.

"Hello, Henley." A large hand wrapped around my mouth, trapping my arms to my sides and yanking me backward. The backs of my calves scraped against the tree trunk as he ripped me over it so fast I saw stars yet again.

This was not my day.

I slammed my elbow into his gut and he released me long enough for me to let out an ear-piercing scream that would hopefully alert *someone* I was in danger. I'd take a horny unmated male over this asshole any day.

"Shut up." He tossed me over his shoulder. The movement hurt so bad I legitimately blacked out for a few seconds. When I opened my eyes back up, he was running us through the forest. Blood slid like water up my neck and into my hair as I hung upside down. It dripped to the ground, leaving an unintentional scent trail that I prayed someone would catch.

A loud, angry howl echoed from the other side of the forest. I recognized the source and knew with certainty that he was coming for me. And that he'd kill anyone who tried to take me from him.

Chills shook me as blood seeped faster. The few stitches I'd had were definitely torn. My consciousness would follow quickly as the bouncing made my injuries worse and worse.

"My Alpha will kill you when he catches you. Leave me here and you might live." My teeth chattered as I spoke.

The guy just laughed at me, an ugly sound from an ugly soul.

Another howl filled the air, this one much closer and much more furious. He'd caught the scent of my blood and realized it was getting stronger.

I lost consciousness again, this time for a few minutes. When I came to again, I was lying in a heap on the dirt while Roman and my abductor circled each other. Both were in human form, both bleeding in places and both radiating Alpha power. I'd seen my Alpha wrestle a wolf in human form, so my bets were on him.

"She belongs with my pack. The pack she came from." The male I didn't know snarled. My heart about stopped.

The pack I came from?

"She belongs with me." Roman lunged for the man, Alpha power drenching the air thick enough to choke on it. Muscle met muscle as they collided.

They wrestled for a minute before Roman's arm wrapped around the man's throat. The man kicked, fought, and shifted, but Roman's arm didn't budge.

"Don't kill him." I called out, voice hoarse and shaky.

"He challenged me for you." Roman snarled at me.

I met his furious gaze with my own fire and repeated,

"Don't kill him."

The man's body went slack. Roman and I faced off, both glaring. Me on the ground, him in the position of complete and utter power.

He dropped the man and stalked toward me, shifting back into wolf form on his way.

I knew immediately what his intention was, and I'd felt violated every time I'd had my wounds healed that way before.

"Don't." I warned.

My big black wolf scowled at me. He lowered his head to my back and inhaled deeply, taking my scent into his lungs. His nose trailed up to my neck and his tongue stroked my cheek.

"No." I knew what he was doing, trying to soften me up so I'd agree. I'd lost a lot of blood but the injuries would heal on their own eventually.

Wouldn't they?

Roman whined and licked my face again. I opened my eyes and saw the emotion in my black wolf's gaze.

He was scared for me.

That was new. I couldn't remember anyone being scared for me before. Not since the night my mother hid me in a closet while our pack was slaughtered.

Past experience waged war with present pain and uncertainty.

The stitches had been a bust, so letting someone heal me was really my best bet at recovery. If I was letting someone's tongue touch my skin, it needed to be someone I at least somewhat trusted. And ironically, the New York Alpha was the person I trusted most in the entire pack.

“Fine.”

His tongue met my skin. I'd expected it to hurt or at least sting with discomfort. What I hadn't expected was the cooling, satin feel. Having my wounds licked by the New York Alpha was much different than when anyone else healed me.

A sigh of pleasure slipped through my lips as the pain lessened. Roman's chest hummed with pride as he continued licking the wounds, soothing my pain far more effectively than the meds I'd taken earlier.

With the injuries vanishing, my body relaxed enough for exhaustion and blood loss to set in. My eyes shut, and I drifted off.

I woke up in bed with my black wolf. Roman was curled up beside me on a mattress that smelled of him. In my sleep, I'd burrowed into his furry side, his head resting against mine. His tongue licked up my spine in a slow, sensual pattern every few moments, turning my body to mush with every stroke.

Damn, I wanted him.

His tongue trailed up my skin again and I couldn't help the moan that slipped from me.

“What are you doing to me?” I groaned.

He licked me again, torturously slow. I shoved at his big hairy face and he gave me a toothy grin.

“Shift back.” I ordered. Roman didn't hesitate to do so, even going so far as to lick my back with his human tongue. I shrieked and pushed him away, and he burst out laughing.

I'd never seen him full-out laugh before, and the sound warmed me from within.

“I definitely didn't agree to sleep in the same bed as you.” I scowled at him, trying to rebuild whatever was left of the wall

I'd put between us before.

"I tried to leave. You started crying."

Shit.

"I was in pain." I protested. Even I knew it was a weak protest.

"It's probably for the better. I would've killed the Alpha who tried to take you from me if I left, and you want him alive for some reason." Roman settled back into the pillow we'd been sharing. It smelled like both of us, and damn, our scents smelled heavenly together. "You're cute when you're asleep."

Cute? I was never cute. Hot, sexy, ferocious, terrifying, sure. But cute? Hell no.

I grabbed the pillow we weren't lying on and smacked him in the face with it, sliding out of bed. When I stood, my legs refused to hold me up. The floor flew at my face, and Roman barely managed to catch me around the waist before I ended up kissing the carpet.

"Easy, Hen. Your wounds have sealed but you lost a lot of blood."

I cursed myself for liking the way he insisted on shortening my name.

"Don't call me that. I haven't agreed to anything," I gestured between the two of us. "And I won't with an Alpha. Alpha power corrupts people."

"So run the pack with me. Keep me in check. If it goes to my head, knock me down a few levels."

"Run the pack? Are you insane?" I stood again, grabbing the dresser off to the side to stay on my feet. "I won't be an Alpha, Roman. I hate Alphas. They're abusive and cruel and you can give up on chasing me right the hell now if you're doing it with the assumption that I'm ever going to lead this pack with you."

My braid swung over my shoulder and brushed against my back as I practically ran across the room. Roman beat me to

the door, standing in the doorway like the six and a half foot wall of muscles he was.

“I’m not going to stop pursuing you. Whether you like it or not, you’re it for me.”

I put a hand on my hip.

“Whether I like it or not? How sweet.” The sarcasm was heavy in my voice.

“Didn’t mean it like that.”

“Careful, Romeo. Your Alpha is showing.” I gave his right shoulder a little push, and he let me move him out of my way so I could slip through the door. “Thanks for healing me, but I’m going to pass on mating.”

I crossed the hall to my room. Though I still had on my leggings from before the stitches and attack and everything, the towel that had covered me was gone and someone had dressed me in one of Roman’s t-shirts. The owner of it, if I had to guess.

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, I left again. Roman was waiting outside my door with a bag of takeout food.

“When did you have time to go pick that up?” I wondered, accepting the bag.

“Ordered it when you started waking up.” His shoulders lifted, and he walked with me down the stairs. “Where are we going?”

“You said you didn’t kill that other Alpha. Wherever he is.”

“No.” He shot it down immediately.

“I wasn’t asking permission.”

“I didn’t spare him so you could get friendly with him, Hen.”

“Sure you did. You just didn’t realize that was why I asked.” I shot him a devious smile.

“You didn’t ask, you ordered. Didn’t anyone ever teach you not to give an Alpha an order?” he opened the front door for me. I stepped outside, and he had no problem making up the ground I’d gained.

“Didn’t anyone ever teach you that Alphas don’t obey orders?”

“Touché.” Roman’s lips tilted upward.

“Alright, where is he?” I looked around the front yard. A few werewolves lingered outside their mansions, some kids running around up the street.

“I remember telling you I wasn’t taking you to him.” Roman said.

I scowled at him and shut my eyes, focusing on my nose. With a little effort, I managed to shift that piece of me on its own. Scents lit up like colors, and the other Alpha wasn’t difficult to find. I opened my eyes and followed it down the street, Roman staying at my side, swearing under his breath.

“I can’t even smell him from here. How can you?”

“Mad skills.” I flashed him a smirk.

Roman opened the door of the mansion his people were keeping the other Alpha in, and I stepped inside. Jamie stood in the kitchen in workout clothes, dumping protein powder into a blender. Her eyebrows lifted and she pulled a wireless headphone from her ear.

“I thought you weren’t letting her near him.” She spoke to Roman.

“I’m right here.” I gave Jamie a little wave. “And unless Roman drops an assload of Alpha power on me, I’m talking to that guy. So what’ll it be?” I looked up at Roman, daring him.

“We both know that would shatter the tentative trust you have in me.” He met my stare with one of his own.

Smart man.

“But if you’re going in, I’m going to be standing between you and him at all times.”

I folded my arms, narrowing my eyes and daring him to back down. He didn't.

Ultimately he wasn't really asking a lot. He was chasing me, so my protection would be one of his main priorities. I could appreciate that.

"Fine. That's fair." I nodded once.

"This way." Roman led me into the large garage. The place was empty other than a man chained into a chair that looked like it had been drilled to the ground so it couldn't move. He smelled of his own blood but didn't look like he'd been tortured. After experiencing it, I'd never be able to stand by torture.

"Are you finally going to tell me why I'm here?" The man drawled.

Roman stepped between me and the other Alpha, and I took a couple steps of my own to the side so I could see him.

"What pack do you run?"

My stomach clenched with nerves.

I wanted to punch the man's cocky smirk right off his face.

"So that's why."

"The New York Alpha spared you because I asked him to. I imagine he'd be happy to challenge you for your pack, and he already beat you once. So you can answer my question, or I can change my mind about wanting you alive."

The man worked his jaw, face reddening.

"Is that a threat?"

"Not at all." I gave him a cold smile. "It's a fact."

He decided he was willing to answer my questions.

"Georgia."

I swallowed hard, and said,

"That pack was wiped out thirteen years ago. How did you know that's where I grew up?"

“How easy do you think it is to kill every single member of a pack, Henley Renee Clark?” His smirk was back, as if his earlier outburst hadn’t happened at all. Panic rose within me.

“Who survived?”

Please let it be my grandparents.

I’d seen my mother die, I’d watched the life leave her, but my grandparents hadn’t been there. If they had lived...

“Unchain me and I’ll be happy to tell you.”

Roman looked at me, a warning in his eyes. Understanding the need not to question my Alpha in front of this man, I tilted my head to the door. Roman led me out into the rest of the house with a hand on my lower back and his body close behind mine, protecting me. He waited until the door was shut and we were on the other side of the living room, where the Alpha shouldn’t be able to hear us.

“No.”

“You don’t get it.” My fists clenched.

“So explain it to me.”

“I don’t just give people pieces of my past, Roman. It hurts too much.”

“I understand.” His eyes softened. “But I’m telling you as an Alpha who cares about his pack and has to think about the way other leaders perceive me that I can’t release him without a damn good reason.”

“I know.” I turned to the wall behind me, eyes closing. He was right; letting this Alpha go would look insanely bad. Any other pack rulers who heard about it would think he was weak, and I’d seen the shit that followed a weak Alpha. It was never good.

But I had to know.

“He’s probably lying. The Georgia pack has a reputation, and it’s not a good one.”

“I know.”

Could I do it? Let Roman in?

If I had to do let someone in, it may as well be him. He hadn't betrayed me yet.

I turned back around and met his eyes.

Why did he have to look so damn understanding?

"I grew up in Georgia. The pack kept my secret quiet and close. They didn't let any outsiders in, and no one left. A few weeks after my eighth birthday, the South Carolina Alpha lost his mate. He was friends with my Alpha at the time, so he came to visit to get away from his house for a few days.

"He was drunk off his ass when the shifting time came around. He shifted, and we didn't. He challenged his friend the next morning, killed him, and massacred the rest of the pack. Someone told him I was the reason for the pack's immunity to shifting, so he took me into his pack and dragged me back to South Carolina. I saw a lot of bodies but not all of them, and I was only eight. What if my grandparents survived? Or my aunt and uncle? Or a cousin?"

My fingers were tangled in Roman's t-shirt, but I didn't remember grabbing him. When had that happened?

His arms wrapped around my back, and he pulled me closer.

"Don't hug me." I smacked him on the arm. "Let him go. I have to know."

I could see the war in his eyes, and I could tell the moment he made up his mind. He was chasing me, which meant his beastly side was pressing him to do whatever it took to convince me to mate with him. But he was still an Alpha.

"I'm sorry, Hen. Letting him go would endanger the pack, and I can't risk that."

I stepped back and Roman released his hold on me.

His reasoning was logical, but it still freaking hurt.

"Fine. Kill him. But stay the hell away from me. I shouldn't have trusted you."

I spun on my heels and stalked out of the house. I wouldn't cry, but I would figure out a way to get to Georgia. I'd find out about my family if it killed me. Until then, I just had to sit back while the New York Pack's money piled up in my account.

ELEVEN

“Look, Henley, I have to agree with my brother on this one.” Arla lifted her hands in surrender. “If you’re leaving, three enforcers are going with you. You’ve been attacked way too many times since you’ve been here.”

“You think I’ve already forgotten?” I leaned over her desk. “I’m not saying I don’t want the protection. I’m saying at least one of the enforcers needs to be a girl. I like your enforcers, but the ones Roman is sending are bumps on a log. They’re seriously messing with my tips, the way they sit at the bar and glare at every dude who wants a drink.”

Arla sighed.

It had been three weeks since Roman killed the Georgia Alpha, and he’d come to my door eight times while I’d been home and sent me a barrage of texts. I had yet to find out what he was coming around for, but I assumed it had something to do with his desire to mate with me.

As if I could ever mate with someone who thought the pack was more important than me.

“Alright, we’ll send two guys and two girls.”

“It’s a night shift, so I don’t see how anyone from another pack could possibly try to grab me. One guy and one girl should be fine.” I countered.

“Go live your life. I’ll deal with it.” She swept her hand toward the door.

“Thanks.” I turned on my heels and stalked out of the room.

With the Alpha my declared enemy, human interaction had become my only solace. Hopefully Bodhi would be working the bar with me; he was my favorite human and humans had started outranking werewolves as far as I was concerned.

Jamie and London met me at the elevator after I changed and grabbed my shoes. Kyler and Oliver were outside, in the SUV we’d take to the nightclub.

The girls and I chatted about surface-level things on the way there—the weather was nice, and we all agreed that wearing our hair down was more comfortable than up because of the headaches we got from hair-ties. Small-talk wasn't something I appreciated but it wasn't horrible with the girls.

The first half of my shift went quickly. It was busy, just the way I liked it. Around midnight, Lilac walked in with three other she-wolves at her side. The way her eyes flashed to me the moment she walked in gave away the reason she was there.

“Trouble incoming.” London muttered, tossing back the shot of tequila she'd asked for half an hour ago but hadn't touched.

“Maybe she wants to talk.” Jamie suggested. She was sipping her second sidecar, her eyes brighter and happier than normal.

“And maybe she wants to slit Henley's throat.” London accepted the second shot I handed her.

“She wouldn't be the first, nor will she be the last.” I crossed the bar to disperse a set of drinks I'd just made and got caught up filling orders for a bit. When I went back to the girls, they were watching Lilac grind on some human guy. She was going hot and heavy, and though I hadn't been pouring her drinks I knew she was deep in the glasses.

I stepped back to the girls, finding them mid-conversation.

“She drinks to hide from her problems.” London slammed down a third shot. She looked a bit more relaxed, but nowhere near as buzzed as either of the other werewolf chicks we knew.

“No, she drinks because it makes her feel lighter.” Jamie smiled. It did the same for her, clearly.

“Well, I drink to hide from my problems.” London held her hand out for two more shots.

“That, we have in common.” I said as I handed her the shots.

“Oh no.” Jamie groaned. London and I spun to see what she was panicking about and noticed an angry Alpha striding

toward Lilac. She giggled when she saw him, stumbling against Roman's chest and wrapping her arms around his neck. Surging forward, she pressed her lips to his.

I turned away to grab someone a drink, my stomach clenched like it was a fist, and Roman was carrying her out of the nightclub over his shoulder when I glanced backward. His eyes met mine, alight with his wolf.

Fury and pain warred within me. Clearly, turning him down was the right move on my part. That didn't make it hurt any less.

"How many times is she going to throw herself at him?" Jamie leaned her back up against the bar for support.

"As many times as it takes, apparently." London glowered after the two of them.

I left the girls to their drinks, halfheartedly making my rounds to refill glasses and take new orders.

"Aww crap." I hear London mutter as I walked past her. "What's Kyler doing here? He never bartends."

"He owns this place." Jamie reminded her.

My boss strolled behind the bar, shooting me a grin when I stepped past him.

"Has anyone ever told you that you look dangerous when you curl your hair?" Kyler asked.

"Surprisingly, no." I glanced over my shoulder at the man, who was rolling the sleeves of his black button-down up to his elbows. He'd already tied an apron around his waist and tucked a towel in his back pocket. "They should, though."

"I hear you turned down the Alpha." Kyler grabbed a cup and poured himself two fingers of bourbon, tossing it back in one fell swoop. "You've got balls."

"Boobs, actually."

"Which look great in that shirt, by the way." He walked with me to my side of the bar.

"I know."

Kyler laughed.

We filled orders together. He wasn't like some owners who had no idea how to work behind the bar. He knew a bunch of complicated drinks that hadn't made our menu, an impressive feat for a guy who couldn't have ever worked nights before meeting me.

"How long did you bartend?" I asked him, when there was a break in customers.

"Through most of college. My pops didn't grow up with money, so even though I did he made sure I knew how to work. I come here and work a shift every now and then when I start to miss him or people call in sick. What about you?"

"I've never done anything else. Mom owned the only bar in the town I grew up in, and I was her little assistant. When Alphas started fighting over me, they pitied me enough to send me to their packs' bars so I'd at least have something a little familiar."

"Bet you know all the best secret drink mixes." Kyler grinned. I flashed him a mischievous smile.

"I can tell a person's favorite drink after just one conversation with them, too."

He laughed.

"Alright, read me." He held out his hands and gestured to his chest.

I looked him up and down. A customer waved us over.

"I'll take them. Make my favorite drink, Wonder Woman." Kyler winked and left me to make his drink. It was a no-brainer, really. I mixed it and handed it over when he came strolling back.

Kyler sipped it to determine the taste first, as I'd expected he would. Some people, like London, would gulp an entire drink down as fast as possible. I was like that. Others preferred to really taste their drinks.

"I think this is the best sex on a beach I've ever had." His lips twisted upward.

“I aim to please.” I bowed.

He laughed again and I ducked away to serve another customer. I’d noticed Jamie and London watching our interactions and could practically feel them judging me for flirting with the owner, but I liked Kyler. He was chill. And I’d been straight with Roman when I turned him down; it wasn’t like I was cheating on him.

“So what’s your favorite drink?” He asked the next time I was close.

“Vodka straight from the bottle.”

“You’re hardcore.”

“Must be the boobs.” I kept a straight face and he laughed.

“Must be.”

My shift went quickly with Kyler there for amusement. In another life, I could’ve seen myself falling for him. He’d be a fun mate. Unfortunately, in this life I’d already met Roman.

When I got home after my shift, I jumped in the shower to rinse off the sweat-and-booze smell I always felt like I left work with. I heard a knock at my front door and ignored it. They knocked again, and again.

It was clear they weren’t giving up so I groaned, shutting off the heavenly water-flow and stepping out to wrap a towel around me.

Who the hell knocked on a person’s door at 5 AM?

Whoever it was, they could deal with me answering the door in a towel if they were going to be that obnoxious.

I tugged the door open and bit back another groan.

“This is how you answer your door in the middle of the night?” Roman quirked an eyebrow and glanced both ways down the hall. “Expecting male company?”

“Yup. Your guards probably have him detained though since we both know not a single unmated dude can get on this entire floor right now.” I didn’t move to open the door any wider.

“Hopefully they rough him up a bit.” Roman’s lips tilted upward. “Can we talk?”

“No.” I tried to shut the door and Roman caught it with his hand.

He pulled his other hand out of his pocket and held up a candy bar.

Mmm. Twix sounded so good.

I stared at it long and hard before scrubbing my hand over my eyes.

“Fine.” I snagged it out of his hand and let go of the door.

Roman shut it behind us, following me into my bedroom as I made my way toward the closet to get dressed. He’d sprawled out on my bed when I came back out, his baseball cap on the bed while his head was propped up on my pillow.

“Make yourself at home.” I drawled, patting my hair dry with a towel. Brushing it out after a shower was one of my least favorite things on the planet, but if I didn’t I’d spend twenty minutes detangling when it was wet it’d look like a tornado in the morning.

Disappearing into the bathroom again, I hung my towel and grabbed my brush off the counter.

“About earlier,” Roman watched me start on the ends of my hair, brushing slowly.

Curse my sensitive scalp.

“I wanted to make sure you know that there’s nothing between me and Lilac.”

“Sure. Because everyone kisses their drunk friends and then carries them out like they’re honey-mooners.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s fine, Roman. We’re not together. You date who you want, I date who I want.”

“That’s the thing,” Roman’s eyes tracked my every movement. I wasn’t sure if I should be flattered by his predatory stare or alert because of it. “I don’t want to date

other people, and I sure as hell don't want you dating other people."

"What part of 'we're not together' do you not understand?"

"All of it."

I dropped my brush to the bedspread and leaned toward Roman. He leaned toward me too, speaking the moment I opened my mouth to do the same.

"Your wolf side wants me. Let me give your human side a reason to do the same." He picked the hairbrush up off the bedspread. "You hate brushing your hair wet. I'll do it for you, you enjoy your candy bar."

I scowled.

"I don't hate it."

Lie.

"You were making frustrated faces with your nose." He tapped the side of his nose. "It was cute. Come here."

"Seriously, Roman. Get out of my apartment." I paused. "And don't call me cute."

"Let me brush your hair and I will." He waved the brush at me. I huffed.

"This is ridiculous."

But, like the sucker I was, I sat down on the edge of the bed and he scooted over to join me. His legs draped on either side of my hips, closing me in a comfortable cocoon as his fingers and the brush began slowly and gently brushing through my hair.

The slight tugging and gentle pressure of his fingers relaxed my body as they stroked my hair, slipping beneath it to my neck for brief moments. The baser parts of me were turning to freaking mush, but I refused to let go of my anger.

"I went to the nightclub to see you since you won't answer your damn door or phone. Lilac saw me first. She kissed me out of nowhere and when I told her to piss off, she said she was going to sleep with the human she was dancing with.

She's Arla's friend, so I had an obligation to get her out of there."

He explained quickly and quietly as he brushed my hair with soft fingers. It felt so good I thought I'd fall asleep.

"I saw your eyes shift; you responded to her." I said, through a sleep-heavy voice.

"My eyes didn't shift until I noticed you watching me."

"Sure. Whatever. You didn't owe me an explanation, and this doesn't change anything." I started to get up but was stopped by a large hand on my nonexistent abs.

"I don't want her. Never have, never will. If I see another guy kiss you, there's a good chance I'll rip his head off."

Great, now I felt guilty for flirting with Kyler all night.

Should I tell him? Maybe if he knew, he wouldn't go trying to kill anyone when he found out.

"Your enforcers might mention that Kyler showed up after you left with and bartended with me. We flirted a bit, but nothing happened."

Roman's hands stilled in my hair and I mentally cursed myself for choosing honesty. Lying made life so much easier.

"Kyler flirted with you?" his voice took on a gravelly tone.

"He's cool. And we're not together."

Roman's fingers tightened in my hair, tugging a little before he forced them apart and set the brush on the bed.

"I need to go." He said.

Something told me Kyler was about to get punched in the face.

Or worse.

Roman moved through the apartment and I hurried after him. "I spent the whole night comparing him to you." I blurted the words before I had time to consider what admitting them out loud would mean. "You're taller and stronger. Your voice is sexier. You don't laugh as much as him, but when you do

laugh, it lights up your whole face. You're rough around the edges, but I've never wanted perfection."

Roman watched me intently for a long few seconds. My heart pounded. Why had I gone and exposed my stupid-ass feelings to him? He was still the douchebag who chose his pack over me.

"My voice is sexier?" His tone was amused again and his shoulders relaxed.

"Shut up." I walked back into my room, flipping him off over my shoulder. "And show yourself out."

His low chuckle followed me all the way to my bed.

TWELVE

The next day, I spent my afternoon in the indoor forest. After a shower to clean off the dirt, I met my entourage in the lobby. Jamie and London waited with their mates, Oliver and Gunner.

We all chatted on the way to the nightclub, but I noticed the stiffness between London and Gunner. She pointedly ignored him, and he stared at her in frustration. Jamie and Oliver didn't seem to be fighting, but they didn't seem to be any closer than usual either.

When we got there, the girls followed me up to their usual stools at the edge of the room, where they could see everything and stay out of the way. The guys took a booth further away, Oliver pulling out his laptop while Gunner played a game on his phone.

My shift started, and London was already drinking whiskey like it was water.

"Might want to take it easy." I warned her half an hour in.

She snorted, definitely drunk already.

"I haven't been able to take it easy since I made the biggest mistake of my life at seventeen years old." She glared at her mate, who glared back. He stood up and crossed the room to lean over the bar two feet from his woman.

"Can I get a bottle of rum?" he asked.

"A whole bottle?" I lifted an eyebrow.

Did he realize how much that would cost in a high-class place like this one?

"What are you, a pirate?" London snapped.

Gunner gritted his teeth,

"Yes, a bottle."

I ducked behind the counter and grabbed a half-empty one that would still cost him a small fortune, handing it over.

Gunner dropped a black credit card and stalked back to his booth.

London tossed back another few fingers of whiskey and slipped off her stool, headed out to the crowd of dancers.

“I didn’t know she liked to dance.” I commented.

“She doesn’t.” Jamie grimaced. “This isn’t good. They’re not people who resolve conflicts quietly in their own space. If they both get drunk here, things could get ugly fast.”

I looked over at Gunner, who was watching his mate dance with fire in his eyes as he chugged rum.

Not good.

“London’s uncle raised her and he didn’t tell her anything about mating. She and Gunner were in love when they mated, but she had no idea sleeping together meant they’d never be with anyone else.” Jamie explained quickly.

Yikes. No wonder they were practically enemies.

“He knew it was forever and she didn’t.”

Jamie nodded and looked over at Gunner like she was assessing him. I noticed Oliver’s wary look as he glanced between the fighting couple; he was thinking the same thing his mate was.

Hours slipped by and when last-call approached, both Gunner and London were completely plastered. The nightclub was in the process of closing when some random drunk guy put his hands on London’s hips while she swayed to the music. The careful peace we’d established went to hell.

Gunner surged to his feet, his face twisted in a snarl as he crossed the floor.

Jamie flew after him, Oliver close behind them both. If either of the enforcers lost control and shifted in public, all of werewolf kind could be in deep shit.

Gunner didn’t waste time. He shoved the guy away from London and swung his fist right into the dude’s eye. I couldn’t hear the crack over the pounding music as knuckle met flesh,

but the guy's scream hit my ears. Gunner knocked him to the ground and swung his fist into his face twice, and then three more times.

London screamed as loud as the guy had, shoving her mate off the random dude and raining swear words upon him. There were only a few people left in the club, and luckily enough the bouncers had already gone home.

The three remaining humans ran for the exit while Jamie dropped to her knees to check the dude's pulse. London and Gunner were screaming at each other now. I shut off the music before hurrying to the other werewolves.

"He's not breathing." Jamie's hands overlapped. "Starting CPR. Call an ambulance." She commanded her mate.

"I'll deal with the scorned lovers." I said quickly, turning to face the arguing couple.

Arguing was much too mild a term for the fight they were having.

London ripped her stiletto off her foot, chucked it at Gunner's head with a fury I'd never realized she possessed. Gunner ducked out of the way clumsily.

"You throw like a girl." He mocked her.

Were people seriously still slinging gender-based insults? Wasn't this 2020?

"I *am* a girl, dummy!" she yanked her other stiletto off and chucked that one too.

Riiight. It was 2020, they were just so drunk we may as well have time-traveled back to the nineties.

I stepped between the two of them.

"The police are on their way, we need to take this back to the 'scrapper." I put my hands on my hips.

"I'm not going anywhere with him." London screamed. "He just tried to kill someone for touching me!"

"YOU'RE MINE." Gunner yelled back.

London pushed past me and swung her fist into Gunner's face much like he'd done to the poor human on the floor. This time, I heard the crack that was likely both made by breaking fingers and face. It brought to mind images of my own fingers and knuckles breaking against Ledger's face.

"I wouldn't be yours if you tattooed your big, ugly name across my forehead." Her voice dropped as she glowered, clutching her now-broken hand to her chest. "You're the worst thing that ever happened to me."

With a roar, Gunner shifted to wolf form and tackled London to the ground. I was actually afraid for her life. If he really wanted to hurt her it would take a lot more than a medium-sized strawberry wolf like myself to stop him, so I yelled at my phone to call Roman. It only rang once before he picked up.

"Hey. What's—"

"Get to the nightclub now." I yelled, ripping my clothes off. "Your enforcer lost his freaking mind."

Roman demanded answers, but I shifted and launched myself toward the dark blond wolf that was Gunner. My back arched as I snarled at him, warning him to back off as I stalked closer. He crouched over his mate possessively, and I realized he wasn't pinning her to the ground at all. She was just too drunk to realize she could've moved if she wanted.

Still, an ambulance was on its way and Gunner was out of control.

I lunged toward him and he jumped backward, as I'd intended. When I snapped at him, he snapped back. He didn't get anywhere near me, and I realized he hadn't tried to. He was pissed, but he didn't want to hurt me.

It was a damned miracle.

I herded Gunner into the break room and then shifted back to human form, locking the door that opened into the nightclub. Breaking into Bodhi's locker took all of one second, and I pulled his uniform shirt over my head to cover myself.

The thing was so tight I couldn't really breathe, but I didn't have time to worry about indecent exposure.

Instead I turned a glare at the wolf who was still growling at me.

“Shift back now and go lock yourself in the bathroom.” I barked.

He did. Brown fur gave way to smooth white skin as he morphed back into human form on the breakroom floor, clutching his head in his hands.

I heard the police outside and panic washed through me. We had security cameras, and they'd definitely caught both Gunner and I swapping our skin for fur. I needed to deal with that.

Gunner seemed to have recovered from his lapse in sanity, so I left him and went to deal with the cameras.

I sprinted through the kitchen and broke into the locked door that led to Kyler's office, then looked around wildly for whatever the cameras would be connected to. My gaze stuck to the large, crazy-expensive computer on the desk and I grimaced. Everything was online these days.

Kyler would delete the footage, but the cops could likely access it from this computer if they tried. The password was written on a sticky note and stuck on the bottom edge of the monitor, so it wouldn't be hard to do.

The cops were questioning Jamie and Oliver; I could hear them. There didn't seem to be any kind of a weapon in the office, so I grabbed the item that most closely resembled a baseball bat:

A decorative telescope.

Clutching it in both hands, I swung that sucker into the computer monitor and jumped backward when both the telescope and monitor shattered.

Roman ducked into the office, catching me red-handed.

“You're okay?”

Geez, his gaze was intense.

I nodded on my way to the door.

“Let’s go!” Cops yelled. They’d be charging toward the noise I’d made.

Grabbing Roman’s arm, I yanked him toward the supply closet and shut us in together. My heart pounded as I pulled my phone out and scrolled through the music, turning on a song with a heavy beat that would drown out most noise.

“Shirt off.” I gestured to his hoodie with one hand, turning the volume up as loud as it would go with the other. His forehead wrinkled and he made no move to follow my order, so I grabbed the edge of the hoodie and began tugging it off myself. The police would be in here in any second, and we needed a believable excuse.

Roman’s shirt hit the floor and I threw myself at him, bare legs wrapping around his hips as I grabbed his face with both hands and yanked it to my own.

Our lips met in an explosion of fire. Heat flooded me, and every thought about the cops vanished from my mind as our bodies moved together. Roman’s hands found my backside, kneading my flesh as he urged me to continue. My nails raked up his back and he growled deep in his chest.

Roman turned us so I was pinned to the shelving along the wall, every part of his body hard as it ground against mine.

The supply closet door splintered inward. Roman blocked me, and I clutched his biceps.

“Hands up.” Two cops had their guns trained on us. Roman’s eyes met mine, the air layered with lust and confusion, as he slowly pulled his hands off my skin. I missed the touch immediately. He turned around, chest still heaving from our kiss, and raised his hands in the air. I did the same, making sure my lower half was hidden behind the giant in front of me so none of them realized I was going commando.

Non-werewolves tended to have a problem with that.

“Is there a problem, officer?” Roman’s voice was grittier than usual. The boner that raged through his jeans was enough evidence to them what had been going on in here.

Clearly a non-committal makeout session wasn’t in the books for us. We’d never be able to keep it in our pants.

The cops glanced at my phone, which still thudded with the bass of my music.

“I work here. Is everything okay?” I leaned my head around Roman to see the officers.

“You’re the bartender?” they checked.

“Yeah. I needed a break before last call. What time is it, by the way?” I acted far more shameless than I felt.

“A quarter past four.” One of the officers looked angry, the other annoyed. They’d probably hoped for a car chase or something. I guess anything was better than walking in on two people getting all hot and heavy on each other.

“Shit. I’d better get dressed and kick everyone out...” I glanced meaningfully at the cops, hoping they’d get the message that they should leave so I could get dressed.

...Which would be a problem, considering my clothes were out on the dance floor.

Shit.

“You didn’t hear anything odd?” They checked.

“Should I have?”

The annoyed cop heaved a sigh, swearing under his breath about horny twenty-somethings as he walked out of the doorway.

“Call your boss. Someone nearly died in your club a little while ago.” The bored one followed his partner out. I gasped dramatically as they left, and then sagged against the shelf behind me when they were gone.

“Quick thinking.” Roman picked up my phone and shut off the music.

“Thanks.” I bit my lip. What did one say after a crazy-hot staged makeout with a guy they had feelings for when they were refusing to acknowledge said feelings?

Hell if I knew.

Roman grabbed my clothes from behind the bar—where Jamie hid them, luckily—then we headed out into the main part of the nightclub to see how everyone was faring. Kyler and Roman had pulled Gunner out of the bathroom before Roman found me destroying a perfectly good computer, so at least London’s mate and his incriminating hand injuries wouldn’t be found. His DNA on the human’s face was another story.

Hopefully Roman’s pack had enough money to bribe some officers or Gunner was screwed.

It was a long night-slash-morning of talking to cops. Roman and I rehashed the story of our tryst in the supply room a dozen times to a dozen different people. The sun was up high in the sky when we were finally allowed to leave, and I was so hungry I questioned if I’d survive the drive to food.

Jamie and Oliver took London home while Roman led me to his car.

“Where are we going?” I glanced over at him, bleary-eyed. Food and sleep; I needed food and sleep.

“I hear you have a thing for McDonald’s.” he glanced back, and I met his gaze.

“Sometimes. Right now, I’m craving pancakes.”

Roman turned left at the next stoplight, and we coasted into the parking lot of an upscale breakfast place.

“You ever been here?” he checked. Of course I hadn’t; places like this were far out of my budget. At least they had been before the New York Pack went and made me rich. When I shook my head, Roman parked and came around to open my door. “Their pancakes will change your life.” He promised.

“Don’t go getting my hopes up when you can’t deliver, Romeo.” I warned. He flashed me a smirk, and I rolled my

eyes. “That wasn’t a sex reference.”

“Sure sounded like one.” He pulled the door to the restaurant open for me too, leaning his lips to my ear as I brushed past him. “For the record, I’ll always deliver.”

There he went again, making my lady parts go all tingly.

“These pancakes better be freaking good.” I muttered.

And yes, *that* was a sex reference.

THIRTEEN

It was nearly 8 AM when I finally got home and crashed. Less than an hour later, someone decided to knock on my door. I tried to ignore them but they kept knocking, so I cursed at whoever it was the whole way to the door.

When I swung it open, my jaw fell open. There I was in ancient sleep shorts and a tank top with a giant grease stain over the boob (my pizza obsession was getting to be a real problem), makeup I hadn't bother to remove last night streaked under my eyes, and the hair I hadn't washed in four or five days tied up in a messy bun that was probably petrifying into some sort of dry-shampoo rock.

There she was, Maisy Jane, famous pop singer who turned country when she married Jude Roman, also-famous country singer. My mom and I had danced to her music when I was a kid, and I'd followed her ever since. She wore a dress that was likely worth more than my entire closet and her hair fell to her collarbone in chocolate barrel-curls.

"Um, hi?" I stammered.

Damn, I was a mess.

"Hello." Maisy glanced down at my boob stain and back up at my face. The disgust in her eyes was barely hidden. She offered me a hand, though I could tell she hoped I wouldn't shake it. "Maisy Jane Ellis."

My eyes nearly exploded from my face.

Maisy Jane Ellis?

As in Roman's last name, Ellis?

Hot damn.

"Henley Clark." I shook her hand, because why the hell not? Roman was determined to talk me into mating with him and if he ever succeeded, she'd be my mother-in-law. That was so crazy I didn't really want to think about it.

Maisy's nose wrinkled like I stank and she stepped inside my apartment without permission, careful not to brush up against me.

Bitch.

Closing the door behind us, I followed her into my living room and folded my arms as she critiqued the room.

"My daughter has great taste." She finally said, not turning to look at me.

"Yep." Arla had the place furnished at Roman's request while he and I were eating pizza and picking up my stuff; one of the girls had told me weeks earlier. I'd added it to the list of ways he was different than every other Alpha male in existence and went on with my life.

Maisy narrowed her eyes at me.

"You're disgusting."

"I don't always look like this. I got home from work an hour ago and threw on my pajamas." I gestured to my clothes and unintentionally pointed to the boob stain.

Shit.

"Precisely." She sashayed toward me, her chin as high as her stilettos. "Stay away from my son." She towered over me, trying to threaten me.

Maisy Jane Ellis was the least terrifying person who'd ever threatened me, and I wasn't exactly a beginner in the world of being threatened.

"I've been pushing Roman away for weeks."

She scoffed like that was ridiculous.

"No woman could push my son away."

I snorted.

"Cocky, much?"

"Confident. It comes with age." Her eyes swept up my outfit again. "To some." She amended.

What was one step up from bitch? Douche-bitch? Was that a thing? Doubtful, but she was one anyway.

“Why are you here?”

“Because you challenged the girl Roman was going to mate with. You think you deserve him, but you don’t. He needs a girl like her, not someone like you.”

My face heated when she gestured toward me—namely, my boob stain. It was looking like my love for pizza was going to get me into a fight with Roman’s mom. Cool.

“He’s been turning Lilac down for years.”

“Great relationships take time.”

“She’s the one who challenged me. If I’d been in human form I would’ve walked away, but what wolf backs down from a fight?” I protested.

“A sensible one.”

Maisy stepped close enough that we were nose-to-nose. Or at least nose-to-neck. I wasn’t above tilting my chin up to meet her glare from below.

“You will leave this skyscraper by midnight tonight and disappear.” Maisy ordered.

I laughed in disbelief.

“I’m not allowed to leave here without three or more enforcers at both of your children’s command. Even if I tried, they’d find me. I smell like some sort of sex bomb to shifter dudes.”

In hindsight, ‘sex bomb’ wasn’t a particularly wise thing to call myself in front of an overprotective mother.

Maisy’s hands shot to my neck, delicate fingers wrapping around my windpipe. My eyes bulged as I gasped for air and got nothing, too focused on trying to get her hands off me to try to attack her.

“You’re misunderstanding me. I will personally slit your throat if you don’t get yourself to a place my son will never find you. Do you understand?”

I jerked my head in a nod. As she released me, my apartment door flew open and Arla rushed inside, cheeks pink. I grabbed my throat as I inhaled air, reeling backward quickly to put distance between myself and Maisy's insanity.

"Henley, did—what the hell are you doing, mom?" Arla rushed to my side. "Are you alright?" When I nodded, she focused in on my attempted murderer. "Roman is going to kill you. He threw one of his own enforcers out the freaking window for mentioning her smell last week. Her smell! Do you have a death wish?!" her voice lifted to a scream.

I hoped my neighbors had loud music playing, or they'd have a front-row seat to this family drama.

"This nobody is the one with a death wish." Maisy still wanted to kill me.

Shocker.

"Get out of Henley's apartment and don't ever come back." Arla stood tall, her voice thick with Alpha power.

"She's going to destroy our family." Maisy's voice raised as she strutted out of the room.

"You did that years ago." Arla yelled back.

The door slammed behind her mother and Arla spun back to me.

"I am so sorry, Henley. That woman is legitimately insane." She flitted her hand in the direction of the door. "Let me see your neck. Can you breathe alright?"

I lifted my chin so she could get a better look. The grimace she wore told me it was a bruised mess already.

"Fine." My voice was scratchy and talking hurt. "You might want to go do some damage control. She doesn't seem stable."

Arla shook her head.

"She's not. But I won't leave you until I know that's okay." She pointed to my neck.

