



THE
DIRE
REACTION

M.A. COBB

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Afterword

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This is for anyone who is afraid to try something new.

If it wasn't for the encouragement and acceptance of a special group of friends, I would have never been brave enough to write this.

It's okay to try.

CHAPTER ONE



DANI

“I’m sorry, I know this isn’t the prognosis you were hoping for. But, with diet, exercise, and some supplemental vitamins, he will still have a long and healthy life.” I can’t stop fidgeting with my stethoscope. I hate having to tell dog owners that their animals are going to undergo a lifetime of pain.

“There isn’t a fix? Like a surgery or something?” The woman in front of me didn’t look like she was used to being told “no”. Her perfectly manicured hand pinches the rhinestone leash while her other smooths the silk blouse over her slacks.

Her white labrador lays at her feet, panting. Even with the air conditioning turned up, the small office is overpoweringly hot from the August sun pouring in the window.

I feel ya, buddy. I’m sweating like a racehorse in here, and the heated gaze from his cranky owner isn’t helping.

“Hip dysplasia isn’t really an easy fix. Think of it like arthritis.” I have to stand on my tiptoes to reach the pamphlet regarding care. “But, there are a wide range of options to help him stay comfortable.”

Her garishly red lips press in a thin line, but she flashes me a practiced smile when I hand her the flier.

“The clerk will have your prescriptions ready, and she can go over the vitamin supplements if you’d like as well.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

I can’t get out of the room fast enough. At least I know that dog will be spoiled rotten, and offered the finest options.

“Jenny, room two is going to need hip dysplasia discharge paperwork,” I call out over my shoulder, dropping the chart on her desk.

She’s barely out of high school, but knows exactly what to do. She dives into the filing cabinet as I grab the pile of mail and head to my office.

Closing the door behind me, my head makes an audible thunk when I lean back against it.

I never knew when I decided to be a vet that there would be so many owners who treated their pets like accessories. Status symbols.

Thank goodness there are still enough farms around that I can still see people with realistic expectations.

Flipping through the mail, I file most of it in the garbage can. But, there’s one in here that looks intriguing:

The National Agriculture and Food Research Organization

It looks official even.

A quick glance, and I can't keep it to myself. I go back to the main desk where Jenny is busy filing paperwork, but the room is otherwise empty. Miss Fancy lab owner has left.

"Jenny! Check this out!" I wave the letter to her. Her blond hair is pulled back out of her eyes which grow big at my excitement.

"What? What is it?" She reaches her slim hand out and I push the letter into it.

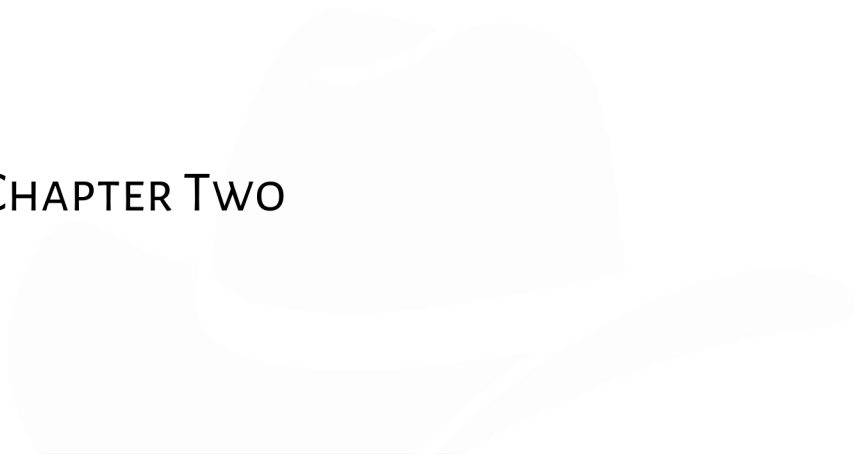
I can't even wait for her to read. "We've been asked to participate in a clinical trial for a new dysplasia and arthritis medication study! How cool is that?" I shift impatiently watching her read, idly flipping through the unfiled charts on the desk, a track record of today's patients.

"That would have been great for Mrs. Pinkerton," Jenny replies, her eyes still scrolling down the letter.

Yea, I'm not overly excited about that one.

My thoughts drift to one rancher in particular. Tall, dark blond hair, and looks good in a tight pair of Wrangler jeans. Sam Downing.

CHAPTER TWO



SAM

“Lie down. Lie down! Back! Away! Lie down!” My border collie minds every command. Working her way around the back of the protesting cattle, she pushes them and waits.

There’s always one that doesn’t want to load out. This time it’s a two year old steer. He turns his broad head back at the dog. Dropping his snorting nose, foam dripping from his bellowing mouth, he tries to charge her.

Misty dodges easily away. She’s a been-there-done-that dog. Hitting five years old, she’s at peak performance. That ornery angus won’t get the best of her.

Shifting in the saddle, I stretch my legs, careful not to spur my horse accidentally.

A few more quick movements from my dog, and the ranch hand is closing up the gate on the stock trailer.

“Okay, Boss?” he asks, his Mexican accent thick.

“Yep, thank you, Javier. You and Carlos have a safe trip. Call me when you get to the rail yard.”

The small man tips his hat and climbs into the cab.

We've been at this for three weeks, rounding up the cattle from the hills and loading them out to the stock yards at the rail center to be shipped back east.

And my ass is tired.

It's nice to be making the last trip home for the season.

"Whoa, Red, hold." I pull the reins tight. I don't really need to tell him. He's done this a million times. "Misty, up!" She comes running, launching herself behind me onto the back of the horse. The blanket extends past the saddle so her claws don't spook Red. She settles behind me, panting against me as we ride. She's already worked her ass off; she deserves a little break, too. Relaxing in the saddle, I let Red lead the way. The gentle rocking of my hips is hypnotic, winding the miles back to the ranch house.

It's nearly dusk when I get close enough to see the silver Nissan coupe still parked in the driveway.

"Looks like Becky's still here," I mutter to Misty. She wags her tail against my thigh in response. But, she does that whenever I talk; she's a glutton for attention.

Red leads himself to the barn, and Misty jumps from his back, chasing one of the chickens running loose in the yard.

She's met with a growl from the guard dog.

"Misty, you know better than that. Thor will kick your ass if you hurt one of his chickens."

At the sound of his name a giant white dog meanders into the barn to watch me unsaddle Red.

He rubs his head against my hip, nearly knocking me off balance.

“Easy, boy, or I’ll throw the saddle on you next.” After getting his head pat, he seems content enough to wander off, keeping a wary eye on Misty.

Red is nose deep in a fresh bale of sweet smelling grass hay as I finish up. He gives me a one-eared side eye when I catch a burr with the curry comb, but stands quietly for the brush down. His skin ripples from the aggressive strokes, and tufts of hair and dust dance in the last of the sunlight spilling through the doors.

Closing the barn doors behind me, a quick glance at my phone shows it’s already after six. I’m surprised Becky is still here. Maybe it’s because she’s still new.

“Oh, Mr. Downing!” There she is. Becky steps carefully down the concrete steps from the kitchen door, bracing her considerable weight on her knees with each step.

“Hi, Becky, how did everything go today?” The cool September breeze teases through the open lapels of my jacket.

“Very well, Mr. Downing. He got a bath and new blankets today. He even grunted when I asked if he liked what was on his TV!” Her smiling brown eyes are framed by her gray curly hair which she pushes back impatiently.

“I’m sure Alex appreciates all of your attention. Thank you for taking care of him while I’m gone.” I flash her a grateful smile.

The wrinkles stand out around her eyes when she smiles. She reminds me a little of my grandmother, the glasses hanging from a chain around her neck completing the resemblance.

“It’s so sweet that you take care of him. Angela said he’s your father-in-law?” Her brows draw together with unspoken questions.

I wince a little involuntarily. I can’t help it. It still hurts.

“Yea, my wife, Claire, passed away two years ago. That’s her dad. He was a victim of a home invasion about ten years ago that left him like that.” I didn’t want to say the word “vegetable,” but it’s the closest description I’ve heard. “I told her I’d take care of him.”

She lays her hand on my sleeve. “That’s very sweet of you. I’m sorry about your wife. I didn’t mean to pry.”

They always ask. And it always feels like my heart is ripping out of my fucking chest. But, I plaster on my best smile. This is the part about home health care they don’t tell you about. The revolving door of people who want to help, but want to know the stories. The digging back through years of pain for each new smiling face.

“Thank you, Becky, I’ll see you tomorrow.” My teeth ache from clenching them. “Come on, Misty,” I grunt out. I nearly trip over her because she’s so damned fast heading for the door.

Becky squeezes into her little Nissan and waves through the window before leaving.

Closing the door, I lean against it until my head thumps against the paned glass.

Every single time. They always ask about her. I guess it's what I should expect, keeping her dad here in the house.

Shit, I don't even know the guy. He was like this when I met her. When I married her. Even when I buried her from cancer only three years later.

He's just, there.

But, I promised.

My phone dings with missed calls and messages. Being out of range all day, then coming back into the wifi at the house, the pocket of my denim jacket feels like it's going into some kind of seizure, beeping and vibrating.

Fishing it out of my pocket, I hang up my coat and hit the pre-heat on the oven.