"How many colors is the bruise?"

Arla eyed it.

“Five. Wait, no. Six. Damn it. I’m sorry, I never should’ve told her your name.”

“You aren’t the one who attacked me.” I headed back toward my bedroom. Arla followed me. “I’m going back to bed. You can watch TV or something.”

“In a room where I can’t watch to make sure you’re still breathing at all times? Not happening.”

I slid into bed, too tired and now too achy to fight.

Arla plopped down on the other side of my bed as I got situated on my stomach. My neck was tender, and I winced as I adjusted the pillow beneath my cheek.

When I closed my eyes and ended up reliving the moment Maisy’s hands wrapped around my neck, followed by Ledger doing the same, I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind.

“Thanks for furnishing this place. I like it.” I paused. “Why was Roman never into Lilac?”

“Truthfully, I don’t know. She didn’t use to be so obsessed with him, but he just wasn’t ever interested in her. He always told me he felt like he was waiting for someone in particular that he hadn’t met yet.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Arla grabbed a nail polish off the dresser and threw it at me. I was too tired to bother dodging, so it bounced off my back and fell on the bed between us. She picked it up. “Is this black nail polish? Who goes to the trouble of painting their own nails *black*?”

“It makes me feel powerful.” I mumbled into the pillow.

“Hmm.” She considered my words. I smelled the polish when she unscrewed the cap and began to paint her own nails. “Holy shit, you’re right. I’m an Amazonian Warrior-Goddess.”

“Wonder Woman. You’re Wonder Woman. Now shut up so I can sleep.”

My eyes had only been closed for a few seconds when Arla's phone rang. She answered it in a hushed whisper before swearing and grabbing my arm.

"We need to go *now*. Someone told Roman about all the shouting here and now he's worried you're hurt. You need to be in wolf form when he finds you so he doesn't see those." She gestured at my neck.

"I'm sleeping." I grumbled.

"Sleep in wolf form. Come on."

She dragged me out of my bed, but I let her. We were in the elevator when I glanced down and realized I was still wearing the boob stain shirt. And now I was self-conscious about it.

Damn it.

Damn it all.

"Your mom sucks."

"No kidding." Arla glared at the elevator. "She's been trying to set me up with the Washington Alpha since I was sixteen."

"Marcus? He's not horrible."

"Who the hell wants to mate with someone who *isn't horrible*? She could at least throw me at someone decent."

The elevator doors opened on Kyler, whose eyebrows lifted in surprise. Arla stared at him in horror and he had the same expression when he saw the multicolored bruises on my neck.

"Is he with you?" she whisper-yelled.

"Maisy did that?"

"Hold the elevator." Roman shouted from down the hall somewhere.

"I'll distract him. Get to the 4th floor." Arla ordered, dashing out into the hallway. The elevator doors closed on Kyler looking sick to his stomach as he turned to follow her.

A bunch of unmated dudes were getting dressed behind the bush everyone dropped their clothes at—which I'd started thinking of as the naked bush. They all stared at me, and I

recognized a few of them from the slip 'n slide. I saluted them and ducked behind a tree off to the left of the naked bush.

Ditching my clothes at the newly-coined Naked Tree, I swapped my skin for fur and took off. I ran hard and fast, leaving a scent trail that twisted and swirled across the whole floor. The longer it took Roman to follow my trail, the more time he'd have to cool down after whatever Arla did to piss him off for the sake of buying time.

Tired of running, I flopped to the dirt and shut my eyes. Five minutes later, Roman poked me with his nose to wake me up. I growled at him, and he swapped his fur for skin.

“Shift, Henley.” Roman didn't put any Alpha power into the order, but in wolf form, I wanted to listen to him anyway. I was kneeling on the dirt in the nude a fraction of a second later.

“What the hell?!” I demanded, wrapping an arm around my boobs.

He didn't hear me. His eyes were glued to my neck, his face turning red and then purple and then a blue-green color that had me worrying he was either going to explode or turn into the Hulk.

“Who hurt you?” He snarled, grabbing my upper arms and pulling me toward him. Though he was pissed, his grip was still gentle.

Somehow, he'd managed to forget that we were both very much naked. The arm covering my boobs was the only thing separating our bodies, not that he'd noticed.

“Henley, I am hanging on by a thread.” Roman's jaw was clenched. His Alpha power pulsed from him in small shockwaves, each one hitting me in the stomach and making me queasy.

“Control your power.” I choked out. It vanished immediately.

“Who hurt you?” He snarled.

Was he getting even angrier? Shit.

“Can’t remember.” I blurted. It was the first thing that came to my mind.

Not one of my better lies.

“You can’t remember who tried to strangle you?”

Now he looked like he wanted to kill me instead of whoever hurt me.

Progress.

“Nope.” It was an obvious lie but I’d take it to the grave. I wasn’t about to be the reason he killed his own mom, however insane she was.

“Fine.” He pulled my body flush against his, making me all warm and tingly. His skin on my skin felt a hell of a lot like heaven to me.

A girl could get used to that.

Roman pressed his nose to an unbruised part of my throat and inhaled deeply. When he caught his mother’s scent, he roared and spun around, depositing me on my feet before stalking toward the elevator.

“Wait.” I yelled, throwing myself at him to stop him. He didn’t catch me, and I slid partway down the side of his back as my arms and legs struggled to find a hold. Roman didn’t pause, a man on a mission. He didn’t even seem to care that I was hanging naked off his back.

He grabbed a pair of sweats off the dirt and pulled them on. Since I intended to follow him and couldn’t very well do so naked, I went to the tree to find my own clothes. Leaving him alone didn’t bode well for my following him so I pulled on my underwear and made up a distraction.

“Stop staring at my ass, unmated dickwad!” I yelled as I yanked my stained shirt over my head.

Of course, there was no real dickwad nearby that I could see. But I thought it would work anyway.

And what do you know—it did.

Roman was beside me in a flash, looking for someone to slice up with those already-shifted hands of his.

“There’s no dickwad. But you can’t kill your mom.” I grabbed his upper arms.

“She strangled you.” His eyes blazed. I expected him to add something, but it seemed he considered that fact alone enough to warrant her death.

“She gave birth to you.”

“And I’ve spent my entire life being manipulated by her for it. She went too far this time.”

He stalked toward the elevator. I rushed after him.

“She wasn’t trying to kill me, just threaten me. And I provoked her.”

The excuses I tossed his way didn’t stop him, so I threw myself in front of him and grabbed his arms. Stepping up close, I lifted my chin so my hazels collided with his blues.

“Don’t do this, Roman. It’ll only hurt you.”

His eyes darkened and he pulled his arm away, storming into the elevator. Our eyes maintained contact until the doors shut and the light above the elevator began moving up.

Most of me wanted to turn tail and run back into the man-made forest, hiding out in wolf form. But a tiny, guilty sliver of my conscience had me watch until the elevator stopped on the fourteenth floor and then started back down.

I went back for the rest of my clothes and got dressed completely before heading up to the same floor Roman had gotten off on.

Loud shouting practically shook the entire floor. Kyler stood outside the door to the left of the elevator, his arms folded as he leaned back against the wall wearing a deep grimace.

“Why do you look like you’ve done this before?” I strolled over to him, wearing my stained top with confidence. If people judged me for it, that was their problem.

“Because Ellis family drama is nothing new.” His eyes lifted to the sky. “One of these days they’re finally going to kill each other or split apart for good.”

Since I could hear the yelling and it didn’t sound like Roman was ripping anyone’s head off, I leaned up against the wall next to Kyler.

“Roman seemed pretty set on option one a few minutes ago.”

“Arla helped him see the light. They’re used to dealing with each other when it comes to their parents.” He nodded toward the apartment door.

It was ridiculous, but I was a bit self-conscious that she’d been able to chill him out when I hadn’t.

Why did I want to be the person he turned to, the one he needed to calm him down? And why did it upset me that I wasn’t?

My stomach churned.

What was I doing? Roman and I weren’t together. I didn’t belong in front of his parents’ apartment during his family’s civil war, regardless of me being the reason for the argument.

“I need to get ready for work.” I told Kyler, leaving without waiting for an answer. My shift wasn’t for a couple hours so it wasn’t a good excuse, but at least it wasn’t a lie.

Sometimes I got tired of lying to people. Whatever tiny bit of hope still lived in me wanted to believe that eventually, I’d find people who actually want to know my truth.

FOURTEEN

I tried and failed to go back to sleep after the conversation in the hall with Kyler, so I spent the morning doing what I'd told him—getting ready. I curled my hair with the iron someone had left in my bathroom and put on the foundation and eyeshadow I'd picked up when I first got my job but had been too lazy to actually wear.

After I finished my makeup, I decided my hair looked shitty and threw it all up in a high ponytail. The thick scarf I added to my outfit was purely to hide the bruises on my neck.

London and Gunner had been banned from the nightclub by Kyler and Roman, so my entourage had been reduced to just Jamie and whichever two guys were on the rotation. Oliver was one of them more often than not.

“Aren't you bored of sitting here for hours every day?” I asked Jamie, sweeping my rag up and down the bartop. She shrugged.

“Not really. I like it here.”

A guy called me over and asked for a complex drink I hadn't made in years. After I checked with him to make sure it still consisted of what I thought it did, I stepped back behind the bar and mixed it up. It took a couple minutes to gather everything and get the drink made, but when I handed it over I was pretty proud. That thing was a freakin masterpiece.

“What was in that one?”

I started listing the ingredients and then paused. Jamie and I had this conversation almost every time someone asked for a drink we hadn't already dissected.

“You know what? Come on, I'll show you.” I gestured for her to come behind the bar. Her cheeks reddened.

“Oh, that's okay.” She shook her head.

“Why not? You obviously want to learn.”

She glanced back at Oliver and then bit her lip.

“Worried your mate will think it’s silly? You guys are barely friends. If he says bartending is stupid, tell him to suck it.”

Jamie laughed, though she still looked embarrassed.

“Alright, I’m coming.”

She came behind the bar and I walked her through the process of making the drink. The next time a customer came up, she took the girl’s order and with my help, made the drink.

We went on like that for hours. It made my shift a lot more entertaining, and Jamie had this glow in her eyes that I’d never seen from her before.

An hour before the end of my shift, a cute human guy in his twenties came strolling up to the bar. I say cute because although most girls would call him hot, he looked like a puppy compared to Roman.

Who I really needed to stop comparing all men to.

“Two beautiful women working the bar? I should come here more often.” The guy slid onto the stool. In a crisp white button-down with a navy suit and tie, he looked expensive. Jamie laughed. I bit back an eye-roll. She hadn’t spent enough time in nightclubs to know that was just how rich human men talked when they wanted to get in a girl’s pants.

“What can we get you?” She smiled.

“Whiskey sour.”

“Coming right up.” She winked and followed me down the bar a bit.

“Too friendly.” I shook my head at her. “If you treat all the guys like that, they’re going to think you want to sleep with them.”

She scoffed.

“People tip more when you’re friendlier.”

“False.” I said. She mixed the whiskey sour and brought it to the guy, giving him a big bright smile before coming back over to me.

“Alright, let’s have a contest. We’ll do half the customers your way and half mine and see who leaves with the most tips.” She paused. “You’ll have to make most of the drinks though.”

“What are we betting?”

A slow smirk twisted her lips.

“Loser walks home her bra and underwear.”

Devious. I liked it.

“Who says I’m wearing a bra?” I kept a straight face.

“Your boobs.”

We both lost it and laughed so hard our eyes watered.

“You’re on.” Another guy came up to the bar. “Watch and learn, rich girl.”

I pasted my best bored-face on and swept over to the stool he’d claimed.

“Bourbon on the rocks, please.” He held out a twenty.

“Sure.” I was careful to take the money with my wonky knuckles in his view.

“Whoa, what happened to your hand?”

I shrugged.

“Punched a rapist in the face and couldn’t afford the hospital bill.” I left him with that and got his drink, feeling his eyes on me. When I brought the drink back, he threw it down quickly and handed me a fifty.

“One more?”

“Sure you don’t want two?” my lips curled upward and the dude grinned. He opened his wallet and pulled out a hundred dollar bill. “Why not?”

I saluted him with his money and went to grab his drinks.

“Did you just make a hundred and twenty dollars off one dude?” Jamie gawked at me as I slid the bills in my bra.

“Nope.”

She relaxed.

“I made one-twenty-five off one dude.”

Her eyes practically popped out of her head.

“How?”

“I made him care.” I tightened my curly ponytail. “That’s how you make the big bucks in a crowd of rich people. They don’t need the money; make them care enough to give it to you.”

“Show me.”

I sashayed to the uptight-looking woman who’d walked up to the bar. It was rare for me to make extra money off of women; I’d really have to try, and I didn’t often bother.

“Can I get three shots of vodka?” She sat in a stool and pulled her hair out of its tight ponytail, shaking it out as I left to get the drinks. People doing shots alone at night were typically looking to escape. I could definitely relate to that.

While I poured the shots, she watched silently.

“Long day?” I kept my voice casual and my face neutral.

“Long year.” She threw two of the shots back and made a face. “Man, I hate alcohol.”

I lifted an eyebrow and waited for her explanation.

“My husband has been trying to talk me into a divorce for the last year. I convinced him to try therapy. Felt like things were getting better until I found him having sex with his receptionist on my couch an hour ago.”

“Damn. I’ve got a crowbar in the back if you want to borrow it.” I gestured over my shoulder.

“Might take you up on that.” She drank the last shot. “The worst part is that I actually fell back in love with him.”

“I get it. I finally started considering letting a guy into my heart for the first time in my life and realized I’m not enough for him. Wish there was a way not to care.”

“Men are the worst.” She dropped her head in her hands and groaned. “What am I going to do?”

On a whim, I grabbed the bottle of vodka and two new shot glasses, filling them both.

“Tonight you’re going to drink. You can worry about tomorrow when it comes.”

“That shot’s for you, right?” she gestured to the second one.

“Nah, alcohol makes me mean. But five shots will put you in the right mindset; take my word for it.”

She grabbed the shots and clinked the glasses together before drinking them both, one right after the other.

“You’re the best bartender I’ve ever had.” She already was starting to sound drunk.

“You rarely drink.”

“So?”

With a chuckle and a shake of my head, I made my way back to Jamie, who was struggling with a cocktail shaker. I helped her with a couple more customers, our competition the last thing on my mind. After seeing that woman’s heartbreak and realizing that I’d actually started caring about Roman, all I wanted to do was lock myself in the bathroom with an entire bottle of cheap vodka.

“Roman told you you’re not enough for him?” Jamie asked when the crowd slowed for a second.

“I don’t want to talk about this.” I went to help the next customer and noticed my Alpha leaning over the table the male enforcers were seated at.

Since when did he hang out here?

“Need a shot to loosen your tongue?” Jamie wiggled the bottle of tequila in her hand.

“If I drink with you, we won’t be friends afterward.”

We separated to take orders, and then Jamie delivered the first drink while I made the second.

Roman strolled up to the bar, leaning his forearms on the granite. His eyes tracked me until I acknowledged him.

“What’s your drink?” I pushed a curl off my shoulder, rocking a cocktail shaker in my other hand. “Wait, don’t tell me. It’s—”

“I don’t drink.” He interrupted. I lifted an eyebrow.

“Since when?”

“Since my dad and grandpa become abusive assholes with alcohol in their system and I’m not willing to risk turning out like them.”

I stopped shaking.

“When the hell did I say you’re not enough for me?” his eyes were narrow, pissed and offended at the same time.

“Is that done?” Jamie rushed over and reached for the cocktail shaker. I moved it from her grasp and gave it a few more hard shakes before handing it over.

“I can’t talk now.” I told Roman, glancing out at the crowd. It was a weekday, but there were still too many people for Jamie and the other bartender to take care of alone considering Jamie could only pour shots and mix like three drinks. “I’m off in an hour. I’ll meet you at my apartment.”

Roman didn’t get up.

“I’ll wait.”

“You’re going to wait at a bar without drinking?” I lifted an eyebrow.

“For you, yes.”

I grabbed him a glass of water.

“Don’t glare at dudes who flirt with me. I want their money.”

I headed back to Jamie, who was pouring shots and making a mess of it.

“These count on my tip-tab.” She pointed to the drinks. It took me a minute to remember the bet.

“Oh, whatever. I’ve got this in the bag.” I said.

Jamie laughed.

“Prepare to walk home in your underwear, pinky.”

“That’s low.” I shook my head at her, ignoring the intrigued expressions from anyone in earshot. That included Roman. “And ridiculous. Anyone can see my hair is red.”

“Bullshit.” Some random guy laughed. I’d made him three drinks already. “It’s totally pink.”

I flipped him off and the small crowd we’d gathered roared with laughter.

Jamie and I competed for tips and made drinks for half an hour before I noticed Roman’s glass was empty and went back to fill it. He lifted his eyes from his phone.

“I can make you a virgin drink if you want.” I offered. Beating Jamie had kicked my adrenaline up too high if I was offering things to the guy I was trying not to have feelings for.

“I wouldn’t even know what to order.” He said.

I leaned toward him and dropped my voice, meeting his gaze.

“Do you trust me?”

His lips quirked upward.

“Depends on the day.”

My mouth twisted in a smirk.

“Good answer.”

It only took me a minute to put the drink together, and I stuck an orange slice on the glass as I brought it to Roman.

Why was I nervous about giving it to him?

“What’s in it?” He asked as I handed it to him.

“Just drink it.”

He lifted the glass to his lips and took a swig. His eyebrows lifted.

“Better than I expected. What’s it called?”

“A pussyfoot.” I grinned at the name and Roman chuckled. I loved the way he rumbled when he did that.

Roman slipped some cash out of his pocket and leaned over the bar, tucking it into the top of my bra. I froze, swallowing hard as his knuckles brushed the sensitive skin at the top of my boob.

Shit.

Damn.

What the hell was this man doing to me?

“That’s where you put your tips, right?” He asked, voice low and close enough to my ear to give me goosebumps. Desire flooded my lower belly, and the way his eyes glinted told me he’d caught the scent of it.

I pushed his hand away from my chest slower than I should have, and he didn’t lean away from me. Tugging the money out of my bra, I glanced down and then did a double-take.

“Roman.” I protested, sliding the bills apart to show him the five hundred dollars he’d given me. “This isn’t a tip.”

“It’s an investment in Jamie and Oliver’s relationship.” His lips curved. “It’ll make him jealous when she walks home in her underwear.”

“You’re invested in keeping me from walking through the city half-naked.” I countered, dropping the money on the bar in front of him. “I’ll win without your charity.”

“It’s about as far from charity as you can get.” He grabbed the bills, tucking them back in my bra lightning-fast. He wasn’t groping, just tucking, but I smacked his hand anyway.

He sat back down and grabbed his drink. “You’re good at this.” He said, after taking a drink.

Someone waved me over and I went to take care of them, shooting daggers at Roman with my eyes. My replacement would be there soon, and something told me I wouldn’t get away from Roman after I got off work.

Ten minutes later, Jamie was stripping behind the nightclub while I cackled like a maniac. As predicted, I won even without Roman's tip. Which I hadn't given back to him, purely out of fear his fingers would slip back in my bra and he'd smell how much I wanted him again.

Oliver looked pissed, and Jamie wore a look that was some combination of excitement and dread. Roman was grinning, and the other enforcer had already headed home.

"Nice bra." I told Jamie, who blushed the same color as her bright red lace bralette and thong. She probably would've worn less-revealing underwear if she'd been planning a walk through the city in the near-nude. Oliver growled at me, and Roman tucked me out of the other male's reach.

We started walking, and I hoped everyone was too shocked by Jamie's lack of clothing to notice Oliver's wolfy eyes.

"Great ass." I called out, just to piss Oliver off and embarrass Jamie. She scowled at me over her shoulder and I grinned.

The sun was setting, and snow fell lightly. I shivered in the cold so Roman slung his arm over my shoulder, lending me his warmth.

"Work that body!" I hollered, and Roman slapped his hand over my mouth. Oliver glowered at me and Jamie walked faster. "Let go of me." I mumbled into the Alpha's hand.

"You're pestering them." He said, hand not budging.

I licked his hand and groaned when I scented his desire in the air.

"Seriously?" I complained. He just shot me an amused smirk.

I had one last catcall saved up from my time in the Bronx, so I ripped Roman's hand off my mouth and shouted,

"YEAH BABY, THAT'S MY WIFE!"

Oliver scooped his mate up off the ground and picked up the pace, practically sprinting into the skyscraper with her. Roman

tossed me over his shoulder, but I could feel his shoulder shaking with silent laughter.

“Spoil-sport.” I complained into his back muscles.

Which I pointedly didn’t notice were gorgeous. And that he smelled too fricking good.

“Troublemaker.” He shot back.

“What are you going to do, spank me?” I taunted.

“Only if you want me to.” One of his big hands landed on my ass and squeezed. I squeaked, smacking him upside the head. “*This* is a great ass.” His hand went back to my thigh. With my vagina so close to his head, I’m sure he could smell my desire loud and clear. His chest rumbled and I groaned.

“I hate you.”

“It’ll pass.” He promised, setting me down on my feet in the elevator.

Damn him for knowing me that well.

Roman helped me out of my jacket when we got back to my apartment. I didn’t have a coat yet—something that needed to be resolved pronto. I’d just never gotten around to it.

He hung my jacket and his coat up and I headed into the kitchen, scrubbing my hands with soap. My stomach demanded food, and cooking would give me something to do.

“Which part of the conversation did you hear?” I finally asked.

“Jamie asked when I said you weren’t enough for me.” He was calmer than I’d expected considering the topic. I couldn’t smell any emotion, as opposed to the anger I’d expected.

“I didn’t actually say you told me that; I told a lady I realized it. Which I did.”

Pulling some raw chicken out of the fridge, I stuck it on a cutting board and grabbed a knife. Roman sat in a bar stool and seemed to be waiting for me to explain, but he’d be waiting a long time.

“Well that’s bullshit.”

“Is it?” I shot him a dark stare.

“Yes.” He mirrored my expression.

I turned on music from my speaker and started to cut the chicken into thin strips, ignoring Roman’s eyes on me. A few minutes passed before he growled.

“I’m not a mind reader, Hen. Tell me why you’ve decided you’re not enough for me.”

“I don’t need to explain myself to you. I’ve already told you to stop chasing me. The pack comes first for you, and I get that. It’s just not what I want in a mate.”

“You’re dodging the question.”

I shot him a fiery look.

“And you’re pestering me.”

Roman groaned and got off the chair, pulling my fridge open, glancing at the chicken and pulling out onions and bell peppers. He grabbed a knife and cutting board, dropping them all a few feet to my side.

“You don’t need to wear the damn scarf.” He growled, tugging it over my head to reveal the bruises on my neck. The scent of his anger caught my attention.

“Forgot I had it on.” I said. That was the truth.

“I’m so damn sorry.” Roman scrubbed his fingers with soap so hard I wondered if he was trying to remove the skin.

“Why? You didn’t tell her to attack me, did you?”

“Never.” he snarled.

“Then you have nothing to be sorry about. She’s a grown-ass woman who can make her own decisions, and I am too. Next time she comes by to see me, I’ll know to be ready to protect myself.”

Roman dried his hands on the towel and tossed it to the counter.

“How can you say things like that,” He gestured to me, “And then tell me you’re not enough for me? It doesn’t make any sense, Hen. Most women would have ended things after that shit show earlier and ran for the hills, but you just put on a scarf and went to work. I showed up at the bar to grovel at your sexy little feet and found you claiming *you’re* not good enough for *me*. How the hell did you come to that conclusion?”

He paced the kitchen, the air flooding with the scent of his guilt.

“You think my feet are sexy?” I glanced down at my feet, hidden by the brown leather combat boots I hadn’t taken off yet.

Weird compliment, but I could dig it.

Roman groaned.

“That’s what you got from everything I just said?”

“Fine, you want to know what I think? I think you ignored me on the shifting floor. Didn’t even consider what I was saying when *I* was the one who got strangled. I think with the Georgia Alpha, you picked the pack over me. I get that was your duty or responsibility or whatever you want to call it, but I’m too selfish to accept that. I think I’m not enough for you because you need someone who’s okay with coming in second to the pack and your family and I will never be that person. I think you’re not enough for me for the exact same reason.”

Roman pulled the knife from my hand and spun me around, pinning me between him and the counter. His lips collided with mine, hands cupping my face.

I pushed him away before the kiss could get hotter.

“I told you I’m not right for you.” I glared at him, grabbing my knife and pointing it at the Alpha.

Like I could ever stab him.

“Last I checked, that doesn’t translate to ‘kiss me’.”

“I love this pack, Henley. I do. But when I’m mated, my mate will be my entire world. I’ve done the shitty family thing.

I've dealt with abuse. I've seen the way it hurts a woman when her mate doesn't put her first. That's not a life I'd give anyone, especially you. I'm still trying to balance what I feel for you with everything I have to do for the pack, but I want you to tell me when I've hurt you or if I'm being unreasonable."

I didn't lower my knife.

"You're assuming I'm going to agree to mate with you at some point." My eyes were narrowed at him.

"Yes." He met my gaze head-on.

"Cocky bastard."

"I thought you decided just to go with 'dick'."

I lowered my knife and rolled my eyes, turning back to my chicken to hide my smirk.

"Both words refer to the same part of you, so they're pretty much the same insult." I said.

Roman's chuckle lifted my lips further toward a smile.

He stepped back up to the cutting board he'd got out.

"What are we making?"

"I'm making tacos. Are you staying for dinner?" I checked.

"If you're inviting me."

"Invitations are lame. I'm more of a 'just show up hoping for the best' kind of girl."

"Then I'm staying for dinner." He grabbed the onion and cut off the end. "You can't have tacos without onions."

"That should be a law." I agreed.

We cooked and ate and cleaned together, and didn't stop talking through any of it. It was weird to spend so much one-on-one time with a person, let alone Roman, but in a good way. A really, really good way.

FIFTEEN

Despite my calm and relaxing evening, I tossed and turned all night.

Around 10 AM the next morning, I gave up on sleeping. I threw on a sports bra and shorts, heading down to spend some time in wolf form so I could breathe for a few minutes without feeling like the world was closing in on me.

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open, revealing London dressed in ripped jeans that fit her like a second skin and a sheer white top over a black bandeau-bra. Giant, glittery sunglasses were perched on her head and pushing huge curls from her bright blue eyes, which lit up when she saw me. Her arms were loaded with shiny pink Victoria's Secret bags.

"Henley!" She exclaimed as I stepped into the elevator. It continued upward to the top floor. "How are you?"

"Okay." I shrugged. "Haven't slept much."

London's smile twisted into a grimace.

"I know how that goes. Retail therapy always cheers me up, especially when my employers cover it." She shook the bags at me.

"I've never heard of retail therapy in bras and underwear." I eyed the pink bags. I'd always been the chick who just grabbed a sports bra that kept my girls safely strapped down and a pair of comfortable, cheeky panties.

"Serious? Do you only own sports bras?" London's eyebrows shot into her forehead as the doors opened onto the top floor. "I don't even know why I asked; I've never seen you in a real bra. Come on." She grabbed my arm and towed me down the hallway.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm going to drop these bags in my room and take you to Victoria's Secret on a little shopping spree."

"I don't really care about my underwear."

“Well you should. The right bra and underwear will make you feel like a sex goddess who can conquer the world.”

“Not sure I want to feel like a world-conquering sex goddess.” I said, following her in as she scanned her keycard and opened the door.

“You will.” She promised, dropping her bags on her kitchen counter. “GUNNER!” She yelled.

“You live with him?” After what happened the other night, I’d assumed they’d be staying far away from each other.

“Depends on the day.” She rolled her eyes. “I’M LEAVING AGAIN. DON’T LOOK IN THE BAGS ON THE COUNTER.”

Once again, London grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the room. She flashed me a mischievous grin.

“Going through my lingerie makes him totally horny. The sex tonight will be great.”

“TMI, girl. Way TMI.”

Especially after seeing how their fights went.

“Let’s grab Arla. If she and Jamie come with us, we’ll have enough chick firepower to leave the dude enforcers home. Roman would flip if we let his guys watch you try on lingerie.”

“Roman and I aren’t together.” I felt the need to clear that up. Particularly before going shopping for underwear. “We’re drawn to each other in wolf form, and we’re sort of friends. But that’s it.”

Lie. Total lie. But I wanted it to be true.

Didn’t I?

“That can’t be it. Have you made out yet? Talked about mating? Had a heart-to-heart about childhood struggles?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I ended that conversation as quickly as possible.

London opened the door into the office and stepped inside.

“Hey, chica. I’ll hook you up with some free bras if you come to VS with us. Henley here is in dire need of a boob pick-me-up.”

“I need a break anyway.” Arla grabbed her purse off the floor next to her large glass desk and led us out of the room. “Let’s grab Jamie. Lilac is going to be bummed she missed this.”

Both girls looked at me after the mention of the girl who’d challenged me for Roman and then looked away.

“You can see if she wants to come too.” As soon as I said it I knew it was stupid. I’d reamed into her pretty good after the fight, and she clearly hated me.

Plus she’d kissed Roman, which I was totally holding a silent grudge about.

“On second thought, maybe we should just enjoy today. As much as we can enjoy shopping for underwear.”

“You’ll be into this.” Arla assured me. She flashed her black-painted nails my way. “Sexy underwear has the same effect as this stuff. Makes a girl feel like she can kick serious ass.”

We stopped by Jamie’s place and she seemed even more excited about the trip than Arla had. I’d seen first-hand her taste in fancy underwear so it wasn’t surprising.

One twenty-minute cab ride later, we were walking into a ginormous Victoria’s secret. The walls were plastered with pictures of women in lingerie, and I grinned when I realized a good portion of the pictures were of London.

Said model ushered me into a dressing room and insisted I have my boobs measured for the right bra size. Apparently “real” bras didn’t come in options of small, medium, or large. Who knew?

Because Jamie and Arla already knew their sizes, they got to browse while some chick came in and measured my chest. She then brought in a couple of bras for me to try on, to see what I liked the most.

The first one I put on made my boobs look massive.

“Come show me.” London ordered from outside. She’d been chatting with the lady who measured me along with a few other people who recognized her as the model from the walls

“Hard pass.” I called back. We hadn’t gotten to the underwear yet, so I was still wearing my sleep shorts.

“Get out here!”

I sighed loudly but did as she instructed. London whistled.

“Too obviously a push-up bra. Next.” She swept her hand at me, and I walked back into the room in my bra and shorts.

London rejected the next two bras too, and then I rejected the four after that. Everything they came in with was lacy and flowery, and I really wasn’t that kind of girl. I was definitely questioning Arla’s claim that sexy bras made a girl feel powerful when I tried on the eighth. It was a simple silky V-shape with complex straps.

When I put it on, I couldn’t stop checking out my own boobs.

“What are you doing? Come out here.” London complained. After a sweep of her eyes, she declared, “It’s perfect.”

“It is.” I admitted, checking my silhouette in the mirror.

Damn, I looked good. Even in my sleep shorts.

Arla and Jamie poked their heads out of the changing room to ooh and ahh a bit, and we all went back to shopping. London forced me to pick out a piece of bedroom-lingerie as she called it, “just in case”.

I wasn’t a complete idiot. The “just in case” was Roman.

When I’d refused, she grabbed the lewdest thing in the store and added it to my bag, so I’d grudgingly replaced it with something slightly more tasteful.

After we finished at VS, we grabbed some lunch in a little café a few doors down. It wasn’t the kind of place I’d eat at by myself, but it was cute and smelled good.

“How did you and Gunner work things out again after everything at the nightclub?” I asked London, as we waited for our food around a shiny round table.

“You can’t call your love-life off-limits and then ask about mine.” She chastised me, shaking her head with a smirk. “You tell me something about you and Roman and I’ll spill about me and Gunner.”

“I second that.” Jamie agreed.

We all looked at Arla, who shrugged.

“I’ve got nothing to contribute here.”

London waved her off, and everyone looked back at me. I weighed my options. I could make everything awkward by refusing, or keep the banter fun by giving them what they wanted.

“You get one question.” I took one for the team.

“Hmm...” London drummed her fingertips on the table. They all leaned in and whispered for a minute. I stared up at the ceiling, hoping they’d pick an easy question.

“Why won’t you admit you’re interested in Roman?” Arla asked.

I groaned.

“Right for the jugular.”

The girls laughed.

“You only gave us one question, we had to make it count.” London pointed out.

“Yeah, yeah.” I muttered. Coming up with an answer that didn’t go into too many details took a minute. “I’ve lost every person and thing I’ve ever loved. That shit messes with you. Part of me feels like if I admit I could like Roman, I’ll be setting myself up for more heartbreak. The other part of me is just too broken to be in a position to consider taking a mate.”

The girls stared at me.

I guess that wasn't the answer they were looking for.

I pointed to London.

“Next.”

She groaned loudly.

“You all know Gunner and I are a mess. He hates my job and thinks the fact that I model underwear makes me a whore. Modeling doesn’t make me worth any less, but he’s hell-bent on making me feel otherwise. After our fight in front of all of you, Gunner showed up at my door with a bouquet of roses and a boner. I caved. Sex is really all we have at this point.” London pointed to Jamie. “You’re up.”

“I think my relationship is more of a mess than either of yours. Oliver and I sleep together sometimes but we aren’t even really friends.” Jamie shrugged sadly. “I shouldn’t have agreed to a political mating.”

“He was watching you closely when you helped me bartend.” I pointed out. “And he didn’t like you walking half-naked through the city.”

“Yeah, you aren’t enemies. Your relationship has the potential to grow.” London agreed.

“Maybe.” Jamie definitely didn’t believe us. “Arla, you have to contribute something.” She geared the conversation to the next person like London and I had.

“I’m coming up on the end of my dissertation. That son of a bitch has taken more than long enough.”

Our protests met Arla’s grin.

We stayed for a long while after we finished eating, just talking about normal things. They discussed the pack and people in it, and Arla’s dissertation topic—which went right over all of our heads. It was nice.

“I’m not ready to go back to my mate.” London said as we finally left the café.

“Same.” Jamie grimaced.

“You know, I think Henley needs some new clothes to go with her new boobs.” Arla tossed me a saucy grin. “What do

you say to spending some of that nice chunk of change my brother is giving you?”

“My wardrobe could probably benefit from something new.” My thoughts went back to the boob-stain on the shirt Arla’s mother judged me so harshly for. And then they flashed forward to what Arla had said. “Wait, what do you mean the money your brother is giving me? Isn’t the pack paying me?”

“That’s what I meant.” She brushed it off, but I noticed her cheeks reddening.

What the hell?

“That’s not what you meant.”

“Roman’s covering part of this month. We split it up between pack members.” Jamie explained.

Okay, that made more sense.

“So it’s a date.” London declared. It took me a second to orient myself back to the conversation. “I’ll call and schedule pedicures, too, and we’ll make this into one big girls’ day.”

That was that.

SIXTEEN

Sleep eluded me again that night.

I hadn't seen Roman that evening, and this time, my dreams were of him. Dying, being tortured, torturing me...

After a particularly gruesome nightmare, I grabbed my phone and called him. My hands shook as I held it to my ear.

It rang and rang before going to voicemail.

I called Arla next, but she didn't answer either.

Even though I knew the feelings and thoughts were irrational and anxiety-generated, I'd gone and started caring about the guy and needed to know he was okay.

Taking the elevator up a level, I shifted my nose and followed Roman's scent to the place it was the strongest. Roman's door was at the end of the hallway to my left, on the left side. 4501. His scent was too strong there for it to be anything but his apartment.

I knocked. He didn't answer, so a minute later I banged on the thing.

"Roman!" I yelled.

He still didn't answer.

I inhaled deeply and didn't catch a fresh scent that would suggest he'd been there recently.

My lungs were starting to feel tight. I'd been responsible for so many deaths. Adding Roman's to the list could kill me.

"Henley?" Arla stepped out of a door a bit down the hall. Her hair was messy, eyes sleep-clouded, and all she had on was a t-shirt. "Are you okay?"

"Where's Roman?" I demanded. Desperation flooded my voice, but I was too focused on finding my Alpha to care.

"If he's not answering his door or phone, usually the fourth floor."

Muttering my thanks, I hurried back into the elevator. I wrapped my arms around my chest and forced myself to keep breathing as the machine descended.

Was I losing my mind?

It definitely felt like it.

The elevator finally stopped and I rushed out into the man-made forest.

“ROMAN!” I yelled his name at the top of my lungs. His scent was by the naked bush, but when I checked all I found was clothing.

My big black wolf came running. He stopped at my side, his fur on my bare leg, scanning the area for threats. My breaths came out rapidly even though I now knew he was okay. The panic had a solid grip on my lungs.

Roman’s concerned eyes bore into me as I dropped to the dirt, arms still wrapped around my middle as I struggled for air. He dropped beside me, prodding my arms with his nose until he’d maneuvered himself so my arms wrapped around him, squeezing his giant furry body to mine.

“Panic attack.” I panted the words as my breathing sped and the world seemed to close in around me. Roman shifted back to human form, standing and sweeping me up off my feet. He cradled my body to his warm, bare chest and carried me away from the elevator doors.

My eyes were shut tightly as the worst of it passed, breaths slowing back to a normal rate. He didn’t say anything, just holding me tight.

He stopped walking at one point, sitting on something and moving me to another position. My legs wrapped around his middle, my head resting against his neck while his arms held me against him. One of his hands brushed over my hair slowly.

It was a long time before I was mostly calm. He didn’t speak until then.

“What happened?” he finally asked. The question was a soft one, and I knew I wasn’t obligated to answer.

“Nightmares.”

He didn't ask who they were about. A few minutes later, I told him anyway.

“Most of them are of Ledger.” I confessed into his neck, not making eye contact. “Sometimes other Alphas, but mostly Ledger. I dreamed that he killed you because of me.”

Roman's arms tightened around me.

“I'm not going anywhere.”

There was a long pause. I wondered if he was falling asleep, but the warmth of his skin and the beat of his heart against my nose was so calming I couldn't bring myself to care.

“Henley,” He began and then paused.

“Spit it out.” I mumbled.

“I'd really like to know what Ledger did to you. I understand if you're not ready to talk about it now, or ever, but if you ever want to tell me I want to know.”

The words surprised me. Not the concept—he'd asked before—but the fact that he'd so painstakingly tried to make sure I understood that it was my choice when I told him. If I told him.

“Thank you.”

We sat in silence for a few more minutes. I was emotional and vulnerable, and for some reason I wanted to share a part of myself with Roman.

“It's going to be a long time until I'm ready to mate with you.” I said quietly. “I haven't really trusted someone since my mom was killed. A person doesn't just relearn how to trust overnight. Or over a few months.”

“I'm not in a hurry.” His hand trailed down my hair and back again. I started blinking quickly. Something had to be in my eyes, because I never cried.

“You should be. You're out of control.”

He snorted.

“Says the girl who got in a fight over me.”

“She started it.”

His chest rumbled.

“Where are we?” I looked around. Still in the man-made forest, it seemed. A large, flat area that resembled a giant mattress wrapped in a plastic-like sheet was beneath us.

“A lot of werewolves don’t like sleeping in the dirt in wolf form, so we built this and they’d all pile on here at night. It doesn’t get much use now that you’ve joined the pack.” He fiddled with my hair again.

“That’s genius. I’ll have to try it out next time I come for a run.” I yawned and rubbed my eyes. Panic attacks were exhausting “I’d better get to bed.”

“If that’s what you want.”

I leaned away from him, a question in my eyes.

“We could spend the night here. Together.” He gestured to the oh-so-inviting wolf mattress.

I scoffed at him.

“We’d be sleeping in wolf form, if that didn’t come through in my suggestion.”

It wasn’t a terrible idea. It might help with my anxiety, even. But I didn’t feel ready to accept Roman to that extent. There was still a lot between us that I wasn’t ready for and I wasn’t about to lead him on in thinking we were more serious than we were.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m going to turn in.” I stood. My gaze dropped down and I realized Roman had been naked as he comforted me and we had a conversation.

“Like what you see?” He lifted an amused eyebrow. My cheeks flamed.

Caught checking him out again. I needed to get my damn eyes under control.

“Eh. Seen better.” I shrugged casually, turning and heading out.

He totally knew I was lying.

“I’ll be here if you change your mind.” His silky voice gave me goosebumps.

Damn it.

I didn’t know the way back to the elevator, so I followed Roman’s scent trail. The way our smells wrapped around each other and morphed into something deliciously new was ridiculously sexy.

Not too much later, I was in the elevator heading back up to my apartment. I realized Roman hadn’t commented on my clothing and looked down, snorting when I saw that I’d gone to bed in leggings and a big, comfortable long-sleeved top. Guess I’d forgotten to change before bed.

I threw the leggings over the back of the couch when I got home and collapsed in bed wearing just my long-sleeve top and panties. My eyes closed and I started drifting back to sleep. All of three minutes later, I was gasping awake again. An image of a beige wolf closing his teeth around my throat burned my mind.