Frozen pizza for the win. I should buy stock in them during roundup season.

Scrolling through the messages, I grab a cold beer from the fridge.

One name catches my eye as I pop the top on my Coors.

Dr. Dani Michelson.

Oh. What do we have here?

She certainly gets the fires going. That cute little veterinarian who took over the clinic my family has used for forty years. She's feisty, with blond hair, blue eyes, and the way she fills out those tight little scrubs leaves my throat parched.

The groan that escapes my lips is from the beer. At least, that's what I tell myself.

Flipping to my voicemail, I hear her light voice tickling my ear.

Why yes, I will come down to the office to talk to you.

Thor, my boy, you get to go for a ride tomorrow.

CHAPTER THREE



DANI

I shouldn't be this nervous. Every time I see Sam I can feel my stomach flip flopping, my heart racing. He's not even here yet and I feel it.

Maybe it's the tight jeans. Maybe it's his dark blue eyes, or the lopsided smile he always seems to wear.

"Yes, Mrs. Forester, your kitten is adorable. But, these shots will help to keep her healthy. She will forget about them almost instantly."

Please just let me give the shots and stop crying.

"Are you sure they won't hurt my little Fluffy-pants?" Her gnarled hands cling to the kitten that is struggling to free herself from the arthritic clutch.

"I'm sure. Would it be easier if my helper and I take her into the other room?" My patience is wearing thin.

But, I've also been borderline haywire waiting until eleven when Sam is supposed to be here.

"Yes, I think that would be easier. I don't want her to think I just stood here while she was being hurt!" Her long gray braid

drapes over her shoulder, and the kitten tries to bat at the small fabric tie she has on the end.

“Okay, I’ll be right back.”

I find Jenny who’s busy wiping down the table in room three. “I need your help for just a minute. We need to give the distemper shots in the back.” She locks me with her brown eyes and nods, a wisp of blond hair flits across her forehead. This isn’t the first time we’ve taken animals to a different room.

I doubt it will be the last.

I head straight there, antsy to get this done. I’m just getting everything gathered when Jenny walks in with a very wrapped up angry kitten.

“She scratched the shit out of Mrs. Forester.” Jenny’s eyes are huge as she whispers.

“I can’t imagine why since she was squeezing her so hard I thought her whiskers were going to pop off,” I say quietly, trying not to laugh.

Jenny giggles as I give the small injection to the protesting feline.

“She’s all set. Bring her back in six months for her follow ups. Thank you, Mrs. Forester, have a great afternoon.” I smile my practiced smile, and drop the chart on Jenny’s desk.

I practically run back to my office, closing the door behind me. I do a quick spot check in the mirror that acts as my coat

rack and fix a few tendrils that have fallen loose from my braid.

Maybe that looks sexy? Curling it down the side?

A dash of pink lip gloss, but not too much.

I'm so bad at this. I haven't dated since high school besides coffee dates in college. I'm a freaking doctor. I shouldn't be pining like a schoolgirl.

Was that the main door?

My heart rate spikes. My pulse rushes through my ears.

Nails click on the hard linoleum floor. I hear a deep rumble of a voice drifting from the main desk, and Jenny's, muted through the door.

I'm going to pass out if I don't stop hyperventilating.

Jenny gives a soft knock and pokes her head into my office. "Mr. Downing is here," she says with a broad smile.

Go time.

I gather the documentation I've received and the criteria checklist. The turnaround was surprisingly short from when I accepted their trial request and when everything arrived.

Armed with a clipboard to grip, I step into the waiting area.

He's there.

Folded into one of the chairs. His ankle propped on his knee. Dark blond hair curls from beneath his baseball cap.

And his eyes. They suck me in. Dark blue pools, a crater lake in a volcano.

The corner of his mouth turns up. “Doctor.”

“Yes, hello, Mr. Downing.” I’m shaken from my momentary stupor. “If you’d like to come into my office, I can go over the details of the clinical trial with you.”

I finally notice his dog, a giant white Great Pyrenees standing idly next to him. Heavy jowls are dripping while he placidly watches me.

How could I miss a white dog standing between us that weighs almost a hundred and fifty pounds?

Turning on my heel to hide the flush of heat rising into my cheeks, I beeline for the safety of my desk. Maybe putting that between us will help?

I hear the click of the dog’s nails behind me, but I don’t want to turn around until I reach my chair.

He fills the door when he steps in. Broad shoulders under a black coat that narrows his waist even more.

His gaze almost hurts as it pierces into me.

Shuffling papers, I try to slip into a professional mode.

“Please, have a seat.” I gesture to the hard plastic chair on the other side of the desk. “So, Mr. Downing—”

“Please, call me Sam.” A tiny tightening around his eyes teases the humor in his words. He sets his elbows on his knees,

leaning toward me. The scent of leather and pine drifts over me.

“—Um, yes, of course. Sam.” Such a short word fills my mouth. I have to chew on my cheek to cleanse his name.

“So, a couple of weeks ago, our clinic was asked to take part in a trial for a new therapy for hip dysplasia. One of their requirements was a dog who was still in the early stages. Since I know Thor here fits that criteria, I wanted to see if you’d be interested?” Fidgeting with the corner of the paper, I try not to meet his eyes directly. I fear I’ll be drawn in again.

“What exactly would it do?” His words pour from the depths of his chest.

“Oh, um, so it’s a gene therapy. Looking at the data, they’ve implemented a new DNA protocol that should improve his healing rate, and reduce the wear on his hips. The laboratory trials look quite promising!” My eyes land on his full lips which are pursing while I ramble.

“Will it hurt him?” His hand moves to the head of the giant dog, softly scratching behind his ears.

“I don’t think so? It says here—” I shuffle to the right page, “—that common side effects are lethargy, vomiting and diarrhea. So, you’d likely want to keep an eye on him for a day or so after each dose.”

I wasn’t really expecting that question. It’s kind of endearing he’s worried about that.

His brows knit together. “How many doses?”

His eyes focus on my mouth. I realize I'm biting my lip.

“Well, it's only four doses. But, each administration takes about six hours, so it may be easier to give him a small sedation to keep him calm while he gets the infusion.”

Does his bottom lip stick out just a bit when he smiles? I wonder what it would taste like.

Oh, man.

Heat rises into my cheeks. I fight the urge to squirm in my seat.

“The doses are a week apart, so it's really only a month, but it might extend his quality of life pretty dramatically. If it works.” I splay my hands on my thighs, my palms are sweaty enough they might warp the papers if I keep messing with them.

He sits back, leaving the leash draped across his lean thigh. His fingers knot behind his head, giving me a tiny flash of skin above his pant line.

“Well, the thing is, Doc, I just finished roundup yesterday. I have to preg check six hundred heifers that will be turned out to my northern pastures next week.” He leans forward, the heat of his gaze intensifies when he draws closer.

I'm sucked into his eyes. I knew I should have avoided them.

“So, what would be the chances I could get a hand with that while Thor gets his meds?”

The dog turns back to him when he hears his name, giving a soft whine.

“I’ll be happy to compensate you for the help,” he adds. His smile grows, playing along his cheek with a twitch, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Of course, I’d be happy to help.”

Wait, what did I just say? I can’t! I have patients lined up.

Who am I kidding. I’d jump at his pants. I mean, I’d jump at the chance to spend all day with him.

He’s standing over me, his large calloused hand out, brow raised expectantly.

When my fingers touch his warm palm, it feels like electricity runs past my elbow into my chest.

“Thank you, Mr. Downing, er, Sam. Please make sure Jenny gets a weight on Thor before you go.”

He holds my hand a moment longer than necessary, but I’ll be damned if I’ll be the first to pull away. His grip is so firm, but gentle.

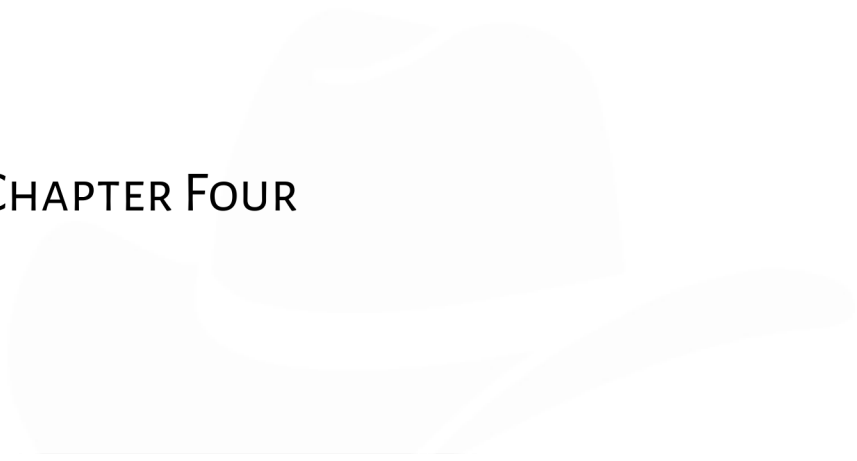
“Thanks for thinking of me, Doc.” Did he just wink?

The air is vacuumed from the room when he leaves. The back of the chair squishes my hair against my neck, but my bones don’t work any more to hold me up.

I hear Jenny talking to him, and within a moment the door closes behind his departure.

What did I get myself into? Seeing him for hours every week?

CHAPTER FOUR



SAM

I couldn't resist trying to get her out here. I am surprised she agreed.

“Away! Away! Lie down!” Misty's like a robot, her tongue lolling as she responds.

It doesn't take a lot of pushing to run the cows into the sorting pens. I'm not looking forward to the days of work preg checking and tagging I'm rounding up for myself and my small crew.

But, the last bawling heifer finally gets pushed through the gate, and I head back to the house. The sun's barely coming up, and it's right in my eyes. I hate this time of year. With the days getting shorter, I have to get out and going when it's still dark.

Knowing what's waiting at the house puts a little fire in my gut though. My limbs feel electrified thinking about Doctor Dani with her tight little ass in those scrubs.

Misty follows a little behind and next to Red as we ride. She's been kicked enough by the cows to know where to stay

out of reach of any animal bigger than her. Giving a quick bark at the new vehicle, she disappears into the barn. Either finding water or finding chicken shit to eat.

A Toyota pickup is parked next to the silver Nissan. It suits her. I can feel her eyes following me from her driver's seat when I head to the barn.

Disappearing into the shadows near the hay bin, I don't bother tying Red, but just wrap his reins around the post to keep them away from his feet. As long as he has food, he won't move. I hear her car door, and I'm drawn to it like a dog to a bone.

Fuck, my hands won't stop shaking. I haven't wanted anyone like this since Claire.

And there's the dose of cold water I needed.

Just think of your dead wife, asshole. That will kill a hard-on quicker than a cold shower.

I try to shake her out of my head as I leave the barn.

Latching my eyes on the doc's blond ponytail sticking out over her red ear muffs, I let past memories fade into the recesses of my mind.

Her pink cheeks and blue eyes slam me back into the present with a tingle in my groin. Her hot breath gathers around her pouty mouth, a soft cloud in the cool morning air.

"Good morning, Doc. Welcome to the ranch." Her truck radiates heat when I lean against it. "Anything I can help you carry?" It is cute watching her struggle with the insulated bag

she brought, her ass cheeks clenching beneath her jeans when she leans into the truck.

“Good morning, Mr. Downing. I can get it. It just slid across the seat on the way here.” She smiles triumphantly, sliding the strap over her head so it crosses her chest. Right between her breasts. They jut out through her bright blue windbreaker, hugging the tight nylon that divides them.

A blossoming shade of red moving up her neck makes me realize I’ve been staring at her chest far longer than I should be.

Shit, so smooth.

Clearing my throat, I catch her eyes and I turn on my heel. “Right this way.” I lead her toward the kitchen door, silently wishing it led to purgatory to cover my idiocy.

Remnants of my bacon and eggs still cling to the air when we step into the warm kitchen. The wood stove in the living room churns out enough heat to warm all two thousand square feet easily. The wave of heat pummels us when we step inside.

“Come in, make yourself comfortable. You can put your stuff either here on the table or on the island if it’s easier?” I feel like a stewardess on a plane. The heat is stifling. I don’t remember it being that hot in here this morning. Unzipping my jacket, I tighten the flue on the stove to dampen the blaze.

“Thank you, the table will be fine. I have everything already drawn up for his weight.” She unslings her bag and her jacket puffs back out to hide the swell of her breasts.

Damn.

“Let me get Thor.” Her presence in my house rattles me. The blast of cool air sobers the hazy feel of my head.

Thor’s laying down in the shade of the barn. Even the frosty air is too warm for him with his shaggy coat. Raising his head when he sees me, he offers a low whine when he rolls himself to his feet.

“I know, buddy, we’re going to try to fix that. Come.” I pat my leg, and he falls into step next to me.

Misty reappears, running circles around us while we walk. Thor gives her a low growl when she darts too close to him. Bad part about a herding dog is that their version of play is nipping at heels. Thor is touchy about his legs.

“He’s going to kick your ass, Misty, go on now.” She runs off to a new distraction, and I coax Thor to go into the house.

Becky is there, chatting with the doc.

“Good morning, Mr. Downing! This sweet girl is a veterinarian! Can you believe that?” Her round cheeks nearly hide her eyes as she smiles.

“Yes, Becky. Thank you and good morning to you, too.” Did that sound too dismissive? Fuck, I hope so.

I think she gets it.

“It was very nice to meet you, dear. I have to get back to work.” Becky heads back toward Alex’s room, quietly closing the door.

“She seems, nice.” Dani’s eyebrows pinch when she looks up at me. “She takes care of your, um, father-in-law?” She looks like she is choking the words out.

Fuck, Becky. Dammit.

“Yes. He’s been like that for ten years or more, I think? When my wife was dying of cancer, she made me promise to take care of him.”

Please don’t let this make things weird.

“Oh.” Her mouth makes a perfect circle, springing very wicked thoughts to my mind. But, relief floods through me as well when I see her features smooth, the impact of what I said working through.

“I’m sorry about your wife.” Her words are flat, almost monotone.

Dammit, Becky.

“Thanks, she passed two years ago.” It’s too fucking hot in here. I hang my jacket and wide brimmed hat on the hook by the door. Her eyes following me are not helping.

Thor stands between us, his head finding her lap, prompting double ear scratches from her.

“Would you like some coffee?” I pace to the coffee maker in the corner of the kitchen, digging out two cups before she responds.

“Yes, thank you.” She digs into her bag, withdrawing two IV bags and some tubing. “So, I brought an oral sedative for

him. Do you have a favorite treat of his we can hide it in? That should relax him enough to start the IV, and then the medication has a dosage in it to keep him sleeping.”

I nearly drop the cups of coffee when I turn around. She’s shed her jacket. A tight little green blouse clings to her chest and small waist. What I would give to be that button, straining to keep her breasts in check. The white flash of her bra through the seam transfixes me, and only the scorching of the ceramic mugs breaks my concentration.

Setting them carefully on the table so I don’t spill any on her paperwork, I fetch milk and a package of hot dogs from the fridge.

“Sugar is on the table if you want it. Here’s a perfect Thor treat.” Tearing a little hole in the package, I squeeze out one of the cold franks.

I barely resist wiggling it at her, and settle for grinning like a teenager. She’s been nothing but professional. I really don’t want to push my luck.

It earns me a smile and a reddening of her cheeks when she holds the pills out for me. Her soft scent of vanilla and honey envelopes me as I hold my palm open for her to drop two tiny pills into it.

“These will take about thirty minutes to kick in once he eats them.”

Fighting back all of the ways I can envision to kill thirty minutes, I settle for stuffing the pills in the cold meat and

giving them to a very willing dog.

Sitting in one of the hard backed chairs, I add a little milk to my coffee and watch her pull more items from her bag. A cordless shaver, a razor, some medical tape.

It has me involuntarily rubbing the stubble on my jaw. I didn't get a chance to shave this morning in my rush to get out and move cows.

Actually, I think it's been three or four days since I shaved. It's past the itchy stage. Damn, my beard already shows a little gray when it grows out. Something to expect in my thirties, but she's still maybe mid-twenties?

"Can you hold his paw, please? I can go ahead and shave his leg for the IV, if he'll tolerate it." She tilts her hip, holding the cordless clippers, her raised eyebrows watching me.

"Sure, Thor, come." Thor walks over to me, his jowls draining matching dots of drool on my knee. "Good boy, sit." I scratch his ears, and offer another bit of hot dog as he groans to the floor.

"Can we do this with him laying down? The hard floor is hard for him to shake on. I think it hurts his hips."

"Absolutely! I get it." She gives me a broad, eye lightening smile.

"Thor, down." I reward him with another piece of hot dog. His tongue drips on the hardwood floor after he swallows it down.

“Oh, you’re such a good boy!” She kneels next to him and rubs his ears using a singsong voice, I swear that dog is smiling. Hell, I am too.

Sitting on the floor next to him, I give his belly a good scratch to get him to roll onto his side, and he obliges by reaching his paw out and resting on my folded knee. It nearly fills my hand when I grasp it. “Well, that was easy.”

“Sometimes, they just know we’re trying to help.” She says it matter of factly, and turns on the clippers.

When the vibration touches his leg for the first time, he gives a gentle tug against my hand. He relaxes into it quickly, the soft buzzing filtering through to my palm as she works.

My view is exceptional. Only inches from her. I can watch her as she concentrates. The small freckles across her nose, her blond lashes that brush her cheek, and the dart of her tongue against her lip when she goes carefully over the tendons of his leg.

It only takes a couple of minutes before she has a bare spot all the way around his leg and a small pile of loose white fur on the floor against my knee. I can feel his paw getting heavier as he relaxes, the toes no longer curling against my palm like he’s holding on.

The gentle rhythm of his breathing has slowed and deepened.

“Guess it’s like a spa day for him,” I smile, scooping up the loose fur. I don’t want to disturb his long nose resting against

my boot. So, instead, I find myself leaning back on my elbow awkwardly to drop it into the small garbage can behind me.

A quick glance at her before I sit back up reveals her eyes glued to my stomach, at the place my shirt lifted when I stretched.

The blush returns to her neck, but I don't think she noticed me catching her.

Maybe she isn't completely professional.