Freaking Ledger.

Hurrying out to the living room, I paced the room for a few minutes, mind at war. Should I try to go back to sleep and risk yet another nightmare? Or should I swallow my pride and go find Roman? Something told me his presence would be enough to keep the nightmares at bay.

My whole body shuddered at the memory of the last nightmare, and my mind was made up in an instant. The door slammed behind me as I headed to the elevator yet again.

When I got off on the fourth floor again, I hiked off in the direction of the scent trail I’d just barely left. Roman’s scent was still strong in the air, and I questioned myself all the way back to the wolf bed.

His head lifted as I broke through the trees, gaze following my movements. He looked sleepy, remaining on his belly.

“Changed my mind.” I muttered, sitting next to him. The walk had drained the last of whatever energy I had, so I wrapped my arms around Roman’s black fur and shut my eyes. He licked my face as I lowered myself to my side, my squishy human body pressed into his powerful wolf form.

Sleep took me then, and I was right. Roman kept my nightmares away.

I woke up when something tickled my nose. My face wrinkled against the feeling, and I shook my head. The tickling intensified.

What the...

It came back to me in an instant. The panic last night, finding Roman and then leaving him and then coming back. My fingers were twisted in his fur, my grip so tight he was probably in pain.

My black wolf morphed into a strong human, and then my fingers pinched warm skin rather than tangling in fur. Roman’s face was right over the top of mine, his arms on either side of my head.

I swallowed and a surge of attraction flooded me.

Holy hell, I wanted him.

He inhaled deeply, eyes darkening when he caught the scent of my desire. Whoops. Roman groaned and his body pressed into mine. I tried not to respond to the feeling, I really did. But somehow, I managed to flip him over so I was on top of him, pinning him to the firm bed beneath me.

Midnight-eyes bore into my soul. I could scent his desire as well as feel it, and the way his eyes swept slowly over my t-shirt clad, bra-less body made me hot. The panties between our lower halves hid nothing about what either of us was feeling.

I should’ve worn pants if I didn’t want to jump his bones.

“I should go.” I whispered, not budging an inch.

“Me too.”

He stared at me.

I stared at him.

And *damn*, I wanted him.

One of his hands burned a trail down the back of my thigh as we remained in place, eyes locked and bodies tense with need.

“Roman.” Arla’s shout rolled through the man-made forest. “We have a problem.”

The man beneath me stopped petting my skin. His hands squeezed my thighs just soft enough not to hurt, and I let out a breathy moan as my eyes fluttered shut. He squeezed harder. When I gasped, he rolled me over so he was posed over the top of me. Every part of him pressed into every part of me.

Definitely should’ve worn pants.

“I know you’re in here.” Arla sounded more irritated now.

We heard her footsteps at the same time, our gazes jerking to the trees off to our side. Roman shifted in an instant and was settling down beside me in his wolf form again by the time Arla broke through the trees.

“You are so annoy—Oh.” Her eyebrows lifted.

My heart pounded too quickly to speak out loud. Whether that was an aftereffect of my close proximity to Roman’s naked body or nearly being caught in such a scandalous position, I didn’t know.

So I lifted my hand in a half-wave.

“Did you guys sleep together here?” She glanced around.

“Yep.” I managed the one word. Roman shot me a dark-eyed stare.

“Are you mated?” She sniffed the air.

“Arla!” I hissed.

She made a gagging face.

“Did not need to smell my brother’s lust.” She waved her hand in front of her nose and backed away. “Melanie caught Hayden beating Maddie.”

A snarl tore the air. Roman licked my face and neck before sprinting away from me. He was gone so quickly I felt a bit of whiplash.

“Roman’s big on males treating their females with respect. The last guy who took his temper out on his mate is now missing an eye.” Arla told me. I grimaced, and she followed Roman back to the elevator, leaving me alone.

Alone with my lust.

Part of me couldn’t believe Roman had just walked away while I smelled lust and was dressed like this. His smell was definitely thick on my skin, but so was my own.

I made my way back to the elevator slowly, regretting pretty much all of my decisions in the past twelve hours. Particularly one.

Pants. Next time, wear pants.

When I stepped in the elevator, it was full. I groaned inwardly, avoiding eye contact.

All seven of the werewolves in the elevator took a deep sniff of the air. One of the four men groaned and stepped closer to me. His body was less than an inch from mine when another of the men stopped him with a hand to the chest.

“Bad idea.” The guy warned his friend.

“Smells so good.” The mesmerized guy mumbled.

“Roman will kill you if he smells you mixed up in all that lust.” The reasonable one said.

I would’ve denied it, but something told me the reasonable one was probably right. Roman wasn’t exactly level-headed when it came to me and other men.

“You’re so freaking lucky.” The woman shot me a death glare as the elevator stopped on the second floor to let another two women in. They both took deep breaths as well, and their

eyes shifted as they caught the scent of Roman's desire on my skin.

My arms folded over my chest as they glared at me too. They were probably some of the girls from the pack run. If they'd challenged me, I would've fought them for him too. My level of possessiveness was getting ridiculously high.

The elevator emptied when it reached the first floor, and then a middle-aged woman stepped inside. When she took a breath in, her lips lifted.

"You two seem like a good match."

I'd expected her to hate on me too.

"Uh," I didn't finish the sentence. Didn't know what to say. She pressed the button for her floor, which luckily was only a few above where we were.

"I've known Roman his whole life and never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you." She added. "He needs someone to pour all that protectiveness into."

By the time I came up with half a response she was striding out of the elevator, leaving me with a,

"Good luck, Wolfsbane."

It was the first time someone called me that and I didn't want to punch them.

SEVENTEEN

“Oh, that’s bad.” Kyler coughed, pounding his chest with his fist. Tears streamed down my face as I laughed harder than I had in years. If I’d ever laughed like that before. Jamie’s nose screwed up with her face.

“I did exactly what you said.” She protested.

“Whatever that was, it wasn’t a martini.” He grabbed a glass of water and chugged it.

I slid a whiskey sour down the bar to some chick and she nodded her thanks as I wiped the tears off my face. Training Jamie had become my favorite pastime as soon as Kyler showed up to help. He was testing her drink-mixing knowledge, guiding her through the steps to make them as customers ordered them. Not that the customers got to taste her drinks; that was all on Kyler.

“I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.” Jamie’s forehead wrinkled.

My eye caught on Oliver, who was watching her closely. If I hadn’t known better, I’d say he was worried about her.

“There, there.” Kyler put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

Oliver was on his feet in an instant, stalking toward the bar. I acted like I hadn’t noticed him, taking another order and handing out another drink as he approached.

Kyler choked on another of her drinks.

“Everything tasted better when Henley was teaching me.” Jamie complained.

“Hey Jame,” Oliver gave his mate a quick smile, but I noticed the territorial way he flashed his eyes at Kyler. “Can I get a drink?”

“Sure. What do you want?” Her cheeks pinked a bit.

Did these people actually live together?

“What’s your specialty?”

“That would be shots.” Kyler grinned at Jamie, who scowled at him. I choked back a laugh when Oliver growled at the nightclub owner.

“She’s still learning.” He dared Kyler to dis her again.

“Easy, Prince Charming.” Kyler lifted his hands.

“It’s fine, Oliver.” Jamie’s expression held a hint of excitement. Their semi-relationship was so freaking adorable. “Alright, what next?”

She failed a couple more drinks before Kyler somewhat approved of the way she mixed one, and she handed it to her mate with a sheepish smile. Oliver grinned and took a big drink.

The liquid wasn’t in his mouth for more than a second before he spat it back into the glass, coughing. Kyler gave the guy a knowing smirk and handed him some water, which he gulped down quickly.

I couldn’t take it anymore and lost myself to my laughter again, my face hurting from the smile I wore and my belly cramping as I laughed.

“This is hopeless.” Jamie moaned.

“Learning takes time.” Oliver comforted her, reaching across the bar to take her hand. Her eyes met his in surprise and my lips tilted upward. I’d never even seen them touch like that before.

A smile blossomed on Jamie’s face, lighting her eyes.

“Henley was a better teacher than this idiot.” Oliver tipped his head toward Kyler, releasing his mate’s hand and sitting back in his stool.

“He’s right. Her drinks were fine when I was in charge.” I grabbed a cocktail shaker and tossed the ingredients I needed in, pouring it into a glass after a moment and handing it to the customer, who gave me twenty bucks in exchange. I stuck the money in my bra, as always.

“Alright, swap. You teach, I’ll serve.” Kyler said.

Jamie and I fell quickly back into the pattern from the day before.

“Grab the glass.” I instructed, leaning up against the bar and wiping my hands on a towel. “Add ice, and then gin.” She did as I said, “Now tonic. Good. Give the glass a good swirl, and grab a lime wedge.” I waited, the side of my lips lifting with her awkward glass-swirl.

“Kyler told me to stir it.” She explained.

“Well Kyler doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

He shot me a teasing glare and I smirked back.

“How do you know, if you never drink?” Jamie legitimately sounded curious. I couldn’t blame her.

“I’ve served a lot of them.” The half-truth weighed on my conscience. We were friends; friends could talk about their pasts. “And I used to drink for fun. When the last pack had me, pretty much everything about me changed. Trauma.” I shook my head, not wanting to go more in-depth. “Now, drinking gives me too much of an escape. I have to be careful not to do it often.”

Jamie gave me a sympathetic smile.

“Rub the lime wedge around the rim of the glass. Be generous with it. Then squeeze that sucker and drop him in.” I guided the conversation back to our gin and tonic lesson. Jamie did as instructed. “Alright, Oliver.” I gestured to him. He and Jamie both grimaced.

“He already suffered once.” She protested.

“Hand it over.” He held out his hand.

Jamie reluctantly gave it to him. Cautiously, he took a sip.

She waited, body tense. I bit back a grin.

“It’s good.” Oliver’s eyes lit as they met his mate’s. Jamie cheered.

People on the other side of the bar were looking at her weird, but she didn't seem to care.

I caught a scent that had me freezing in place and my gaze jerked to the door. My fists clenched when I saw two of my torturers from Ledger's pack stroll inside.

Their eyes landed on me and they grinned wickedly. I tossed the towel I'd been holding on the counter and stalked into the back room. Either I'd get away or they'd grab me, but whichever way things went for me, the humans in the club couldn't see it happen.

One of the werewolves vaulted over the bar and sprinted after me while the other created a diversion by grabbing a human man and tearing his head clean off his body. Screams erupted from the humans, the level of noise quickly growing louder than that of the pounding music.

"Ledger misses you, Henley." The guy behind me yelled as he chased me. I didn't have to look back to see the sneer on his ugly mug; it was forever ingrained in my mind. "Make this easy for us and we'll make it easy for you."

"Go to hell." I yelled back as I shoved the back door open. It led onto a street, and in proper New York fashion, none of the humans cared that some random chick was racing down the sidewalk.

My lungs burned as I ran with everything I had, chest heaving for air. I'd been working out, but I was still a female werewolf, and we weren't made to outrun males.

My torturer's body came hurtling at mine, tackling me to the ground. I grunted as two hundred pounds of werewolf knocked the breath right from my lungs. His hand wrapped around my mouth and I bit down on his fingers. The only thing that accomplished was making him swear and shove his elbow into my side.

I cried out at the impact.

Freaking muscular elbow.

Muscular elbow man tossed me over his shoulder and charged down the street. I screamed for help and people finally

started noticing that I was being attacked. They were no match for Muscular Elbow though; he barreled through anything and everything in our path, including a hot dog stand.

He slammed my head into the top of a sedan and I saw stars. Next thing I knew, my mouth, wrists, and ankles were duct-taped and I was being shoved into the trunk. When Muscular Elbow slammed on the gas, I flew face-first into the odd-shaped inside of the car's tail end. My nose crunched, and I screamed into the duct-tape. Tears fell automatically as the pain had me nearly seeing stars.

My body slammed into the back of the car's seats when Muscular Elbow hit the brakes so hard I smelled them burning. The tail end of the car spun out of control, and I was thrown around like a rag doll.

I could hear yelling outside but no one opened the trunk to let me out. This wasn't my first time trapped in a trunk, and I'd made it a point to know how to escape after my last, which led to Ledger's storm cellar. Mentally spewing every swear word I knew, I wiggled myself enough to locate the trunk's release button near the latch. It was a lever-type thing, so I rolled to my back and squirmed over so I could grab it with duct-taped hands, yanking up and down until I heard the giving 'pop' of the lock releasing.

The yelling was much louder with the trunk open and the sirens were nearly deafening. I threw my bound legs up over the trunk's ledge and used every ounce of ab muscle and finger strength I possessed to lift myself into a seated position. Hopping down was easy after that.

Right outside the car, I caught Kyler in a fistfight with Muscular Elbow. They both wore bruises on various parts of their figures, Elbow pinning Kyler to the cement. Police horns ordered the men to put their hands up, and the guys ignored them.

Kyler wrestled his way out from under Elbow. His knee landed on Elbow's throat, and he held my torturer down.

The police surged forward and took Muscular Elbow from Kyler, cuffing him and shoving him into a police car. Even

Ledger had *some* rules about keeping our society's secrets, so the man glared out the window at us rather than shifting forms and going for our throats.

Kyler was also handcuffed and shoved into a separate cop car while two officers tugged at my duct-tap. The tape ripped hair and flesh as it was yanked from my body, and I rubbed at the raw skin when it was free.

"What happened?" a female cop demanded.

She was scarier than any werewolf chick I knew, except Jamie. That bitch had skills.

"The blond guy and his friend showed up in the nightclub I work at. When I ran, the blond followed and grabbed me. My boss," I gestured to the car Kyler had been shoved into, "Must've chased after him because the car only made it a few yards. He saved my life."

I tried to make Kyler into a big hero so the cops would let him go. They decided to hold him in the car until they heard a few more takes on the story, and I respected that. After a quick ride in one of the police cars, I followed the cops into the nightclub.

There was an obscene amount of blood on the tile. Jamie sat on the floor with tears streaming down her face, Oliver's arms wrapped around her. Ledger's enforcer was on the ground, his blood mingling with that of the human he'd killed and the third male enforcer who had been sent to protect me. Roman's enforcer was dead, too.

One of the cops ran out the door, and I heard vomiting before it shut behind him.

"What happened?" A cop asked.

"It's all on the security cameras. He attacked him." Jamie pointed from Ledger's guy to the human. "My husband's friend tried to stop him and he..." She bawled, burying her face in Oliver's shoulder. Oliver wore a sick grimace.

More questions were asked, but one of the cops dragged me away from the scene and set me down in a booth so my back faced the crime scene. With a gentle voice, he asked me more

questions about what I'd seen and everything that happened earlier. I was only partway through the questions when the doors were thrown open and all of the cops turned, pulling their weapons out and pointing them at the entrance.

Roman stepped inside, face tight as he lifted his hands up beside his head. His eyes snapped to me in an instant and scanned me for injuries.

"That's the owner's best friend." Jamie blurted.

The cops put their weapons away and asked him to leave. He wouldn't listen, obviously.

I expected Roman to go talk to the officers or ask Jamie what happened, so I turned back around. A second later, large hands were on my shoulders before Roman slid into the booth beside me.

"Are you okay?" He demanded, both hands moving to cup my face. One lifted to my nose, and my eyes watered as he gently prodded it with his thumb.

"Just shaken up and a little bruised." I batted his hand away from my nose. That sucker was probably broken and freaking hurt. Roman's wolf-side seemed to be at the helm, though.

"You need medical attention." His whole body began to shake with fury, a sharp scent that filled the air.

"I'm fine, Romeo." I flicked my eyes to the human cop who'd been interviewing me, dropping the nickname and all to try to knock him into realizing where we were. He didn't follow my eyes.

"I'm sorry, how do you know each other?" the cop pulled both of our attention.

"This is Roman Ellis." I gestured to him.

"Henley's fiancé." Roman's arm draped over my shoulder.

I coughed, choking on my own spit at the shock of the statement. Roman pulled me closer.

The cop leaned away, and the scent of his sweat caught my nostrils. I elbowed Roman in the gut, warning him to cool it.

He ignored me.

“She needs to see a doctor. Her nose is still bleeding from whatever happened.”

It was?

I lifted my fingers to my nose and sure enough, wet red blood stained my fingers. It wasn't pouring blood anymore, which was why I hadn't noticed, but was definitely still bleeding.

“As an officer of the law, it should've been your duty to make sure my fiancé was medically cared for before questioning her about the incident.” Roman rose to his full height, pulling me to my feet with him. With six and a half feet of muscle and power glowering down at him, I'm surprised the officer didn't crap himself. “You'll be hearing from my lawyers.”

The cop's face flushed.

“*Roman.*” My voice cut through the tension like a knife. “There's no need for that. I'm sure he was getting there. Weren't you?” I prodded.

“Of course.” The cop said stiffly.

When Roman let out a low growl again, I grabbed his hand and squeezed as hard as I could. The scent of his blood hit my nose, and I realized my nails had shifted into claws.

Shit.

I wasn't about to think on the fact that I could pick out the scent of his blood despite all the other blood on the ground.

“Kyler was in a police car last time I saw him. Go check on him while I finish up. Please.” I added that last word after the fact.

Roman looked like he was going to argue. He was as much wolf as human in that moment, so I did the only thing I knew would snap his human side back into control.

I leaned forward and kissed him.

Our lips only met for a brief moment, but his hands found my lower back and mine found his chest. When I stepped back, his eyes were entirely human and his muscles were more relaxed.

“Thanks.” I tried not to sound breathy, sitting back down with the cop. Roman grudgingly left me with the officer. “Let’s finish the questions so someone can look at my nose.”

I answered the rest of his questions without protest, although they were pretty repetitive. My nose was throbbing long before we were done. The cop led me to an ambulance, and my eyes lingered on the body bags within.

Jamie’s ankle was wrapped and her arm around Oliver’s shoulder as he held some of her weight. They stood talking to a set of officers in front of a police car. Roman was talking to Kyler, and their body language made it look like they were arguing about something.

The EMT looked at my nose for a minute before deciding I needed to see a specialist. Going to the hospital wasn’t high on my to-do list, so I declined. Although I’d never had a broken nose before and didn’t know how to deal with it myself, I’d text Dr. Grant for instructions on how to fix it.

EIGHTEEN

They had me sign something saying I'd refused care before I was allowed to leave. I thanked them for their help and made my way to Jamie's side. She was leaning up against the building, waiting for me.

"The guys left us here?" I lifted an eyebrow. She shook her head and tilted her head toward the nightclub.

"Oliver and Kyler are cleaning up. Roman stepped away to take a phone call."

"I'm ready to go home." I told her. "You in?"

She glanced back at the building, eyes puffy and sad.

"It's okay if you want to wait for your mate."

"No, let's go."

We started off down the street together, cops staring at us as we left. When I noticed her limping, I pulled Jamie's arm over my shoulder so she wouldn't have to walk on her ankle.

"What happened?" I gestured to the wrapped limb.

"Oh, I kicked the Colorado wolf in the stomach. He'd already hit me, so the angle was weird. It'll be fine in a few days."

The walk home was longer than normal thanks to Jamie's ankle but still only lasted a few minutes. No one inside the 'scraper looked twice at our bruised, battered, and bloody appearance. I guess that was a benefit of living where everyone was a werewolf.

When we got up to the forty-fourth floor, I considered asking Jamie to stay with me in my apartment for a bit. After my near abduction, alone wasn't something I was dying to be.

"Would you be okay to hang out at my place for a bit? After watching Charles die, I don't want to be alone." Jamie and I were on the same page.

"Sure. Let me just grab my clothes." I agreed.

After I swiped one of my new bras and a pair of comfortable leggings from my room, Jamie and I headed for hers. Sleek chocolate-colored floors partnered with white walls and chrome accents as far as I could see. It wasn't terribly homey, but looked nice.

"It's pretty." I commented.

"It's modern." Jamie shrugged, slipping her shoes off by the door. I'd already dropped mine in my place; no need to track blood everywhere. "Oliver and I moved to this apartment when you got here, so we're still getting used to it. The guest bathroom is down the hall and on the right." She pointed to the left.

I'd ask about her moving because of me *after* I showered off the blood and sweat that came with being locked in a trunk and nearly abducted.

Until I saw myself in the mirror, I hadn't realized how injured I was. No wonder Roman had flipped out. The craziness of everything distracted me from my many aches and pains—including the hideous appearance of my nose. I prodded it gently and bit down hard on my lip at the fiery pain that had my eyes tearing up.

Grabbing my phone, I quickly texted Dr. Grant.

Me: How do you fix your own broken nose?

Grant: You don't

Shit.

Grant: If it's not bleeding, Roman can bring you to my room and I'll do it.

With a huff, I dropped my phone on the counter. That would be an after-shower problem. If the damn thing ever stopped bleeding.

Stepping into the shower, I shut my eyes and let the hot water rinse away the evidence of more shit Ledger was to blame for. As my muscles relaxed, I really started to feel those bruises. I was hurting bad when I stepped out with clean hair and skin.

Jamie whistled when I finally made it out of the bathroom. She stood in her kitchen, throwing frozen fruit into a blender.

“Those are some massive bruises.”

I made a face and moving my nose to do it nearly made me cry.

“None as bad as the nose.” I gestured to it, slowly making my way into her kitchen and sitting down on one of the stools attached to the island. Soft piano music played from a smart speaker on the counter as she continued adding things to the blender. “Peanut butter in a smoothie?”

“You won’t taste it.” Jamie promised.

I took her word for it, accepting the greenish smoothie that filled the glass to the very brim. Lifting it to my lips, I sipped some and nearly gagged.

“Holy peanut butter and kale.” I coughed. She scowled at me.

“It’s good. Drink it.”

“As good as the drinks Kyler had you making.” I muttered, tilting the glass back and swallowing as much smoothie as I could manage like it was one big shot.

“Oliver likes this recipe.” Jamie protested, though her face looked nearly as green as the drink in her glass. “It’s good.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” I dropped the empty glass on the table.

When Jamie finished her smoothie she led me into her spare bedroom and told me to take a nap. The feeling of being taken care of was so foreign to me that I didn’t dare argue. Of course, I only managed a few minutes of sleep before nightmares jolted me awake. I stayed in the spare room for a solid twenty minutes, staring at the ceiling and trying to deal with my anxiety before creeping out.

Still not wanting to offend Jamie, I peeked around the corner and saw her snoozing away on her couch, hands under her head like princesses in movies. I pulled out my phone as I slipped out the door and crossed the hall, texting her:

Me: Thanks for the gross smoothie and the company. Come to my place if you wake up and don't want to be alone.

When I was back home, I cooked up some real food and turned the music on loud. Quiet was something I really couldn't deal with at the moment.

I was only a quarter through the giant pile of tacos I'd made myself when someone knocked on the door. I swept it open to a bleeding, half-naked Roman, and my eyebrows lifted.

"What happened to you?"

"Snapped at an enforcer. He snapped back. Ended up challenging me for Alpha."

I blinked.

Not what I expected to hear.

"Which one?"

"Roland. You didn't know him; he was too volatile to protect you."

"And you're not volatile?" I lifted an eyebrow.

"Didn't use to be." He leaned up against the doorway and closed his eyes. Roman looked...

Tired.

And not just because of the fight with the enforcer, although it couldn't have been easy. He'd been battling his beast side, too. Which was partially my fault. My guilt was strong, so I pulled the door open wide. He eyed it.

"Come on. I'll get you cleaned up and you can call Grant to come fix my nose."

"How much does it hurt?" Roman asked, stepping inside before I had a chance to change my mind. His question was stupid, so I ignored it. His phone was already in his hand, fingers flying across the screen for a moment. His phone buzzed, and he paused. "Grant can't come in your territory. For my sanity and his." He shot me a hesitant look. "How do you feel about coming to my apartment?"

I shrugged, grabbed my taco plate, and off we went.

“How close was the fight?” I asked as the elevator moved upward.

“Not close.”

He glanced sideways at me.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

“You can’t be everywhere and do everything. Sometimes shit happens.” I stated facts, not wanting to remind myself of any of the day’s earlier events or look into them too closely. “It’s not your fault.”

Roman’s head jerked in a nod.

“I’m still sorry.”

I said nothing. Nothing I could’ve said would change what had gone down or the fact that sleeping wouldn’t be on the table for the next few days.

He led me into his apartment, 4501. The same one I’d followed his scent to during my panic attack.

Leather mixed with chrome and dark wood, making the place into a modern, rustic sanctuary. The place looked nice, but its real draw was the way everything smelled purely like Roman. Not a single other scent mingled with the Alpha’s.

A girl could get high on that smell alone.

I’d screw up the place’s smell, which I hoped he didn’t mind.

He disappeared into a door at the side of the room that I assumed led to his bedroom. When he came back he had a shirt, a pair of sweats, and a baseball cap. He handed them to me.

“Pretty sure I’m already dressed.” I gestured to my bra and legging clad body without accepting the bundle of heavenly-smelling clothes.

“Grant already made a move on you once.” He reminded me. “You’re bleeding this time, so you need to be extra

careful.”

I wanted to protest. A whiff of the air around me gave me a solid reason not to: if Roman smelled any better, I’d want to jump his bones as much as Grant apparently wanted to jump mine. Scent was definitely powerful.

So I put his clothes on over my own. No changing necessary.

Roman leaned in and sniffed the air around me. When he straightened, he wore a frown.

“That’s exactly the expression I want people to make when they sniff me.” I gestured to his wrinkled face.

“You still smell too damn good.” He grumbled. With a quick sweep up and down, he grabbed my damp, long braid off my back and twisted it, stuffing it up into the back of the ball cap. Then he hugged me.

“Dude, you’re all bloody.” I protested.

“This is the best way to make you stink.” He rubbed his hands all over my shoulders and back. I focused on my throbbing nose so I wouldn’t get all hot and bothered by the contact.

As if him touching me could make me stink.

His hands were so freaking big. So was the rest of him...

That train of thought was hella dangerous so I geared my mind right back to the nose pain.

Roman opened the door for Grant a minute later, and the guy sniffed the air.

“Does no one ever come in here but you?” he raised his eyebrows at the Alpha, who shrugged.

“The last person other than me was my sister, a few months ago.”

“Well, I can barely smell Henley.” Grant declared. “Nice work.”

The three of us crossed the hall to Roman's office to keep Grant out of his apartment, too. Roman liked his space.

When he saw my nose he decided it wasn't too bad of a break and set it himself, warning me to ice it and not sleep on my face. Considering the pain, that wouldn't be a problem. The doctor visit ended faster than I'd expected and Grant left me and Roman alone.

We went back to his apartment and I stepped out of Roman's sweats, dropping them and his hat on the table, leaving his t-shirt on. It smelled too good to take it off.

"Do you have a rag or something? I can clean your cuts." I suggested. Why I did so was beyond me, but plenty of what was going on with Roman and I felt beyond me.

He retrieved a damp towel and a thing of hand soap, then sat facing the back of one of his kitchen chairs when I started cleaning his wounds. They weren't horrible, but weren't nothing either. His skin relaxed under my fingers, and I could've purred at my effect on him.

You know, if I was part cat rather than wolf.

"So Arla hasn't been in here for a few months?" I prodded. There was a lot I didn't know about my Alpha, and I was curious.

"We always hang out at the offices or her place. I like my territory to be mine and mine alone, and Arla gets it." He was even starting to *sound* relaxed. "Why does that surprise you?"

"I thought you'd have friends come to hang out or something at least." I said, slipping my hand from under his to resume wiping blood from his back. It had started to dry in most places and wasn't coming off easily.

"Not many people want to be friends with their Alpha. My enforcers are the closest I have to that."

And he'd just killed one of them.

"Ah." I bit my lip.

"Don't feel bad for me, Hen." He shot me an amused glance over his shoulder. "I kept to myself long before I was Alpha."

“Do you want me to go?” I stopped moving my towel.

“No. Having you in my space calms me.” He reached up and touched my hand as it rested on his shoulder.

“So why did Roland say he was challenging you?” I changed the subject, my hand moving down to the cuts on his lower back. I won’t lie; I was really tempted to reach down and squeeze his ass. I’d been dying to know what it felt like.

“It doesn’t matter.” He said.

Yeah, I wasn’t letting this slide.

“He was willing to kill you to take your title, Roman. Of course it matters.”

I stared him down, waiting for the story.

“Roland said that since I brought you into the pack I’ve become a ticking time bomb. Decided he wasn’t willing to wait for me to lose it completely and challenged me.” He finally said.

“You were challenged because of *me*?”

“I was challenged because Roland is a coward who needed an excuse to fight me for more power.”

His words didn’t stick. I stared out the windows, mind spinning with that revelation and others. My hand stilled on Roman’s back again, rag resting on one of the cuts.

“Showering will be a more effective way to clean your injuries.”

I removed the rag, tossing it to the table.

“I’d better go.” I headed for the door. Roman crossed the room, blocking my exit.

“Don’t run from me.” His eyes narrowed, daring me to keep going.

“I’m not running.”

Lie.

“You left your tacos on the table.”

Shit.

“Fine, I was running.” I folded my arms across my chest. “Someone challenged you to a fight to the death because of me, Roman. Why wouldn’t I run?”

“There’s always someone looking to gain power. Usually, they’re assholes. His reasons were bullshit he spewed just so he’d have an excuse. I’d like to think you’re not going to run because you care about me and want to spend time with me after I survived a challenge that could’ve ended with me dead.”

His words struck me, hard.

Caring about someone was dangerous enough, but caring about an Alpha? That was setting myself up for heartbreak sooner rather than later, and I’d sure as hell had enough of that shit. It’d be much safer not to care about anyone at all.

“You’re right. I care about you, and you could end up dead any day because of your place in the pack. I’m not running, I’m leaving. Because I can’t do this.”

I stepped around him, yanking the door open and stalking out toward the elevator.

“Whoa, Hen.” Roman protested, following me down the hall. “Let’s talk about this.”

My tired eyes met his briefly.

“It’s better this way.”

“Better for who?” He followed me into the elevator and I pointedly didn’t look at him.

“Me.”

The doors closed and took us down to my floor and he walked at my side out of the elevator.

“What are you doing?” I asked, voice weary.

“Sticking around until you’re ready to talk to me.” He sounded frustrated.

“Good luck with that.” My eyes rolled as I grabbed my doorknob. “What are you going to do, sit outside my apartment?”

“Yup.” Roman stopped in the hall and stuck his hands in his pockets. “Unless you’re going to let me inside.”

I pulled the door open and Roman caught my arm gently turning me. His very-human tongue stroked over my nose quickly before he let me go.

“I didn’t tell you to heal me.” I snapped.

“Well I hate seeing you hurting.” He shot back.

“Go home.” I went inside. As the door closed, he said,

“You’re the only home I want anymore.”

His voice was low and sexy and his words made me want to take back what I was saying and doing. But the longer I let myself care about Roman, the more it would hurt when life came back and bit me in the ass. And it always did.

I stumbled and shut my eyes, leaning against the door. I was trying so hard not to care, but that was easier said than done.

Much easier said than done.

NINETEEN

I didn't sleep that night. Or the next. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Ledger viciously attacking and murdering me or Roman or Arla or the female enforcers I'd befriended. The longer I went without sleep, the worse the nightmares got.

"Hey Henley, did you—what are you doing?" Jamie stopped as the door closed behind her. She was the only person who'd tried to visit me since I told Roman I was done.

I looked up from the plate I was scrubbing.

"Dishes." I mumbled. The rings under my eyes were bigger than my actual eyes.

"Roman's worried about you."

I scowled at the door she'd closed. True to his word, Roman was still camped out in front of my door three days after our conversation.

Three.

Freaking.

Days.

The man was as stubborn as I was. He could stay out there forever.

I'd have talked to him so he would leave, but he was only waiting to convince me not to care about the pain that would accompany the loss of him. That conversation would be pointless. People around me always ended up dead.

With Roman being an Alpha, even if by some miracle I wasn't the reason he got killed he would still lose a challenge at some point, and then I'd lose him. So there was no point in talking. I wasn't going to let him change my mind.

"He can shove his worry up his ass."

"I'm worried too, Hennie."

It was the first time she'd used the nickname.

I paused, scalding water running over my hands. Even as my skin burned under the water, I couldn't muster the energy to care. Exhaustion was too heavy.

"No one's called me that since my mom died." I said. "I like it."

With a nod, I went back to scrubbing my dishes.

"Were those dishes even dirty?" Jamie folded her arms. I noticed a fabric bag in one of her hands, the kind people who really cared about the environment used at the grocery store. I wasn't one of those overachievers, but I could definitely picture Jamie as one.

"I'm not washing them because they're dirty; I'm washing them because I can't sleep and it's something to do." I shot her an exasperated look. "Did you come here to question my coping methods?"

"No." She strolled on into my kitchen like I'd invited her in. Which I hadn't. "I came to make you chamomile tea and watch a movie with you." She put her bag on my sparkling countertop and pulled out a movie case. When she held up a copy of a movie that was still in the theaters and smiled, I rolled my eyes.

"Rich girl connections."

"You bet." She pulled out a hot pink tea kettle and what had to be a hundred-dollar box of fancy handmade tea bags.

"I'm not drinking something that will make me tired."

"You have to sleep."

"I'll sleep when Ledger gets out of my mind. Took a week of drowning myself in alcohol last time before I even felt partially sane." I scrubbed harder.

"What do you mean?" Jamie abandoned her expensive tea and came around to sit on a stool in front of my sink.

"About the alcohol?"

"About Ledger."

"He was my old Alpha. Not a great dude."

“I know. What’s he doing in your dreams when you can’t sleep?” she folded her arms and rested them on the counter.

Now I had a reason to clean it again. Score.

“Beating me. Raping me. Killing people I don’t hate. Ripping my heart out through my throat. Same old shit.” I didn’t meet her eyes.

Why was I telling her this?

“No wonder you can’t sleep.” Jamie remarked. “Can you stop cleaning already-clean dishes and watch the movie?” she changed the subject. I shot her a dark glare.

“If I stop cleaning, I’ll fall asleep. So no.”

“If you don’t go to sleep, Roman is going to barge in here in his wolf form. He thinks he can keep your nightmares away.” She studied me. I scowled at the door again. I’d been doing a lot of that.

He wasn’t wrong.

“Go home, Roman.” I shouted.

He didn’t answer; he’d stopped responding to my yells on day one.

“You should see the office he has set up out there. It’s kind of impressive.”

“Don’t care.” I mumbled, putting every ounce of muscle I possessed into scrubbing the plate.

“Why aren’t you drowning your nightmares in alcohol this time?” she changed the subject again.

“If I drink, I’ll puke. If I puke, he’s going to come in.” I flicked my hand toward the door and then deemed the plate clean, moving on to the next one in the stack beside the sink.

That was a lie.

I wasn’t drinking because Roman hated alcohol; that had been clear when he was in the nightclub. And I was a sucker who already cared more about him than I should have.

“Why are you so against him coming in?”

“Why are you asking so many questions?” I shot back. She laughed.

“Because you’re my friend.” She said it like it was simple. My heart warmed a bit until she tagged on, “Roman is too, and he asked me to check on you.”

I pointed to the door and flashed her a heated glare.

“Get out.”

She scoffed.

“He’s not the devil, Hennie. If you talk to him, he’ll leave.”

I was so tired of everything.

Dropping the plate and sponge in the sink, I left them with the water still running and stormed to the door. When I threw it open, Roman looked up from the laptop balanced on his lap as he was sitting in a camping chair.

“What do you want?” I growled.

She was right, the makeshift office was impressive. Camping chair, cooler, tent, and all.

Did Roman like camping?

I pushed my thoughts away and focused on what I’d gone out there to do.

He put the laptop down and stood, moving closer.

“I thought I made that clear.”

“I’m not interested in playing games. What do you want, Roman?”

“You.”

The word sent a tingle up my spine.

I turned around to stomp back into my room, but he slipped between me and the door before I could escape.

“I don’t like games any more than you do, Hen. You know what I want, so what about you? What do you want?”

“To be left alone.” My anger vanished, replaced by an overwhelming sadness. This was my life, but it had never been

mine. Other people always sat in the driver's seat. "I just want to be left alone."

The air seemed to leave Roman's body.

A long pause made the distance between us feel much bigger.

"Alright." His voice was quiet.

"Alright?" my eyebrows wrinkled together.

"If that's really what you want, I'll respect it."

He grabbed a backpack and then gathered his papers, sliding them in. I didn't move; I was too shocked.

Roman packed up his cooler and camping chair, along with his laptop and an open bag of pretzels. Without another word, he walked away.

I went back inside.

"Do you want me to go?" Jamie slid off the stool.

"No." I admitted. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just..." I shoved my hands through the top of my hair before realizing it was up in a ponytail. It was probably sticking up everywhere then, but I didn't care. "My whole life, people have been chasing me and fighting over me and killing each other because of me. I just want that to end. I want them to leave me alone so I can live a normal life and be what I want and love who I want."

Understanding dawned in Jamie's eyes.

"You don't want Roman to leave you alone either."

"No. I just don't want—"

My phone dinged and I pulled it out of the pocket on my leggings. Whoever invented leggings with pockets deserved every cent of the money they made. I scanned the text quickly.

"Kyler needs us to work. No one else showed because of what happened a few days ago." I headed into my bedroom. Jamie got the message that the conversation about Roman was over.

“He doesn’t want me there.” She grimaced

“Sure he does. You might not be the most skilled at making drinks but you’re good with people. When they ask about the killing, you’ll know what to tell them.”

Jamie looked a bit surprised at my answer.

I glanced over at her and the light blue shirt she had on.

“Do you want to go home and change or borrow something?”

“Oliver’s home.”

With a grin, I tossed her one of my black tops—okay, pretty much every top I owned was black. She called Kyler to tell him to grab another male or two for backup protection if she wanted me to leave the ‘scraper, and fifteen minutes later we were off.

I’d temporarily forgotten how tired I was, but that didn’t last long.

Since I didn’t feel like peopling while I was tired, Jamie talked to the customers while I prepped drinks. She served and I mixed for our two-thirds of the bar. Kyler took the other third, and we worked like a well-oiled machine. The crowd wasn’t any smaller than a typical weekend night. I guess just as many people were excited about the drama that had gone down here as were afraid of it.

We were creeping up on last call when Lilac sauntered through the doors. I glanced over when I caught her scent and groaned inwardly when I caught the sour look aimed at me.

I didn’t have the energy for another fight over Roman, particularly after I’d turned him down to avoid heartache.

“Hey, Jamie.” Lilac greeted our friend in a sugary voice.

“Hi.” Jamie gave her a quick, fake smile. “What can we get you?”

“Oh, I’m not staying.”

Jamie looked a bit confused.

“I just have a little unfinished business with Henley here.” She strolled down the bar, stopping across from me. “Got a few minutes?”

“Not really.” I lied. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know how to talk while I made drinks. I was mixing the base of an old-fashioned into a glass when she started.

“Well, you can just listen.” She leaned forward on the bartop. “I welcomed you into my pack. I tried to help you feel at home and tried to be your friend. You repaid me by betraying me in the worst way.”

I stilled, drink half-made and hands on the glass.

“I’ve been in love with Roman for years and you knew that, but it didn’t stop you from rubbing your body all over what you knew was meant to be mine and then attacking me for trying to remind you who he belonged to. You may quite possibly be the worst friend on the planet, and I regret my part in making your stay with our pack any more comfortable. Go to hell.”

With that, she walked out of the nightclub.

To hell with this.

To hell with everything.

The moment she was gone I set the glass down. Jamie strode over to me as I calmly picked up the bottle of bourbon and poured the typical two ounces into the glass.

“Are you okay?” her eyes flashed with worry.

“Peachy.” I rolled the glass a couple times to stir the base into the whiskey.

And then I tipped the drink back and swallowed it all. Any bourbon lover would’ve been ashamed at how quickly I drank it, but I wasn’t a bourbon lover.

I was a vodka girl.

Jamie’s eyes widened.

“You don’t drink in public.”

I grabbed a full bottle of the cheap vodka no one ever asked for off the shelf along with a couple shot glasses, filling all three of them with the speed of a girl who'd never worked outside a bar.

"Today I do."

Picking up two of the shot glasses, I clinked them together before throwing them down the hatchet. The third followed shortly.

"Should I call Roman?"

"Only if Lilac comes back. You'll want to stay away from me until the alcohol is out of my system."

I shut my mouth and remade the old-fashioned while Jamie rushed back to the customers. She listed off a few more drinks and I made them as the alcohol warmed me from within, dulling some of the emotional pain that had been seeping inside me for days.

Arla came in shortly after I began drinking. I was six shots deep by the time she showed her face. Like Lilac, she came barreling straight toward me. Jamie gave me a worried glance when I swallowed a seventh shot in preparation for the conversation that was to come.

"What did you say to my brother?" she demanded, vaulting over the bar so we stood nose-to-nose.

"Told him to leave me alone." I glanced over at Jamie's customer in time to hear the drink he ordered and began throwing it together. Truthfully, my drinks became less precise the more alcohol I put into my system.

"He's been chasing you for months, and you decide now that you're done with him?" Arla shoved me backward and the glasses shook as I stumbled into the counter. "And now you're *drunk?*"

"Yup." I filled another shot glass and lifted it to my mouth.

She snatched it away and downed it herself, gagging at the taste.

"What was that?"

“Cheap vodka. Not something a rich girl like you would ever have a reason to drink.” I drawled. “Aren’t you worried about getting addicted, like your famous daddy and grandpops?”

Arla slammed the shot glass on the counter and glowered at me. We were about the same height, but she’d had loads of fight training so it wouldn’t be an even fight. If I hadn’t been drunk, I’d have been on my knees at the pressure of the crazy amount of Alpha juice she was throwing my way.

“Shut the hell up.” She snarled. “Roman is a good guy, Henley. You don’t deserve him and for the life of me, I can’t figure out why you would push him away.” Her hands flung through the air as she spoke.

She couldn’t figure out why I would push him away?

I could help her with that.

“When you were eight years old and you put your tooth under your pillow, did the tooth fairy come for it?”

She didn’t respond, confused.

“Answer the question.” I snapped.

“Of course.” She looked at me like I was an idiot.

“I lost a tooth two weeks after the South Carolina pack massacred my family and kidnapped me. The tooth was still there when I woke up the next morning, so I put it back that night. Two weeks later, I realized that my tooth fairy wasn’t behind schedule. She was dead.”

I poured another shot right into the glass Arla had drunk from without looking away from her and drank it in one swallow.

“As soon as you know what it’s like to be an eight-year-old who knows there isn’t a soul alive who loves you, you can call me whatever you want. Until then, get out of my bar and leave me the hell alone.”

I went to pour another shot but paused with my bottle in the air.

Why was I still here?

With that thought, I tucked the bottle of vodka under my arm.

This wouldn't last long, even paired with my emergency bottle hidden in the pantry.

So I grabbed the cheap bottles of rum, gin, whiskey, and tequila too. I had to use my shirt to carry them the way little kids carry rocks and junk, but I was too deep in the glasses to care.

I decided I could fit another bottle and grabbed the bottle of cheap bourbon too.

It wasn't like our customers were drinking them.

Then I strolled right out of the nightclub, alcohol dulling my emotions and taking away my memories.

Jamie ordered the guys who made up my entourage (minus Kyler) to go after me. I ignored their loud footsteps, swaying as I carried my haul back to the 'scraper. Only because we were in Manhattan did I get a few odd glances, but no one looked at me long.

I poked the button in the elevator with the cap of my bourbon bottle and cackled. When I slammed my apartment door in the enforcer dudes' faces, I cackled again.

After hiding some of my alcohol stash in case anyone came in to steal my stuff, I set my vodka and whiskey on the counter and grabbed one of my dark blue glasses from the cupboard. I filled it halfway and swallowed a crap ton of vodka, then did it again.

All liquored-up, I plopped down on the couch with three bags of microwave popcorn and turned on a movie. I was so far gone I don't even remember what movie it was.

Not much later, Jamie came waltzing in. I opened my popcorn-filled mouth to send her packing when I noticed the bottles of cognac and orange liqueur cradled in one arm and the thing of lemon juice in the other.

A grin tore my cheeks apart as I lifted my popcorn bowl in the air and cheered,

“I’ve broken you too!”

She laughed and dropped her things on the counter, grabbing her own glass from the cupboard.

“I’ve got plenty of reasons to drink, Hennie. Might as well try to drown them in alcohol if you’re so sure it works.”

I snorted at her reasoning.

“You’re a lightweight. You won’t survive drinking with me.”

“We’ll see about that.” She smiled wickedly and mixed a sidecar at least four times as big as the ones we made at the nightclub. “What are we watching?” She asked, sipping at the drink.

“Don’t know.”

She grabbed the romance movie off the counter and brought it to the TV, sticking the DVD in the device connected to the TV.

“Didn’t know rich people still used DVDs.” I said.

“We’re phasing them out.”

When I snorted again, she laughed again.

The movie began and I took a long look around the living room. It looked wrong.

“We need a Netflix nest.” I whispered. Jamie shot me a confused look. “We need a nest!” I paused the movie and stumbled as I hurried off the couch.

“We’re not watching Netflix.” Jamie said.

“Shut your trap and come help.” I snarled.

She followed me into my bedroom.

“Perfect.” I declared, grabbing one end of the mattress and giving it a good shove. Jamie caught on to what I was doing and grabbed the other side. It took a good two minutes for us to get the massive thing off the bedframe, but we did it.

“Pull!” Jamie screeched, as she struggled with her shoulder pressed into the mattress.

“Push harder, bitch!” I snapped back.

We were both sweaty when we finally got the mattress wedged crookedly in-between the couch and TV. One of the corners was actually resting on part of the couch because we couldn't get it to fit even after jumping on the thing, but we decided it made the nest that much better.

After gathering every pillow, blanket, and towel in the apartment, we piled them on the mattress. Then we grabbed our drinks and nested.

“No Alphas or douchebag mates allowed.” I glared at the door.

Jamie laughed hysterically.

We were completely opposite drunks, but you know, I think it made it more fun for both of us.

TWENTY

Four days later, I was puking into a toilet in the guest bathroom while Jamie showered her own vomit out of her hair in mine. We'd had no outside contact other than Arla showing up and declaring us unfit to leave the apartment. Jamie had laughed and I'd cussed her away, and no one had bothered us since.

When Jamie ran out of alcohol, she hid mine and decided that our binge was over. I tried to fight her, but she knew how to fight and I didn't, so all that had done was earn me a big bruise on my stomach.

I didn't hear my front door opening, but Arla came into the bathroom mid-barf. She stood against the door, arms folded over her chest. Ignoring her, I rinsed my mouth with water and then mouthwash even though I knew that wouldn't be the last of my puking.

"You here to lecture me about how much I suck?" I muttered, thumbs massaging my temples to help with the awful headache.

"No." She studied me but didn't say anything else

I walked back to the kitchen to find some water and she followed me.

Jamie came out of my bedroom wrapped in a towel, wet hair in one big tangle at the back of her neck

"I need my own shampoo and clothes." She mumbled, holding her head with the hand that wasn't holding her towel up.

"Lightweight." I yelled after her. She flipped me off over her shoulder.

Immediately, I regretted the yell.

Damn hangover.

The door closed behind her.

I forced a third glass of water down and then pulled a coke out of the fridge.

“Want one?” I asked Arla. She nodded, and I slid her a soda across my kitchen’s island. She grabbed it and sat down on a stool.

Bartender skills for the win.

“Why are you here?” I asked, popping the tab and taking a swig of coke. Some people claimed soda made hangovers worse, but I swore by chugging both it and water to drown out the alcohol.

Which, ironically, I’d been drowning my feelings with first.

I know, not a healthy coping mechanism.

“You’re afraid you’ll lose him.” She said.

“We’re not talking about this.”

“I’m afraid of losing him too. It’s the reason I don’t date and won’t take a mate until Roman does so she can take my position. He’s protected me our whole lives, and that’s the way I protect him.” She sipped her drink. I glowered at her.

“I’m not going to be an Alpha Female. Ever.”

She dropped her can back on the countertop.

“Would you just look at yourself for a second? You don’t take no for an answer. You make up your mind and it’s nearly impossible to change it. No one bosses you around, and if they do, you just ignore them. You’re one step away from being an Alpha Female already; why the hell are you against it?”

“It’s the principle of the thing, Arla. I’ve been mistreated by Alphas my whole life. Putting myself in the position to be like those people is like saying none of that shit mattered at all.”

“Or it’s like saying you’re going to do whatever it takes to make sure that doesn’t happen to anyone else.”

I tossed my now-empty soda bottle in the trash bin and shoved my greasy hair away from my face.

“We’re not good enough friends to be having this conversation.”

Arla groaned loudly.

“Just think about it. And don’t be a bitch when he shows up to make sure you haven’t turned into an abusive asshole like my father.”

She left right as my stomach churned and I covered my mouth with my hand, sprinting back to the bathroom as every bit of liquid I’d gotten down came right back up. I was rinsing my mouth again when someone knocked on the door.

The sound of my front door opening had me swearing under my breath about this annoying pack.

“You don’t have to knock. Henley’s so hungover the noise probably sent her running.” Jamie spoke quietly. I guess she was back. Oliver must’ve been home.

Slowly and reluctantly, I walked back out to the living room.

“Hey, Hen.” His hands were in his pockets. For the first time since I’d known him, the man actually looked uncertain.

“Hey.” I glanced over at Jamie. “I thought you needed your own space for a bit.” I’d already guessed the reasoning behind it but didn’t want to talk to Roman.

“I did, but Oliver’s there. He was scolding me like a little kid rather than a grown woman.” She grimaced and clutched her head. “As if the hangover isn’t punishment enough.”

Jamie shuffled to the Netflix nest that we’d somehow managed to keep free of vomit.

“You have a second?” Roman asked.

I wanted to say no. Without the time to recover from my bender and catch up on sleep, nothing good could come from a conversation. But when Roman looked at me with those damn dark blues of his, I didn’t have the heart to say no.

“Sure.” I gestured him toward my bedroom. It wasn’t really intimate in there without a bed, so I figured we’d be safe.

My definition of safe, not his.

“What’s up?” I pulled my hair over my neck.

“I heard you’ve spent the last few days drinking with Jamie.” He shut the door behind us.

“The mattress on the floor of my living room gave me away, didn’t it?” I said dryly. The corner of his lips quirked upward.

“You said before that you don’t drink often, so I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

Dude, stop being so sweet.

“Is that a question?” I lifted an eyebrow. “Because I feel like this is turning into one of those games neither of us is interested in playing.”

Roman grimaced and stuck his hands back in his pockets. That sweatshirt he had on looked ridiculously comfortable and if I hadn’t told him I wasn’t interested, I totally would’ve snagged it when the opportunity arose.

“Why were you drinking?” He spit out the real question. “What happened?”

“I couldn’t sleep.” My shoulders lifted.

“That’s not enough to make you drink for four days straight. I know you well enough to know that.”

I looked up at the ceiling for a minute before deciding just to tell him.

“I’m surprised no one told you, but Lilac and Arla chased me down at the nightclub. Spent a couple minutes each telling me all the reasons I’m a terrible person who deserves to rot in hell. It was really pleasant, so I drank in celebration.”

Roman whirled to the door and I grabbed his arm before he could go pummel the chick who was madly in love with him. Not that he’d really punch a woman.

“It was a combination of everything, Roman. Ledger, the kidnapping, the triggers, the lack of sleep, you... Lilac and Arla just sort of pushed me over the edge. But I’m fine, you can go.” I gestured to the door.

“Fine.” Roman’s voice was clipped. He stalked toward the elevator, more pissed than disappointed. I sensed that he was learning to see through my lies. That wouldn’t bode well for me.

Someone stepped out of the elevator as Roman approached it, a blonde chick I didn’t recognize. The short shorts she’d paired with a crop top were clearly expensive, as were the perfect thick, blonde waist-length curls that couldn’t have possibly been real.

“I heard you might be here. I need to talk to you.” She said, placing her hand on his arm and stepping up close to him. Her giant boobs pressed into his chest and I saw red.

Jealousy exploded within me, and my beast side went with it. Strawberry fur burst through my skin as my body morphed into that of a wolf.

A wolf who launched herself down the hallway, snarling at the woman who’d dared touch what was mine. Human Henley and every bit of common sense she possessed had left the building. Between the jealousy and hangover, my monstrous side was in complete and total control.

Roman heard my snarl and reacted, stepping between me and the other woman.

That was the wrong thing to do.

I threw myself over him, teeth aimed for the girl’s fragile neck. Her scream tore through the air and she was ripped out of my view just as I would’ve bitten down on her jugular and torn her head from her body.

The animal side of me didn’t have the same hang-ups about being with Roman that the human side did.

When I leaped toward the girl again, Roman launched toward me. He wrestled me as I shook him off to no avail; this wasn’t his first rodeo. Still, I fought, my eyes burning into the terrified girl as she stood up against the wall.

What kind of wimpy werewolf chick wouldn’t shift when another wolf was trying to kill her?

“Shift back, Henley.” Roman snarled.

I guess the girl didn’t shift because she knew she had the Alpha to fight her battles for her.

Pussy.

My body shifted back to human instantly, but my mind was much slower. I growled at the girl and lunged for her on wobbly human legs. Roman yanked my back into him, one giant arm under my boobs and another around my waist. He held me up off the ground until I stopped fighting. “Carly, Arla’s in her office. She’ll help with whatever you need.” He told the girl, spinning and hauling me down the hallway.

Something told me he would’ve thrown me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes if I wasn’t naked.

“I’m in control now. You can put me down.” I bit the words out, still trembling with fury. Whether the fury was toward the flirty chick or myself for losing it to my beast was undecided.

“You’re naked in the hallway. Not happening.” His words tickled my ear and my trembling suddenly had an entirely new cause. Roman caught a whiff of my desire and stiffened, swearing under his breath.

He stomped us past Jamie and into my spare room without a word, tossing me onto the perfectly-made bed and folding his arms over that delicious chest of his.

Why wasn’t he naked too?

“What was that?” Roman demanded. “Scratch that—what is any of this? You say you want to be alone and then spend four days drunk with Jamie? You tell me you can’t handle what we have and then attack another girl for being interested in me? What the hell is going on?”

I grimaced, unable to come up with a lie I’d be able to pull off. So, I went with a partial-truth.

“I lost control.”

“That’s a lie.”

Shit, he was learning my tells.

“Sometimes a lie is better than the truth.” I rolled off the bed, distracting him with my curves before heading to my room and into my closet. He followed me.

Dude totally wanted to watch me get dressed.

I grabbed one of the bras I’d picked out with London and pulled it on. That sucker made my boobs look fantastic.

Not that I was dressing for Roman.

“I’d rather have a difficult truth than an easy lie.” Roman’s eyes traced my movements as I buckled the bra and grabbed a pair of cheeky black panties. I tugged the underwear on and he growled under his breath, ripping his gaze back to my eyes.

“You want the truth? Fine. I want you. More than I’ve ever wanted anything. I want to mate with you, to spend my life with you, all that romantic shit. I want you to be mine. But I also haven’t known you that long, and I’m terrified that you’re going to change as soon as I’m yours. Or that you’re going to get challenged and lose next week, or next month, or next year. The longer I have with you, the more it’ll hurt when I inevitably lose you.”

I yanked a pair of yoga pants on and pulled my hair out from where it was trapped under the straps of my bra, stepping out of the closet. Roman definitely watched my ass as he followed me out.

“I spend hours at the gym every day, Hen. I’m not going to lose a challenge. I’ve never even come close to that.”

“Your cockiness is going to get you killed.”

My eyes flicked to his joggers. The thin material put his raging boner on display, and desire surged within me. Roman’s nostrils flared and his eyes slammed shut.

“You’re the one killing me, woman.” He muttered, fists clenching at his sides.

My stomach chose that moment to growl loudly. Roman grabbed me around the waist and threw me over his shoulder, hauling me into the kitchen.

“I heard none of your conversation.” Jamie informed me as Roman sat me down on the countertop. She made her way to the kitchen and claimed one of the stools. “Absolutely none.”

Rolling my eyes, I finger-combed my hair over my shoulder. It was all tangled from the shifting, and somehow I’d lost my hair-tie in the process of attacking that girl. Which reminded me...

“Who’s Carly?” it came out as a bit of a growl. “And why was she coming to talk to you?”

“You attacked Carly?” Jamie snorted and then covered her mouth, eyes wide as she looked to Roman. “She attacked Carly?”

“She touched him.” I defended myself.

“She did.” Roman opened my fridge. There wasn’t much inside and I figured he’d complain about that, but he just pulled out a carton of eggs and some lunch meat and then grabbed a bowl from the cupboard. He cracked eggs into the bowl; all of them.

“This might be the best day of my life.” Jamie pressed her hand to her heart.

“Wait, why? I thought you were mad about this.” My gaze jumped between Roman and Jamie. She snorted again, only wincing a little at her own hangover pain.

“No male wolf would be mad his woman attacked someone else out of possessiveness, they’re all violent assholes. And Carly Tate was the biggest jerk in high school. She treated us like dirt until Roman became Alpha. Then she was all over him, trying to convince him to mate with her.”

“She’s never stopped.” Roman added.

“Why didn’t you let me rip her head off, then?” I grabbed a piece of lunch meat from the container and popped it in my mouth. Jamie laughed.

“Because the guys that have been challenging Roman for you are almost equally interested in her. If you killed her, they’d all be focused on you.”

“Wait, what?” I paused with another piece of lunch meat in my hand, headed toward my mouth.

“Hadn’t mentioned that bit.” Roman muttered.

“How many guys have challenged you for me?” I spun to face Roman, who was whipping the eggs in the bowl vigorously, and winced at the pain in my head. Roman avoided making eye contact with me. I whirled toward Jamie, who studied the countertop like it was a million-dollar painting. “Jamie.” I growled at her.

“Fifty-two.” She blurted. “That was before we spent four days drunk out of our minds, though.”

Roman’s shoulders tensed when I turned back to him, my face flaming red.

“Fifty freaking two?!” I shouted and saw stars as a result. “You didn’t think I deserved to know this?”

“I thought it would upset you. Looks like I was right.” Roman met my gaze. “I’ll fight as many more as I have to.”

I huffed and jumped off the countertop, pacing the kitchen with fisted hands. Nausea was rising within me and I blamed it on the lunchmeat and hangover. The pacing wasn’t helping with that but my animal side had me feeling like I needed to be moving.

“What reason did they give for challenging you? They can’t all want me for my scent. They don’t even know me.” I chewed my lip, trying to come up with some way to stop all the warring. The throb of my headache made it difficult to brainstorm much of anything. Other than mating with Roman of course.

When Roman didn’t respond, I glared at Jamie. She sighed loudly.

“Most of them are only challenging him for the chance to meet you. You’re the Wolfsbane and every pack on the planet wants you. That makes you seem powerful, and what male werewolf doesn’t want power?”

I looked at Roman and he met my gaze.

“It wouldn’t hurt anything to let them meet me.” I said. His eyes shifted and his fingers sprouted claws.

“You’re mine.”

Well okay then.

I rolled my eyes at Jamie, who stifled a laugh.

Roman’s claws vanished and his eyes shifted back as he got out a pan and dumped the scrambled egg mixture inside, setting it on the stove. He seemed entirely relaxed as he began stirring it with a spatula so it didn’t cook in one big clump.

“I want the fighting to end.” I lifted myself slowly back up onto the counter in hopes my nausea would start to go away.

“Not happening.”

“Do you think I’m incapable of kicking a couple dozen guys to the curb, Romeo?”

“No. I think it’s my job.” He said.

I leaned toward him.

“Let me rephrase that; the fighting *will* stop. You can come up with something that will settle your wolf into accepting that I’ll be meeting other guys or I can spend the next few days going door to door introducing myself to every dude that lives here.”

Roman met my stare-down with his own.

“Mate with me.”

I choked on my spit. Not what I was expecting him to say. I’d assumed we were on the same page when it came to that considering I’d just ended things a few days ago.

“You asked what would settle my wolf. If you were my mate, I wouldn’t worry so much about other guys around you.” He said it so matter-of-factly.

“We’ve known each other what, a month and a half?” I folded my arms over my chest. “Be reasonable.”

“Still here.” Jamie waved. “I can leave if you want, but Oliver’s still home and I don’t feel like being ignored by my

mate after watching all this sexual tension heat up.” She gestured between us.

“Stay.”

“Go.” Me and Roman barked at the same time.

“You don’t think that’s long enough to know you’ve met the right person? The first moment I scented you, I was yours.”

“Maybe that’s long enough for someone who has a family and a plethora of good memories, but I’m not that person. If you think that’s long enough for me, you definitely don’t know me well enough for us to be having this conversation.”

Roman sighed.

“You drive me crazy, Hen.”

“I had no idea.” I drawled.

Roman pulled his scrambled eggs off the pan and dumped them on one of my plates, handing it to me and grabbing a fork. He stabbed a piece of egg and lifted the fork to my lips.

I obediently took the bite, half-expecting him to coo, “good dog”.

That may have been the lack of sleep talking.

His lips quirked upward.

“Stop being so adorable when some of us are trapped in loveless matings.” Jamie complained.

“Feeling left out?” I teased. Jamie made a dramatic sad face.

“Yes.”

“She wants a bite.” I told Roman. He shook his head at me but stabbed another piece of egg and crossed the room. She opened her mouth and ate it.

“Now I’m force-feeding both of you.” Roman grumbled.

“I saw that smile when you fed Henley. You’re not fooling anyone.” Jamie reached over the island and grabbed the alcoholic-beverage cup she’d been using for days, filling it up with sink water.

“That reminds me, Oliver was actually showing interest when we were working the bar.” I pointed out, swiping the fork from Roman’s hand when he tried to feed me another bite. Eating eggs only required one person.

“I won’t survive getting my hopes up and then crushed again where he’s concerned. Let’s talk about something else.” She took a long drink of water.

“Bite me.” Roman said, out of nowhere.

I stopped chewing.

“Werewolves used to bite their mates to mark them as taken.” He added.

“Trading bites was like trading wedding rings.” I countered. “We’re not anywhere near married.”

Roman grabbed my face between his hands. Our eyes collided, and I wished we were kissing instead of arguing.

“You touch me without permission way too often.” I informed him. Although, I hoped he wouldn’t stop.

“You’re mine. I don’t need permission to touch you.” He said. I rolled my eyes. “You sure as hell can touch me wherever you want whenever you want.”

“I’m leaving.” Jamie called out. Roman didn’t release my face.

“Think of it like a trial run for mating. We trade bites and we’ll smell a bit like each other for a while. It’d be something tangible connecting us so we’d both feel more secure and closer without doing anything irreversible.”

Screw him and his good arguments.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Me too.” Roman gave me a sly grin. I whacked him with the back of my hand and his chest rumbled.

“If you don’t quit it with the secrets, I’m not even considering it.” I warned him.

“I’ll tell you everything if you do the same.”

I opened my mouth to protest but closed it when I realized it was a fairly reasonable request.

“Fine. We’ll tell each other *most* things.”

My stomach took a turn for the worse and I jumped off the counter, running for the bathroom. It was going to be a long day.

TWENTY-ONE

Roman stayed another hour before he got a call that he was needed to go break up a fight between two unmated dicks—I mean males—fighting over a woman. He left me with a kiss on the forehead like we were an old mated couple. I wasn't going to think too hard on it.

Jamie came back a bit later to nap in the Netflix nest and I headed for the guest bedroom. Sharing a bed was normal while we were drunk but felt a little weird while sober, especially after I'd spent a chunk of time with Roman.

Of course, the moment I closed my eyes the nightmares assaulted me.

Would I ever really be free from my past?

With a low groan, I climbed right out of bed and headed to the elevator. Maybe if I further exhausted myself by running around in wolf form, I'd shake the images from my head.

After a bit of running, I curled up on the wolf mattress—which was far more comfortable than dirt—and finally managed to fall asleep for more than five minutes. I slept dreamlessly until strong arms scooped my furry-self up off the dirt. I'd have flipped out if his smell wasn't so damn relaxing.

I nuzzled Roman's neck and he chuckled.

"You're one sexy pink wolf, Hen." He murmured.

I growled sleepily and his chest rumbled.

"Red." He corrected.

With a satisfied snort, I fell back asleep.

Roman must've grabbed my clothes from the naked bush because he handed them to me when we reached my room. Mostly asleep, I pulled on the panties but shot the bra and leggings a death glare.

"Give me your shirt." I mumbled.

Roman pulled it off without hesitation and watched me pull it on.

“You’re shameless.” I muttered, collapsing in the guest bed. Jamie was still in the one in the living room. Plus, I’d rather sleep on the floor with Roman than let him sleep in a bed that smelled like another woman’s scent. Even if she was mated and one of my only friends.

“Your body is a masterpiece, and it’s going to be mine to worship for the rest of our lives. It’d be shameful *not* to look at you.” He pulled the duvet out from underneath my legs and tugged it over the top of me before kicking off his shoes.

“Cocky asshole.” I muttered.

“Yup.” He shot me a grin.

“You’re wearing jeans.” I opened one eye to watch him strip out of them. He never wore anything but joggers or basketball shorts.

“Had a meeting.” He settled on the bed next to me in black boxer briefs. “I usually wear jeans for that.” If I wasn’t so tired, I would’ve been completely turned on by his lack of clothing.

Scratch that—it was the plethora of skin that’d turn me on, not the lack of clothing.

“Hmm.” I shut my eyes, expecting him to move the blankets again and slip under them. He remained on top of the blankets, plumping the pillow behind his head. My eyes opened and narrowed. “What are you doing?”

Roman’s eyes clouded.

“You want me to go? I should’ve asked.” The second part, he mumbled to himself as he stood and grabbed his jeans.

“I meant what are you doing on top of the blankets.” I corrected myself. “You—” The world’s biggest yawn interrupted me. “Forgot what I was going to say.” Heavy eyes closed and refused to open.

“I assumed you wouldn’t want me in your bed.” He pulled the blankets aside and slipped underneath. I snorted.

“You smell like heaven and make me feel safe. Plus, you keep my nightmares away.”

Roman’s arms wrapped around me and rolled me onto his chest. I lifted my leg over his pelvis and fell asleep in about a quarter of a second.

His lips on my forehead accompanied me into another blessedly dreamless sleep.

I woke up tangled with Roman and absolutely soaked in sweat. The scent coming off the sweat was clearly mine.

Freaking hangover sweats.

At least the worst of it seemed to be over. My headache was nearly gone and I hadn’t puked in ages.

Pulling my head off his neck, I found Roman’s eyes caressing my figure, giant hands on my back. Since I’d gone to bed in just his t-shirt and some panties, he had plenty to see.

“How long have you been awake?” I made a face at the gross taste in my mouth.

“A while.” His lips stretched in a wolfish grin. “The view’s great.”

My lips tilted upward as I fought back a smile.

“Sorry I sweat all over you. Gross, I know.”

Peeling my limbs off him was a real struggle.

“It’s not gross. Wearing your scent like this has me calmer than I’ve been in months. You can sweat all over me any time you want.”

“Shut up.” I pushed his face away even though my cheeks flushed a bit at the compliment. “I need a shower.”

“I’m happy to join you.”

“In your dreams.” I rolled my eyes and scooted to the edge of my bed.

He chuckled and sat up, cradling the back of my neck as he pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“Definitely.” He grabbed his jeans and put them back on. “Can I have my shirt back?”

I lifted it to my nose to see if it still smelled like him. Since it didn't, I pulled it off and handed it over. I'd forgotten I wasn't wearing a bra and glanced down when his eyes dropped to my boobs. Spinning toward the bathroom, I headed for the shower.

“You can borrow my clothes any time you want.” He called after me.

I flipped him off over my shoulder and the full belly-laugh that filled the air made me grin too.

A long, hot shower later, I strolled out to the kitchen fully-dressed and with my hair up in a tangled wet bun since I didn't want to brush it. Jamie was long gone, her scent stale. She'd be back when she needed a break from her mate, but I hoped they'd bond or something so she didn't feel like she needed a break from him. It was a long shot since they'd been together three years already, but a girl can dream.

Roman was whistling and tossing fruit into a blender while eggs fried on the stove, bowls of steaming oatmeal already set on the counter. I'd expected him to be either gone or mooching some of my cereal.

“This is health food.” I gestured to the stuff he had cooked and still was cooking. “I don't buy health food. Do you buy health food? Where did this shit come from?”

Roman barked out a laugh.

“I own a gym, Henley. Of course I eat healthy food. Your fridge was empty so I went grocery shopping for you and brought the stuff in before I grabbed you from the fourth floor.”

“You own a gym?” I turned questioning eyes on him. “Since when?”

“Five years or so.” He plopped the eggs on plates and handed them to me so I could put them down beside the bowls of oatmeal. After a little blending, he was pouring the smoothie into cups.

“How did I not know that?”

His lips tilted upward.

“You’ve been trying not to develop feelings for me.”

He sat beside me, placing a cup of smoothie beside my plate.

“Well you’re not wrong.” I grabbed my fork and cut into the eggs. “But I just recently started working out, so if you make fun of my fitness level I’ll dump this on your head.” I gestured to the drink with my fork. Roman grinned.

“I won’t.”

“Then we won’t have a problem.”

Music played from the speaker on my counter, some rock music that borderlined on screamo but was turned down enough not to be annoying. It was surprisingly nice just to sit beside each other and share a meal. I’d never considered the way it would feel to eat with someone who meant something to me.

After I was done eating, I walked around the island and started cleaning up. My thoughts were focused on the man sitting a few feet away from me, still working on his much larger plate of food.

“You really feel confident enough in your feelings for me that you’d be willing to mate with me right now?” I looked up from the plate I was rinsing, sticking it in the dishwasher without looking.

“Yes.” Roman met my gaze with confidence. “Why don’t you?”

I shook my head.

“We haven’t known each other that long, and every other Alpha I’ve known has turned out to be a real douchebag. Plus I don’t know what a relationship is really supposed to be like; my mom’s mate wasn’t around and I moved around too much to see a stable couple.”

Roman sipped his drink. He didn't respond immediately, but I appreciated that he took the time to think about what he was going to say rather than flipping out and getting all offended.

"Can I tell you why I became Alpha?" he finally asked.

"Sure." I'd been wondering for a while, having only heard bits and pieces of the story from him and others.

"Lark was the old Alpha. He was the kind of guy who would've killed another pack to take you from them. Everyone assumed he mistreated his wife and daughter, but he was intimidating so no one asked questions. I was a sixteen-year-old kid with a crush on his daughter, Ella, so I asked her out. My hands were so sweaty when I knocked on her door to pick her up. She didn't answer so after a few minutes, I was ready to take my broken heart home. That's when I heard her scream.

"I saw red and busted the door down. Ella was bleeding, and the scent of her blood reminded me of the abuse Arla and I had been through. I challenged her dad for Alpha then and there. Although I was a football player, I wasn't a fighter in any way. Lark nearly killed me a couple of times during the fight, and it's a miracle I came out of it alive." He watched my face for a sign of my emotions, but I didn't let my feelings show.

"Did she survive?" I loaded another dish into the dishwasher.

"Ella? She lives on the eighteenth floor with her mother. Her mom gave Arla the Alpha Female position a few days after I killed Lark."

"Why aren't the two of you mated, then?"

"She was bleeding badly when the fight ended, unconscious on the floor. I was already in my wolf form and went to lick her wounds, to heal her. The human in me assumed we'd mate after everything. When my tongue touched her blood, I shifted immediately, the beast in me refusing her. Had to call another pack member to do it. We're still friends, but there was never anything romantic between us."

I focused on the cup I was loading into the dishwasher, giving it much more attention than it deserved. Neither of us addressed the elephant in the room. Namely, that Roman had healed me by licking my wounds.

“I’ve never met anyone the beast in me sees as my equal until you, and I’ve met most strong women from a good portion of the packs. You’re the reason for that. You’re it for me.”

A wet strand of escaped hair slapped me on the cheek as I leaned forward, arms resting on the sink.

“I like you, Roman. I do. But I never had an experience like that.”

“I’m not trying to convince you, Henley. I’m stating facts. Every Alpha you’ve met is a douchebag, but that’s the exact reason I became one. I can’t stand people who hurt others.” He took a long drink of his smoothie before setting it down. “And as far as real relationships go, I’m not convinced there’s one particular way to do things right. I’m just willing to do whatever it takes to be close to you.”

This conversation was getting to be too dramatic, so I changed the subject rapidly.

“So if I bite you, you’ll stop fighting every dude who wants to meet me?”

I saw the hesitation in his eyes.

“If we exchange bites, yes.”

“You don’t look happy about it.” I grabbed the blender to wash that too.

“Well I’d rather not give any of my males a chance to seduce you before I manage it.”

I laughed.

His phone buzzed and he glanced down at it.

“I have to go.” He leaned over the counter and cupped my face in his hands, pulling me in for a quick kiss. My lips parted as they met his, and the kiss went from zero to a hundred.

Roman's hand found my lower back and pulled me up higher as he deepened the kiss. One of my knees slid into the sink while the other went to the side, giving me more traction. A low growl rumbled Roman's chest and he tugged me even closer. My legs wrapped around his hips and he pinned me between him and the counter.

His phone buzzed again and he growled at it, pulling away to read the text.

“Damn.”

Roman pressed another quick kiss to my lips and nipped at my throat before striding to the doorway. The look he shot me over his shoulder told me he would be back sooner rather than later.

I couldn't wait.

TWENTY-TWO

I didn't have to work that night but was up late waiting for Roman. Grabbing my phone, I checked again for a text or call.

Nothing.

I threw on a pair of sleep shorts and a tank top. Should I call him? Would that be weird or desperate?

I was clueless.

I'm ashamed to admit that there was somewhere near ten minutes of pacing my kitchen before I finally growled,

"Screw it," and called him.

The phone rang and rang but he didn't pick up.

I chucked the thing into a pillow on my mattress—which was still on the floor. Just to give myself something to do, I stripped the sheets, pillowcases, and mattress protector and tossed them in the washer, replacing them with one of the extra sets in the hall closet.

"He's not coming, Hen." I muttered to myself, trying not to be disappointed. That was a hard-core fail. My heart had managed to slide right into my gut. "Go to sleep like a normal person."

I was plugging my phone into the charger when a text came through.

ARLA: Go to Roman's apartment. Don't tell him I sent you.

I considered ignoring it but decided against it. Throwing on a high-necked bra and some leggings, I headed up to the floor above mine and down the hall to Roman's apartment. The smell of blood had me pushing the door open. It was locked, so I slammed my fist into the wood.

"Roman!" I yelled.

He pulled it open, a tube of antibacterial ointment in one hand and an alcohol wipe in the other. His eyebrows lifted

when he saw me.

“What are you doing here?”

“What happened?” I demanded, pushing past him and ignoring his question. My fists clenched as I saw the source of the blood. Roman had multiple deep wounds on his torso and a huge bite mark on his shoulder. His black sweats were pushed up over his left ankle which was wrapped in an ace bandage. The desire to kill whoever had hurt him hit me hard.

“Back to back Alpha challenges.”

Was that a black eye forming?

“Did they challenge you because of me?” I demanded.

“Yes.” Roman gently took my tightly-clenched fists in his hands and unwound my grip, sliding his fingers between mine. “You’re worth it, Hen.” He stepped closer and tilted his head down, inhaling deeply with his nose to my hair.

“Give me those.” I snatched the ointment and the wipe from him, gesturing for him to sit down. He sat on the chair backward but didn’t lean against it, so I knew he was hurting bad.

I began on the biggest wound, the nasty bite on his shoulder. He tensed, jaw clenched as I cleaned it.

“What do I smell like to you?” I distracted him as I worked. “Other than sex on a stick.”

He’d told me before... something about a forest?

“Pink.”

I couldn’t hold back a snort. Definitely different than a forest. He was full of shit.

“You’re lying. Pink is not a smell.” I paused. “And my hair isn’t pink.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” He leaned his head against the chair. “What did you have for dinner?”

“Did you not eat?” I paused and frowned at him. “Stay here. I’ll make something.” I dropped the ointment on the table He

eased off the chair instead, opening the fridge.

“You don’t need to cook for me.”

“You cooked for me this morning, so I’m repaying the favor.” I shooed him back to the chair he’d been sitting in. “

While I threw a couple sandwiches together, he pulled off his pants too. Turning a chair around, he sat with his chest to the back of it again. The injuries on his back were worse than those on his front.

“I don’t remember paying you to strip.” I commented, trying to lighten the mood. He looked absolutely exhausted. The words had my desired effect though.

“You don’t pay with money.” His smirk had me biting back a stupid grin as I assembled the sandwiches.

“Which Alphas?” I checked.

“New Mexico and Arizona. They flew in together; guess their packs have some sort of alliance. Doesn’t matter now that they’re dead.” He worked his shoulder in a half-circle, a tight grimace weighing down his lips.

“You beat Matt and Wayne on the same day?” I gaped open-mouthed at him. “They’re both gigantic.” A sweep of my eyes on Roman’s body had me correcting myself “Not as gigantic as you, but still.”

Roman’s lips quirked upward again.

“There’s more to fighting than your size.”

I brought him his sandwiches and scanned the injuries as he began eating.

“I think you need stitches on a few of these.” I chewed my lip, considering the other option. I’d avoided stitches thanks to Roman, so should I return the favor? What if my wolf side rejected him the way his rejected the old Alpha’s daughter?

He swallowed what he’d been chewing and said,

“I’ll be fine.”

Roman worked on the food I'd made him and I sat down beside him, thinking about the possibility of healing him. Honestly, I was kind of excited by it. Something about the thought that I could make him feel better made me all warm and fuzzy. When I got tired of keeping my thoughts to myself, I asked him.

“Do you want me to lick your wounds?”

He stopped with a sandwich halfway to his mouth.

“I didn't think you'd be comfortable with that.”

“I'm trying to decide if I am. Was it weird when you did it to me?”

He put the sandwich down.

“No, but it was intimate.”

It went without saying that Roman wouldn't expect me to do something so intimate. He'd stay silent unless I offered.

I went to pick up the kitchen. It was pretty much clean, but cleaning the kitchen was always a good opportunity to reflect on my thoughts while my hands kept busy.

The worst thing that could come from licking Roman's wounds was finding out that my beast side didn't want him—which was extremely unlikely given the way I'd wanted him the moment I'd caught his scent. But I'd survive that. There was also the chance the gesture might leave me more bound to him than I already was, but I felt pretty confident I'd mate with Roman eventually. It would take time, but he seemed fairly determined to wait me out.

So there really wasn't a reason not to do it.

“I want to lick you.” I announced. When Roman's laughter boomed, I realized how it sounded and made a face. “You know what I mean.”

He grabbed my hand and lifted it to his lips, his eyes light. I'd never seen anyone else make them look that way, and I liked that.

Roman stood immediately, taking my hand and tugging me toward his bedroom.

“You’re still hungry.” I protested, pulling my hand from his grip and stopping with my arms folded. He paused, his eyes raking up and down me slowly. Goosebumps blazed along my skin.

“Not for food.” His low growl turned me the freak on.

“I cooked for you.” Even I knew how weak the protest was.

“I’ll eat it after.”

With a dramatic sigh, I slowly caught up to Roman and took his hand. Now I was the one leading him to the bedroom. He didn’t push me to move faster this time, letting me stay in control of the moment.

“We should take the sheets off so we don’t ruin them.” I decided. Roman ignored the comment and carefully lowered himself to the mattress. The way he moved broadcasted how much pain he was in.

“Where’s the worst of it?” I checked, stepping out of the leggings I had on. His eyes followed my every movement.

“My shoulder.” He stared as I turned away and stripped out of my underwear. Those eyes of his could’ve set a glacier on fire. His finger trailed down my spine and I shivered. “One day, you won’t turn from me.” The gravel in his voice was going to kill me.

I shifted into my wolf form and turned back to the man I was fighting feelings for. One step put my body up on the mattress with him. Roman’s hand reached out and met the fur on my head, trailing down with a reverence I’d never seen from anyone before, let alone an Alpha.

In wolf form, the scent of his blood and pain was too much to focus on anything else. I gently moved closer, my eyes on the gnarly bite in Roman’s shoulder. The rough satin of my tongue met the scabbing wound and Roman’s fingers gripped the fur on my sides so tight it was almost painful.

Almost.

His grip encouraged me, and I let myself focus on my feelings for a moment. My heart thrummed in my chest, excitement blooming inside me. Roman needed me. He wanted me. He was there with me, wholly and entirely, touching me and feeling me and having feelings for me.

And he was mine.

I could practically feel the bond between us thickening and growing as I licked his wounds and any other skin that called to me. As I finished the last injury on his calf, I went back to his shoulder for another pass. Roman's body shuddered as the licking stopped and I pulled my tongue back into my mouth.

He turned to face me, hands catching my large furry head the way he'd grab me in human form too.

“Thank you.” His voice was hushed.

My head bobbed and I stepped back. Although I wanted to stay close to him, I wanted to do so in my human form. Even in wolf form I knew I wasn't ready to be his mate, so I shifted and pulled my clothes back on.

The silence in the room was heavy, Roman's glacier-melting eyes burning me with desire—both his and mine. I turned around, dressed in my bra and leggings once again, and stalked back to my man.

My man.

Mine.

Roman waited with legs off the bed, watching me intently. I dropped into his lap and wrapped myself around him, capturing his lips. Like a dam bursting, Roman's chest rumbled with a growl and he met me movement for movement. With every stroke, every touch, every brush, I gave him the permission he'd been waiting for.