She raises on her knees and turns, drops the clippers into their case and grabs the razor. I catch another glimpse of her bra as she turns, ever so briefly. It's enough to cause my cock to twitch though.

Down, boy.

She drags the razor in a small rectangle on his leg. Up at the table, she exchanges the razor for her coffee cup before rolling back to sit cross-legged next to Thor. Sadly, a few inches further away from me.

"So, what brought you to Boise?" I ask, curiosity killing me.

"Oh, I went to school in Idaho. It wasn't a big leap to land here. Better mix of customers. Still lots of large livestock to offset all the dogs and cats." Her hand reaches over, smoothing out the fur over Thor's shoulder. "I'm from Missoula originally, but it's pretty full of small animal vets. Boise is growing so fast and there's still lots of room. With Doctor Carter retiring, it seemed like a good fit."

“He’s been around for a long time. My dad started going to him soon after he opened his practice. They’ve been friends forever. Heard they’re planning a golfing trip to Florida.” The thought of my dad wearing golf shorts and a Hawaiian shirt is hysterical.

Thor gives a soft snore, his nose pressing against my knee.

“Looks like he’s out.” She finishes her coffee and stands. Her ass is right at eye level, tight in the confines of her jeans.

Kneeling with her IV kit, she sprays the bare spot with some sort of aerosol.

“Lidocaine to numb it.” She answers my unspoken question.

With a deft motion, she sinks the needle. Thor doesn’t even twitch an ear.

“Oh, good, I was hoping he’d be out enough.” She tapes the tubing to his leg, and attaches the bag to it. Yellow liquid works its way down the line, disappearing into him.

“Can I hang this on the chair? Or do we need to move him?” She holds the bag, the yellow fluid viscous, like oil, slowly sloshes inside.

“Chair sounds good to me. He’s awfully damn heavy to move now.” Finally getting to stand, my legs tingle from sitting on the hard floor so long.

“So,” she says, “let’s go check some cows.”

CHAPTER FIVE



DANI

Exhausted. I am absolutely exhausted. I've never had to check this many cows in a day, and there are four others checking along with me.

I have also never been shit on this much in my life.

"It's a good thing you remembered your rain gear." Sam says, walking next to me as we head back up to the house.

"That's the one thing I remembered from college. Checking cows is, well, messy." The only reprieve I've had was periodically checking on Thor. And that entailed stripping out of all my slimy gear each time I went into the house.

His laugh is so deep that I can feel it in my chest. "It's okay, Doc, you can say it. It's shitty." When a smile plays on his lips it makes his eyes practically glow.

"You're right." I can't resist him. "It's shitty." Poop is crusted down the front of me; my boots are covered. I feel two inches taller from the manure caked to the bottoms.

"See, Doc? That wasn't so hard to say." I can hear the laughter simmering in his voice. "I have a hose in the barn if

you want to clean off a layer or two.”

I’d need to put my gear in the bed of my truck if I didn’t. There’s no way I want this nastiness in the cab with me. “Yes, thank you.”

I’m not sure why, but it makes me happy to see that his barn is tidy. All the walkways are clean, the tack room, with its rows of saddles, is organized, even the hay storage area looks under control.

“Here we are.” He holds up the end of the hose for me. “Ready?” His eyebrows raise, watching me.

My fingers are cold already. The nozzle nearly burns when I grab it. A quick nod and he cracks the spigot. A slow flow of water drizzles out, and all I manage to do is find the crevice between my jacket and pants, and soak my clothes underneath.

To his credit, he stands quietly while I fumble my way through trying to spray areas I can’t even reach.

“Okay. Can I beg for help?” I try to give my best defeated look. But, by the look of his eyes, I may have said the wrong thing.

“You don’t have to—” His eyes are nearly black in the dim light, his lids heavy. I can see his jaw tighten when he holds out his hand. “—but it never hurts to beg a little.” A smile teases his lips as he steps back.

My stomach is flooded with heat, his words ricocheting through me. Biting my lip to keep from panting, I raise my arms so he can spray me down.

Holy shit, if it wasn't so damned cold, this would be so hot.

He thumbs the water nozzle so it pressurizes. Starting with my legs, the spray makes a tingle that massages me through the layers. He works it rhythmically up and down each leg, thoroughly rinsing the evidence of an untold number of cows from my body.

Up and down. Up and down, he works it farther up my legs, he passes over my hips quickly to my belly, then back down.

It's so hard not to rub my thighs together, to push down the rising dampness inside my pants. I'm so glad the rain gear is thick enough to not broadcast my painfully hard nipples.

"Turn sideways," he growls, his voice low and husky.

I obey, a half turn, my arms still raised.

It's then he hits higher, the tantalizing vibration cresting across my breast and back down my side and leg.

"Again," he commands.

I hate how much I love this.

I can't see him, but the spray moves up my legs, up my ass, along the small of my back, pausing right where my bra strap sits. The weight of the water caressing its way back down. Shutting my eyes, I can almost envision it being his hands working their way back down my back, cupping my ass, stroking his way down my thighs.

"Turn," he grunts.

The water finds my other breast, the nipple rubbing against the firm cloth, the spray misting around my neck. It cools the fire raging in my belly, but barely.

“Face me.”

The heat from my cheeks I’m sure is making steam. Biting the inside of my lip, I can’t believe the tightness I feel. My thighs are quivering.

When I look at him, his whiskered jaw is set. I can’t see his eyes. The brim of his cowboy hat blocking my view. But, I can feel his gaze as he’s focusing on the water landing on my belly, following it down my legs.

His thumb loosens from the hose. The water drops back down to a slow pour. Closing the spigot, did he just sigh?

What I wouldn’t give to have him tell me to strip right now.

I’d beg him.

CHAPTER SIX



SAM

I keep dreaming she strips out of her rain gear, and that she's naked underneath. Her pouty mouth is begging me to take her.

I wake up every time, my hand wrapping around my cock, squeezing back from making a mess in my bed.

Thor's due for his next dose today. I wish I could figure out a way to get her back out here.

Of all the times for things to run smoothly on the ranch and not need a vet.

The next batch of heifers aren't due for preg checks until next month. I don't know if I can sucker her into it twice. But, I do have a whole pen of yearlings that need their vaccinations.

But, all I need to do is get her here.

It's a hunger, gnawing in my gut. Her flushed cheeks, the panting when I moved that hose up and down. She might talk professionally, but her body told me a whole different story.

"Thor, load up, buddy." I hold the door open to my Dodge pickup.

Shit, was he just a little more nimble jumping in? He's not whining when he lays down.

Win, win. I get time with the tempting little doctor and he gets a new set of hips.

We'll both be happy boys.

My jeans are tight in the crotch driving into town, and my heart beat thrumming in my ears when I unload him at the vet clinic.

I don't even need to lead him; he walks in like he owns the place.

The girl behind the desk meets me with a big smile and disappears down the hallway.

"Doctor Michelson asked me to make sure Thor got this to get him relaxed." She carries a small cup with two tiny pills, and a baggie of treats when she returns.

"Thank you." I try not to show any signs of disappointment of not seeing the doc.

"Here, buddy, I have a treat." The dog's eyes open wide when he hears the words, drool creating long stringers from his jowls, nearly touching the floor. "Okay." Thor reaches forward, slobbering on my hand when he swallows the morsels.

"Did you even taste those? Nearly took my hand off, too." Wiping the drool onto my pants, I see Jenny smiling.

“He’s so well mannered. I just love him!” She squats on her heels, running both of her hands through the fur around his neck, pressing her face against his forehead.

He bestows a wet lick on her arm for her affections.

Giggling, she goes back to the desk, wiping her arm with a paper towel before sitting back down.

“Doctor Michelson will be out in a moment. She had to get the meds ready for you.”

My jaw hurts from clenching my teeth, but I pass the time scrolling on my phone and answering a few texts.

Thor sits, then lays next to me on the floor.

I sincerely hope she doesn’t wait much longer, or he’s going to be dead weight.

Her steps echo closer. My eyes zero in on the door to the hallway.

The blush on her neck starts as soon as she sees me, working its way higher with every step closer she takes.

“Good morning, Mister—Sam.” The blush completes its ravaging of her cheeks. I have a nearly uncontrollable urge to follow it to its source, hidden somewhere below her tight scrub top.

Tiny paw prints. Adorable. It would look better on the floor in a pile at her feet.

Fuck, I struggle to pull my thoughts to the present, standing and stretching the firm chair’s mark from my tailbone.

“Good morning, Doc.” At least my smile feels pure, unlike my thoughts. “Thor, come.” I make sure to meet her eyes when I say the last word. She seemed to like it when I directed her last week.

Her eyes flare for a split second.

Yes, she likes it.

It takes everything in me to not tell her to go into her office and follow her in there.

Patiently, I wait for Thor to stand. I bet he’s feeling a little groggy already.

I follow the tight sway of her ass down the hallway to the backroom, her vanilla scent teasing me. There’s a large stainless steel examining table with a ramp leading to the surface.

“Well, at least I won’t have to lift him.”

“I’m sorry, that’s what took me an extra few minutes getting that hooked up for him.” She busies herself along the counter, laying out her supplies.

“Next time, come and get me. I’m sure that isn’t light.” She turns back, giving me a small nod and a little half smile.