I'd planned on kissing him, but this wasn't a kiss. It was a freaking *bonfire*.

I gasped as his lips ripped from mine to my neck, trailing lips and tongue along the sensitive skin there. His teeth scraped the base of my neck and I moaned with desire.

Roman's grip on me tightened, pulling my pelvis into his. I cursed the clothing between us for all of the half-second before his fangs sunk into my skin.

My breathing stopped. The feeling of my soul colliding with Roman's overwhelmed my senses, our bodies stilling for the faintest moment before the wolf inside me surged to the surface and my own fangs bit into the man I'd chosen.

Roman's low groan pulled me out of the otherworldly moment we'd shared. I pulled my teeth from his skin and lifted my gaze, meeting his eyes. He held my eyes as he moved forward and ran his very-human tongue over the place he'd bitten me. Lust hit me so hard I shuddered, and his eyes shifted as I licked his neck again. As his wound sealed, the crazy heat between us burst and we fell to the bed together, panting. I was on top of him, holding myself up over him on shaky arms.

Roman cradled my face with his hands and pressed a soft kiss to my lips, tilting upward so our foreheads met softly. No words were exchanged, only gazes that said things I wasn't ready to speak out loud.

We laid there in silence until we fell asleep, cradled in each other's arms.

I'd always wondered what it would feel like to know I belonged somewhere. Now I knew.

TWENTY-THREE

“Is Henley here?” A feminine whisper that didn’t belong in my space caught on the edge of my sleeping mind. Roman’s arms cradled me so securely that the noise didn’t actually wake me up.

“I think they’re in bed together.” Another female commented.

“It’s about time.” A third grumbled.

Roman stirred and I made a noise of protest. He chuckled into my hair when I rubbed my face against the crook of his neck.

“Are you finally mated?” Arla shouted from the living room.

“Get out.” I shouted back.

Roman rose from the bed, lifting me in his arms and carrying me to the living room. He’d put his pants back on when he got up to eat the rest of his sandwich the night before. “We’re not mated.” He told his sister, who we found standing in the open doorway with London and Jamie. They must’ve known how he felt about his space.

“It’s time for another girls’ day.” London announced. “Put on a shirt and we’ll get out of here.”

“I haven’t fed her yet.” Roman sat me down on the countertop.

“We’re getting breakfast.” Jamie offered.

“The Alphas of All are demanding answers as to why those guys challenged you yesterday.” Arla leaned up against the frame of the door. Roman shoved a hand over his buzzed hair. He made hair seem totally unnecessary.

Maybe I should shave mine.

“Any ideas?” He looked between Arla and her two enforcers, leaning against the counter beside me. Roman

caught a strand of my hair and fiddled with it, his forehead creased as he considered his options.

Better not shave it.

“You could tell them that you found the girl you want to mate with in one of their territories and they didn’t want to give her up. It’s close enough to the truth that it could stop them from coming out for a visit.” Jamie offered. Arla’s eyes narrowed in on her brother’s neck while Jamie was talking.

“And if they demand they meet her?”

“Did she bite you?” Arla turned fiery eyes on me. “Did you bite him?”

I shrugged.

No point in denying it.

“He bit you too?” She glared at both of us. “What the hell is wrong with you people? You’re doing everything out of order.” She sighed in defeat and leaned her head against the doorframe. “We need pastries for breakfast. Something chocolate”

“You and I can agree on that.” I slid off the counter and headed for the girls. Roman caught my hand, spinning me around and planting a kiss on my lips before releasing me. I stumbled toward them, Jamie and London wearing knowing smirks while Arla grimaced.

We stopped at a fancy café for artisan coffee and the best chocolate croissants on the planet before heading to some boutique the girls had been wanting to check out for a while. It was getting close to Christmas, so they were all looking for gifts. I’d never bought a Christmas present for anyone and had no idea who I was supposed to buy things for so I looked at the bracelets, considering a thin one with a star on it that reminded me of my mom.

I figured I’d get something for Roman and the other girls at some point, but there were still a few weeks to figure out what I wanted to get them.

Arla walked over, checking out the earrings. Her hair was in its typical high ponytail, and I noticed the way piercings studded up her ear.

“Did they hurt?” I gestured to the piercings. She lifted her hand to fiddle with them.

“Not really. You’ve never had your ears pierced?” She frowned.

“My mom told me I had to be twelve. She died before I got there and I never really had the chance afterward.” I lifted my shoulders. “They’re pretty.”

“Thank you.” She seemed surprised by the compliment, looking back to the display of earrings. I looked back at the bracelets, and she pulled out her phone to type a bit. “The guy who does my tattoos and piercings can fit us in about an hour from now if you want.”

My eyebrows lifted.

“Usually the good ones are booked out for months but he pushes appointments back for me. It can be your Christmas present.” She gave me a tentative smile. I mirrored the expression.

“Sounds cool. What tattoos do you have?” I hadn’t noticed anything, but the two of us had never shifted together so we’d never seen each other naked.

“My ribcage says, ‘survive’, and I’ve been thinking about getting a tramp stamp but Lilac and Roman keep talking me out of it.” She made a face. “My brother is a protective son of a bitch. He nearly tore the door off my office the first time he saw the first of these lovely ladies.” She ran her finger over the earrings studding her ear. “He prefers all things natural, so you getting a piercing will be the highlight of my year.”

“Who says I’m only getting one?”

We shared a grin.

“What are we laughing about?” Jamie wandered over, a few articles of clothing draped over her arm.

“Hennie’s getting a piercing. Maybe we’ll talk her into a tattoo, too.” Arla wore a devious smile.

“Ooh, testing the Alpha’s control, are we?” Jamie wiggled her eyebrows.

“I think it’s been plenty tested already.” I said. “This will be testing his attraction to me.”

“Those sweats did nothing to hide his boner this morning. The man clearly passed that test.” London declared, waltzing over with a hand full of hangers.

“An unfortunate truth.” Arla looked ill.

Jamie and I laughed.

We shopped around for a bit, but I didn’t buy anything. Despite the large chunk of change in my bank account after my months with the pack, I was still the fourteen-year-old girl who worked in a bar of all places just to afford life’s basic necessities.

After everyone checked out, we piled in a cab that drove us all the way to the Bronx to Arla’s tattoo and piercing guy.

He had his own storefront, and he’d named the place ‘Full Moon Tattoos and Piercings’.

“I wonder if he’s a werewolf.” London drawled. The rest of us grinned.

Arla pushed the doors open. The inside of the place looked like an alley covered in graffiti, but this graffiti was really freaking beautiful. My eyes caught on an image of a forest, bigger than anything else on the walls.

“Look who finally made her way out of the doghouse.” A hot blond guy came waltzing out of a back room. My eyes lit up when I realized it was Zack from the slip ‘n slide. “Didn’t think our girl’s brother would ever let you out of his sight again after he nearly killed me upstate.”

“I’d say he means well, but he doesn’t.” I smirked

Arla laughed and gave Zack a quick side-hug.

“He wanted to kill you long before you grabbed Henley’s ass.” She teased.

I looked between the two of them.

“Roman caught us kissing once in the tenth grade. Zack nearly lost his head.” She explained to me.

Zack exchanged greetings with London and Jamie too as he led us into a room in the back of his shop. The walls were just as busy in there as they were outside.

“So this is your first piercing?” Zack grabbed an odd-looking needle-gun from a table to the side of the room. It smelled like bleach, so I knew it was clean. I picked out a set of ruby earrings—mine and my mom’s shared birthstone. The deep red color brought the pink out in my strawberry-hair, but for once I didn’t care.

“Yep. Never had the time or money to do it before.”

“Well it’s your lucky day.” He drew dots on my ears with some sort of marker and backed up, making sure they were even. Nerves fluttered in my stomach. I’d never chosen to change any part of my body before; the only permanent change was on my collarbone and I kept that tattoo-covered pretty much all the time.

He did the piercings quickly, but feeling them in my ears weirded me out so I decided to wait on getting more.

“I want a tattoo.” Jamie blurted after my second piercing was done.

We all gaped at her.

“Perfect, flawless Jamie? With a tattoo?” London demanded.

“You drink peanut-butter in your smoothies because your mate likes them.” I scanned her, checking to make sure she was alright.

“I don’t think I’ve ever even heard you swear.” Arla agreed.

Jamie’s face was so red it may as well have been on fire.

“I’m undergoing a period of self-actualization. Google says it’s a real thing.” She defended herself. “If Oliver doesn’t like it, he can add it to the list of reasons we’re barely friends.”

Arla held out her hand for a high-five and Jamie slapped their palms together.

“I’ll have my assistant push my appointments a couple hours.” Zack was grinning broader than ever now. He probably liked all our drama; he seemed like the kind of guy who’d be into that. I slid off the tattoo chair and stepped to the side so Jamie could take the seat. She did, a determined expression on her face.

“I want a flower, something like this.” She handed Zack her phone so he could see a picture. He nodded.

“Just below your collarbone?”

The words made my stomach clench, reminding me of my hidden tattoo. Jamie shot me an apologetic look.

“Yeah. I love the way yours looks there, Hennie.” She sounded sorry. It was a compliment though, so I forced a smile and nodded.

Zack got things ready while the rest of us grabbed chairs and got comfortable. Zack started up the gun. Because Jamie’s tattoo was a simple one, he told us it wouldn’t be long.

“You know, I could fix your tattoo.” He said as he focused on Jamie’s collarbone.

When everyone looked at me, I realized who he was talking to.

“You keep it hidden. If you liked the way it looked, you wouldn’t feel the need to.”

My face warmed but I kept my expression neutral.

“Hiding it keeps away the memories.”

“You could make new ones.” Arla met my eyes. “If you already hate it, what’s the worst that could happen?”

Why did she have to have a point?

“Do it.” Jamie encouraged me, despite the grimace on her face. As I recalled, getting a tattoo freaking hurt.

“It’s her body, guys. Don’t pressure her into anything.” London’s words were sharp. All of us girls glanced over at her, a bit surprised.

But they had a point. It wouldn’t be possible for me to hate my tattoo more than I did; maybe I wouldn’t be so self-conscious of it if it looked a little more attractive.

“They’re right.” I told her, a heavy sigh slipping from my lips.

My foot tapped anxiously as I waited for Zack to finish with Jamie’s tattoo. It turned out pretty, so I felt slightly better about the future of my own skin. He cleaned his instruments while I sat down in the chair and wrestled a bout of nausea.

“Don’t go adding a bunch of flowers to the thing.” I warned. My mind went back to some hideous tattoos I’d seen. “Or a skull. Or—“

“Relax.” He interrupted me. “I know what I’m doing.”

When he gestured to the walls, I didn’t deny the truth. The man had a gift.

He took the gun to my skin and I shut my eyes against the pain, fingers going white as I gripped the armrests. Memories of the time I’d been strapped to a chair as a little girl, held down by many massive hands as I screamed and cried surfaced.

Jamie took one of my hands and squeezed it. Arla took the other.

I forced my eyes open.

This was my choice.

I wasn’t eight anymore; I was free now.

My eyes fell down to the top of my left wrist and the scar Roman had given me when I joined the pack. It represented the life I was creating for myself.

When Zack finished, I didn't want to look at my old tattoo yet.

"I need you to do one more thing." I went with my gut. Detangling my hand from Jamie's, I held up my wrist and pointed to my Alpha mark. One scar, much neater and smaller than any of the ones on my back thanks to an Alpha who cared enough to try not to hurt me. "I want you to write the word, 'free' in cursive. Don't go outside the lines of the scar or I'll kill you." That last part came out a growl.

Zack did as I said. Not much later, I had two tattoos, one new and one improved.

I stepped into the bathroom afterward and locked the door behind me. Looking into the mirror, I reminded myself that I was alright. I was a fighter. With shaking hands, I slowly pulled my shirt down. The bandage over it wasn't supposed to come off yet, but I needed to get a look while I was in the right mindset so I peeled it away carefully.

My eyes stung as they traced over the tattoo I despised. One that ruled my closet and made me afraid of my own skin. The word was still there, the "WOLFSBANE", but he'd made the ugly, stretched, and faded letters pretty. The new look to my tattoo didn't take away my hatred for the nickname or the terrible things that had happened to me because of it, but it did make me feel slightly better about my own skin.

After a few minutes to regain control of my emotions, Jamie knocked on the door.

"You okay?"

I nodded in the mirror and shut my eyes, steeling myself once again before answering by pulling the door open.

"I'm good."

Zack looked a bit worried, cleaning his tools on the side of the room while London and Arla chatted quietly on the other side. He was probably worried I'd hate it and Roman would try to kill him again.

I didn't blame him. That man could be one scary son of a bitch when he tried. I considered myself lucky that he'd never

tried to scare me.

“It’s great. Thank you.” My lips tilted upward. Zack relaxed and grinned.

“Knew you’d like it.” He said.

Liar.

Takes one to know one, after all.

Arla paid, writing it off as her Christmas presents to me and Jamie. I left a fat tip.

We were piling into the cab when London’s phone dinged and she groaned.

“Ugh, I forgot it’s fight night.” She made a face. My forehead wrinkled.

What was fight night?

“Roman didn’t invite you?” Arla checked.

“Nope.”

“He’s a protective moron. You need to learn to fight, so you’re coming with us.” She declared. “Do you have workout clothes?”

“All she wears is workout clothes.” Jamie pointed out.

I flipped her off and Arla cackled.

“Those are athleisure.” London waved her hand through the air. “We’re talking high-impact workout clothes. Your girls will be bouncing all over the place in those pitiful excuses for sports bras you own. Take it from the lingerie expert.”

The cab driver looked at her like she had three heads and we all coughed back laughs.

“I’m a model for Victoria’s Secret.” She explained to the middle-aged man. He looked her up and down, checking her out. Another cackle burst from Arla and then Jamie and I started laughing too. London folded her arms over her chest awkwardly.

Luckily for London the drive wasn’t much longer, because it was crazy awkward and utterly hilarious.

When we got out of the cab, she flipped her hair over her shoulder and the rest of us burst out laughing again.

“Maybe you shouldn’t tell random men that you’re an underwear model.” Jamie suggested, as the last of our giggles faded and we entered a place called Lululemon. I hadn’t realized fancy stores dedicated to workout clothes were even a thing, but they were.

When I saw the price tags on the clothes, the poor orphan in me was horrified. I pulled up my bank account on my phone and realized I’d be more than fine to buy as many as I wanted. Especially in the name of learning to protect myself. So I pushed away my worries and accepted the clothes the girls piled in my arms to try on.

“Black clothes, guys. I like black.” I warned them.

“You can’t buy black workout clothes. It’s practically illegal.” Arla protested.

The other two girls agreed, which is how I ended up trying on a pair of tight but ultra-comfortable leggings covered in what looked like watercolor flowers. The sports bra I had on was a dark pink color that squished my boobs to a level they’d never been squished before.

I turned side to side, checking out the silhouette it gave me.

Not bad.

It wasn’t black, but... I kind of liked it.

Even though it showed my WOLFSBANE tattoo. I had only seen one high-necked bra in the store so there probably wasn’t a way to avoid that.

“We want to see.” London reminded me of the order the girls gave me before shoving me in the dressing room. I’d started to feel a bit like their working-class Barbie, but I didn’t entirely mind.

I pulled the door open and they oohed and ahed before deciding neither of the items fit well enough and instructing me to try on another pair. When I did as they said, they turned down that outfit too.

There were a surprising number of styles for the workout clothes, and they made me try on every single one of them. I went home with four sets, every piece in a pattern or corresponding color. None of them concealed more than half of my tattoo, but I'd sacrifice it to avoid bouncing boobs while I learned to protect myself.

We stopped for lunch at a healthy place that I'd heard of before. Healthy crap wasn't my jam, nor was it any of the other girls' as I learned, but they said if we ate anything heavier fight night would be hell so I choked down the healthy food.

I got a phone call from a number I didn't recognize and stepped outside to take it while the other girls finished up.

"Hello." I answered.

"Henley Clark." Ledger purred. My stomach dropped.

"How did you get this number?"

"I have connections everywhere, the New York Pack included." My blood chilled at the revelation. "Love what the artist did to that tattoo of yours. I can't wait to see how it tastes on your skin."

My eyes rocketed around the street and all the people moving around. Where the eff was he?

"What do you want?" I ground the words out, still trying to find him.

"You."

It was the exact thing Roman had said to me after camping in my hallway, and that fact had me fighting a bout of anxiety about both of the men.

"My sources tell me you're considering mating the New York Alpha. I'd advise against that if you want me to leave him alive when I retrieve you."

A humorless laugh slipped from my lips.

"Good luck with that." I hung up and resisted the urge to throw the phone down and stomp it to bits. The girls came out

of the restaurant then.

“What’s wrong?” Jamie asked, looking around for threats the same way I had looked for the Colorado Alpha.

“Ledger called me.”

Three sets of eyes widened.

“How did he get your number?” Arla demanded. Roman was the one to give me the phone, and not many people had my number.

“Said he has connections in the pack.” I forced myself to take a long breath in and out. “Fight night is sounding more appealing by the minute.”

“We won’t let anything happen to you.” Jamie promised, giving me a quick side hug.

“Thanks.” I gave her a tight smile, but I knew that would be easier said than done. Roman was strong, but he couldn’t spend every minute of every day with me. The near-abduction when I was in the nightclub could’ve easily gone another way and I could be back in Ledger’s storm cellar instead of on the receiving end of his phone call.

He wasn’t going to give up, and there was a good chance he’d get lucky one of these times. I either needed to stay in the pack and accept that he’d get to me eventually or make a run for it again.

That knowledge made me uneasy. I’d finally found a place I felt like I belonged. My relationship with Roman was still developing, but it was one of the best things I’d ever had going for me. The friendships I’d built with Arla and her enforcers were important to me too. Running away from all of that would leave me feeling more alone and angry than ever.

But could I really risk letting Ledger capture me again?

While I was thinking and we were walking, the girls decided we needed to get manicures and pedicures to ease some of the tension and took us and our shopping bags toward a salon. My mind continued whirling as we sat down in chairs with our feet soaking in warm water, jets blasting our toes to

comfortable mush. Not even the massage chair working on my knots could distract me from my thoughts.

“Have you thought about mating with Roman?” Arla asked me quietly. My chair was sandwiched between hers and Jamie’s.

“Hmm?” I looked at her. Of course I’d thought about mating with Roman; I assumed that was obvious.

“To get Ledger to leave you alone.”

It took a second for me to put what she’d said together, and then I shook my head. It was a good thing werewolf hearing was slightly better than humans’ so we could have this conversation without the chattering nail-techs hearing us.

“Ledger is even more obsessed with me than your brother. If I mate with Roman and Ledger gets ahold of me, his entire focus will be on causing me pain rather than hurting me to convince me to mate with him.”

The girls’ eyes widened in horror and I realized I’d told them something they didn’t know.

“What did he do to you?” London demanded.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I tried to get out of the conversation, but it wasn’t happening unless I decided to be a real jerk to them.

They all stared at me with laser-eyes. I decided I trusted them enough to tell them.

“He ordered me to mate with him. You know Alpha orders don’t work on that, so when I turned him down he locked me in his storm cellar. He came down every day to torture me in various ways in an attempt to force me to mate with him. I’d been there six months when I finally escaped.” The short version of the story was easier to get out.

None of the girls said anything for a long moment. Their gazes ranged from pity to shock to fury.

“I can’t believe Roman hasn’t killed him.” Arla sat back in her chair, radiating fury and a bit of Alpha power. I hated the

feel of the Alpha power grating against my free will but didn't say anything.

"He doesn't know all the details." I looked forward so I didn't have to make eye contact with any of them. They didn't know all the details, either. No one did but me and my torturer.

"What?" Arla demanded.

"He'd look at me differently."

"He wouldn't." Jamie looked as angry as I'd ever seen her.

"You have to tell him." Arla grabbed my hand. "Roman does better when he has all the details. He needs to know so he can make sure you're better protected."

"It's my trauma. My choice." I said sharply, pulling my hand from her grip and meeting her eyes with my own steely gaze. "I told you what I've been through in trust. Don't break that trust."

I wasn't one to trust easily. If Arla broke it, that would be the end of a real friendship between us.

"Please, Henley. Roman deserves to know." She was practically begging.

"I'll tell him when I'm ready." I looked away again.

Would I ever be ready?

It wasn't likely.

The manicurists worked on our nails for a bit before London asked,

"So who do you think the mole is?"

By mole, I assumed she meant whoever had given Ledger my phone number.

"There aren't many options. Just the Alphas and our enforcers." Arla chewed her lip. "Lilac is still pissed, but I don't think she'd betray us to the enemy. She knows Roman will challenge him for Alpha if he needs to for Henley. I went to lunch with Kylee and Shy the other day and they don't like Hennie either, but they're definitely still loyal."

“Well Roman has what, fifteen enforcers?”

“Seventeen. He promoted Bryan and Parker last week. It’s probably one of the newer guys; they’re never as loyal.”

“Roman will have a better shot at figuring it out than us.” Jamie said.

“It would be better for the wolf if we find out first.” Arla wore a grimace.

I had no doubt she was right.

After the manicures and pedicures, the girls decided I needed a haircut. When I was a kid the packs that had been in control of me hadn’t given me a choice on what my hair looked like, keeping it cut to my chin or shorter in an attempt to attract less attention with the red locks. One of the Alphas had even forced me to shave it off and wear a hat at one point. The pack before Ledger’s hadn’t cared about my hair so I’d started growing it out, and Ledger liked it so he hadn’t cut it.

It fell to my waist and tangled easily, so I was on board with a tiny haircut. The hairdresser only took off an inch or so, evening everything out and making it look healthier. I loved the way it looked long, even if it had the tendency to look more pink than red on occasion. The hairdresser talked me into a few sun-kissed-looking highlights too.

At the end of the girls’ day, I felt like an entirely new person. Even after Ledger’s call.

TWENTY-FOUR

When seven PM rolled around, the other girls and I arrived on the eighth floor, which hosted a gigantic gym and a padded area for whatever fight night was. Every machine in the gym was occupied.

“Do people watch fight night?” I asked. I’d been assuming the Alphas and their enforcers got together and practiced their moves or something, not the spectator event it was turning out to be.

“Yep!” Jamie wore a cheerful smile. Everyone there was staring right at us.

Not my cup of tea.

“I changed my mind.” I turned back toward the elevator. Arla and Jamie grabbed my arms and towed me to the side of the padded area, on which a dozen male enforcers already stood along with Lilac and two other girls I knew as her friends. Gray walls and blue floors gave the place a much calmer feel than it deserved being the gym and the place fight night took place.

“What’s she doing here?” one of Lilac’s friends growled under her breath.

“Why does she smell like him?” Lilac muttered.

I looked away. No need to rehash the biting episode for everyone in the gym to hear. Although, the lovely new scar on my neck wouldn’t exactly be easy to hide.

“This is where the Alphas and Enforcers sit and stand.” Jamie explained as we sat down on a bench along the outside of the mat and room.

“I’m neither of those things.” I said, leaning back on the bench and eyeing the men in the room. In theory Roman’s bite had toned my scent down with his enough that none of the men would go berserk and attack me, but the theory was untested and I didn’t relish trying it out in a room with at least a hundred men. Probably more like two hundred.

“You’re Roman’s girlfriend. That counts.” Arla stood up and began to stretch. Jamie joined her while London waltzed off to talk to someone I didn’t know.

Was I Roman’s girlfriend? We hadn’t talked about it.

“Chin up; every unmated girl in the pack wants to be you.” Arla added.

I lifted an eyebrow, getting up and stretching with the other girls as I scanned the men in the room again, just to be safe.

“Are Lilac’s friends enforcers too?” I asked Jamie.

“Kylee and Shy? Yes. They’re the only other female enforcers you haven’t met. They said no to helping guard you when Arla asked.” She confirmed it. “Kylee is Kyler’s sister. She’s about a year younger than him.”

“Ah.”

Kyler came strolling in with Gunner, London’s mate. Kyler headed straight toward us, wearing a monstrous grin.

“Something tells me no one told the Alpha you were going to be here.” He tried to mess up my hair and I dodged his hand.

“Don’t mess up her blow-out.” Arla slapped the same hand away. Her wolf shone through her eyes and I had no idea why.

“Sorry, sorry.” He raised his hands in surrender. “The nightclub has been missing you.” He told me.

“Went on a bit of a bender. Bad memories and what-not.”

Kyler nodded that he understood. With how well he knew his drinks, I didn’t doubt he’d had his fair share of benders.

“Nice new accessory.” His eyes caught on my neck.

“The bite or the tattoo?” Jamie teased. I rolled my eyes and Kyler squinted, eyebrows lifting when he saw the bite.

“No wonder he was so much calmer today.” He looked around. “Roman’s going to be pissed when he sees you here. If I were you, I’d run.”

“If I ran, he’d chase me.” My lips lifted when Jamie and the guys laughed. Arla’s face twisted in a grimace.

“TMI, sis.”

“Really though, Roman doesn’t want the pack to know that you can’t fight. He’s going to lose his mind.” Kyler scratched his head, glancing at the elevator. “We need to get you out of here.”

Arla scoffed.

“Every girl deserves to know how to protect herself. Henley’s even more at risk than most of us, so she stays. End of discussion.”

I’d always wanted to learn how to fight, so I was glad she’d put her foot down.

At least until the elevator opened on Roman. His head lifted as he caught my scent, and his eyes narrowed on me the second he stepped out. I could hear his low growl from the other side of the room, and a chill ran up my spine.

“Yikes.” Jamie muttered.

“Good luck.” Kyler strode over to his sister.

I looked away from Roman as he stalked toward me, trying to look as casual as possible.

“Henley Clark.” The threat was heavy in his voice.

“Oh, hey.” I tilted my head to the side so he’d notice his bite mark on my neck and maybe chill a bit.

His eyes zoned in on my tattoo instead, his body stilling as he lifted his fingers to the shiny skin. I’d taken the bandage off after the three hours Zack had instructed me to wait and put Vaseline on it as I’d been ordered.

“Ahem.” Arla coughed to get his attention to the large crowd we had watching our every move.

Roman’s knuckle went under my chin, lifting my face so he could press a quick kiss to my lips before striding out to the middle of the mat.

“Welcome to fight night.” His voice boomed.

Everyone cheered. I wasn't sure if they were cheering for fight night or our kiss, or both. Lilac and her friends definitely *weren't* cheering. I'd hoped Lilac would forgive me at some point, but it wasn't looking good.

“Do we get to fight Wolfsbane?” some chick yelled from the back of the room.

“No.” He didn't hesitate. Discomfort flooded me, and I tried to tamp it down so no one would scent it.

I shouldn't have come.

Arla quickly strode across the mats to stand beside her brother.

“Me and my enforcers will be the only ones fighting Henley Clark.” Arla announced. I saw her arm reach around Roman's back and pinch him

Definitely shouldn't have come.

Lilac and her friends were smirking at the announcement. Things weren't looking great for me. Not only was Roman pissed, but I was about to get pummeled by girls who wanted to challenge me for my Alpha and they could probably all fight better than me. I could be savage in fur, but my limited number of human self-defense classes wouldn't help me beat anyone in my skin.

“Kyler and Kylee will be emceeding today.” Arla finished, she and her brother walking straight back to me when they were done. Jamie and I sat on the bench together, but since I was on the edge of the thing she scooted over to make room for Roman. He didn't sit.

Definitely pissed.

The first fight started, two male enforcers facing off against each other. Someone turned on loud, booming rock music that reminded me of what Roman always had playing. The guys were evenly matched, so it went on a good ten minutes.

Arla took the seat Roman had left open beside me.

I noticed Roman start shaking partway through the fight. Arla noticed too. She nudged me and pointed to Roman with her eyes, pretty much telling me to deal with him. Then she got up and crossed the room, whispering something to Kylee and Kyler.

I figured touching him was the best way to chill him out and grabbed Roman's hand. He looked down as I slipped my fingers between his and squeezed tightly. He didn't relax, but the shaking stopped.

Success.

Or at least close enough.

Arla sat back down as the shorter male enforcer cracked the taller one on the head and the tall guy went down hard. The short one wrestled the tall one on the ground until Tall tapped out. Kyler and his sister declared the winner and then announced the next fight.

Roman would be going up against an enforcer named Jett. He hadn't been in my entourage rotation because he wasn't mated, but I'd heard of him. He was just as big as Roman and a professional MMA fighter to boot.

I didn't like the idea of Roman fighting him, but this was just for fun.

Roman slipped his hand from mine and tugged his shirt over his head, handing it to me. He stretched his shoulders as he sauntered over to Jett.

Part of me wondered if he'd expect me to heal him again after his fight tonight, but I reminded myself how much I'd enjoyed the whole thing the night before. And Roman had never really *expected* anything from me.

He was good like that.

Everyone cheered when Jett made the first move. Roman dodged easily. Jett threw a couple more punches and Roman dodged a few more times before jabbing at Jett. Jett ducked and punched back, his fist shooting toward Roman's face. Roman's head moved with his body as he dodged and put his

weight into a jab to Jett's chest. Jett staggered backward but clipped Roman on his shoulder.

The crowd roared. I'd forgotten they were there, the music was so loud and the fight so intense.

"Are they glad he's hurt or angry?" I asked Arla. She grinned.

"A little of both, probably."

The fight continued, jabs exchanged. Both took a few hits, but nothing serious. I was on the edge of my seat when Roman kicked it into gear, hitting faster and harder. The fight ended quickly after that. Although Jett put up a good fight, he was used to fighting for show. Roman usually fought for his life.

Roman helped Jett up off the floor and the two of them exchanged grins. Both were worse for the wear, littered with bruises.

At least they weren't claw marks.

The next fight was between Sky and Jamie. I'd seen Jamie kick ass, but I'd never seen her in a practice fight. Arla scooted over on the bench to make room for Roman between us, and when he sat he draped his sweaty arm over my shoulder.

"Gross." I complained, pushing at his arm. He was still grinning from the fight and pulled me closer, squeezing me tight. I fought half-heartedly to get free and Roman maintained a death-grip until I gave up all hope of escape. His arm went back to my shoulder and I leaned into his side.

People could stare all they wanted. He was mine.

My eyes were glued to the fight as it started. The two women made it look like an art form. Lithe bodies flowed through movements, neither of them fazed by the move of the other. The first time Sky stumbled, Jamie struck like a cobra. All it took was one focused kick to Sky's head and Jamie had her on the ground, unconscious for a second and a half. She came to before the time ran out, but Jamie pinned her so she was out anyway.

I high-fived Jamie as she came to sit back down, her cheeks flushed and a bright smile on her face. The only other times I'd seen her that happy were when she was drunk or bartending.

A few more fights between enforcers went down. Kyler won without taking a single hit and Oliver came out on top despite a few punches to the face. When Arla went up for her fight against Kylee, I noticed the tightness in Kyler's expression.

He really cared about his sister.

That fight was the longest of the night. The girls were evenly matched and both were skilled at dodging. Arla won, but it was decently close. Not a great sign for an Alpha, and the grimace on Roman's face told me he knew it. Someone could challenge his sister, and if they were really skilled they would win.

After a few more fights, Kyler and Kylee announced that the last fight of the night would be between me and London, both beginners. Roman tensed at the announcement, and I could sense that he was close to shifting.

"London's just as bad as Henley, Rome. She'll be fine." Arla told her brother.

I met London in the middle and noted that she looked about as thrilled as I did.

"Don't aim for the face. I sell shit with this nose." She gestured to her face and I cracked a smile.

"The last time I punched someone in the face I ended up with two messed up knuckles. Not eager to try again."

Kylee called for the fight to start. London struck quickly with a jab to my shoulder and I jumped backward.

The beast in me kicked into gear, my eyes shifting as my mind went into survival mode. I'd never been in a friendly fight before and my senses told me it was kill or be killed.

I hadn't survived this long to lose now.

My elbow met her stomach, leg sweeping into hers as I leaped back away from another punch. Her fist clipped my cheek and I saw red.

A snarl tore from my lips and I shifted on the fly, leaping toward London. She screamed and dove to the side, shifting into her own dark-furred wolf as two-hundred-and-something pounds of muscle tackled me to the floor. Roman rolled my wolf form onto his chest and stood quickly, hauling my furry ass over his shoulder.

My humanity set back in as Roman pushed the doors to the men's bathroom open, barking for everyone to leave. The only guy inside quickly zipped his fly and hurried out, nodding at Roman. I shifted back to human form and Roman sat me on the countertop, pulling his shirt off and handing it to me. I put it on, not meeting his eyes.

I'd lost control of my beastly side like a horny teenage boy.

"Are you okay?" His hands framed my face and I realized he looked more concerned than angry.

"Fine. Thought you'd be pissed." I waited for his fury.

Instead, his lips twisted in a grimace.

"I am, but not at you. I knew that was going to happen before the fight started." He tugged his fingers through my now-tangled hair, lifting it closer to his eyes.

"You changed it." He scowled.

"It's still red and long. What is there to complain about?"

"I liked the way it was."

I scowled back at him.

"You're supposed to tell me my hair is beautiful and you don't care what I do to it. Haven't you ever seen a romance movie?"

"Your hair is beautiful and I don't care what you do with it as long as you leave it pink and long." He said, grudgingly. I smacked his bare shoulder.

"It's red."

“You’re lying to yourself, Hen.”

This was a pointless conversation.

“How did you know that was going to happen?” I gestured to the door, which I was 99% sure Roman had locked behind us.

“When you attacked Carly in the hallway, I sensed the moment you registered her as a threat. Your mind shifted and your body followed. It was an automatic response.”

“So I’m not going to be able to learn to fight?”

“You’ll learn. We’ll just go at it a little differently than what happened out there.”

Relief relaxed my shoulders.

“Ready to go back out?” He looped a strand of my hair around his fingers. I grimaced.

“Everyone’s probably judging the shit out of me.”

“If they judge you for your survival instincts they can go to hell.” Roman took my hand and pulled me off the counter. His shirt fell to the middle of my thighs, plenty long enough to cover the important bits.

I held my chin high as the two of us walked back to the bench, ignoring the eyes on us. I mouthed an apology to London and she grinned and shook her head. She was probably glad the fight ended early.

Fight night was over, but it didn’t look like anyone had left. They were all waiting to see me and Roman if I had to guess.

Kyler was now running a class of women who stank of desire, showing them the proper way to throw a punch. Punching bags had been dragged onto the mats, and the women were using a couple of them.

“Sorry, Henley. I didn’t realize that would trigger you to shift.” Arla looked a bit sheepish. “I wouldn’t have forced you to come if I’d known.”

“I’m glad you did.” The words surprised me as much as they did her. “I’d like to be able to protect myself. It didn’t go

the way I expected, but I'm alive so that's got to count for something."

"After that call today, I'd definitely say so." Arla said.

"What call?" Roman looked between the two of us. Arla and I looked at each other.

"You didn't tell him?" She asked.

"I thought you did."

"One of you tell me." Roman's grip on my hand tightened uncomfortably. I glanced at the crowded floor.

"We'd better take this to your office." Arla told him, leading the way to the elevator. Roman and I followed.

The ride up was tense and uncomfortable. I extracted my hand from Roman's grip to avoid more broken knuckles and he folded his arms over his chest. Said arms were looking much hairier than usual, betraying his state of mind.

We were in his office a few minutes later. Roman slammed the door behind us and I jumped at the noise.

"Ledger called Henley today." Arla jumped right in. Roman snarled.

"And said what?"

"That I'm his and he'll leave you alive if I go to him willingly." I said.

Roman cursed loudly, grabbing the computer off his desk. With a roar, he launched it at the wall to the side of the room. I flinched and took a few quick steps toward the door as it crashed into the wall and shattered.

"I'll kill whoever betrayed us." His words were loud, Alpha power pouring off him and making me ill. The assault of power brought back a memory of my ten-year-old self cowering against a wall while the Alpha shouted at me for talking to his son as if I was a normal werewolf girl rather than an abomination and an absurdity.

Instinct kicked in and logic left the building. I grabbed the door and sprinted to the elevator, skidding inside just as the

doors shut with a surprised-looking woman inside. Roman's snarl shook the elevator as his fist thudded into the metal of the closed doors while the elevator glided toward the floor.

The middle-aged woman was pale.

"Did you run from the Alpha?" she whimpered.

"Yup." One of my hands wrapped tightly around my stomach, fighting the fear that had flooded through my veins.

"He'll chase you."

Thanks, Captain Obvious.

"I know." I stabbed the button for the first floor a couple more times. Getting out of the building and away from Roman's power was my first priority.

I needed a place to breathe.

There was only one place I knew I could do that away from Roman, so the moment the elevator stopped on the first floor I practically flew out. Bare feet pounded cement as I wove through the crowded streets. Gasps erupted from the few fancy people who noticed my lack of clothing and I cursed myself for shifting and tearing up my clothes earlier.

It wasn't long before I hauled into the break room at the nightclub, heading straight for the bathroom. I locked the door behind me and gripped the edges of the counter tightly, forcing air into my lungs and words through my mind.

Roman isn't like the other Alphas.

He's not.

My heart clenched and my chest began to hurt. It was a panic attack, not a heart attack, but the two could feel the same.

A fist pounded the door moments later and I screamed at the sudden noise.

"Open the door." Roman's voice was quiet, not the shout it had been earlier.

“I can’t.” My hands shook and I shrunk to the floor, heart and mind racing. My knees scrunched into my chest and I held them close, tightly.

“I’m going to force my way in.” he warned. “Is that okay?”

“Fine.” I shut my eyes tightly.

There was a crack and then Roman was on his knees beside me, reaching for me. He hesitated before touching me.

“I’m so sorry, Hen. I can’t believe I did that.” He pulled his hand away.

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” The words came out in wheezes. “You just have a lot of power. Last time I was hit with power like that wasn’t good. Brought back memories.”

Roman’s fists clenched, and I could tell he was fighting not to touch me.

“Hold me.” I said.

His arms wrapped around me tightly and he pulled me up into his lap. I buried my nose against his neck, body shaking against him. The steady sound of his heartbeat calmed mine, and over the next few minutes I stopped shaking and my breathing went back to normal.

“Sorry I flipped out.” I apologized, not lifting my head from his chest because I didn’t want to meet his eyes.

Roman leaned back and used his finger to tilt my chin up so our eyes met.

“You’ve been through shit. You’re allowed to flip out every now and then. I’m just sorry I caused it. I shouldn’t have lost control like that.”

“No one’s perfect.” I glanced at the door and then down at my clothing. Or lack of it. “Shit, we should get out of here.”

“Probably.” He agreed. “I’ll order dinner.”

We held hands during the walk back to the skyscraper and through the elevator ride to the forty-fourth floor. He went to my apartment with me. I ducked into the closet to put on pants

and heard Roman's phone ring. He was still on the line, fist clenched and pacing my living room when I came out.

"Are you sure?" He demanded.

I couldn't hear the other person's response.

"Fine. I'm coming." He barked, hanging up the phone and shoving it in his pocket.

"So where are we going?" I forced my voice to sound upbeat. Roman's expression told me without words that where he was going, I wasn't invited.

"My mom showed up on Arla's doorstep beaten and bloody. Dad relapsed again. I've got to take him back to rehab and help my mom." He dropped a kiss on my forehead.

"Oh. Alright." I bit my lip.

When would he be back?

He strolled out the door, lifting his phone back to his ear.

TWENTY-FIVE

I saw Roman every day over the next few weeks, but never for more than thirty minutes or so at a time unless you counted the two nights we shared a bed. He was busy dealing with family stuff. I got that, and was used to entertaining myself and working a lot.

When Christmas Eve came around, I got dressed for my normal night shift at the nightclub. I'd worked every holiday for nearly ten years since I had no family or friends to spend them with. The girls hadn't texted about Christmas get-togethers or anything, so I figured I'd spend this Christmas the same way.

I was heating up leftover pizza when the front door burst open. Roman flew into the apartment, half man and half wolf. Thick black hair covered his arms and what I could see of his heaving chest, blue eyes lit with the beast within and fangs exposed.

"Your phone." He snarled at me.

I glanced down at the device, face-down and dead on the counter beside the Ziploc bag I'd pulled my pizza out of.

His mind had clearly shifted with his eyes and teeth, so asking what was wrong wouldn't get us anywhere. I waited.

"Ledger King is standing in my lobby demanding to see you."

My heart seized in my chest and I was on my feet in an instant.

"I have to go." I rushed toward my bedroom but ran into a wall of solid muscle.

"Mine." The beast snarled. I stilled.

"You think I'm going *to* Ledger? Oh, hell no." I placed a hand on his chest and shoved him backward. He moved barely an inch, but it was enough for me to get past him and into my room. "I'd never willingly go to him. He's a monster."

“What are you doing?” He demanded, as I pulled my suitcase out of the closet and started throwing everything I owned into it.

“What does it look like?” I shot back.

Running.

His hands closed around mine.

“No.”

“I don’t remember asking your permission.”

“You’re mine. I can only protect you here.”

“I’m not your possession.” I snarled, the beast in me surfacing to fight Roman’s. “The only person I belong to is me.”

Roman’s grip on my hands tightened just a fraction. It didn’t hurt, but it wasn’t comfortable either. He glowered at me.

“MINE.”

“Put the man back in the driver’s seat. I’m not talking to a wolf while my worst nightmare sits in the lobby.”

I ripped my hands from his and clenched them into fists at my sides. I’d rather avoid another hand injury, but I’d punch him if I had to. If it would snap him out of it.

Roman spun around and stalked out of the closet, leaving me inside. I continued packing. I’d let myself start to get comfortable and had collected too many things to fit in my bag, so I ditched the books in favor of pants.

Roman stepped back into the room, arms a normal level of hairy and eyes back to their human dark blue.

“He won’t get past the lobby. You don’t need to pack.”

“I can’t stay here if he’s willing to show up and wait me out.”

“Why not?” Roman challenged. My eyes flashed, anger growing inside me.

“Because he wants me and will do anything to have me. He’s insane, and I can’t go through that shit again.”

Strong arms wrapped around my waist, pulling my body slowly against Roman's. My hands fisted in his t-shirt, arms sandwiched between our fronts.

"There's no way in hell I can let you walk out of this building, Hen. As your future mate and your Alpha, I'm telling you right now that I can't watch that happen. I'll lose my mind and total control of my beast, and Ledger will take this pack." The look in his eyes told me he was being completely serious.

I groaned.

"I shouldn't have let you chase me."

"Like I gave you a choice." He growled. I shoved my hair out of my face.

"Alright. If I'm staying, we need a plan." Arla's words during our pedicures struck me. "We need to sell our relationship to him. If he believes we're going to mate, he'll either flip his lid or get over me. Either way, it'll trigger whatever comes next."

"No." Roman didn't even wait for the rest of my plan. He knew it would involve Ledger seeing me in person. "I won't be able to control myself if you're within his reach. Protecting you is my first priority."

"You'll be holding my hand while you threaten him for hurting me and trying to force me into mating with him. He won't be able to reach me."

"I'm going to do a hell of a lot more than threaten him."

"Roman." I grabbed his face between my hands like he always did to me. I had to go up on my tiptoes to manage it, but I did. "It won't be hard to pretend we're a few days from mating. I need you to focus on that."

"Fine." He tossed his baseball cap to the floor and shoved his fingers over his growing-out buzz. I let go of him to grab the hat. "But I stay between you and him at all times."

"Deal. It will be more convincing if you can seem relaxed." I plopped it back on his head backward and grabbed his hand,

leading him toward the elevator. He adjusted the hat but left it backward and slipped his fingers through mine.

We were silent as the elevator descended.

It dinged and the doors slid open. My body tensed, expecting to see Ledger just outside.

“No one who isn’t pack gets past the receptionist.” Roman’s voice was low. He took charge again, grip tightening on my hand as he led me through the floor. “Chin up.” He murmured.

I lifted my chin and forced every ounce of confidence I had into the way I walked.

Six of Roman’s enforcers formed a barrier between the pack-side of the lobby and the public. Two parted to let us through, nodding at Roman.

Ledger and two of his enforcers stood waiting in front of the receptionist’s desk. The receptionist was a petite female who held a gun trained steadily on the Colorado Alpha’s chest.

I hoped she’d pull the trigger.

Ledger’s gaze snapped directly to me, ignoring the Alpha at my side completely. Roman’s arm snaked around my waist, pulling me to him. I stumbled but made it look smooth by catching myself with a hand on Roman’s chest.

“Release my future mate and I won’t challenge you for your pack here and now.” Ledger snapped.

I hope he didn’t notice my flinch at the sound of his voice. Roman definitely did.

“Henley and I will be cementing a mating bond tonight.” Roman countered. “Whatever the two of you shared is in the past.”

I barely held back a shudder at the mention of what we’d ‘shared’. Roman was trying to solve this as peacefully as possible, but I needed to switch the conversation’s gears if we were going to get rid of Ledger permanently. I steeled myself for discomfort and turned away from Roman’s chest.

“Cut it with the shit, Ledger.” I glanced up at Roman, whose face was a mask of stone. He was probably confused, but going along with it the way he had when I attacked his mouth in the nightclub to fool the cops. I turned back to Ledger with a hot glare. “Alpha Ellis knows what you tried to force me to do, and all of the pain you inflicted on me. He and I will be mating for my safety and the benefit of his pack, and if you so much as look at me too long, he will challenge you for the right to lead the Colorado wolves.”

Ledger snarled and stepped toward me, hatred burning in his eyes.

Roman tucked me behind his back. I’d promised to let him stay between me and the other Alpha, so I didn’t protest.

“I challenge you for Henley Clark.” Roman’s voice was steel.

“I accept your challenge.”

My Alpha tugged his t-shirt off and handed it to me, maintaining eye contact with Ledger. He stepped out of his joggers and boxer briefs, balling them and handing them to me too. I wasn’t an idiot; he was obviously marking me as his territory by doing so. Ledger’s nostrils flared as he stripped, having seen the same thing in Roman’s gestures as I did.

Roman caught my eye and gave me a quick smile, tugging his baseball cap off his head and pulling it over mine backward so the visor was over my neck. “Relax.” He leaned in to press a kiss to my forehead. Ledger snarled, and I saw the way Roman’s eyes glinted. He was excited to fight my old Alpha.

Insane. He was completely insane.

I was too for having feelings for him.

Roman shifted into his big black wolf and Ledger followed into his own beige fur. Roman was a much bigger man and as such a much bigger wolf. Bigger didn’t always mean better in a fight, though. Ledger was cunning and vicious, and he would probably fight dirtier than my Alpha.

The wolves circled each other, sizing one another up. Ledger launched forward and snapped at Roman's throat. He dodged smoothly.

They circled again. Ledger lunged at Roman, teeth closing on air where his shoulder had been a second earlier. Roman barreled toward the Colorado Alpha, slamming the beige wolf with his furry black shoulder. Ledger flew backward, shattering a glass wall toward the front of our building. Roman turned away from the wolf, confidence dripping from every fiber of his being as he strutted toward me.

He was on his feet and flying at my Alpha in an instant. Roman's cockiness was going to cost him his life.

My black wolf flung his body backward and caught Ledger's throat between his teeth, pinning the beige wolf to the floor before I could even scream.

Ledger whipped his body around, fighting for freedom, but Roman's grip was firm. He waited until the Alpha wolf admitted defeat to release Ledger and step back, shifting to human form again. A massive purple and black bruise painted his right shoulder and back.

His arms folded over his chest as Ledger, too, shifted back. Roman was careful not to show pain.

"Henley is mine." His voice ice. "If you ever show your face here again, you'll lose your life and your pack."

"Large words for a man who answers to someone higher." A musical voice sounded from behind Ledger. Ledger wore a smirk bigger than any I'd ever seen.

Roman swore and spun around, shoving my hair up in his baseball cap to hide as much of the red stuff as possible, and then tugged his shirt over my head so I wore it on top of mine.

He stepped into his sweats as two tall, muscular werewolves stepped past Ledger and his people. They were a couple, a man and a woman.

I didn't see a thing about their faces; my eyes were glued to their hair.

It was almost an exact match to mine. Red, but theirs didn't have any hint of pink.

Roman stepped in front of me, hiding me from sight and protecting me at the same time. The power coming off the couple was stronger than anything I'd felt from any other Alpha, Roman included.

Were these people the Alphas of All?

Arla had mentioned them threatening Roman not to kill another Alpha.

They had to be.

I'd heard of them throughout my life but had never met them in person. Few people did. They were supposed to be vicious and cruel, and I'd heard that death followed them.

I finally pulled my eyes off their hair and looked at their faces. They were on the older side of middle-aged, but still among the strongest-looking people I'd ever seen. Both attractive, him with dark skin and her with light. They held hands and smelled the same; clearly mates.

"Alpha Ellis. Care to explain why Alpha King called us, complaining that his mate was stolen away to New York?"

"My future mate." Ledger corrected.

The Alphas suddenly looked skeptical.

I'd have stood up for myself if not for their hair. It couldn't be a coincidence that mine was so similar, could it? Because of that similarity, I didn't want to draw attention to myself. Who knew what that could lead to?

"Henley Clark was held captive by Alpha King. She got herself to New York, and I took her into my pack for her protection. Since then, we've decided to mate. We were actually planning on doing it tonight until Alpha King decided to challenge me for my woman." Roman drew me forward, just a bit. His arm draped over my shoulders, hiding the strands of hair he hadn't managed to stuff in the hat. I held my chin high, trying to portray confidence I didn't feel.

“Lies.” Ledger spewed, stepping toward the Alphas. They held him back with a wave of power so strong it made breathing difficult.

“What does the girl have to say about it?” the Alpha Male of All demanded.

“Alpha Ellis speaks the truth.” I forced the words out.

“Very well. Alpha King, you’ll accompany us back to our plane.” The female Alpha commanded, spinning on her heels and stalking out of the skyscraper.

“We look forward to hearing of your mating.” The male nodded at Roman, following his mate out.

“You’ll regret this.” Ledger hissed, stalking out after them. I flipped him off.

Roman’s hand landed on the small of my back as he led me to the elevator, his body blocking mine from sight. We didn’t speak until the doors had closed and we were heading up.

“Your shoulder is dislocated, isn’t it?” I finally broke the silence, my voice soft.

“Not for the first time.” Roman grunted. “Grant will fix it.”

“I’m sorry.” I bit my lip, guilt dripping from every pore.

“Don’t be. I could’ve beat him without the injury, just wanted to end it faster so he didn’t have a chance to hurt you.”

“Still, it’s my fault.” I shut my eyes tightly, not mentioning the elephant in the room. Namely, my hair.

“Henley,” Roman turned so we were chest-to-chest again, though there was space between us this time. “It’s no one’s fault.”

“I’m going to heal you again.” I told him. His lips lifted.

“I won’t protest that.”

The elevator dinged, dropping us on my floor, and we headed down the hall together. Roman laced his fingers through mine, and I walked close to him.

“Why does my hair match the Alphas of All?” I dropped my voice low enough no one else could hear.

“I don’t know.” Roman squeezed my hand. “But we’ll find out.”

TWENTY-SIX

I woke up the next morning to the scent of cinnamon, of all things. Roman and I had gone up to his place for food after I healed him, and we fell asleep in his bed together. Christmas music rolled into his room and I could hear Roman and Arla chatting in the kitchen.

Right. It was Christmas.

Feeling self-conscious for my intrusion on the family holiday, I slipped out of bed and padded out to the front door, trying to make as little noise as possible. Grabbing the doorknob, I twisted it slowly.

This was what a walk of shame felt like. Humans were totally right about it being humiliating.

“Where are you going?” Roman crossed the living room. I grimaced.

Caught.

“I don’t want to intrude.” I bit my lip, tugging the door open quickly now that my cover had been blown.

“Come try this, Hennie. Roman thinks everything delicious is gross.” Arla called from the kitchen.

Roman’s eyes were soft as he held out his hand. He had on a red and white striped half-apron with a red ruffle along the bottom, and it was freaking adorable.

“It’s Christmas. Spend the day with me.”

Some emotions I didn’t want to acknowledge welled up inside me.

“I shouldn’t.” I shook my head.

“It’s not intruding when you’re invited.” Arla stepped out of the kitchen, putting a hand on her hip. She had on a full-length apron, and it looked like a Christmas tree had exploded on the thing. “Get in here. I seriously need you to taste these cinnamon rolls. Roman has shitty health-nut taste buds.”

Letting out a slow breath, I shut the front door and took Roman's hand. He tugged me into the kitchen and lifted me up on the one semi-clean spot on his black countertops.

"I'm not a doll." I complained, swatting his hands away. He shot me a grin that made me feel all warm and happy.

"Here." Arla shoved a small plate with a giant cinnamon roll on it in my face. It had been years since I had one, but I plucked a piece off and stuck it in my mouth.

"Holy shit." I said, mouth full. "This is better than pizza."

Arla shot her brother a victorious grin and he grinned back, holding out his hand. She slapped a high-five on there and did a little dance.

I took a bigger bite, savoring the deliciousness.

"Since when do you guys bake?"

"Our grandma used to make these for every holiday. She pretty much raised us, so after she died last year we kept the tradition going." Arla shrugged.

I hadn't known that.

My eyes met Roman's, and his were a bit sad.

"Our mom's at my place, are you cool with going over there for presents after breakfast?" Arla checked. "We finally got her to stop talking shit about you, but it's fine if you want to stay away from her. She's a bitch."

I grimaced but considered it. It might be nice to have a real Christmas. Even with their mom.

"Alright, I'm in."

We ate cinnamon rolls and spent the morning exchanging stories before grabbing my presents for Roman and Arla from my place and heading over to Arla's. Maisy seemed a lot more subdued since the last time I saw her and didn't really acknowledge me other than a few dirty looks when she noticed Roman holding my hand.

To me, that was progress.

The four of us took seats around Arla's sectional, Roman tugging me close to drape his arm over my shoulder. Maisy handed each of her kids a beautifully-wrapped present, staring daggers at me.

Arla pulled out a silky red dress that would show more skin than it covered. Roman opened a tuxedo. My eyebrows lifted, attention going to Maisy as she clapped her hands together.

Had she ever seen what her kids liked to wear?

"This year I bought you both dates to the Influential Werewolves Annual Gala." She clapped her hands together, smiling brightly. "It's smack in the middle of mating season, as always. Arla, Marcus Lynch of the Washington pack will be accompanying you. Roman, I've sent an invitation on your behalf to the daughter of the Pennsylvania Alpha. She's quite beautiful, and mating with her will improve our pack's status considerably."

My eyebrows lifted. The scent of Roman's anger caught my attention, and I put a hand on his thigh before he went and did something he regretted.

"We're perfectly capable of finding our own dates, mother." Arla bit out. "And Roman is like ten minutes away from talking Henley into mating with him."

Roman leaned toward her, arms wrapping around my middle as his chest pressed into my back and side.

"You're going to call the Pennsylvania Alpha and explain your mistake *tomorrow*."

"Arla, where are your presents?" I interrupted before the argument could get explosive.

Swearing under her breath, she stomped over to her tree and grabbed an armful of presents, handing one to her mom, two to her brother, and three to me.

"You already got me something." I reminded her, gesturing to my arm. I realized Roman had either never seen the tattoo over my scar, or just had never commented on it.

I did wear long-sleeves a lot...

“You’re fun to shop for.” Arla shrugged. “And since we’re practically sisters, I’m allowed.”

My face warmed, and I felt Roman’s eyes on me. Maisy scowled and tore the paper off her gift, pulling out a box of expensive shoes.

“Pretty.” She purred, slipping off the stilettos she was wearing—yes, even though we were in the house—and stepping into the ice-colored heels. “Perfect.” She declared, reaching across the couch to hug Arla. It didn’t look like a comfortable exchange.

Roman unwrapped one of his gifts next, pulling out a monster-sized container of what looked like peanut butter. Roman read the label out loud.

“Post-workout peanut butter?” He lifted an eyebrow at Arla, who cackled.

“It’s made of that nasty protein powder you’re always adding to everything. Someone mixed it into peanut butter.”

Roman chuckled and I grinned. Maisy rolled her eyes.

“Open something.” Arla gestured to the gifts on my lap as Roman unwrapped a fancy workout watch of some kind.

“Fine, fine.” I grabbed one and finagled the tape on the edge.

“You open gifts like an imbecile.” Maisy snapped. My cheeks flushed.

“I haven’t gotten a present since I was eight, so I’ve got to enjoy it while it lasts.” I told her.

Her eyes widened in horror. Roman stilled beside me, and Arla gaped.

Ignoring their responses, I unwrapped the present and pulled out a big long-sleeved t-shirt that said,

“YOU WANNA PIZZA ME?”

My face stretched in the most massive grin, and I dropped it on the couch, crossing the room to throw my arms around Arla.

“It’s perfect.” I declared.

She laughed.

“I couldn’t resist.”

“You’re the best.” I went back to sit by Roman, whose expression I still couldn’t read.

I opened the next two presents more quickly, pulling out a pair of black combat boots with spikes on the sides and a purse that matched.

“You’re up, Rome.” Arla declared. Roman grabbed his presents and mine from under the tree, handing me the two I’d brought as well as a slim one from him. At his command, we all opened them at the same time.

Maisy got a subscription to some food service, and Arla got a crockpot she rolled her eyes at.

I just held my present, staring at it in shock.

Two plane tickets to Georgia, leaving toward the end of January. One with my name on it, one blank.

The card read,

You deserve to know what happened to your family. I hope you put my name on the second ticket.

-Romeo

I dropped the card and ticket on the couch, grabbed Roman’s shirt, and yanked him toward me. His lips met mine in a soft kiss that spoke my feelings better than words could.

Maisy was reading my card when I ended the kiss, and I snatched it from her hand.

“That’s private.”

“It’s not even romantic.” She scowled.

“You and I clearly have different standards for just about everything in life.” I leaned against Roman’s chest and he wrapped his arm around my waist, tugging me closer.

“My presents are kind of lame, so don’t get your hopes up.” I handed Roman and Arla their gifts.

They opened them, and Arla laughed. Hers was a bright yellow leather jacket we'd seen in a boutique that all of us girls had joked would identify a chick as a "sunny bitch".

"That's not lame. I'll be the sunniest bitch in the 'scraper."

Roman pressed a kiss to the top of my head. His present was a framed picture of us I'd taken one morning, his nose buried against my neck while I laughed and he grinned against my skin. I'd been sneaky about taking it so he wouldn't know what I was doing.

"Not lame at all." He murmured. "Text me the picture."

Arla pulled out a pile of board games, and Roman cooked for everyone while the three of us ladies played an intense and surprisingly un-awkward game of Monopoly. I lost by a landslide and handed Maisy all my properties before going to join Roman in the kitchen.

The rest of the day progressed similarly, and Roman walked me back to my apartment with my presents in a bundle under his arm—he had something against letting me carry my own shit. I'd stopped fighting it because it was a fight I never won and I liked to win.

We stopped at my door, and I leaned against the doorframe as Roman took a chunk of my hair and lifted it to his nose, inhaling my scent.

"I wanted to get you another present, but I wasn't sure how you'd respond." He admitted, wrapping the strand around his fingers.

"What was it?"

"An all-access pass to my gym and the classes offered there. We do MMA and a few other types of fighting. You need to know how to protect yourself, especially if we're going to mate. Alpha Females don't get challenged a lot, but I'm not willing to lose you to some girl who thinks she can run the pack better than you."

"Wait, what?" My eyebrows shot into my forehead. "I told you, I'm not going to be the Alpha Female."

“I thought you’d adjusted to the idea.” He frowned.

“Adjusted to the idea? I flat-out said no. Not even maybe.”

“You’ll change your mind.” Roman lifted my hair back to his nose, and I tugged the strands away from him.

“You don’t get to make decisions for me. If I’d known you’ve been holding on to this idea, we never would’ve gotten this close.” I gestured between us. The stony expression he wore struck me hard. “That’s why you haven’t brought it up.”

My lips parted, fury and hurt warring within me.

“I’m not trying to make the decision for you, Hen. I just think—“

“This isn’t about what you think, Roman. This is about you keeping secrets from me because you know they’ll affect whether or not I decide to mate with you.”

“You’ve got plenty of your own secrets.” He countered.

“Not secrets like that.” I flung my hand out toward him. “My secrets are just painful tidbits from my past I haven’t told you about. You’re expecting me to change into what *you* want me to be while I’m still trying to figure out what *I* want me to be. I told you I wasn’t interested in becoming an Alpha, and you ignored me.”

Frustration lined his forehead.

“Is it so bad that I want you to lead the pack with me?”

“No, but you *expect* me to. You’ve been willing to mate with me for weeks; would Arla have just stepped down and thrown her title at me if I had agreed to it?”

“No.”

I could spot a lie almost as easily as I could tell one.

“You’re lying.” Disbelief weighed down the words. “You want to trap me, to use me, the same way every other Alpha I’ve had has. We’re done. I’m not mating with you; stay the hell away from me.”

“Henley—“ Roman tried to grab the door, but I slammed it too quickly. Spinning around so my back pressed the wood, I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to process what I’d just learned. “I still have your presents.” He’d still be able to hear me breathing and smell that I was against the door.

“Leave them outside.

There was a soft noise I imagined was Roman putting his hand on the door near my head.

“I wasn’t trying to trap you, Hen. I’d never do that. I just wanted to find a way to have both you and the pack.” His voice was softer, less frustrated. I fought my emotions to remain neutral so he wouldn’t catch a whiff of my hurt.

“I never asked you to give it up.”

“The Alpha’s mate is treated like shit by the pack if she’s not the other half of the Alpha Pair. I’d never put you through that.” This time, the words were raw and honest. “And the messed up power dynamic of an Alpha mated with a pack member could easily lead to abuse. I sure as hell wouldn’t risk that.”

“I don’t care what people think of me.” I said fiercely. The abuse thing, I wasn’t going to touch.

“If that was true, you wouldn’t cover your tattoo.”

The words hurt more than I expected.

It was my own fault for letting him in.

Why did I always do this to myself?

“Leave.”

The sound of his slow footsteps as he walked away was one I wouldn’t soon forget.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“Rise and shine, Hennie-poo.” Arla ripped the curtains in my spare room open. She didn’t ask why I was sleeping there instead of my room; we could both smell her brother on my sheets.

I was a sucker who couldn’t resist sleeping in a bed that smelled like him, even after learning he’d betrayed me.

“Did you just call me ‘poo’?” I couldn’t get my eyes to open, but I had caught that.

“Sure did. Wasn’t as cutesy as I expected.” She looked cheerful. I felt like the walking dead. “Don’t glare at me. The pack gathering is this weekend, and we’re celebrating the start of mating season.” She shimmied her shoulders. “Prepare to be boned.”

“Arla.” I groaned, turning over in bed and pulling my pillow over my head. It was just cruel to wake someone up before noon. “I’m not going.” My voice was muffled by the pillow but she heard loud and clear.

“You’re going to leave my brother alone with all the pack bitches at the start of mating season?” She grabbed the pillow off me and tossed it to the side of the room.

“Yup. I’m going to celebrate mating season with pizza and beer.” I said, and then made a face. “Vodka. Pizza and vodka.”

When I rolled back to my stomach and pulled the duvet over my head, she threw that too. I groaned again.

“What are you talking about?”

“We got in a fight last night.” I sat up just to stop her from tearing apart the spare room I’d been sleeping in and threw my hair up in a bun on top of my head because it smelled too much like Roman.

Should’ve showered off his scent.

Really shouldn’t have slept in a bed that smelled like him.

She rolled her eyes.

“I’m serious.”

“Get over it. This is mating season, sis.”

Padding to the kitchen in just my new pizza shirt and panties, I threw the fridge open. The only thing still inside was some snot-textured concoction Roman left sometime earlier. I’d been too afraid to open the Tupperware containing it until then, but my hunger was finally bad enough.

“What is this?” I shook the thing at Arla, figuring she’d know what her brother liked to make.

“Looks like overnight oats. How long has it been in your fridge?”

“I don’t know. Three days? Nine? Seventeen?”

I sniffed it. The smell wasn’t rancid, just fruity and milk-ish, so I grabbed a spoon.

“Roman’s never left it longer than a night.” She eyed the Tupperware suspiciously.

“My cereal supply is gone as of last night so I have no other choice.” I lifted a spoonful of the stuff to my mouth. The texture was gaggy, but the taste wasn’t awful. I swallowed a Roman-sized serving in a matter of seconds, cleaning the container with my finger.

“Go get dressed so we can hit the road.” She gestured to my bedroom and plopped down in a chair.

“I told you, I’m not going.” I tossed the Tupperware in the sink and strode into my room. “Like I said, vodka and pizza will be my companions this mating season. Men suck.” I called over my shoulder.

I went back to bed and collapsed on the blankets. Arla sat down on the edge of the mattress.

“You can follow me around the apartment all you want, I’m not going.”

“You do know that if I leave you here, my brother is going to come in and throw you over his shoulder cave-man style.

Whether you go peacefully with me or fighting with Roman is up to you.”

She studied her nails. I sighed heavily.

“He manipulated me.” I told her. “He’s not getting a pass for that. I told him from the start that I wasn’t interested in games, and he played me like a freaking fiddle.”

“This is a lecture you should be giving him, not me.” Arla said.

“Fine. Send him in.”

Arla grinned. I flipped her off, and she laughed.

“Deal. I’ll let him know you’re not coming to expedite the process. Try not to kick him in the balls; you might need those suckers one day.”

After an exaggerated wink, she headed for the door.

“Wear the green top London talked you into buying. It makes your eyes pop.” She called as she left.

With a curse under my breath, I went to my closet and changed. Not because I had to, but because she was right. And I wanted to make Roman regret what he did.

I tugged the tight, long-sleeved top over my head. It wrapped around my body, butter-soft fabric that fit like a forest-colored second skin. The deep v-neck cut low to my chest and exposed the tattoo I hated along with a strip of my stomach.

I’d show Roman. I wasn’t afraid to let people see my tattoo.

Pulling on the dark skinny jeans that looked best with the top, my mind rehearsed last night’s revelation and my anger rose again.

Loud pounding on the door was followed by the sound of the thing swinging open.

“I know you’re in here, Henley.” Roman was as pissed as I’d been hoping. “What the hell are you doing?” Roman stalked into the room, eyes drinking me in slowly. I didn’t miss the appreciative gaze, not that I showed I’d noticed it.

“It’s simple. I’m not going.”

“You’re so pissed with me that you’ll risk your safety?” He asked like it was ridiculous.

“Not everything is about you.” I snarled.

“No, but this is.” His eyes shifted and his Alpha power hit me sharply. “You’re going to the gathering. Ignore me if you want, but you can’t stay here alone. Mating season is starting and it’s not safe.”

He stormed out of my apartment, door slamming behind him.

No wonder life had been so shitty to me. It was trying to teach me not to be a complete moron and I’d *never freaking learned*.

Arla called me as I stepped into my mostly-empty pantry.

“Hey.” I answered.

“What’s taking so long?” she complained. I heard laughter in the background and the tail-end of a sex joke.

“Just grabbing snacks.” I hung up and grabbed the stale half-bag of marshmallows and the bottle of vodka hiding behind it. Drunk Henley hadn’t been great at hiding the emergency alcohol supply, which was a good thing.

I lifted the bottle and took a long drink, swallowing as much of the shit as I could manage, threw some clothes in a duffel bag, and headed down to the building’s underground garage. Arla stood beside her luxury SUV with Jamie, London, and Lilac. Lilac didn’t look happy to be there but Arla had what looked like a death-grip on her arm.

“Where’s Roman?” She looked behind me, forehead wrinkled.

“Don’t know.” I popped a marshmallow in my mouth and struggled to chew the hard son of a bitch. Everyone’s eyes fell to the bottle of vodka I’d tucked under my elbow. “Asshole ordered me to come and then stomped out.” I lifted the bottle back to my mouth and chugged some more. It burned as it went down, and I relished the familiar feeling.

“I don’t want to go with you guys if you’re drinking...” Lilac tried to make an excuse to duck away. Arla’s grip was like iron.

“Don’t worry, I won’t be sharing.” I waved my bottle. “No cups.”

“What happened?” Jamie looked concerned.

“He’s an Alpha. They’re all selfish douche-holes. End of story.” I lifted the bottle again and threw back another few ounces of vodka.

Some guys I recognized walked past and I turned.

Fantastic excuse to avoid a conversation I never wanted to have.

“Zack.”

He stopped, along with all of his friends. I recognized most of them from the last gathering. He grinned when he saw me.

“Henley.”

“Yep.” I crossed the garage. “Can I catch a ride upstate with you guys?”

Zack’s eyes flicked to the group of girls I’d been standing with.

“I thought you were with the Alpha.”

“I thought so too.” I gave him a lazy smile. “But who needs a date when you have vodka and marshmallows?” I lifted the bottle and bag.

“You’re riding with us.” Arla crossed the garage and slung her arm over my shoulder.

“Lilac doesn’t want to drink.”

She snagged my bottle and turned it upside down. My liquid peace pooled on the floor under our shoes and I glared at the Alpha female.

“Now neither will you.” She maintained a cheerful façade.

“Bitch.” I said, ducking out from under Arla’s arm to grab Zack’s bicep, daring Arla to disagree with my eyes.

“I don’t want to get between you and the Alphas.” Zack apologized, extricating his arm from my grip and taking a few steps away from me.

“Did you really just turn down the chance to spend two hours alone in a car with this beauty?” Kyler strolled up and slung an arm over my shoulder. “Did he?” he looked to me for confirmation. The glare Arla shot at him was so hot I thought he’d catch fire.

“He did.”

“Well, Zack, your loss is my gain.” He declared. “Henley’s riding with me.”

Kyler offered me his arm and I took it.

“Arla, pleasure as always.” He bowed his head toward her. She narrowed her eyes at him but didn’t protest as we left her with Jamie and her other enforcers, walking over to Kyler’s sports car.

Roman stepped out of the elevator, into the parking garage, and the alcohol went to work.

I would hurt him the way he hurt me.

Turning to Kyler, my fingers fisted in his t-shirt and I went up on my tiptoes, pressing my lips to his. His body was rigid and unresponsive, so I grabbed his face and shoved my tongue in his mouth.

The roar that echoed through the garage only encouraged me.

“What the hell are you doing?” Arla snarled, ripping me away from Kyler.

“Hurting him.” I snarled back.

Roman charged at Kyler, already in wolf form. Kyler shifted, his wolf form nearly equal in size to the Alpha’s.

He was the head male enforcer, after all.

Arla ran between the guys, throwing herself in the middle of the fight. Roman barely veered to the side in time to avoid

ripping her face off. Arla shouted at him, “You’re just feeling the effects of the start of mating season.”

Roman shifted back, storming toward her and Kyler, who she stood in front of like a guard.

“I’m feeling the effects of my head enforcer kissing my girl.” He snarled.

“Drop it. We all saw Henley kiss him, not the other way around.”

I strolled across the parking garage as Roman’s gaze snapped to mine. He glowered at me, and I glowered back.

“You might be my Alpha, but I can still kiss whoever the hell I want.”

Roman stalked closer, his nostrils flaring.

“You’re drunk.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I taunted him, crossing to Kyler’s side. The enforcer dodged when I tried to grab his arm like I had earlier.

“Where the hell did she get vodka in the past half an hour?” Roman snapped at the girls.

“She has a secret stash.” Jamie’s voice was heavy with apology.

“If you don’t want her to be a bitch to you, you shouldn’t be a douche to her.” London shot back. “Give me your keys.” She held her hand out to Kyler, who reluctantly handed them over. “Come on, Hennie. Assholes don’t deserve your time.”

I was on my way toward London when Roman covered the distance between us. He threw me over his shoulder like a freaking rag doll, and I screamed obscenities at him. He hauled me across the garage to his truck, pushing the middle console up and tossing me onto the seat.

I clutched my marshmallows to my chest, glaring at him with every ounce of hatred I could muster. London was cursing and yelling threats outside the truck, but Roman ignored them.

“You’re a real bastard.” I snarled.

“And you just kissed one of my best friends to piss me off.” Roman glowered back.

“Hurt people usually hurt other people.” I snapped, shoving a marshmallow in my mouth.

Roman started the truck, ripping it into reverse and backing out before he hit the gas and flew out of there.

“I’m never going to forgive you.” Drunk Henley vowed. “So it sucks to be you.”

I leaned back in the seat, still chewing my marshmallow as I stared out the window. Even liquored up, I still felt the pain from Roman changing his mind.

“Sucks to be me too. I’m the moron who cared about you.”

Still wanting to hurt him, I grabbed the bag of stale marshmallows and yanked one out, shoving it at his face. He looked at it like it was the devil.

“Eat the damn marshmallow, health nut.” I barked.

With a sigh, Roman popped it in his mouth. He grimaced as he struggled to chew it.

“They’re better hard.” I defended my marshmallows.

“That’s what she said.” He maintained a straight face until I started cackling. Then his shoulders shook with laughter.

“The Office is a classic.” I declared, popping another one into my mouth. “But I still hate you. We’re not friends.”

“We could still be *friends*.”

“No. We can’t.” I pulled my knees to my chest and stared out the window.

Even alcohol couldn’t take away the pain of this betrayal.

TWENTY-EIGHT

I texted Jamie on the drive and got her to agree to let me stay at her and Oliver's place so I wouldn't have to brave the Alpha house. Roman dropped me off there without a fight, and I thanked Jamie before burrowing into her spare bed for a nap. Between my lack of sleep the night before and the alcohol, I slept like a rock for a solid few hours.

Jamie was in the kitchen when I went out, planning on shifting and spending some time in the forest. It would be easy to avoid Roman out there considering he was constantly dealing with peace-keeping shit during the day.

"Hey." She was slicing strawberries, and they looked freaking good. "Want some?"

I needed to get out of there, but... strawberries.

My stomach growled. I trudged into the kitchen and grabbed one with the stem still attached, biting into the juicy skin.

"Want to tell me what happened?" She checked.

"Not particularly." I finished the strawberry and tossed the stem in the trash.

"Arla was yelling at Kyler on the phone for half the drive. Didn't say a word the second half." She watched carefully for my reaction, her knife pausing in the air above a strawberry. I schooled my expression, maintaining neutrality.

"I'm free to do what I want."

"Oh, please. You bit Roman and let him bite you; obviously, you care about him. Don't pretend you're not hurting."

I said nothing. Just grabbed another strawberry and took a bite.

"Most girls would be plotting a way to hurt him more at this point." Jamie continued.

Tossing the stem in the trash, I headed for the back door.

“There’s no point.” I told her, grabbing the hem of my top and pulling it over my head as my bare feet met snow. “He hurt me, I hurt him, and now we’ll move on. Anything further would insinuate that there’s hope we’ll get back together. I’m mature enough to know better.”

“Having hope isn’t immature, Hennie.”

“Not for you.” I tossed my clothes in a pile, shifting and taking off into the forest. As expected, the place was completely free of Roman’s scent. My wolf side despised that, but I kept a tight hold on enough of my humanity not to go looking for him.

I was out wandering the forest so long the sun began to set. Settling into a comfortable place in a snow-free rocky nook, I shut my eyes and listened to nature around me. There were some deer somewhere to my right and two bunnies off to my left. If I’d had an appetite, I would’ve hunted one of them.

Two familiar scents caught my nose and my head lifted, zoning in on the area they were silently approaching from. Arla and Jamie came running into my area, similarly-shaped dark brown wolves. I growled at them and both females lowered their heads in signs of submission; they accepted that this was a small piece of territory I’d claimed for the time being.

The girls came up to me, unafraid even after I’d growled. They knew I wouldn’t attack them. The only time I’d ever been a threat to someone was when they were trying to hurt me.

Jamie cuddled up against my left side and Arla got comfortable on my right. The women were offering me their support, knowing I was hurt even if I’d decided to hide from the emotions. Frustration poured off Arla and I growled at her. She growled back.

We all scooted closer together.

Wild wolf packs slept close for warmth and comfort. Werewolf packs tended to be too human to sleep like that, but

we'd get more out of the physical contact than wild wolves did. It meant more to us.

Surprisingly enough, I didn't have a single nightmare.

When the sun rose, I woke up to what had to be the most delicious smell on the planet.

Roman.

Did the man have to smell so freaking good?

His big black wolf came close enough to see us but didn't approach. Posture tense, he watched us for a few minutes. I knew he was focused on me, but I poked Arla in the shoulder with my nose. She made a noise of protest before opening her eyes. When she saw her brother, she licked my face, dodged my swinging paw, and trotted over to him. The wolves greeted with a quick nuzzle before heading off into the forest together.

I tried unsuccessfully to fall back asleep. The bite on my shoulder felt wrong now that I knew Roman had lied to me, and I wished there was a way to remove it. That wasn't just another mark that made up my tragic backstory; it was a mark I'd chosen, a reminder that I'd been rejected.

Arla had been right. We did things in the wrong order, and I freaking regretted it.

I shook my head of the thought and nudged Jamie until she woke up. We ran back to her house together.

Shifting back, I tugged my dirty clothes on.

"How are you doing?" Jamie checked. Her cheek was streaked with dried mud, hair crusted with the stuff.

"Still pissed. Dying for vodka."

We walked into the house.

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know, egg his car and walk to the nearest bar?" My shoulders lifted.

She shook her head as I picked my phone up off the counter and pressed the button to turn it on. It opened to a picture of

Roman laughing with Lilac, standing closer than friends would. The picture had come from a number I didn't know and there wasn't a comment beneath it.

Anger and frustration and fiery hatred burned through my veins.

Serves me right for trusting an Alpha.

Hands shaking with fury, I navigated back to the rest of my texts. There were a couple more from numbers I didn't recognize, but I opened the one from Dr. Grant.

GRANT: I hear you're back on the market. If the rumors are true, can I take you to dinner? If not, don't tell the Alpha about this text.

Rather than texting back, I pressed the button to call him. Grant answered on the second ring.

"Henley Clark." He purred. It reminded me of Ledger and I shivered.

"Doctor Grant." I hoped my voice didn't sound as flat to him as it did to me. "I just got your text. How about lunch?"

"Perfect."

I glanced over at Jamie and the shock she wore like a glitzy necklace.

"It'll have to be a double-date unless you're cool with eating in the car. I can't be out and about on my own." Honestly, the question was a bit of a test. Any guy I'd ever really consider as a potential mate would rather eat alone with me in a car than in a fancy restaurant with another couple.

"Let's double. I've got a friend who can bring his mate along too."

There went that date.

"Sweet. Pick me up at noon." I hung up and flung my phone on the counter.

"You're trying to make him jealous again?"

I groaned and collapsed in a chair with my face in my hands and tangled, dirt-crusted hair in my face.

“I don’t know, Jame. I feel like the biggest idiot. Roman played me and I actually started caring about him. I’ve been through enough shit that I should know an asshole when I see them but I just don’t. And now I feel like beating Roman to a pulp and pinning him to the ground until he apologizes for being a massive douchewad but then I’d have to be near his mouth-watering scent and I just don’t freaking know.”

“I’m having a hard time making sense of all that,” she gestured toward me. “But I think the gist of it is that you’re hurt and confused and you kind of miss Roman.”

When I didn’t deny it, she continued.

“So go on the date. When you’re with another guy, you’ll either realize that you want to make things work with Roman or there are better fish in the sea.”

Oliver chose that moment to reach the bottom of the stairs. Both of us looked at him.

“Tell him and I’ll rip your throat out.” I narrowed my eyes at him.

He lifted his hands in surrender.

“Didn’t hear a word.”

Jamie and I split apart to shower and met in her room to get ready. I blew my hair dry and swiped on a little makeup before stepping into her closet. How she could ever wear so many clothes was beyond me, although I had seen the way she shopped. Maybe it was more about the buying than the wearing.

I tried on a dozen outfits before she deemed one slutty without being a hussy, which was apparently what we were going for. The top she’d put on me was a simple tight long-sleeve with a high neckline. The tube skirt we’d paired it with was modest on Jamie’s 5’3” form, but it was a different story on my 5’8”.

“Perfect.” Jamie declared. My ass was barely strapped into the thing but I didn’t disagree.

Hearing commotion outside, I stepped up to the window along the wall that looked out over her front yard.

“Holy shit.”

“You’re ready.” Jamie grabbed my arm.

“Look.” I gestured to the window.

We both gawked at the mass of unmated men outside.

The word that I was single must’ve spread to more than just Grant.

Jamie telling me that the pack’s men were interested in me because of my perceived power struck me hard.

“What the hell are we going to do?” I asked. “I’m going to get eaten by an unmated monster today.”

“They won’t eat you.” She chided me. “We’ll go say hi and tell them to take a hike. It’ll be fine.”

“Unmated males aren’t known to retain their sanity around me.” I muttered, walking down the stairs with her.

“We’ll bring Oliver.” She brushed it off.

We grabbed him from his home office and walked out onto the lawn together. It occurred to me as my eyes swept the crowd that many of these men might have gone so far as to challenge Roman to a fight just so they could meet me.

“Are the guys who challenged Roman here?” I asked Jamie. She nodded.

Anyone who cared enough to get in a fight with their Alpha just to talk to me deserved a chance to do it. Alphas were scary.

Including Roman.

“I want to meet them.” I said.

“Line up.” Jamie’s voice rose above the noise of the crowd. Everyone went silent, and I respected her ability to control them. “Those who lasted the longest in their fight

against the Alpha at the front, those who never fought him at the back.”

“Roman is going to kill me.” Oliver muttered.

“I’ll cry at your funeral.” Jamie patted him on the chest. I coughed back a laugh as he grinned.

There was hardly any talking as the line formed.

Oliver’s arm wrapped around Jamie’s lower waist. She stilled at the contact.