Thor hesitates at the bottom of the ramp. “It’s okay, buddy, I have another treat for you.” I let him get a good sniff of the meaty morsel, then use it to lead him up the ramp. Being that high up, he lays down quickly, swallowing the treat without even tasting it.

“Good boy.” With my hand resting on his shoulder, he relaxes on the table. His large head finds his paws with a sigh.

“Can you hold his paw again, please?” The tip of her tongue darts out, skimming across her lower lip before disappearing. She’s killing me with a death of a thousand cuts.

“Of course.” Sliding around the table, I lift his leg, still shorter haired than the other from last week’s shave.

Thor obliges by rolling onto his side, making it easier for me to hold his paw up.

Vibrations from the clippers tickle down my hand. The heat of her body radiates against mine. She’s inches away from me. I can see the rapid pulse on her blushing neck.

When she tilts her head to reach under his leg, she’s so close a single hair brushes my jacket. Glistening gold under the harsh exam lights, it bends and flexes a silent dance against my chest. Clinging to the rough nylon shell, it undulates with her movements, bowing under my breath.

When she moves away, I miss the sensation of the tiny tether.

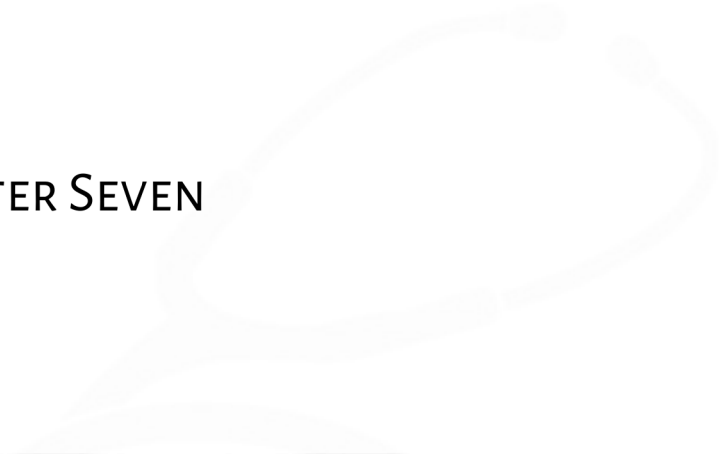
What is going on with me?

Thor is settling into a deeper sleep when she moves the razor within the faint outlines of her previous rectangle. Before long, the yellow fluid is draining into him, one thick droplet at a time.

“Thank you for your help.” She gives a soft exhale, focusing her lips to sway the errant hair back in place.

“I’ll be back in a few hours.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



DANI

Thor smells like him. Every time I check on him I catch the faint scent of leather and pine. More than once, when I know Jenny is busy, I find myself burying my nose in his soft fur.

Today is busy enough that it keeps me distracted most of the time. Large velcro straps hold Thor to the table, so even if he shifts in his sleep he won't fall off.

Time drags, knowing it's at least six hours for the dosage to be completed, I resign myself to trying to focus on my other patients in the meantime.

My last two patients are a cat with worms, and a puppy with fleas. After conversations about maintenance care and preventative treatments, both families are herded out the door, medications in hand.

"You seem tense today. Everything okay?" Jenny asks sweetly.

"Not enough chocolate, apparently." I force a smile back. Maybe it's some other kind of dessert I've had on my mind.

“I have some!” She turns to her lunchbox, and offers me a tiny Snickers bar. “You’re not you when you’re hungry!” she giggles.

“Thank you, Jenny, that’s very nice of you.” Twisting the tiny wrapper in my fingers, my eyes unfocus on the clock above her head.

Soon. He will be here soon.

Kicking myself into gear, I balance my stack of patient charts and find my way into my office.

The next hour disappears into paperwork. I even manage to forget about Sam for a little while in my concentration.

A light tapping at my door breaks my focus.

“Yes, Jenny, come in.” I just need to finish these last few notes.

Garlic and ginger, the heady smell of food, shatters what thought processes I have. Glancing up, I’m overwhelmed with the presence of Sam, his head smiling through the open door, a white plastic bag hanging from his long fingers.

“I brought food.”

“Oh, hi. You didn’t need to do that! I have, well, food.” I gesture to the small candy bar still in its wrapper on my desk.

My senses are on overload. The heavy scent of something fried, with mixes of beef, chicken, vegetables, and his scent of earth, all combine to narrow my breath, lodging in my throat making the air too heavy to breathe.

He fills my office. I can't look in any direction without him in my view.

"Needs and wants can be one and the same." His eyes pierce me, darkened by the brim of his baseball hat, but his words are soft, caressing my ears. "Now, clear a spot."

My body reacts before I can even think, pulling papers and charts away, stacking them on the cabinet behind me.

It's like he speaks directly to my animal brain. He completely bypasses any cognitive thought. My only urge is to do anything he says.

What is wrong with me?

Opening the bag, he pulls out Chinese take out containers, arranging them on my desk in a small square. Plates, chopsticks, forks, even fortune cookies all appear.

"I got a variety. I'm sure there will be something here you like." That teasing curl to his lips transfixes me. "I even got a vegetarian dish, just in case."

"I like meat," I laugh. Heat floods my cheeks when I realize how my words could be interpreted. "I mean, I'm not picky." I can almost taste blood, I'm biting my cheek so hard.

"Good girl," he exhales.

Holy shit.

My thighs clench at his words, tremors infiltrate my belly, seizing my lungs. I can't breathe correctly through the flood of heat radiating within me.

“Ladies first.” He opens the containers one by one. I can’t resist. I need something to do, to keep my hands occupied. Soon, both of our plates are brimming with the steaming selection of flavors. The desk, thankfully, is separating our chairs.

“Looks like it was a busy day,” he remarks. His fork waves in the direction of the pile of charts I had moved.

“It was a maintenance day.” I roll my eyes involuntarily. The food is so good that I have a hard time pausing long enough to talk. I didn’t realize just how hungry I was. Or maybe I’m just feeding my stomach because the other hunger I feel is unrequited.

“What’s that?” he asks. A bite of mongolian beef hangs before his lips, a morsel dangling from the fork. His tongue flicks out, wrapping around the errant piece, pulling it into his perfect mouth.

“What’s what?” I stumble out. Dammit, I can’t even concentrate around him.

The smile is back, working its way along his lips, curling up his clean-shaven cheek, nestling into the sapphire glints of his eyes. He leans closer, filling my vision with the hollow at the base of his throat. “What,” he pauses, “is a maintenance day?”

I must have groaned. His eyebrows shoot up watching me.

“It’s when people come in for things that should be taken care of already, but weren’t. So we end up having conversations about maintenance care. Parasites, dry skin, fun

stuff like that.” There is no way, whatsoever, that any of that is fun.

“Ah, that makes sense. I never thought of it that way. We’ve always just had a schedule and stuck with it.” He leans back and the temperature in the room drops back to normal. Slightly.

“Hmm, yes, it’s usually first time owners who have the biggest issues.” Shrugging, I take another bite.

“Do you have any pets, Doc?”

I shake my head, my mouth momentarily filled with savory garlic chicken. “I have a whole city of them to take care of, and I work so much it wouldn’t be fair to keep one. Maybe a fish would be a good option,” I can’t help but add. Anything else would die of boredom.

“All work and no play does not make for a happy life.” He picks one of the fortune cookies off the desk, popping the thin plastic wrapper between his fingers. A pinch between his fingers, and the small fold of paper comes into view.

“What does it say?” I ask, reaching for my own.

He laughs quietly. “Do you want me to read what it says, or read it the way it’s supposed to be read?”

“What does that mean? ‘The way it’s supposed to be read?’”

“The rule—” He wags the slip, a broad smile pulling his lips. “—is that you’re supposed to add the words ‘in bed’ to any fortune you get.”

“The rule?” It brings a hot flush to my cheeks. This man is torturous. “Well, if it’s a rule, it should be followed.”

He makes a rumbling sound of approval in his chest; my legs clench beneath my desk.

“Fortune favors the brave, in bed.” He grins, turning the slip so I can read it.

I can’t help but laugh. Peeling mine open, my laughter dies in my throat.

Oh, no, I can’t read this.

“What does it say?” he prompts me, jaw flexing as he chews the last of his cookie.

“I, um.” My face is literally on fire.

“Tell me.” His voice drops and he leans closer. His presence pressing upon me. The air is so thick, I don’t know if I can make any sound.

The animal part of my brain kicks in, responding to his voice.

“You are—” I clear my throat. It’s so dry suddenly. “You are very talented in many ways, in bed,” I squeak, grabbing for my water.

His laughter fills the room, rich and deep, swirling through me. I can’t help but give a nervous smile to hide the dampness I suddenly feel between my legs.

His Adam’s apple bobs as he continues to chuckle.

“Well, Doc, you know these things never lie.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



SAM

Thor is just opening his red-rimmed eyes when we make our way back to him. It takes him a little while before he tries to sit up.

It was like this last week, too. He was groggy for a few hours, lethargic another day after.

But, watching how he jumped into the truck this morning, I have hopes that this is helping. Maybe he's enjoying his long snooze?

"Hey, big guy, how was your nap?" I scratch his ears while Dani removes his IV and unstraps him from the table.

Drool cakes the side of his face, dripping when he raises his head. Sliding his feet ahead of him, they rest on the ramp.

"Are you ready to go?" I snap the leash onto his collar, standing next to the ramp in case he gets wobbly.

His shaky legs work his heavy body down the ramp. Once he gets to the floor, he spreads his legs like he just came off of a ship on the ocean.

With a grunt, he shakes.

Drool flies in all directions.

“Oh! Thor!” Dani cries, laughing.

I catch stringers of it across my jacket and pants, some landing on my hands and face.

“Thanks, buddy.” Wiping the dog drool from my cheeks, I catch her apologetic look. She’s already digging out paper towels from the dispenser and dampening them in the sink.

“I’m sorry.” She hands me a damp towel, then begins wiping her own bare arms down.

“For what? Drool?” I think I get it all off of my face. “I’ve been covered in worse. And I know you have, too.” I can’t resist the gentle tease.

The blush that creeps up her neck is calling to me. I don’t know how much longer I can hold back wanting to chase it down with my lips. The throbbing in my pants keeps pleading its vote, urging me to pull her to me.

She’s had me hard all afternoon. I need to leave before I do something about it. As much as she blushes, I still don’t want to hurry her.

“Don’t forget next week. I won’t let you leave hungry next time either. See ya, Doc.” I toss her a little wink and tug Thor out of the office, leaving her staring after me.

Jenny is sweeping the waiting room when we cut through. “Hi, Thor! You’re a good boy!” She gives his head a pat, a horrified look coming over her face when her hand comes away wet.

“I should have warned you. Sorry, he slept hard.”

“It’s okay, have a good night, Mr. Downing,” she calls, wiping her hand on a kleenex she snags from the desk.

“Good night.”

Dusk has already settled, and it’s dark by the time I get home. I’m glad to see the driveway is empty. Not sure I could handle Becky right now.

After giving Thor a chance to relieve himself, I bring him inside the dark house.

His nails click on the floor when he wanders into Alexander’s room where the soft lull of the TV plays all the time. It’s cooler there than in the living room where the wood stove is. He knows I won’t let him sleep in my room. He snores too loud.

A cold beer tastes amazing and cools the fire raging through me.

I should have just kissed her. I should have just bent her over her desk and made her scream my name.

Sinking into the couch, the cold sweat of the bottle feels good on my forehead. My pulse is pounding in my ears and my cock. Neither are pleasant right now.

That woman is making me live in a perpetual state of blue balls and distraction.

Social media does absolutely nothing to drown out the memory of her biting her lip. Or her laugh.

Another beer, a cold shower, and a jack off down the drain, I'm possibly feeling human again. Enough to go to sleep at least.

Still a headache, but a couple of aspirin should fix that.



It's dark when I awaken, a cold sweat covering my body. My stomach is rolling, my eyes burn like I've been welding without goggles.

How can I simultaneously feel like I'm on fire and freezing?

Every inch of me aches. Worse than my hardest work out. Worse than the time I was bucked from my horse and landed in the rocky stream bed.

My fingernails scream at me. The hair on my head bristles against the pressure on the pillow. Every point that touches a sheet feels like razor blades on my skin.

Shivering. Sweating.

I'm pushing at the stinging sheets that knot around my aching legs.

Fuck, even my toes hurt. The air burns my lungs.

Clenching my jaw, my teeth threaten to shatter out of my pounding skull.

Coughing, the shudder rips through me. Lungs spasming, my throat tightens in the rebellion of my frantic diaphragm. Saliva builds in my mouth burning my swollen tongue.

My arms refuse to move. I'm stuck in this hellish bed, suffocating, burning, shredding from the inside out. Focusing all of my willpower, I manage to move one leg. Pushing against the sweat soaked mattress, I get my hips to roll closer to the edge.

Agony rips through my spine when I twist. My organs defy my movement, coil in my gut, bloating, swelling up into my ribs. They feel like they're cracking when I shift, dislodging from my vertebrae.

I feel like I'm dying. This pain. It all hurts so bad. I almost wish I was. I can't breathe without my chest squeezing rigid, inflexible. The weight of my eyelids on my eyes is excruciating.

I throw my leg once more, my last vestige of strength.

The impact of the floor kaleidoscopes waves of pain, fracturing into white hot bursts erupting behind my eyes. Then, everything goes dark.

•••••

There are exactly nine granules of dirt pressing into my skin. I can feel them. Why do I know it's nine?

Deafening noises work their way into my ears; a cacophony of sounds mix and scream for attention. Thor is snoring, Alex's TV is far too loud, and my heartbeat is a drumline. Rushing blood screeches tiny whistles through my lungs with every aching breath. There is a bird outside whose piercing cry

rams right into my skull, its trill reverberating needles behind my eyes.

I'm still freezing and burning. Waves of discord ripple through me, a shiver of cold rattles down my spine, and I can hear my bones grinding against each other with the movement. That sound alone sends spikes of fever washing through me. A wave of tepid sweat breaks from every pore. I can feel each individual pore releasing a droplet of toxic liquid, pooling on my skin. The breeze from the ceiling fan is a hurricane whipping over me, drying the sweat, crusting it onto my sensitive skin.

My bones ache. Both to move and to remain still. This enhances the burning in my joints.

Slowly clenching my fingers, I feel each ridge of the tips tracing a screaming line when they touch. Every dust mote that lands on me is a stone's weight of pressure.

Senses on overdrive, I'm terrified to open my eyes.

The rolling in my stomach propels me to flatten my palms against the rough wood of the floor. I always thought it was smooth, worn from decades of footsteps. But, every fiber pushes its ridge against my hand, every valley swallowing and pinching my skin.

Muscles twitch and protest. My arms shake lifting my enormous weight. Feeling like I'm doing a pushup with a car on my back, I limply manage to find a sitting position.

Covering my eyes with my hand, my brows sting against my fingers. My lashes brushing against my thumb feel like thousands of tiny daggers.

I feel like I've been skinned. Raw nerves exacerbate every movement. The worst sunburn does not compare to the level of burning sensitivity.

Hand clamping firmly over my eyes, I risk letting my crusty lids flutter. My lashes tear apart, the glue giving, releasing the bind. A glimmer of blinding light seeps through my pressed fingers, white hot into my brain.

I hate every second of this.

Sitting up, my stomach tames. My pupils slowly adjust to the scalding brightness. Hesitantly, I drop my hand from my eyes. Blinking, I'm able to finally focus on the room around me.

Everything is so detailed. I can discern a small chip on the corner of my dresser across the room. A tiny thread is sticking out of the waistband of my sweatpants. A hairline crack is in the wall of the bathroom that's at least twenty feet away.

Still bathed in sweat, I risk pushing myself up onto the bed. Screaming against the strain, my shaky legs finally comply.

Exhausted, I perch on the edge of the bed. I'm not sure if I want to lay back, or run to the toilet and hurl. Dizzying waves of nausea and vertigo fight for control.

Toilet.

The room tilts precariously as I lurch my way to the bathroom, but I manage to find the door frame to catch me before I fall to the ground.

Overwhelming smells gag me. I can smell old urine. It's caked around the bottom of the toilet.

But, I know the maid was just in here yesterday. The swirl marks from her mop fade into focus; I can see the streaks on the tile.

The edge of the sink is saturated in the smell of a cologne foreign to mine.

What the fuck? Why can I suddenly smell my dad's cologne? He hasn't lived here for eight years.

My nose burns with ammonia. There's a musty smell coming from below the sink I've never noticed before. It all gathers into the knot in my guts that refuses to stay inside.

The muscles of my abdomen contort, squeezing, spasming until burning bile finds its way into the stinking toilet. Dragon's fire scorches my esophagus, the vile liquid erupts from me, and a drumbeat of splashes pummels my ears.

Finishing, the nasty taste lingering in my mouth, I crawl back to bed. Sheets of sandpaper scrape against my skin. The pillow is a brick under my pounding head.

Darkness at least helps to lessen the headache.

Until a cymbal at full volume crashes through my ears, inches from the bed.

What the fuck?

The sound erupts again, rattling my brain with its jarring noise.

It sounds like my text tone on steroids.

Why is it so fucking loud?

Bleary eyed, I reach for my phone on the nightstand. The case is full of tiny nicks and gashes I've never felt before.

It's just past six in the morning, but I feel like I've been in agony for weeks.

There are two new texts. I really need to figure out how to turn down that tone.

Unknown number: Do you feel okay?

Unknown number: Do you think the Chinese food was bad?

Chinese food. I forgot I even had a life prior to tonight.

It must be Dani.

My cock suddenly swells, despite the grueling pain running through the rest of my body.

Fuck. I feel everything. It rubs against my boxers, the rim tugging at the seam of the access. Holy shit, it is so intense. The rough fabric rubbing against my sensitive skin almost instantly has me leaking. My hips twitch minutely, fiery electric pulses rove through my shaft and down into my balls. Clenching in my belly, a small orgasm rolls through me, spilling into my shorts. The sticky heat scorches my thigh. The endorphin release is a high I've never had before, fuzzy and

light headed, it's the first sense of peace I've had all night. Floating in my bed, I choose to ignore the mess I've made for a little while.

What the shit is going on with me? I didn't even touch myself and I'm coming in my shorts? Like a fucking teenager and my first wet dream.