His eyes bore into the line of men as his nose met her neck, breathing in and out on the sensitive flesh there. Jamie’s eyes were fluttering a bit, and I bit back a grimace when I caught the scent of her desire. A couple groans and growls came from somewhere in the line.

I hadn’t expected Oliver to go and mark his territory, but I’d become something of a fangirl for their relationship so it was awesome.

“Keep things civil so we don’t have to involve the Alpha.” Oliver warned the unmated men, his arm staying on Jamie’s waist.

“Alright, guys.” Jamie’s voice lifted to the crowd. “This is the Henley Clark round of speed dating.”

I coughed at her description.

What the hell? Speed dating?

“You’ll get one minute to catch Hennie’s attention and if you do, she’ll give you her phone number. You walk away without another word if you don’t. Leave if you don’t like the rules. Oh, and if anyone touches Henley without her permission or does anything else she doesn’t like, the next three guys in line will escort him from my land with a good punch to the face. Any questions?”

I’d just planned on saying hi to all of them so yeah, I had questions.

She scanned the crowd. As an enforcer Jamie could channel Alpha power if she needed to, but I’d never been around when

she did it.

The first guy stepped up in front of me. He was almost as big as Roman, though his face was much prettier. His dark hair was artfully-sculpted in a swoop above his head. Pretty guys had never been my thing.

I tried not to compare him to the Alpha, I really did, but that was a fail.

“I’m Arthur Drake.” He held his hand out to me with a charming smile. I didn’t shake it.

“I don’t touch people I don’t know.” I folded my arms. Arthur’s eyes gleamed.

“That’s a good quality to have in a female.”

I bit back a snort.

Asshole.

“I’m a medical attorney working with a hospital in Manhattan, I’m sure you’ve heard of it. I make about five hundred thousand a year and have invested money wisely enough to make three times that in investments.”

I coughed back a laugh.

Was he seriously trying to win me over by telling me how much money he made?

“My mansion here is worth three million on its own, and my properties in the Bahamas are worth almost that much as well. I’m a self-made millionaire, and—“

The alarm on Jamie’s phone went off. She whispered in Oliver’s ear, and he jogged into the house, coming back with a sharpie so I could write my number on any guy I was interested in.

Arthur held out his arm with a knowing smile.

“Thanks for coming.” I folded my arms with a firm hold on the sharpie, making my lack of interest clear.

Shock and then fury crossed his face. The next guy stepped around him. He was built similarly to the guy before. A glance

at the line showed most of the buffest guys at the front, only a few normal-sized ones mixed in; those were the dudes with the training to last the longest against Roman, I assumed.

Not that I was thinking about Roman.

“Terrence Splan.” He didn’t offer his hand so that was a nice change. “I’ve got twelve million in the bank and I manage a large real estate company. What do you do for fun?” he asked.

A question for me? That was new.

“Mostly Netflix. I read, sometimes.”

His lips twisted upward.

“My sister owns a paint-your-own-pottery studio. It’s geared toward little kids but can be fun. Would you want to go with me sometime?”

My eyes swept up and down Terrence’s face and top half. He had a good shape, and I liked that his hair was long but not over-styled. Plus he wasn’t prettier than me, unlike some of the guys. I was definitely petty enough to care about that.

Plus I hadn’t done many exciting things in my life, and I wanted to do more.

“That sounds fun.” On a whim, I grabbed my sharpie and uncapped it. He held out his hand and I scribbled my number small enough that no random people would read it and text me.

He strolled away, oozing confidence.

Roman had enough confidence to fill the entire skyscraper.

...But I still wasn’t thinking about him.

Why was I a sucker for cocky men?

The next guy walked up and listed his job, salary, and the number of people in his family. He invited me to a romantic candlelight dinner, and I turned him down. I’d always thought romance and candles were for people who were already together, not people who didn’t know each other.

We cycled through three dozen more men. A couple of them got my number because they offered me a date idea that sounded like fun and wasn't something I'd ever done before, and the others got nothing. Every one of them told me what their job was and how much money they made as well as how much they had in the bank. I didn't give a shit about how much money they had but didn't tell them that.

Number thirty-something was somewhere around the middle of the line. He looked familiar, and it struck me that he was a famous actor.

How did I not know we had a famous actor in our pack?

"Hello." He swept my hand up and lifted it to his lips. I yanked it away from him, glaring hotly. He had to have heard the warning not to touch me. The guys in line next growled at him, and tension skyrocketed from a solid twenty to a hundred.

"Don't touch me." I warned.

"You said you don't want to touch people you don't know, but everyone knows me." He shot me what was likely a billion-dollar smile. "I've been waiting to meet you since the moment I caught your scent."

"Good for you."

"Obviously you know I'm Sterling Porter, movie-star and singer. The sum of my bank accounts, properties, and investments is in the multiple billions. I just signed a twenty-three million dollar movie deal, so when you mate with me we'll be moving to Hawaii for the next few months."

The level of his pride was disgusting.

"Give me your phone number and I'll take you on a tour of the movie set for *Treerise*."

Honestly, I was excited for that movie. It was the third in a trilogy I'd read before the books became movies, and I was dying to see the final installment. A tour would be freakin cool. But no way in hell would I let this guy think I was in any way interested in him.

The alarm went off.

“I’ll pass. Thanks for coming.” I made no move to give him my number. He stilled.

“Excuse me?”

“I think you heard me.”

Sterling leaned forward, face only a few inches from mine.

“I’ve just offered to mate with you. You’re going to want to accept.”

My eyes narrowed.

“Am I?”

“Of course. You’re special and so am I; just think of the children we’d make together. It’d be a sin to keep something so amazing from the world.”

I laughed in disbelief.

What a douchebag.

He growled and stood, towering over me and trying to scare me. I’d been up against much scarier.

Standing as well, I glowered at him.

“I’ll choose my own mate. Leave.”

His eyes landed on the mark of Roman’s bite on my neck, and I saw in his eyes the moment his mind shifted. He lunged toward me, fangs at the ready, and I dove out of the way. My hip slammed to the grass and I rolled to the side when a big gray wolf launched my way.

Then all hell broke loose.

Turns out unmated males were ticking time bombs.

TWENTY-NINE

Wolves were everywhere. Jamie and I had climbed up on the table for a tiny bit of safety, and she shouted into her phone, kicking out at the faces of anyone who came too close. Oliver fought three wolves in his own beastly form, snapping and forcing Alpha power at them as he tried to regain control. Because he wasn't the actual Alpha, the amount of power he could access was far too limited to regain control of the pack.

Males circled the table, four wolves who attacked anyone who came near. They must've been friends with each other, but I didn't know them and they didn't seem much safer than the ones they were attacking.

A battle broke out between two of the circle and two on the outside, blood and teeth and fur flying as the fight grew to include more and more wolves.

We really should've considered this outcome.

Damned speed-dating.

"I'll protect you, you need to make a run for the house." Jamie looked determined. I was as uncertain as she was sure.

"Told you I was going to get eaten by a wolf today." I yelled after her as she launched off the table, shifting in the air. Clothes tore around her as her body grew, and I envied her fighting ability. My skills were too limited to be of much use.

The moment she was gone, another wolf pounced. I screamed as a furry, dark shoulder rammed me off the table and sent me crashing into the ground. The force of the impact knocked the air out of me, and my chest heaved.

My mind shifted as my attacker's teeth went for my throat and I rolled to the side, but I was too slow. He bit down on Roman's mark and an unnatural, fiery pain tore through the area. A sound between an agonized howl and a human scream met my ears and I realized it had come from me. Fur shifted back to skin as my vision spotted so badly I couldn't even make out the wolf on top of me.

A raging, possessive snarl was followed by a punch of Alpha power, and then a black wolf slammed into the one who'd hurt me. Both went flying, and I struggled to sit up as Roman ripped into the man's throat for daring to hurt me.

When my attacker's heart stopped beating, the massive black wolf turned the crowd. He lifted his head and loosed a howl flooded with so much Alpha power it would've sent me to my knees if I wasn't already on the ground.

My hand pressed into the bleeding wound on my neck. When I pulled it away and saw the amount of blood I'd lost, dizziness had me falling to my back once again.

Most of the males fell to their bellies at the power in Roman's howl. The few that resisted did so because they were still fighting, blood and fur on their muzzles. Roman left them long enough to tower over me, animal-eyes taking in my injury. His tongue lapped at the wound on my neck a few times to close the skin before he stalked to the males who hadn't submitted.

He gave one last snarl, a final warning, before joining the fight. Roman sent one of the men flying with a solid hit from his shoulder and snapped at a second's throat. The man dodged, and Roman's claws raked up his belly. Another guy lunged for Roman and the Alpha met the move with another slash of his claws, this time along the wolf's side.

Roman lifted his head once more and howled again, hitting the men with enough alpha power to knock them into submission. He could've done that from the beginning, but even I understood the need to make a statement in this situation. The power had me seeing stars until Roman's arms were pulling me up off the ground. Like the flick of a switch, his touch negated the impact of his Alpha power and I was blinking up at him clearly.

"I can walk." I said.

His arms tightened around my body before he set me on my feet, movements wooden. Whatever discussion was going to follow this, it wasn't going to happen in front of dozens of unmated males who'd been showing their interest in me.

“Who started this?” He demanded, looking between me and Jamie, who had appeared at my side. Since Roman had let go of me his power had my body trembling. I folded my arms over my chest in an attempt to hide it.

“Sterling started the fight.” Jamie folded her arms. “We started the speed-dating.”

“The what?” He shot her an incredulous look.

I glanced over at the mangled body of the actor who’d lost control.

Because of me.

Panic tangled within me and my breathing began to quicken as Jamie and Roman exchanged words rapidly, power practically boiling around me. My mind began to shift, and I barely kept a hold on my own body.

“Go inside, Hennie.” Jamie’s hand caught my elbow softly, giving it a quick squeeze.

Arla pulled up in her little SUV, slamming the door behind her and stalking up to us.

“What the hell happened here?”

Everything became too much when her power added to the rest. My mind shifted and my body followed, tearing through clothes as I stretched and expanded and then shot into the forest.

Run.

Escape.

Freedom.

The words pounded into my skull with every thud of my paw against the dirt. Some part of me registered that at least a couple of the males would lose to their animal instincts and chase me when I ran, but it didn’t matter.

Go.

I ran harder as the feelings intensified. A wolf wouldn’t rest while she was in danger, and every fiber of my being told me I

most definitely was.

A flying black body came out of nowhere and knocked into me, rolling on top of me and then beneath me before shifting into the man who wore my bite mark on his neck. His touch once again canceled the effects the Alpha power had on me and this time, it calmed me in an instant. Though his hands held my furry body to his skin, his touch was gentle.

“I won’t let anything hurt you, Hen.” Roman’s gaze held a determination I’d seen from him before—one that told me he wasn’t going to walk away easily. I shifted and rolled off of him, furious with the Alpha again. His power had vanished, and I knew he was keeping it under wraps for me.

“You hurt me, asshole.” I snapped, stalking away. I’d have shifted back to wolf form if I didn’t think it’d lead me to run further and harder. As much as I wanted to run from the Alpha, there wasn’t another place on the planet that I’d be as safe as I was in the New York Pack.

Roman caught my left hand and caught up to me. We were both in our birthday suits and I was making a point not to look at his naked body too much. I’d have a hard enough time moving on anyway.

“I—“ He stopped himself and me, my body turning toward his with his soft tug. Roman lifted my hand, turning it so he could see my scarred and tatted wrist. “When did you get this?” His eyes were dark.

I tugged my hand from his grip.

“You don’t get to ask personal questions, Roman. You lost that right when you lied to me for months. Your bite is gone now; there’s nothing connecting us.”

“It felt like someone was cutting my fucking heart out when he bit you.” His reply was sharp and angry. “You have no idea the amount of sheer willpower it’s taking me not to sink my teeth back into you so my scent replaces Sterling’s.” He bared the wolf fangs in his human mouth.

“Well, I’m sorry for causing you pain.” I snapped. “That makes one of us.” I spun on my heels and stalked back along

the scent trail I'd left.

“What did you say?” Roman's hands were on my biceps in an instant, his eyes black pools as he stepped closer to me. To avoid clashing naked bits, I stepped backward. He pushed and I pulled until my back hit a tree and Roman was glowering down at me. With his hands on my bare skin, I couldn't feel his Alpha power and wasn't afraid. If anything, his fury only fed mine.

“You used and manipulated me without a single regard as to how it would hurt me. You don't seem to regret it, either.”

“I didn't *use* you, Hen, and I sure as hell wasn't manipulating you.”

“Save it for the next girl.” I shoved the arm that pinned my left side to the tree and shifted. Roman would chase me when I ran back to Jamie's, but at least I'd have a few minutes away from the warring emotions inside me.

He was so close on my heels. There was no doubt in my mind whether he could catch me or not; his legs were probably twice as long as mine. Instead of tackling me and forcing me to talk, he herded me toward his house. I was outside his porch before I realized where he was leading me.

I shifted into human form and grabbed a shirt I could smell was Roman's off the ground on the porch, yanking it over my head as a string of curses aimed at the Alpha bled from my lips.

“Where are you going?” he followed my blazing trail into his house.

“To get Arla to drive me to Grant's place. He's taking me to lunch.” I shot back.

Roman's low growl gave me goosebumps.

“Like hell he is.”

“You lost any say you had in what I do.” I stepped up to the base of the staircase and lifted my head to holler up the stairs. “Arla! I need a ride!”

“She’s not here.” Rough hands latched onto my waist and spun me, pulling my chest to Roman’s. My curves pressed to all of his hard places and made me feel all fluttery.

I would’ve remembered that if he wasn’t such a distraction.

“Then I’m taking her car.” My voice sounded far breathier than I’d intended.

Roman’s hands kneaded into my waist and lower back, tugging me closer.

“Sterling’s scent on your skin is driving me insane.” His nose touched the somewhat-healed skin on my neck and his fierce growl rattled both our chests. “You should smell like me.”

“You lied to me.” The more of me his fingers touched, the harder it was getting to remember that.

“I protected you.”

“You hurt me.”

I went to pull away but Roman’s lips met mine and the world freaking disappeared.

Lips and skin and heat were the only things that existed. My legs wrapped around Roman’s waist and he gripped my backside. We were moving, but I didn’t realize where to until my back was pressed up against the cold tile of the shower. Our lips didn’t stop, bodies moving together as our mouths warred.

Roman held me up with one hand, reaching to turn the shower on. Cold water spouted from all three of the shower heads and I pulled away, gasping and arching my back. A chuckle rumbled his chest and I smacked him upside the head.

“I didn’t agree to shower with you.”

“You smelled terrible.”

I snorted.

“Debatable.”

“And you weren’t exactly kicking and screaming.”

He had a point there.

“What kind of guy drags a girl into a shower by her mouth?” I snapped. The water was warming, so I finally unwrapped my legs from Roman’s waist. He helped my feet to the floor, making sure I had my balance before letting go.

“The stupid kind.” Roman pulled a strand of wet, tangled hair off my cheek and rubbed it between his fingers. Blood and dirt ran down his arm with the water. “I’m sorry, Hen.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad you ended things before it went too far.” I took my hair from his fingers and rinsed the rest of it in the water.

This would’ve totally been one of those cliché romance-book ‘I wash you, you wash me’ moments if things were different.

“What?”

“We make each other unstable and we both need stability. Even if that wasn’t true, you need to mate with someone who can be Alpha Female. I can’t. Scratch that—I won’t.” I’d shocked Roman to silence. “You and Lilac look good together. Maybe you should finally give her a chance.”

I stepped out of the water stream and squeezed my hair. Dark water fell to the shower tile and I grimaced. I’d need shampoo to get the crap out, but I wasn’t about to use Roman’s shampoo and go on a date smelling like him.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Roman folded those giant arms of his over his bare chest. The man somehow managed to look even better dirty and wet than he did dry. Wearing only soaked sweats was a surprisingly good look for him.

“Someone sent me a picture of you and her together.”

“I haven’t been in a room with Lilac for weeks. Whatever picture you got, it’s not recent.” He stepped closer and I backed into the wall of the shower. “Nothing about you makes me unstable. You’ve calmed my wolf more times than you should’ve had to, and I help you sleep when your memories

make it difficult. You make me feel whole, and you would've ended things much sooner if I didn't do the same to you."

"It doesn't matter. You lied to me and manipulated me." I shot back, a bitter laugh slipping from me. "My life hasn't been full of good things, Roman. When I choose a mate, you can be damn sure he'll be one of them. I met fifty guys today who actually want to be with me, so no, I'm not joking. I have a date to get to, and you're going to keep your beast in check and let me go on it because you're the asshole who broke my trust."

Roman captured my hand before I stepped out of the shower and tugged my body toward his. I stumbled into his chest, catching myself on his arms.

"You're mine." His hands sandwiched my face. "And I'm yours."

"If you ask me not to go I'm going to punch you."

I could take a couple more wonky knuckles to make that statement.

Roman's eyes darkened as he studied my expression.

"Go on the date. Go on as many dates as you want. No one else will make you feel what I do."

His lips met mine again. This kiss was polar opposite from the first. Soft and explorative, my body relaxed against Roman's as his tongue danced with mine.

If I was being honest, I'd already reached the conclusion he expected I would just from speed-dating earlier. Not a single one of those guys had piqued my interest romantically. Some of them were attractive, others insanely gorgeous, but the connection I felt to Roman was something entirely different. Something I wanted.

But something I didn't trust anymore. And trust mattered more than anything.

I pulled away and left Roman standing in the shower alone, walking out of the house. Since I didn't know the way, I shifted and followed scents back to Jamie's place.

Grant was waiting in the living room, chatting with Jamie and a couple that smelled mated. I called out that I'd be ready in a minute and made my way up the stairs in Roman's shirt—I'd carried it in my mouth as I ran for this exact reason. Walking nude through someone else's home wasn't exactly cool.

I felt bad leaving them waiting while I got ready. I'd never been on a date before, but common sense said that was rude. The red in my hair hid whatever was left of the blood and dirt decently well, so I piled it all in a bun on top of my head, threw on some clean clothes, brushed my teeth, and hurried downstairs. I felt pretty gross, but at least I'd made it back for the date.

"Sorry you had to wait." I grabbed my coat.

"Not a problem." Grant smiled and helped me into the coat. The back of my neck prickled unpleasantly as his hands came near my skin. My attraction was nonexistent; his touch felt wrong. "You smell like Roman." He commented.

"Really? How weird." I lied.

Grant seemed to like the answer and changed the subject. I sniffed myself discreetly as we got in the car.

Shit.

I did smell like him.

The date felt incredibly long. By the time I got back home only two hours had passed but I felt a year older. Grant and his friends liked to talk about investments and doctor stuff and inside jokes.

So boring.

I ignored the nagging part of my brain that said a date with Roman wouldn't be anything like that.

After a long shower and a quick sandwich, I headed to the Alphas' place with Jamie and Oliver. The pack would shift together in their backyard, and everyone gathered and mingled for a while before. Shifting as a pack at the cusp of mating season was a tradition every pack I'd been in had followed.

Werewolf mating season stretched from the end of December to the end of March, and it was the only time female werewolves went into heat and could get pregnant.

Because I didn't know many people, when I got to the backyard I just sort of lingered on the edge of the crowd. Gazing into the forest, it occurred to me that I wouldn't mind looking into these woods for the rest of my life. New York was my favorite place I'd ever lived because of the people, but it was beautiful too.

"How many of my males have your phone number on their hands?" Roman growled from behind me. I'd caught his scent as he approached so he didn't scare me.

"However many were attractive enough and came up with a date idea that sounded fun." I didn't turn around.

Roman stepped in front of me, eyes narrowed and wolfy.

"What ideas?"

"None of your business." I met his gaze. His fists clenched and he forced his eyes to shift back before striding to the front of the pack where Arla likely was. They'd start the run off with a few words, as they had last time.

At the stroke of midnight, mating season would officially begin and all werewolves older than fifteen would start to feel lonelier and hornier than usual. Mating season hadn't ever affected me much, but I'd definitely seen a lot of change in the people around me. The women got meaner as they went into heat, the guys more wild, violent, and possessive as their hormones raged and they were affected by the scent of the women.

Arla was talking when four guys stepped up around me. I recognized them as the wolves who'd formed a circle around me when I stood on the table. They'd kept other males away from me for a while, so they weren't the absolute worst.

"We realized what's different about your scent." One of them said.

"What is it?" I made eye contact, though I was itching to get away from them.

“You smell like you’re constantly in heat.” He maintained eye contact.

Great. Who didn’t want to smell like mating season at all times?

“Yay.” My sarcasm didn’t go unnoticed and a few of the guys chuckled.

“We’d like to request to spend the night near you so we’re not as affected by the scent of the other women in heat when they start.” Another of the guys said. “We’ll also protect you from each other so you won’t be in any danger.”

My eyes went to Roman and I found his already on me. Arla was still giving a speech, but I wasn’t listening to her. He probably wasn’t listening either, he was so focused on me.

“Request denied.”

“Can we ask why?”

I didn’t see a point in lying to them. Maybe if they could understand the truth everyone would stop pissing Roman off and the fighting would decrease.

“None of you want to be near me when the Alpha is hit by mating season hormones.”

The crowd around us cheered and then started stripping and shifting. I noticed Roman’s focus on me as he tugged his shirt over his head. Maintaining eye contact, I pulled my own shirt off.

Roman stepped out of his pants without breaking the gaze. I did the same.

Many of the pack members had already shifted and taken off into the woods but I was still surrounded by the guys who had wanted to stay with me.

When I reached around my back to undo my bra, Roman shifted without stripping the rest of the way and stalked toward me. His low growl sent the other males running.

“Possessive bastard.” I muttered.

He growled an agreement.

“You’re going to be a freaking menace the next few months.” I stripped out of my underwear quickly and shifted forms.

Roman gave me another growl and rubbed his side up against mine. I snorted and pushed him away with my nose. In wolf form, his lying didn’t seem to matter. I just wanted to be with him.

He nudged me into the woods. I knew without words what he wanted, and my tail began to wag as I tensed in preparation. Shooting into the woods like a bullet, I streamlined my body and ran from Roman.

He liked to chase me almost as much as I loved to be chased.

The chasing turned into play fighting and the play fighting turned into cuddling. In our wolf forms, there was no drama or confusion or bad memories.

We were just... us.

In our purest and most raw forms. It was beautiful.

THIRTY

“Put the croissants on that table.” Arla instructed the caterers. “Eggs over there.” We’d headed back early to set up tables. Apparently, they rotated between cooking and having their pack get-togethers catered. I would’ve stayed in the forest and let them set everything up, but Roman made it clear he wasn’t leaving without me so I tagged along.

The pack members began wandering in while Arla and I were grabbing food. Though Roman was a few feet away talking with an older pack member, I noticed he had positioned himself where he could keep an eye on me.

Kyler strolled up to me and Arla, and I saw my Alpha tense even from where he was.

Kyler took a deep sniff of the air.

“You smell the same, Henley.” He said.

“Way to make a girl feel good, Martin.” Arla shot back. “Where’s your sister, anyway? She hasn’t been answering my texts.”

“Not feeling well. Grant gave her a prescription for some sleeping meds so she probably won’t answer for a while.” His shoulders lifted and he turned back to me. “Maybe you won’t make as many unmated guys lose their minds the next few months since the other chicks smell like you now.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed.” I said.

I seriously would.

Arla and I sat down on one of the picnic tables and dug into our food. My mouth was full of chocolate croissant when a man with sun-kissed skin and Southern-style working-class muscles sat down in front of me. He reminded me a lot of the kind of men I’d grown up around and was attractive to me because of that familiarity.

“My name is Chris Pooler. I run a multi-billion-dollar chain of dairy farms and own a six-hundred-thousand acre ranch

thirty minutes from here, where I live. I'd like to be your mate."

I stopped chewing. Arla coughed hard.

"I can provide a comfortable life for you away from the busy hassle of the pack's skyscraper," He continued. "I heard you've had a hard life thanks to experiences with previous Alphas and pack members, and if you're my mate, you won't have to worry about any of that. We'll spend our time traveling between my farms and the ranch, taking care of animals, and enjoying nature's beauty together."

Grabbing my cup of water, I took a drink to wash down the mouthful of food that felt lodged in my throat by his words. Arla was coughing again, and if I was any stupider I wouldn't have known she was concealing laughter.

"A life of farming is an honest way to live." I told Chris. He nodded his agreement. "But it's not the way I want to spend the rest of my life. Thank you for the offer."

Chris walked away with his chin high and his hands in his pockets. My eyes found Roman. He held a crumpled red plastic cup in his hand, water still dripping from the broken bits, and wore a gaze that was somewhere between pissed and murderous. His gaze followed Chris like he was tracking his prey.

When Chris was out of sight and earshot, Arla quit holding back her laughter and let out a loud cackle.

"Is that how speed dating went? The guys just rattled off bank numbers and the kind of life they could give you?"

"The life thing was new, but yes to the bank account. I had no idea there was so much money in the pack." I looked around at the people piling food on plates. "Most of them just asked me on a date after telling me how much money they have."

"And that worked?" Arla asked, incredulously.

I shrugged.

“I’d never been on a date until Grant took me to lunch yesterday. So yeah, for the guys that had ideas for dates that sounded fun, it worked.”

Another guy sat in front of me.

“Hello, Henley.” He grinned and held out his hand. He was cute without being pretty, but I wasn’t about to touch him.

“Not a fan of touching strangers.” My eyes flicked pointedly to his outstretched hand.

“Understandable.” The guy nodded, his eyes still bright as he moved his hand away. “Has anyone ever told you that your hair is pink?”

“Never.” I said dryly, and his grin grew.

“Have you been surfing? I used to be a professional, and I make a trip out to the coast every week or two. I’d like to take you with me and teach you next time I go.”

“Depends.” My eyes swept over his body position. Relaxed. I could dig it. “Can Arla come?” I tilted my head toward the Alpha female, who lifted her eyebrows and glanced at something behind me.

Her brother, probably.

“Sure. The more the merrier.”

I handed him my phone, and he put his number into it before leaving us to our food. It occurred to me I’d never gotten his name after he was gone.

“Roman’s taken you on dates before. You guys got pancakes that one time and you cook for each other and share a bed and shit.” Arla said. I noticed ears perk up around us, gossipers greedily taking in every tidbit about my relationship with the Alpha.

“That was different. It was never like we were dating. He just kind of told me he was going to convince me to mate with him and refused to leave. Plus, that’s over now.” I changed the subject. “Why haven’t I ever seen anyone hit on you?” I bit into that heavenly chocolate croissant again.

“Roman scared them all away.” Arla over-focused on the quiche she was taking a bite of.

“Liar.”

If he could do that, I wouldn't have twenty unopened texts about dates to put on the calendar.

“What are we lying about?” Jamie sat beside Arla.

“She’s lying about why guys aren’t hitting on her.” I gestured to the Alpha Female.

Jamie smiled. Arla groaned.

“The last time someone tried to make a move on Arla, she kneed him in the balls so hard she popped one of them.”

My mouth fell open.

“You didn’t.”

“I scare easily.” She protested.

“None of the guys in the pack have come within four feet of her knees since then.” Jamie said. “Unless you count Kyler.”

“Why wouldn’t you count Kyler?” I took another bite, feigning casualness. “He’s hot and funny.”

A growl came from off to my left, where I knew Roman stood. And listened apparently. Though I didn’t turn around, the familiar noise made the hairs on the back of my neck raise.

“Reasons.” Arla shot Jamie a warning look and Jamie rolled her eyes.

I can't believe I thought she was a statue.

“You’re going to stay to help clean after everyone eats, right?” Arla quickly changed the subject. I could feel Roman’s eyes still on me without turning around. If I left, there was a good chance he’d follow.

“Don’t think I have much of a choice.”

Arla and Jamie looked at Roman and then back to me.

“I appreciate the help.” Arla smirked.

“Don’t push it. If I leave, your cleanup crew will be out one set of very large arms.”

Arla and Jamie both grinned.

“So you made up?”

I snorted.

“If you call Roman telling me I’m his and throwing me into the shower for smelling like another guy making up, then yes. If not, that’d be a ‘hell no’.”

“There was kissing involved too.” Roman’s low timbre sent goosebumps up my spine as he sat smoothly on the bench beside me, his hand finding my lower back and curving around to rest on my waist. I shoved his arm away and he withdrew it but didn’t scoot away from me.

Both girls were grinning like idiots.

“You still lied to me and I’m still seeing other people. I’ll stay where you can see me for a day or two so you don’t kill anyone out of jealousy while you adjust to mating season, but I consider myself single right now.”

I slipped out of the picnic table and carried my half-eaten plate to the trash. Tossing food felt like a waste, but I wasn’t hungry anymore.

“If it isn’t my best bartender.” Kyler waved me over to his picnic table, just a few feet from the trash bin. A bit reluctantly, I made my way over.

Couldn’t people just let me stew a bit?

“Hey.” I said.

He sat with a group of other unmated guys and I wasn’t keen on being around them. Especially with the monster of a man who I knew was watching me like a freaking mountain lion ready to pounce on anyone who so much as looked at me weird. Kyler stood and stepped away from the table, meeting me a few feet from the other guys.

“Can we talk in private?” he asked.

I glanced over at Roman and found laser-eyes glaring at my boss.

“Better not.” I looked back to Kyler. “I’d rather you stay alive.”

Kyler focused on Roman for a long few seconds.

“Does he hurt you, Henley?” The words surprised me. I thought everyone knew Roman was about as gentlemanly as a man who was half animal could be.

A light breeze caught my hair and pulled it over my eyes. That was one topic I wouldn’t let the pack even consider—and they were obviously listening in on our conversation. Roman may have lied to me, but he wasn’t like Ledger.

Or his father.

“Never.”

Kyler nodded and opened his mouth to say something else. I interrupted.

“Don’t worry about me.” Giving him a quick smile, I turned to the Alpha who was stalking toward my boss with murder in his eyes.

I met Roman in the middle and grabbed his arm, towing him off to the side of the pack breakfast. We were far enough to avoid curious ears before Roman demanded,

“Is he one of your dates?”

The man wore wolf hair on his arms like a long-sleeved shirt. Since he was bare-chested in the freezing cold, he probably needed it.

“No.”

Roman visibly relaxed, and I released his arm as his fur sank back into his skin.

And then he grabbed my face and kissed me, hard. The move surprised me so much it took a minute for me to pull away.

“You’re giving me whiplash.” I pushed him off of me.

“To clarify, when I took you out for pancakes and cooked for you and came by to spend time with you, those were dates. We were dating.”

“Take a hike, Ellis.” I stomped off toward Jamie’s place. I needed a shower, and all my stuff was there. Roman matched my stride, walking leisurely at my side.

“Will you come with me?” he asked. I shot him a questioning look. “On my hike.”

“You’re taking a hike to get away from me, so no.”

“But if I planned a hike, would you come?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Whether or not it’s a date.” I thought about it a second. “And whether or not there’s trail mix with chocolate and cashews.”

“Do you want it to be a date?” Roman asked. His hands were in his pockets, and although he looked relaxed I could sense his hesitation.

“Do you?” I countered.

“I just want to be with you. Couldn’t care less what we call it.”

“But you just said you considered spending time with me dating. So to you, it would be a date regardless of what I call it.”

Roman made a noise of frustration.

“You told Arla you agreed to go on dates if they sounded fun.”

“Haven’t done a lot of cool things in my life.” I shrugged.

“So I’ll take you to do the things those guys planned and you can cancel.”

“Roman.” I protested.

“Henley.”

“You’re an asshole.” We got up to the door of Jamie’s and Oliver’s place. Roman grabbed the door and pulled it open for me, and I mumbled a thank you as we went inside together. He followed me up the stairs and into my room.

“I hope you’re not trying to worm your way back into my shower.” I warned. He gave me a slow grin.

“Is that an invitation?”

Ducking into the bathroom, I grabbed a bar of soap and chucked it at Roman. He dodged and laughed.

“I’ll stay here.” He took a seat on the bed, kicking his feet up as he stretched across the pillow.

“Get your shoes off my bed.” I hollered, locking the door behind me. After a quick shower, I wrapped myself in a towel and stepped out. Getting my clothes before the shower would’ve been a good idea, but it hadn’t crossed my mind.

Roman’s eyes tracked me as I rummaged through the duffel bag at the foot of my bed.

“You’re staring at me.” I muttered.

“It’s hard not to.”

I grabbed my clothes and stepped back into the bathroom, getting dressed quickly. I’d picked out a modest long-sleeved top and a pair of jeans that were among the least-revealing clothing I owned. The beginning of mating season was not the time for exposed skin.

Roman was asleep on my bed when I made it back out. My gaze caught on the dark circles beneath his eyes and I felt just the slightest hint of guilt for making things harder for him.

Was it really so bad that he wanted me to lead the pack with him?

Roman was a survivor of abuse, and the way he refused to drink and made a point to always be gentle with me showed his determination not to follow the path his dad and grandpa had gone. He wouldn’t put himself in the position to hurt me.

That didn't excuse him from lying, but it did soften me toward him a bit. I slipped under the blankets beside Roman and rolled onto my stomach, near him but not cuddling with him the way we usually did when we shared a bed.

The quiet was peaceful, and my body practically hummed with contentment at how close I was to Roman. His warmth seeped into me and for some reason, made me feel safe. My eyelids refused to stay open any longer.

Our nap didn't last long. My phone buzzed on the mattress beside us, waking the man beside me before I lifted it to my ear.

"Hello?" I whispered, hoping he'd go back to sleep. He'd seemed to need the rest.

"Where are you guys? You promised me a pair of beefy arms to help clean this mess." Arla complained. "He's not answering his phone so I know he's with you. Unless you're boning, you'd better get your asses back here."

I glanced over at him and found him staring at me with tired eyes. He lifted a strand of my hair and twisted it around his fingers before bringing it to his nose.

"Henley?" Arla sounded irritated.

"Sorry. We'll be there in a minute."

I hung up before she could lecture me again.

"I'll step down as Alpha." He said. The words shocked me.

"What?"

"You're more important."

"No, what—stop. The pack needs you. There are a shitload of werewolves here and if another Alpha came in he could do some real damage. Don't do that."

"You're it for me, Henley. If you're not comfortable leading, I'll step down. It's simple."

"We need to go help Arla." I blurted, practically jumping out of bed and away from my Alpha. Roman followed me out of Jamie's place, calling a couple of his enforcers on the way

to ask them to help with the cleaning. They were arriving as we did, and Roman went to move tables and stuff while I headed over to help Arla and Jamie pack up leftovers to put in the Ellis' fridge.

Maisy was in the kitchen when I hauled a large pan of plain croissants in. The chocolate ones were gone, sadly. She eyed me warily as I stepped in, but didn't try to strangle me or cuss me out.

Progress.

I shouldn't have been happy about that, but I was.

THIRTY-ONE

The day went by quickly. Between cleaning, then cooking, then cleaning again, and then going to the bonfire, everything felt busy and rushed. I received a few more date invites, and I turned all of them down. Accepting didn't feel right after my nap with Roman, even if I didn't really talk to him all day afterward.

I'd changed into my pajamas—sleep shorts and my pizza shirt—and was climbing into bed when my doorknob twisted. The door was locked.

“It's me.” Roman murmured from the other side of the door.

“It's night time.” I called back. “I'm sleeping.”

“You don't sound asleep. Can we talk?”

I shut my eyes for a long few seconds.

Did I want to turn him down?

Yes.

And no.

He made choices hard.

“I brought you a chocolate croissant.” He sweetened the offer.

Crossing the room, I pulled the door open. His eyes raked up and down me, lingering on my top.

“You look good.” He stepped in and shut the door behind himself. I locked it just to be safe.

“You smell good.”

His eyes darkened and he ran his hand over his buzzed hair, dropping a plastic container with a gigantic chocolate croissant on the dresser in my temporary room.

“Arla told me you saw my mom.”

“Yeah...” I sat on the edge of my bed, legs hanging off. Roman paced the room.

“Whatever she said, I’m sorry. She’s got issues.” He didn’t stop pacing, so I assumed he had more to say.

“Everyone’s got issues. It’s just life.” I leaned back on my arms. “She was actually decent. No strangling or death threats.” Relief smoothed the worry lines on his forehead. “It doesn’t bother me that you have family drama.”

He stopped pacing and grabbed me off the bed, lifting me and taking my lips with his. My legs wrapped around his waist and my hands tangled in his shirt.

The kiss didn’t go on long before I pulled away. Roman rested his forehead to mine, his eyes closed as he held me to a wall.

“I don’t know why she won’t leave my dad. We’ve taken her to counseling, she’s been to a hundred abuse survivor meetings, and she goes back to him every damn time. I’ve thought about killing him a thousand times. Makes me feel messed up, thinking about killing my dad. But it would be the easiest way to stop him from hurting her.”

“You’re not messed up. I think anyone in your situation would consider that.”

“I just don’t know what to do.” He admitted.

“Follow your gut. You’re a good man, Roman. You’ll do the right thing.”

My words surprised me, but I knew they were the truth. Despite everything, Roman was a good person. One of the best I’d ever met.

He buried his nose in my neck and murmured a thank you.

I didn’t have any advice, but I wanted to give him some piece of me, to let him know that I understood and cared.

It was ridiculous since we were technically still in an argument or fighting or whatever. But I didn’t resist the feeling.

“My mom used to take me stargazing a few nights a week. She told me they looked different with human eyes, and that she’d never gotten to see them that way until I was born.

Called me her star.” I bit my lip and released it. “She would let me stay up late those nights, and we’d be up past midnight talking about life. I wish I could remember what she said all those evenings, but I was so little. That was one of the hardest parts about being passed from pack to pack while I was so young; it felt like I lost her again and again as those memories faded.”

My gaze dropped to Roman’s chest for a moment, and his lips met my forehead. I clenched fistfuls of his shirt, eyes shutting as I breathed against him. Since I’d met him, I’d been making more and more good memories. I didn’t want that to end.

I untangled my fingers from his clothes and wrapped my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. He carried me to my bed and lifted the blankets, lowering us both into the bed after flipping off the light with the switch beside it. He held me on top of him, one of my favorite places to be.

“Is this okay?” His voice was soft. He’d leave if I told him to, no questions asked. That, I trusted.

“It’s perfect.”

His large hands were soft on my skin as they slipped under the back of my t-shirt and traced slow circles on my back. My body molded to his, soft curves relaxing into his harsh edges.

“Don’t lie to me again.” I whispered into his chest.

“I won’t.”

I believed him.

When I lowered my head back to his chest, one of his hands slipped into my hair. After a pause, Roman said, “Will you consider becoming Alpha Female? No pressure or expectations, just thinking about it.”

It meant a lot that he asked like that. I was fairly confident I’d never agree to it, but I nodded.

“Yes.”

My hands slid under his shirt too, tracing the bold lines of his muscles. His body tensed under my touch.

“Can you sleep shirtless?” I lightened the mood.

“You’re going to give me blue balls, woman.” He mumbled, but sat up and tugged it over his head before dragging my body back on top of his. “You’re okay if I sleep here.”

He was giving me one last out.

Good man.

“You smell and feel so good I’ll probably cry if you leave.”

Roman chuckled and his chest rumbled against me again. It was becoming a familiar feeling, his chest rumble. One I liked.

Sleep pulled at me and my eyes closed slowly.

“What future do you imagine for yourself?” I whispered. It was something I’d been wondering after that guy offered me a life of farming. Roman and I really hadn’t talked about that, and it seemed like a vital thing to know.

“A happy one.” He said, like it was simple. I lifted my head, sleepy eyes opening just a crack.

“Kids? No kids? Living in the skyscraper till you’re old and gray? An apartment in the city? A mansion in the country?”

Roman’s fingers brushed my scalp, sliding down my hair without catching on the tangles.

“Honestly, I don’t imagine much other than your naked body beneath mine. Or on top of mine. Or between mine and a wall.” He said. My blood heated and my cheeks were hot on his chest. “As far as where you and I will live and how many kids we’ll have, I really don’t care as long as you’re smiling at me. And naked.”

I shut my eyes tightly and tried not to get too turned on. Roman inhaled deeply and rumbled again.

“You smell damn good when you want me.”

Sleep weighed my eyes down again and I snuggled further into his chest. Roman’s fingers trailed up my spine and made my body hum with satisfaction. The man made me feel things I’d never known were possible.

“I’ll cancel with the other guys.” My murmur was sleep-driven but still true. “I’m not really attracted to them anyway.”

Roman’s arms tightened around me. I fell asleep without hearing his response.

The next morning, I opened bleary eyes to a half-empty bed. My heart sank a bit. It was cold; Roman had been gone a while. Slipping slowly out of bed, I crossed to the bathroom and took a long, hot shower.

He left without saying goodbye.