Lifting my liquid arm, I text her back.

Me: Who is this?

I can play coy.

Unknown Number: Sorry, this is Dr. Michelson. I got your number from your file.

Unknown Number: Dani

My lips feel like they're cracking when I smile. It's Dani now. That's a good sign.

Me: Hi, Dani.

Me: It might have been. Was a rough night.

Rough. That comes no where close to whatever fucking universe of pain this is that I've been experiencing. I distinctly remember wishing to die sometime last night.

I have never, in my life, had food poisoning like this though.

Me: Are you okay?

The thought that she has been suffering through this suddenly has my stomach clenching in agony again.

Dani: Rough night.

WHY is this phone so loud? I've turned it nearly all the way off.

Me: I promise to never buy you Chinese from that restaurant again.

I'm half tempted to promise to burn that fucker to the ground. This level of hell is not fit for humanity.

My liquid arm loses the ability to hold the phone up any longer, and I escape for a while into the darkness behind my eyelids.

The cymbal crash of my text tone goes off again, but I don't have the will to check it yet. Darkness takes away some of the pain. Pain sits just outside of tangible as long as I don't move.

An explosion startles me awake and I realize it was just the front door. Thunderous sounds echo through the house. Smells of pastries and coffee assail me, choking me, blocking my throat.

Becky squeals, her voice amplifies and bombards my ears. "Good morning, Thor! How are you this morning?" My eyes flutter open, expecting her to be screaming right above me.

My bedroom door is closed. They're outside of it. But, it sounds like she's right in my bed with me.

That's an unpleasant thought. Becky's a nice enough lady, but no, thank you.

I'd rather it be Dani.

The memory of her biting her lip when I sprayed her with the hose jumps front and center within my mind and my cock springs to painful attention again. Straining against my crusted shorts, it's both unpleasant and incredibly pleasurable. I thumb the seam to release myself. The cool breeze of the ceiling fan blasts a massaging wave over my shaft. The remains of my last orgasm still clings to me. Brushing it away with the edge of my shorts, it's like I held a hot branding iron against my flesh. The ripples of searing heat from my fingers and the coolness of the fan has my belly tightening and ejaculating another long spurt of burning hot seed across my stomach. Clenching for what feels like minutes, my entire body jerking, my hips bucking, my nuts feeling like they're in a vise.

I've made a nasty ass mess.

But, I feel better. Now, I need a shower.

I check my phone again while I can focus.

Dani: Okay

Dani: The Mexican place on 34th is good.

Mexican. Good sign, might almost call it a date.

When I can walk again. When I can breathe without my ribs feeling like they're cracking.

The pillowcase works to sop up this fucking puddle on my stomach. This coming in two seconds shit is going to have to stop pretty quickly though. It's not going to be pleasant if I do manage to get Dani here.

My still hard cock tightens back up again at the thought of her in my bed. I've barely begun to clean up my mess when the heavy fabric touches my dick and I'm coming again.

Goddamn it. It feels good. I've never gotten off this many times so closely.

But, what the hell is going on with me?

Keeping my brain as blank as possible, I drag my aching body to the shower. My stomach twists again when I am overtaken by the lingering scents of the bathroom.

Cranking on the water, cooler than I normally have it, I drop my boxers and slide under the spray.

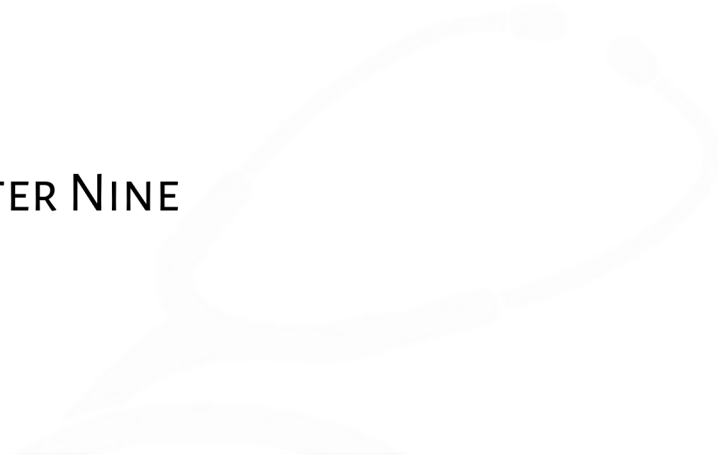
Too much, it's too much. My entire body lights up. I feel every single drop hitting me, dripping down across my skin. The tickle of it running over the hairs on my body. Each one bouncing back under the pressure. Streaming down my belly, running over my dick, which is impossibly hard again, my belly begins to cramp and spasm.

Wave after wave of orgasms crash over me. I shoot a constant stream of hot cum into the tub below me. My legs shake and finally give, my knees screaming in pain when they connect with the hard porcelain. Convulsions overtake my abdomen, my nuts jerk and spasm painfully between my thighs, and yet I continue to leak jets of white into the swirling water beneath me. It's like I'm being electrocuted. Every muscle is screaming, I can hear myself groaning, and I can't stop.

My cock is burning. It's going to burst into flames from the inside out. Ribbons of cum incinerate me with every spurt. Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to ignore the water pouring over me. I have to dampen it, numb myself to it.

Somehow.

CHAPTER NINE



DANI

Jenny: I won't be at work today. I got super sick last night. I'm sorry.

She's sick too. Great.

I guess the clinic stays closed today. I send out a quick text to a neighboring business to ask if they would tape a note to the door telling the patients.

Well, it wasn't the Chinese food.

I didn't think it was. I've had food poisoning before. Last time I got food poisoning was Thai food, and just the thought of it still makes me queasy.

There is no planet where this is like food poisoning.

This is debilitating. Every joint, every fiber, every inch of my skin hurts. More than hurts, my clothes feel like they're rubbing me raw. My hair tugs at my scalp.

The only good part is it seems like the extreme sensitivity is starting to fade a little. Everything is still too bright though. I've pulled all my curtains, only leaving a small light on over

the kitchen sink. Even that is blasting through the house like a Las Vegas neon sign.

Being able to eavesdropping on my neighbor's conversations is unnerving. It's like being in a party and everyone is standing next to you screaming in your ear. But, I know that thick walls and doors separate us.

I've never hated living in a complex more than I do right now.

Trying to eat is hard, too. I can feel every texture. I know that my strawberry was touched by a spider. I know that my granola is tinged with mold. And, even after gagging it down, I can feel my stomach rolling it around, flooding it with acid. I want that feeling to stop any time. I need to plan to be pickier at the grocery store, too.

At least the orgasming finally stopped. Wanting a shower should have been innocent enough, but the overwhelming sensations were incredible, and then painful, and then exhausting. By the end I seemed to have gained some control though.

Just the thought of Sam has me shaking again with need. It took me nearly five full minutes to stop quaking through a release the first time I even thought about texting him.

I didn't even have to touch myself. I just...came.

Even with my little vibrator I've never done that before. My last boyfriend was so long ago. I don't remember if I even had an orgasm with him.

Now, at just a thought? How am I going to face him?

Imagining his face watching me has my walls clenching, the tightness of release flooding through me again. Panting, I grip the counter of my tiny kitchen until the wave passes.

This is ridiculous.

Maybe I need to approach this differently.

Turning on all the lights, I open all the windows. Blinding light blares through my small apartment. My eyes scream at me, but I force them to remain open.

I fight through the needles stabbing into my brain. The pain slowly subsides as I adjust. Soon, I'm able to look around the room again with normal vision.

Maybe that's the trick.

With renewed focus, I grab my terrycloth towel and start aggressively rubbing it across my naked body. Clothes have been too much to wear. That makes this excruciating. The rough texture grabs at every hair and bump, so it feels like my skin is being torn off. It's sandpaper against my hands.

Hot tears sting my cheeks as I work the towel over my body. But, after a few minutes, the pain lessens. The brutal texture fades back to the softened cloth I remember.

Clothes feel normal again. I never knew how good it would be to get dressed.

The thought of having to take care of the animals at the vet clinic naked was at first funny, but quickly shifted to terrifying

when it seemed I actually wouldn't be able to wear clothes.

This is the strangest illness. If Sam has something similar—

Picturing him has me gripping the towel and dropping my hands to my knees, my belly shaking as an orgasm rockets through me again.

No way. This won't work.

On wobbly legs, I totter back to the bedroom and lay down.

Purposefully, I think about Sam. His jaw, his smell, how his ass moves in his jeans. My body tightens and wave after wave of release rolls through me. How he looked riding in on his horse. Another orgasm. Him spraying me down. Oh, my god, rolling waves course through my body, my hips spasming of their own accord. Remembering the heat of his body so close to mine has my walls clenching and releasing over and over.

Eventually, I can picture him touching me, embracing me, even kissing me without the pleasurable tremble of climax rocking through me.

It only takes hours.

At this rate, I'll be fit to be in public again in, oh, ten years. I'm just glad my stomach seems to have settled. The overall pain has somewhat faded, also.

By the next evening I'm feeling, almost, normal again. More like a hangover, less like I'm dying. I just can't believe it's taken me this long to feel like I can even function. I'm glad it's Sunday so I don't have to work.

Sam: Feeling better?

Me: Much, thank you. I don't think it was food poisoning. Jenny was sick, too.