I opened the door as I tugged a brush through my hair—still dry since I’d deemed it clean enough not to bother with the process of washing and drying—with a towel wrapped loosely around my body.

“I could get used to seeing you in a towel.” A low voice made my toes curl.

“I look better without it.” I didn’t look away from the mirror, casually brushing my hair.

“I know.”

Biting my lip, I finally turned to see Roman sitting on my bed with a smoothie in one hand and a fancy-looking bag of food in the other. My chocolate croissant from the night before was still sitting on the nightstand, just where Roman had left it. The heavenly scent of whatever he had in the bag told me the croissant would be living in its box at least a couple more hours.

“I planned on getting back before you woke up but had to stop and break up a fight on my way in. Sorry.” He left the food beside the croissant and crossed the room, sweeping me into his arms and capturing my mouth with his. My body was like putty in his hands, and I nearly dropped the towel and demanded he be my mate there and then.

Memories and past experiences stopped me.

“I guess I’ll forgive you.” I said as he released me.

“Get dressed. We’re going on a date. An official one.” Roman grabbed the food and headed for the door to let me

change.

“Was that a question?” I called after him.

His eyes swept up and down my towel-clad figure.

“Nope.” He shut the door.

I pulled on a pair of high-waisted jeans that fit like they were skin and a tight, long-sleeved crop-top with one of my cute bras.

Might as well have cute boobs on my date.

Even though I didn't know what we would be doing, my heart pounded irrationally fast. Something told me this wouldn't be like my date with Grant.

My black leather combat boots hung from my fingers as my socked-feet padded to the door. Grabbing my purse off the dresser, I stepped outside.

“Better pack your stuff. We're headed back to the city.” Roman leaned up against the doorway.

Tossing my crap in my duffel bag took all of one minute. He traded me the bag of food for the duffel, and we went downstairs together. Jamie was in the kitchen with Oliver, spooning peanut butter into a blender with kale in it.

“Have fun.” She waved.

“Thanks for letting me stay.” I called as Roman dragged me from the house without giving me a chance to chat.

“Next time, you're staying with me.” His low voice gave me chills.

I pulled the food out of the bag as we pulled out of the neighborhood, finding a healthy-looking breakfast sandwich in a plastic container on top of a cinnamon roll in another. Paired with the fruit smoothie in the cup-holder beside me, there was more food than I could eat.

“I wasn't sure what you'd want.” He admitted, turning up the music. I was getting surprisingly used to rock.

“I’m not picky.” I opened the box with the sandwich. “Next time, we should eat together.”

Roman shot me a smoldering look that made my lips curl upward.

I demolished the sandwich and a few bites of the cinnamon roll, sipping at the smoothie too.

“So, what are we doing?” I asked, watching out the windows. New York was beautiful. Not the city—although I did enjoy the hustle and bustle. The scenery was what I really loved. I could see myself living out there.

Maybe we’d moved to the pack’s neighborhood when Roman and I mated.

I shot him a sideways glance. I’d never thought about us mating as a *when* rather than an *if*.

“Speed-dating.”

“You’re taking me to meet other men?” I looked over at him skeptically. Roman barked out a laugh.

“Hell would have to freeze over.”

I waited for an explanation.

“You’ll see.”

Settling back into the seat, I focused out the window.

Roman held the steering wheel with one hand and lifted the other to my thigh.

“How’s the season affecting you?” I wondered out loud. Roman grimaced. “Worse than it has in the past?”

“Far.”

I stared at him. He stared at the road.

“Mating season hormones have never affected me. I assume it has something to do with the reason I prevent werewolves from shifting every night. Probably also the reason I have hair the same color as the Alphas of All and smell like I’m always in heat too.”

Roman relaxed slightly.

“I’m having a hard time keeping my hand from creeping higher, if that tells you anything.” He said. I glanced down at the hand, high on my thigh, and grinned. “Dreamed about taking you against the wall in that bedroom last night, and then my office desk, and then that seat you’re sitting in.”

My cheeks heated. Body flushed.

“Haven’t been able to get the image of your naked body out of my mind in thirty-six hours. Want to kill any other man who so much as glances at you. Woke up with the worst boner of my life and nearly shifted to attack *myself* for climbing out of bed with you while you were so comfortable, even to get you food.”

A grin tugged at my lips.

“Really wishing the hormones were as hard on you as they are on me, because I’d kill to have your hand in my pants right now.” His hand moved up on my leg, just the slightest bit, and he inhaled deeply. “And damn, your desire makes me horny.”

I laughed, and he shot me a guilty grin.

“You asked.”

“I like it when you tell me what you’re thinking.” I said, putting my hand on top of his.

“Right now, I’m thinking you should unbutton those jeans and help me slide my fingers into your—“

“Focus on the road.” I smacked him on the shoulder, smothering another laugh. The scents of both our desire had mingled into the most intoxicating scent on the planet.

“For the record, I was going to say bra.” He kept a straight face. “A little boob action wouldn’t mate us.”

“Liar.” I pushed his hand off my leg. He grabbed my own hand and pulled it up under his shirt.

“Don’t act like you haven’t felt up my chest. I’m the innocent one in this relationship.” He led my fingers over his abs and then up to his pecs. The scent in the car intensified on his end.

“Tell me where we’re going and I’ll let you feel my boobs.”
I lied. Roman shook his head at me.

“Bargaining with your body like a common peasant. You’re the damned queen, Hen. Act like it.”

I laughed and pulled my hand out of his shirt, pushing his face away from me.

“Shut up and watch the road.”

He turned the music up, dropping his hand back to my thigh as we flew down the highway.

When we got back to the city, Roman parked in front of a place with a sign that read:

Indoor Skydiving.

My jaw dropped.

“No way.”

“You liked the slip ‘n slide so I figured this would be your scene.”

“If I go in there, it’s likely I’ll have so much fun I won’t leave.” I warned him, unbuckling my seatbelt.

“I’ll talk you out of there.” He promised, grabbing my hand as I climbed out of the truck and leading me into the building.

Two hours of exhilarating fun followed.

When I thought we were calling it quits, Roman drove me to an old-school arcade that used coins and everything. When I thought that was over, he took me to an escape room. We didn’t make it out, but it was still a blast. After that, we had dinner at a pizza place I’d never heard of before, and it became my new favorite.

We pulled into the skyscraper’s parking garage as the sun was going down. I was so thoroughly exhausted and incredibly happy that I was positive the day had been a freaking dream. Happy shit like that didn’t happen to me.

“So, do you like dating?” Roman asked, helping me out of his truck.

“Hell yes.” I grabbed his face and kissed the shit out of his lips. He pressed me into the truck’s door, one hand on my chin and another pinning my arm above my head.

The rapid honking of a horn had me pulling away.

“Break it up, horndogs.” Arla yelled out her window, wearing a shit-eating grin.

“Go to hell.” I yelled back, flipping her the bird.

Roman’s shoulders shook with laughter as he buried his face in my hair, hiding his grin.

I didn’t hide mine. For the first time in thirteen years, I was well and truly happy. The future could go straight to hell with Arla for all I cared; I wanted to live in that exact moment forever.

THIRTY-TWO

The next evening, it took a shit-ton of convincing to talk Roman into letting me go to work without him. Since I knew he hated the nightclub, I put the necessary effort in.

“You okay?” I asked Jamie, tying my half-apron on. She smelled a bit different than usual and seemed off.

“Just dealing with mate drama.” She gave me a tired smile, mixing a drink. She was still really slow at making drinks, but she was figuring it out.

Her hands shook as she poured the alcohol, and I grabbed the bottle from her.

“What’s up?”

She sighed heavily, looking around before lowering her voice.

“Oliver and I slept together last night. We do it sometimes, but this was different. More real.”

My lips parted.

“What the hell?”

“I know.” She slapped a hand over her eyes.

“This is the best news I’ve heard in my entire life.” I announced, throwing my arms around her. Jamie moaned.

“I’m in heat, Hen. My scent changed the day before yesterday. We didn’t use a condom.”

I froze, arms still around her.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” She sighed, slouching a bit. “That.”

“It was the first day of mating season, so there’s still a chance you’re not pregnant.”

“I can’t be pregnant with the mate I barely talk to, Hennie. I can’t.” I released her and she shut her eyes tightly. “Better sex or not, that’s just... I can’t.”

“Go home, Jame. I’ve got enough protection here.” I tilted my head toward the table where the mated enforcers sat.

“He’s home for the next few days.”

I dragged her to the back room, ignoring her half-made drink and the long weekend-line of customers. Opening my locker’s combo lock, I tugged my keyring out of my purse and handed it to her.

“Go get some sleep at my place. Or watch a chick flick or something; whatever you need to get your mind off it.”

“Alright.” Her voice was small, her eyes a bit wet. “Thanks, Hennie.”

I wrapped my arms around her for a tight hug.

“Don’t sleep in the bed that smells like Roman or I’ll have to kill you. Oh, and you can order us pizza when I get home to thank me.” I said, pulling away. She laughed, though it was half-hearted.

“Deal.”

Jamie left out the back door and I went back to the bar. Finishing the drink she’d been making was quick, so I handed it to the person who’d ordered it and got to serving more customers. Kyler was taking the mated guards a couple of shot glasses, but I didn’t spare them a second glance. There were too many customers to care.

The next couple of hours flew by.

As the crowd began to slow, I noticed the mated guys who were guarding me stumbling around the dance floor. It wasn’t exactly safe, but Kyler looked sober so at least that was something.

Plus it was night time, so it wasn’t like another pack’s werewolves could come for me. They’d all be in wolf form.

“Can you help me grab something from the back?” Kyler checked, as our line of customers paused for a moment.

“Sure.”

I followed him through the break room and into the supply room. I couldn't see those shelves without remembering the first time Roman and I had kissed, the way my body came to life beneath his hands.

When Kyler shut the door behind me, I shot him a strange look. His eyes were full of guilt as he approached with a roll of duct tape.

“What are you doing?” I asked, voice cautious.

“He has my sister.” Kyler's voice was pained. My fists clenched.

“Ledger.”

He jerked his head up and down.

“You're the one who gave him my phone number.”

“I had no choice.”

Like it or not, I believed him. I knew a little something about being chained to a wall by the Colorado Alpha.

“He'll let Kylee go when I take you to him.”

I should've mated with Roman while I had the chance. Being unmated was too freaking dangerous for me.

“Are you going to use that?” I gestured to the duct tape and studied the man. His shoulders were slumped, and all fight seemed to have gone out of him.

Was this what he'd wanted to talk to me about at the pack breakfast?

“Only if I have to. We both know you won't get away from me.”

I considered my options.

Go with Kyler willingly. Or fight and get injured only to get taken to Ledger already less than my best.

There was a slight chance I could actually escape and vanish, but I was tired of running. It was time to face my demons.

“Alright, let's go.”

We walked out to his car.

“I’m sorry, Henley.” He said as we sat down. It sounded like the truth.

“Me too.” I tilted my head against the window, closing my eyes. “Did you book a flight?”

“Yeah. Leaves in an hour.”

“You’re buying me food at the airport, then.”

“I’ll buy you whatever you want.”

Opening my eyes, I stared as the people and buildings whirled past as us. Kyler’s guilt made the air heavy and painful. His guilt wasn’t helping either of us, so I broke the silence with something I figured would remove the guilt.

“I want your nightclub.” I folded my arms over my chest. “If I get away from Ledger alive, give it to me and we’ll be even.”

“That’s it?” He looked over at me with raised eyebrows. The guy was so rich, he’d probably give me anything else I asked for.

“Yep.”

“Done.” He said. We drove to the airport in silence.

I wondered how long it would take Roman to realize I was gone. His enforcers were drunk out of their minds and would probably be crashed on the floor of the nightclub sometime soon, thanks to Kyler, so Roman wouldn’t hear it from them.

But he would come looking for me by the time my shift ended. He’d been so against me leaving in the first place, I had no doubt about that.

Which meant I’d spend a minimum of what, eight hours in the storm cellar? That was if Roman came after me the moment he realized I wasn’t behind the bar. He wouldn’t wonder where I’d gone; he’d know Ledger was behind it. But he’d likely go looking for me first, checking Kyler’s house and shit. Because my Alpha definitely didn’t know his right-hand

man was the one who'd betrayed him. Kyler would be long-past dead if he did.

So realistically, I'd have to survive forty-eight more hours in the storm cellar. Maybe a little more, maybe a little less.

We made it through security without a problem and slipped into our seats moments before the doors closed. As the plane took off, I made up my mind.

I'd fight Ledger until I was dead or rescued by my Alpha. The monster wouldn't win.

We got in a rental car after the plane landed in Denver. Neither of us said much. Kyler and I had been friends, and while that was over I didn't hate him. I understood his actions too much for that. Plus, he seemed to hate himself enough for both of us.

As we approached the small town the Colorado Pack occupied and operated, Kyler drove more slowly.

"Where will you go with Kylee?" I asked.

We both knew Roman would kill him if he went back to New York. My Alpha didn't trust much more easily than I did, and he was far less forgiving. Kyler's heart would end up on the outside of his body if Roman knew he'd betrayed the pack, let alone kidnapped me.

"I don't know. Heard there's a pack of lone wolves in LA, might try to find them."

I nodded.

"Send a postcard." I said as we pulled into a gas station on the edge of Ledger's town.

Ledger got out and stood up against his truck, and old dingy thing. Kylee was dirty and tear-streaked, mouth, hands, and ankles duct-taped. Dried blood and bruises dotted her skin. I was relieved she'd be getting out of Ledger's grasp, and even if it meant I was going back into captivity in her place.

She deserved a brother to protect her from all the crap Ledger would do. I wished I had the same.

“Roman will come for you.” Kyler said. Guilt and anger seemed to be at war within him.

“Probably.”

He parked.

“Not probably. He will. I’ll text him your location when I’m far enough away that my sister is safe.”

I’d left my phone in my locker at the nightclub, so I couldn’t do that myself. Not that I would’ve. If Roman came for me, there was a chance he’d get hurt and I wouldn’t set him up for that. Another pack capturing me was inevitable; why risk someone I cared about in a silly attempt to stop that?

Kyler got out of the car but I didn’t move. If Ledger wanted to torture me again, he could lift me out of the passenger seat all on his own.

The door opened and the eyes that haunted my dreams collided with my own. I glared at Ledger.

“My mate.” He rumbled, reaching toward my face.

“I’m not your anything.” I slapped his hand away. His eyes narrowed and his hands landed on my shoulders, squeezing tight enough it hurt. Alpha power pounded into me, and I steeled myself for the attack.

“You decided not to mate with the New York Alpha because you knew you were mine.” He unbuckled my seatbelt.

I slammed my palm into Ledger’s nose and took a page from Arla’s book, kicking him in the balls as hard as I could. Ledger roared in pain, bending in half as he struggled for air. With one last nod at Kyler, I lunged out of the rental car and landed on old asphalt with four paws. Shaking off the shredded bits of my clothes, I took off in the opposite direction of Ledger’s town.

Howls and snarls filled the air. Ledger’s men were on my heels as I raced through the trees and snow, dodging and jumping and weaving.

One of the wolves launched himself at me. I rolled to the side, narrowly dodging his attack. The roll cost me time

though, and it was all the others needed. Three men pounced on top of me, claws scratching and teeth biting into the skin on my back. I snarled and bucked, trying to get out from underneath them to no avail.

“Enough.” Ledger barked. “Human form, all of you.”

The men shifted but I remained a wolf, glaring and growling at him despite the blood oozing from multiple wounds on my back and shoulders. In beast form, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Roman would come for me in time. I just had to keep fighting until he made it. Unfortunately, I could already feel the blood-loss.

Not good.

Ledger came close, and I snapped at him in warning.

With a lunge, he grabbed me around the middle and heaved my front half over his shoulder. The pain in my back was enough that I couldn't hold back a whimper. Ledger's disgusting hands stroked down my bleeding back.

“Don't worry, love. When you've accepted you're mine no one will have to hurt you anymore.”

I growled weakly. Every step he took sent more pain flooding through my system until I finally passed out.

When I came to, I opened heavy eyelids to the soul-crushing sight of Ledger's storm cellar. The same spiders climbed on the same spider webs in the same corners of the place nearly a year after I'd escaped. The concrete floor was still littered with stains that smelled of dirt and blood. The only thing different was the chains.

Two old, rusted chains had connected my ankles to the floor the last time I was there. They'd been replaced with gleaming monstrous metal contraptions that wrapped around my ankles, wrists, and neck. All I had on was a holey t-shirt that reeked of Ledger.

I'd been trapped like an animal.

Yanking against the chains did nothing but make my body hurt more. I did a quick inventory of myself.

Hair was matted with blood, hanging limply down my spine.

Face felt bruised.

One of my knees ached. It was a flare-up from an old injury caused by a kick to my leg when I was a teenager, but nothing hurt badly enough to assume it was broken.

My back wasn't nearly as sore as it should've been, which told me someone had licked my injuries. My stomach churned. Ledger wouldn't have let anyone else near me, and the mental image of his tongue on my flesh had me choking back a mouthful of vomit.

But all in all, I was in better shape than I'd expected.

The next few hours passed by in a slow march of hunger pangs and shaking legs. Being chained so close to the wall in five places made it impossible to sit down, or really move much at all. I wondered at what point my legs would give out.

Last time I'd been in the storm cellar, I'd had no hope of escape. It was just me, crossing my fingers that some other horrible Alpha would realize I was there and abduct me again. This time was completely different.

In the silence, my mind went back to the months I'd spent in the New York pack. The laughs with Jamie. The girls' days with her, Arla, and London. The close calls. The shifts at the nightclub. The good food and nice clothes and amazing showers.

More than that, though, my mind went back to Roman.

Again, and again, and again.

The moment I'd run into him. The first time I caught his scent in wolf form. The way he'd nearly killed Zack when I fell against him. The times I'd calmed his wolf. The way his lips felt on mine the first time I kissed him.

The way he looked at me every time we were together.

Roman had brought me back to life. Him, Jamie, London, and Arla—they'd given me a reason to live. Friends and family to look out for and take care of. I'd wanted that for so

long I fought it when they first came into my life, but now I knew better.

The doors creaked open and I tried to prepare myself for the pain that would follow.

Ledger walked down those steps like he was the king of the world. I wanted to rip his head from his body and wear it like a freaking crown.

He crossed the room and grabbed me by the chin, dead eyes staring at me.

“I will never mate with you.” I said.

“Maybe not.” He acquiesced. I could hardly believe he admitted it. “But if you’re not mine, you won’t be anyone else’s either.” He slipped a knife from his pocket. It was old and rusted, with a dull serrated edge I knew would hurt like a bitch.

“You’re going to kill me?” I lifted an eyebrow. “Went to a lot of work to do that, didn’t you?”

He laughed darkly.

“I’m going to make you wish you were dead.” He stepped closer, pressing his nasty knife to my boob—covered only by the old shirt. The tip of the blade nicked my skin and I forced my expression neutral as the scent of fresh blood caught my nose. “Let’s start with separating you from your Alpha.”

He reached up and released my right wrist from its cuff. Luckily, he didn’t seem to have seen the scar and tattoo on the other wrist.

Ledger forced my shoulder to the side, exposing my scarred back. He scanned it, looking for the Alpha marking. When none of the scars stood out to him, he sneered.

“Guess we’ll just have to cut through all of them.”

He started at my right shoulder. With his dull knife, he tore through thin, scarred skin inch by inch. I sweat and shivered, biting my lip hard enough to taste blood, but I refused to give him the pleasure of hearing me cry.

“What next? Hmm...” He prowled slowly around me. His eyes met the small cut on my boob, and the tip pressed back into my sensitive skin a moment later.

Ledger’s knife went deeper into my breast and I gritted my teeth, holding back a vocal response. He turned the knife, and my white-hot scream pierced the air.

“Stop!”

The knife halted where it was, buried in my skin.

Ledger’s forehead knitted together.

Had he followed my order?

Why did he look confused?

“What did you do to me?” He snapped.

“Step back.” I commanded. Ledger visibly struggled against an invisible opponent but ended up stepping back, curses flying from him.

What the hell?

A loud howl rang out somewhere outside, shooting the best kind of chills up my spine.

Roman was there for me.

The noise knocked Ledger out of whatever had him obeying my orders. He crossed the room. Shouts rang out up above the storm cellar, and Ledger twisted the knife again. My legs gave out, and I fell a few inches until I was held up only by the cuffs around my neck and left hand.

It didn’t matter though; Roman was here.

“Where’s Ledger?” Roman’s snarl warmed me from within.

He was right outside.

Ledger shoved me into the wall and I screamed again. His knife was still buried in my chest, and it hurt like nothing else. His hand latched on the handle of the knife, holding it tightly.

Roman charged down the stairs, his eyes blazing with the wolf within.

“Step away from her.” Roman’s words carried more power than I’d ever felt from anyone but the Alphas of All. I was in too much pain to be very affected by it, but Ledger crashed to his knees, knocking me with him. His hand slipped off the knife as I fell, chains yanking into my skin with the force of gravity.

I grabbed the knife and yanked it out of my skin, screaming and slashing it at Ledger. Roman managed to get between me and the Alpha, catching my flailing hand and trying to take my knife. He must’ve seen the threat in my eyes because he left me with it and hooked his elbow into Ledger’s temple.

An inhuman scream left my torturer’s lips as Roman kicked him away from me.

“Ledger King, I challenge you for your right to lead this pack.” Roman snarled, bending over and shifting his claws. Ledger stumbled to his feet, and Roman waited for him.

Small hands found my wrists and I screamed again, thrusting my knife in the person’s direction. Arla caught my wrist and met my eyes. Jamie was right behind her.

“It’s just me. You know I won’t hurt you.” She waited for my reluctant nod. When she got it, she swiftly unlocked all of the cuffs that bound me to the wall. When I fell away, Oliver caught me.

Roman snapped something at Arla, and I was carefully lowered to the floor. Arla sat on one side, Jamie on the other. Jamie lifted my arm around her shoulders and I winced.

Arla dabbed at the gaping hole in my boob with some cleaning stuff that burned like nobody’s business. I bit back another cry.

“Who fights at your heels?” Ledger demanded. I’d missed something, I thought, but everything was too much to follow along with.

“Oliver.” Roman barked out his name. The man sauntered up beside the Alpha. They were both bigger and stronger than any of Ledger’s pack.

I'd never met the whole pack, but I'd picked up that there were only around fifty members. Colorado was a great place for werewolves, but almost no one would choose to live under Ledger.

Ledger called his own second, and the four men faced off. I'd never seen an Alpha challenge before, but I knew this was protocol. They'd choose someone to play referee, to fight at their side if everything went to shit.

"Where's your Alpha Female?" Roman demanded.

A challenge to the Alpha Male wasn't always a challenge to the Female.

"Away." Ledger sneered.

Roman's eyes found mine for a moment before he turned back to Ledger.

"There's no room in here. Outside." My Alpha commanded.

Ledger looked like he was going to argue, but must've realized Roman was right. Trying to retain his power, Ledger strolled out of the storm cellar before anyone else.

"Keep her here." Roman's low order hit the females helping me. Both women stiffened as he and his enforcers followed Ledger and his men out.

"What the hell?" Arla growled.

"We have to watch." My eyes squeezed shut as pain washed through me.

"Holy crap, Hennie." Horror filled Jamie's eyes as she lifted the tattered t-shirt to expose my back. Blood and who knows what else was still oozing from my many cuts.

"Help me out. I have to see." My eyes met Arla's, pleading.

"I don't think we can carry you."

"I'll walk." I gritted my teeth, lifting my body. The girls grabbed my arms, pulling them over their shoulders and helping me to my feet.

We moved quickly, my brain spinning as I struggled against the pain. My legs shook, and by the time we sat on the icy asphalt outside Jamie and Arla were carrying me completely.

Both male Alphas were in their wolf forms circling each other when we got outside, beige vs black fur making it easy to track their movements. Roman snarled in my direction, and Ledger took the opportunity to attack. His teeth sunk into Roman's back leg, and I bit back a scream.

Roman kicked the other man in the face, snapping at Ledger's shoulder. Ledger dodged and then lunged for Roman's throat. Roman ducked to the side, slicing into Ledger's shoulder as he moved.

The men exchanged blows a few more minutes. My hands were clenched tightly on Jamie's arm, icy sharpness cutting into my bare legs. Arla held the cleaning stuff to a wound on my upper back, but my injuries were a past thought as we all watched for the outcome.

I'd never seen Ledger fight before or since he challenged Roman in the 'scraper. He'd been cocky then, and unprepared. That wasn't the case this time. This fight was much closer.

Roman dodged a particularly powerful slash of Ledger's claws. Ledger rolled over the top of him, and Roman barely jumped away from a kick of claws toward his belly. He leaped for Ledger as the beige wolf landed, and the men rolled a few times. Roman bit down on Ledger's uninjured shoulder and yanked. The beige wolf snarled and slashed at Roman, who ducked to the side to avoid another cut.

Ledger launched toward my Alpha, and Roman lunged for his throat. Roman's teeth met Ledger's pulse and ripped with a powerful shake of his head.

Ledger's body fell to the ground, lifeless.

He was finally gone.

Roman lifted his muzzle to the sky and loosed a powerful, victorious howl. The Colorado pack shifted forms at once, every member falling to his or her bellies and responding in kind.

My big black wolf stalked toward me, blood on his muzzle as he walked around me and the girls, checking to make sure I was in one piece. I shut my eyes, heavy relief on my shoulders. Roman had won—he was fine—and Ledger was gone.

Large, calloused hands cradled my face. I opened my eyes.

“I shouldn’t have left you.” Roman’s eyes were filled with self-hatred. It wasn’t an expression I’d seen on him before, and it surprised me. His face was covered in blood and I didn’t even care.

“You have a life. You can’t be with me every minute of every day.” I croaked.

“*You* are my life.” He growled, turning his attention to his sister and Jamie. “I’ll take her from here. Thank you.”

A warm, muscular arm slipped under my legs.

“Careful of her—“

I cried out as Roman’s arm pressed into my back. He yanked it away, taking a closer look at the tattered fabric. A loud snarl ripped through the air, making most of the wolves around us whine.

When he lifted the material and saw my back, a barrage of curses spewed from his lips.

“I’m tired.” I whispered. As grateful as I was for his rescue and fury on my behalf, I’d gone from chained to a wall being tortured to sitting half-naked on sharp, icy asphalt. A shower and a bed sounded heavenly.

Roman’s face twisted into a grimace.

“Do you want Jamie and Arla to help you get cleaned up instead of me?” I could tell he had a hard time getting the words out. No part of him wanted to let me go, but he was trying to be understanding of what I’d been through.

“No.” My hand moved a couple inches, grabbing onto his arm.

Relief crossed Roman's face and he lifted me carefully, my chest pressed to his. The wound on my boob throbbed with pain, but it was nothing compared to the fire on my back.

"Thanks, guys." I murmured to the girls.

They nodded.

"We'll deal with whatever we can without you." Arla told her brother.

His head bobbed. Cradling me to his chest more gently than I'd known he could, he carried me into the house that smelled of Ledger. With my head in the crook of Roman's neck, even Ledger's scent didn't scare me.

THIRTY-THREE

“I want a shower.” I spoke into Roman’s neck as we stopped in a bedroom that smelled like a variety of people, none of which were Ledger. It was a guest room, I assumed, and I was grateful for that. I felt his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed and then nodded.

“I’ll have a hard time putting you down.” His voice was rough.

“Don’t put me down.”

Roman’s arm tightened around my hips, and he carried me into the bathroom. Turning the shower handle, he spun so the ice water hit his back. When it was warm, he eased me into the water too. My head remained against him, and I felt Roman’s body begin to relax beneath the hot water.

“Can you get this shirt off me?” I asked.

Roman lifted his leg, using it to hold me up as he reached for the neckline of the shirt Ledger had dressed me in. He tore the fabric down the back and eased it off my skin before maneuvering it from my arms. I pulled my chest off of his, and with another bob of his throat, he pulled it off completely and tossed it to the side of the shower.

He stared at me, and I stared at him. Both of us naked, much of our bodies pressed together.

I was getting turned on again, but was exhausted and in pain. So, I just leaned my bare chest into Roman’s and wrapped my arms around his back again.

His fingers pressed into my backside as he lowered his leg, holding me up by my hips and ass once again. Roman’s desire made me feel warm and light after the heavy darkness of the storm cellar.

“Can I heal you?” his words tickled my ear as warm water fell on my bloody, dirty hair.

“After I’m clean.”

He nodded and carefully pulled my hair out from between us. Rubbing the strands between his fingers, he cleaned as much as he could with water before grabbing the shampoo.

“You can wash yourself, you know.” My lips brushed his throat, and I loved the way he moved beneath me because of it.

“I’ll take care of you first.”

His gruff voice sent goosebumps up my arms.

“Does that only apply to this situation?” I whispered.

Roman’s chest rumbled. With his knuckle, he lifted my chin so our eyes met and our lips were barely an inch apart.

“You’ll always come first. In every situation and every way.”

The mischief in his eyes had my lips cracking in a smile.

“I missed you.”

He grabbed some shampoo and massaged it into my hair and scalp, going slowly and thoroughly. His hand glided over my skin as he cleaned my body, warming me with every brush of skin against skin.

The perfect ‘I clean you, you clean me’ romance novel cliché. Minus the back injuries, and a bathtub.

By the time he was done cleaning me, I was somewhere between hot, bothered, and relaxed. We wouldn’t be mating right after I spent a day being tortured though, so I ignored the hot and bothered bit.

Roman stepped out of the water and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around me and carrying me to the bed. He pressed a kiss to the back of my neck after setting me down on the bed on my stomach, striding back to the shower to finish scrubbing off the blood. He was back less than two minutes later, holding a towel loosely around his waist.

He opened drawers on a dresser at the side of the room until he found a pair of basketball shorts and tugged them on, then slipped onto the bed beside me.

“Do you want me to heal or feed you first?” His voice was soft, His hand sliding gently up the back of my thigh as he waited. My eyelids fluttered closed, body heating as his fingers stopped before reaching my ass and trailed back toward my knee. Roman stroked back up my leg and side, stopping to rest on my hip as he leaned over my back. “Hen?” He prodded.

“Healing first.” I wiggled a bit and swore at the pain that erupted as the towel brushed my back. Roman pushed the fabric off to my sides, large palm landing on my lower back.

“Are you going to shift?” my words came out sounding choked.

“Yes.” he met my eyes. “This is going to be intimate, Hen. You passed out last time, but when you healed me...” He trailed off. “It was intense. You can tell me to stop at any time.”

Roman shucked the basketball shorts and shifted. His tongue slid over my shoulder and I gasped at the feel of the warm, wet silk on my skin, back arching in pleasure. The pain that accompanied the movement had me whimpering, and Roman shifted back, his other hand landing on the injury he’d healed on my shoulder.

“Stay still. Let me take care of you.”

He shifted back. His tongue stroked over another cut on my back, and I bit back a moan. I felt better and wanted him more with every stroke of his tongue, my body flaming with desire.

My back was healed when Roman tugged the blanket over my lower half and carefully rolled me over, his eyes landing on the cut on my very exposed boob. I covered my nipples with the towel and his hand spread over my flat stomach, my back arching again at the contact.

“May I?” His eyes were nearly black.

“Yes.” I bit my lip, trembling with want as his tongue traced over the wound.

He pulled away a moment later, my eyes held closed as I struggled for air. When his hands left my skin and he slipped

out of bed, I made a noise of protest. He pulled the blanket over my body, and the rough feel of the fabric had me biting back a groan.

“I’ll be back with food.” The low rumble of his voice had me grabbing his arm to stop him from going.

“I’m not hungry anymore.” My eyes met his, my body still flooded with want.

“You need to eat.” He bent toward me, lifting my hand to his mouth and pressing his lips to the tattoo on my wrist, intact thanks to Ledger’s chains. My eyes shut again after he strode out to the kitchen.

With the room quiet and empty, I relaxed and began to feel heavy. When he stepped back in with a sandwich, I was mostly asleep. Roman woke me up with his lips on my neck and wouldn’t quit licking and kissing me until all of the food was gone.

We cuddled up on the bed afterward, only a thin towel and basketball shorts separating our skin. I’d just fallen asleep when a fist pounded on the bedroom door.

“Henley!” Arla yelled. My eyes opened and collided with Roman’s. “ROME!” She yelled louder. “The Alphas of All are here. Ledger called them—they’re here for Henley!”

Horror filled my eyes while fury burned in Roman’s.

When they saw my hair, they’d flip.

Arla burst into the room, panic in her eyes. She saw my lack of clothing and ran to the closet, flinging the doors open and yanking clothes off the hangers.

“You need to get dressed—you have to run.” Arla shoved the clothes at me while Roman rolled away from me, fists clenched.

“I’m tired of running.” I pushed the clothes back to Arla, climbing to my feet with my towel as Roman began to pace the room.

“I don’t care!” She screeched at me, grabbing the shirt she’d shoved into my hands and yanking it over my head. I pushed

her away, but she wrestled my arm into one of the sleeves.

“I’ll challenge them.” Roman snarled.

Arla froze, leaving me wrestling her and the shirt I was half-wearing.

“No, you won’t.” I snarled back.

“I won’t let them anywhere near you.” He growled at me, crossing the room and forcing my arm through the other sleeve of the shirt.

What was I, a Barbie doll?

“I’ll run.” I said. It was a far better alternative than losing Roman to the Alphas of All. “You can’t fight them. I’ll go so you’re all safe.”

“Like hell you will.” Roman grabbed me by the shoulders, lowering his eyes so they met mine. “You’re mine, Henley. I’ll kill anyone who gets between us.”

His wolf was at the helm, but mine was close to the surface too.

Roman had protected and taken care of me for months. It was my turn to protect him. As far as I could see there was only one option.

I reached to my wrist to slice through the scar and tattoo there. Jamie flew through the doors and I hesitated long enough for Roman to realize what I was about to do and grab my arms, holding them away from each other.

“What are you doing?” Jamie demanded, looking between the three of us. “They didn’t kill anyone last time you saw them. We’ll be fine.”

“I have Alpha hair.” I tugged my arms from Roman but he held on too tightly to get free.

“We’ll hide it.” Roman growled.

I felt the touch of a crazy strong Alpha power reaching for me; it had to be them.

“Pants. I need pants.” I lunged for the closet. Arla shoved sweats in my face and jammed a hat over my head, stuffing my hair up in it as I struggled into the pants.

Roman scooped me into his arms as soon as the pants were on while Jamie helped Arla finish wrestling my mass of hair.

“I can walk.” I snapped at Roman.

“I don’t care.” He snapped back.

The feeling of their Alpha Power became stronger, and I heard tires crunching snow outside the house.

Roman strode out the door, an iron grip on me. I stopped struggling against his hold since there was no point.

Arla and Jamie were close at Roman’s heels, Oliver and Gunner waiting outside already. Roman stopped beside them, the Alphas and enforcers standing together in a united line. And then there was me.

Wolfsbane.

The Alphas of All rode in a massive black hummer with windows tinted so dark I couldn’t see a thing through them. The driver’s and passenger’s doors swung open together, the Alphas stepping out of the vehicle at the same time. The doors closed, revealing the werewolves who’d visited the skyscraper weeks earlier.

Their hair seemed even redder than I remembered.

“Shit.” Arla muttered.

Roman shot her a glare and she snapped her mouth closed.

“Roman Ellis.” The Alpha Female’s voice boomed, she and her companion strolling toward me and my pack. Their alpha power flowed in a continuous stream, and the way they held themselves said they knew their strength.

“Alphas.” Roman’s head bobbed jerkily. He wasn’t a guy who bowed to anyone.

Why did I have their hair?

They covered the distance between us and walked along the line of our pack, their noses only inches from our faces. They sniffed each of us, crossing paths with each other so they both smelled everyone.

The Alpha female stopped in front of Jamie, leaning her nose all the way to Jamie's neck before pulling away with a small smile, pressing her hand to Jamie's lower belly.

"Cherish the time your pup lives within you. They are much more difficult out than in."

Jamie's face flushed bright red and she met Oliver's gaze. All the blood rushed out of his face.

When the Alphas finally stepped back, satisfied with our scents, they were focused on Roman.

"Tell me you haven't taken out another Alpha." The male Alpha of All glowered at Roman and protectiveness rose within me. I fought the instinct to bare my teeth at the man.

"Ledger King abducted me again. Roman killed him to save me." I spoke. Roman's arms tightened around me and I got the sense he didn't want me defending him to these people.

"Why were the men fighting over you in the first place?" The Alpha Female hit me with an icy stare.

I pulled myself from Roman's arms, and he put me down although his arm remained around my waist.

"My name is Henley Clark, but I'm more well-known as Wolfsbane." I pulled my shirt down to show them the tattoo on my collarbone.

Awareness filled the Alphas' eyes.

"Well," The female looked to Roman, her body position more curious than angry now. "We have many questions for you."

"I can imagine. And I'll answer them." I swayed a bit, and Roman pulled me closer as he held more of my weight.

"Henley spent the past twenty-four hours in Ledger's torture room. She needs food and sleep before answering anything."

Roman was acting too much like he was in charge; I was afraid the Alphas would freak out at him. Instead, they exchanged glances and nodded.

“We’ll handle things here and visit your pack when we’re finished.” The Alpha Female said.

The Alphas seemed surprisingly reasonable, given their reputation.

“Thank you.” Roman nodded his head again, slightly smoother this time.

“The Colorado pack has been gathered in their cafeteria.” Arla said. She must’ve had the same thoughts as I did, that they were reasonable.

Maybe having their hair wouldn’t be such a bad thing.

“Go.” The male commanded. Though I didn’t feel the impact of the order, Roman lifted me by the waist and my people all walked rapidly toward their rental van, their limbs moving stiff and robotically.

Arla took the driver’s seat and Gunner the passenger’s. Roman set me in the back seat and climbed in beside me, leaving the middle row to Jamie and Oliver. As they shut the doors, screams erupted from the building Arla had called the cafeteria.

She drove us away, still under the Alpha’s orders, but she rolled down the windows.

My heart stopped.

The scream of one grown man was followed by another, and another, and another. Arla rolled up the windows as it continued. Tears tracked down Jamie’s cheeks. Roman’s arms went tightly around me, and Arla’s fingers were white as they clenched the steering wheel.

The Alphas of All weren’t reasonable. Not at all.

And they were coming to question me in just a few days.

Me and my pinkish-red hair.

Damn, I was screwed.

Please Leave a Review

Here it is. The awkward page no one likes to read at the end of the book, where the author begs you to leave a review.

Believe me, I hate it more than you do.

But I have a husband in college for his master's degree, an almost-three-year-old, and a five-month old baby. Reviews will help us make money we really need, so please, please consider leaving a review.

Whether you loved or hated the book, you made it this far. So please review!

Regardless of whether you do or not, thank you for reading <3

-Lola Glass

Afterword

Henley and Roman's story really threw me for a loop. As I was editing one day, nearly done, it occurred to me that a real life Henley Clark would never commit to the version of Roman Ellis that existed at that point.

The first version of Roman was meaner. More manipulative. More violent. More like a lot of the leading men in popular indie books you and I love.

But I realized he wasn't someone Henley could stay with or love. Not in the long run. And telling you a love story while knowing the couple wasn't healthy or functioning felt like a lie.

So I went back and rewrote him entirely. It took longer than expected, but it was important to me that you got to see two characters build a relationship that could really last. One that was about more than just sex and bodies; one that was believable.

The final version of Roman isn't as harsh as many of the Alpha Males we read and obsess about.

He's not rough or cruel or calculating.

But I hope you love him for that.

-Lola Glass

FREE STUFF

Join my mailing list with this link for a free chapter from Roman's point of view! There will be a new bonus chapter at the back of every one of my books for subscribers :)

[FREE CHAPTER](#)

You'll receive a monthly update on my books as well as any upcoming deals and promotions. No spam!

Acknowledgement

For this book, acknowledgements go to my dad. He taught me about goals over and over and over and over again. Even when I complained about it. Even when I told him I understood. If not for those lessons, I have no idea who I'd be right now.

Also to my husband. Because he takes care of our boys while I work and makes time for our family even when PA school is kicking his butt. Because he loves our boys and is their best friend as much as he's mine. Because marrying him was the best decision I've ever made.

Connect with Me

Connect with me! I create tons of character art for my stories and others that I love, so stop by one of my pages to check it out and let me know what you think as well as stay updated on upcoming releases.

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About Lola Glass

Author of books. Wrangler of children. Buyer of Chinese food.
Designer of art. Lover of life.

If that's too vague for you, I'm a twenty-something with two little boys and a sexy-as-hell husband. I breathe books—in and out, reading and writing—and adore romance in all forms except reverse-harem. That's not my thing.

I reread books more times than the authors themselves probably do and am passionate about living life to the fullest, without regrets and with a ton of adventure. I can often be found walking on the beach with my baby, staring into the sky and pondering the beauty of our world.

Thanks again for reading!