Sam: Huh. Crazy flu? Weirdest flu ever...

Weirdest flu ever. I'd agree with that. I still wonder if he had the same symptoms as me? Heat moves up my cheeks when I think about him coming in the shower like I did.

I may not instantly seize up in an orgasm when I think of him, but he still makes my insides jiggle.

Me: Did you get the "lights are too bright, sounds are too loud" thing?

Sam: Yep. Sucked. Getting better though. Glad it wasn't the Chinese food.

My stomach rumbles at the thought of the garlic chicken. I haven't eaten much today; every bite tasted off. Being so sensitive to the flavors brought out all the hidden things I never knew existed, and now they make it unpalatable.

Feeling almost queasy, I think I'll brown some chicken and pasta. It's easy and filling, and the closest thing I have in my apartment that resembles the garlic chicken we had.

That mongolian beef would be good, too. Only if Sam was here to tongue it into his mouth again.

Ugh, my panties soak at the memory. It takes a few deep breaths to simmer my pulse down enough to focus on food.

Skipping the “thaw the chicken” step, I toss the frozen chicken straight into the pan with a little garlic and olive oil, and start a pot of water boiling for the pasta.

The noodles smell stale. I didn’t know noodles could go stale? Weird, the expiration date isn’t for two years.

Rice works as a side, too. Except I can smell traces of mouse poop. Seriously?

Back to stale noodles.

At least the chicken is starting to smell amazing. Enough that I’m standing over the pan scraping off cooked slivers and eating them. Flavor explodes over my tongue, and my belly growls louder at the sample.

It’s so good that I pull another piece of chicken from the freezer and toss it in the sizzling pan. When the first piece and half of the second disappear and my belly is still growling, I grab the last two pieces and put them in to cook.

I really haven’t eaten much the last couple of days, and now am making up for lost time. By the time all four chicken breasts are gone, my belly is just starting to settle down.

I could eat more.

Apples and bananas on the counter don’t really look that appealing. Staring into my small freezer, I find a two pack of pork chops and a pound of hamburger.

Before I know it, they’re eaten, too. That’s more food than I could eat in a full day. I must have really been hungry. Strangely enough, I’m not even overly stuffed.

But, I do feel full enough to get drowsy, and I sleep like I haven't slept in a week.



Monday's usually suck. Today is exceptional.

Not only is my stomach trying to gnaw a hole into itself, I am now fighting through the overwhelming new stimuli that hits me as soon as I leave my apartment.

I eat an apple and a banana just to get to my truck.

Why am I so damned hungry? I should be still stuffed from last night.

My truck is saturated in smells I never picked up on before. Someone smoked a cigarette in here at one point. And a joint. And had sex in here.

Gross. I don't want to smell that.

Driving to work with the window down doesn't help either. I'm assailed with exhaust, oil, rain run off, pollen, and noises. I can even taste the air when I drive past the donut shop.

Okay, that one isn't bad.

The pebbles and ruts change the vibration when the tires roll over them. Rotation in the engine rocks the cab gently side to side in a rhythm in time with the RPMs. I can hear each individual piston firing and the turning of the drivelines below me.

I know better than to try and ignore it, so by the time I pull into the small parking lot for my clinic I'm exhausted. My

head is pounding from the noises and the voices that come from blocks around to lodge themselves in my ears at once.

Inside the clinic, the noises fade to a more manageable level.

“Good morning, Doctor Michelson,” Jenny whispers.

I can’t help but smile. “Good morning, Jenny,” I whisper in return. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. I had a fever and was achy. Everything is still a little loud, but otherwise okay.”

Now, I’m curious if she experienced the same symptoms as I did. The glare of the lights, the scents of the antiseptics, and the layers and layers of animal smells make it hard to concentrate.

She doesn’t seem as affected. Her smile looks relaxed. Her shoulders aren’t rigid. I can even hear her heartbeat, slow and regular.

That’s new. I didn’t realize I could do that, too.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better. It looks like a busy week ahead. Do me a favor? Find your favorite take out place, and let’s order in lunch. My treat.” I need to get to my office because the whine from the fluorescent overhead lights is eating into me.

“Thank you, Doctor Michelson!” she calls after me. I almost can’t hear her over my stomach growling.

CHAPTER TEN



SAM

I'm glad I had a few days to learn how to control myself before I saw Dani again.

Between the sensory overload and the crazy appetite increase, it's been everything I can do to get caught back up on the day to day business on the ranch.

I even had to call my sister for help. She stopped by Tuesday to pick up the truck receipts. We sent almost five hundred head of cattle down to the rail yards this last shipment, and all the tare weight tickets came in. With it being the beginning of October the monthly billing needed to be done, even if I felt like shit.

One day, hopefully soon, they'll go to digital copies instead of the printouts that we have to hand enter in on our side.

Story of the ages though, the middle men never give a shit about the producers. Just get the products through as fast as possible.

It's eerie being around the animals now. I can hear their heartbeats. Individual mice scurrying through the barn sound

like raindrops on a tin roof. The barn cats that chase them have a softer step, but I can still hear the death screams with each one as they're caught.

The chickens sound like they have grinding gears in their guts, the muscles of their gizzards working when I walk by.

One day I hope this either stops or I get used to it. The phantom noises I can't explain creep me out. I can never tell if they're close or far away.

Moving cows, I can hear their bellies as they digest their food. One older cow smells different. I'm able to get her peeled off with the help of my confused looking ranch hands. When I check her out, she has a leaking abscess under her chest.

I'd have never caught it before. She very likely would have died from it. Now, I have her in the barn and already started her on antibiotics. My improved nose is an asset, apparently.

A low hum catches my attention. It slowly gets louder until I can hear the crunch of gravel under tires.

"Come on, Red, time to see the doc." I touch my ankle to the big roan's side to turn him back to the house.

It's still unnerving listening to his heart beating between my legs. Hearing the air rushing in and out of his lungs. The pungent crush of plants beneath his hooves.

It all fades into background noise as my eyes focus on that little blue Toyota pickup pulling into my driveway.

Her long blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail, her red fleece ear warmer hugging underneath. I'm clear across the pasture, but I can see the pink in her cheeks, the little purse in her pouty lips when her eyes find me.

My cock fills in my jeans, rubbing uncomfortably against the saddlehorn.

Oh, fuck, this might be harder than I thought.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



DANI

This might be harder than I thought.

I watch him ride up on his horse, his black cowboy hat pulled low, his hips rolling with every step of the animal beneath him. Jaw set, his blue eyes meet mine. I can see the flare of his nostrils, the little smile that pulls up the corner of his full lips.

He disappears into the darkness of the barn, and I realize I was holding my breath.

I can't grip the steering wheel hard enough. My breath is coming in tiny gasps. Tremors grip my belly. The tingles of arousal work across my nipples.

Losing control in front of him is not going to happen.

But, what if he's struggling, too. What if he's fighting this pull, this need, every time he thinks about me?

One can hope.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I crawl out of my truck into the cold October morning. The woodsmoke from the fire and the manure smell from the barn wrap around me in an almost

calming way. Much less chaotic than the foreign smells that taint the air of town and burn my eyes with the violent way they permeate every sense.

I'm just slipping the bag of meds and supplies over my shoulder when I hear the gravel crunching under his boots.

"Good morning, Dani." His lips curl around my name. It's the first time I've heard it rumble from his chest. My stomach flips onto its side, tugging at both my chest and my loins.

I'm breathing too quickly. His scent of leather, horse and pine pushes across me. Something deeper lingers too, a musky earthy cologne that ripples under my skin and sharpens my nipples beneath my shirt.

"Hi, Sam, how are you this morning?" My tongue feels fat and swollen in my mouth as I'm grasping at an innocent phrase instead of what I really want to say. How do you say "ravage me" and have it part of a normal conversation?

"Better, now that you're here." His eyes dance around the steam of his words escaping, thickening in the cold air. I can hear his hands tightening into fists in the pockets of his coat, his fingers popping faintly, but loudly enough that they sound like an ax striking a log to my ears.

The heat rushing to my cheeks warms the air around us until it's suffocatingly hot. Fighting the urge to pant, I slam the door of the truck just a little too hard, making myself look away from him.

There's no way he means it the way I hope he means it. "You must have a lot of cows lined up if you're happy for my help."

He throws his head back and his laughter is deep, sensuous, coursing through my body in tremoring waves. I can feel my belly tightening, and I dig my fingernails into my palm to stave off the release he nearly wrests from me.

The weight of his gaze falls on me, his eyes still crinkled at the corners. "Dani," he says. My name again falls from his lips, drawing a shiver through me. I can smell the coffee lingering on his breath as he draws closer, sweet and dark. "I could give a shit about the cows, now that you're here." His hand lands against the hood of my truck, his nostrils flaring as his eyes flit to my stomach before finding mine again.

"A clever ruse." I can't help but smile. I too would rather be out here than in the office. "But, I still do need to give Thor his next dose." Readjusting the strap over my shoulder gives my hands something to do.

"Of course." He turns his head, facing back to the barn. "Thor!" He turns back to me, fire dancing in his eyes. "Come!" he says, deeper, like he's speaking right into me.

My legs wobble and I reach out for the door handle as the tightening in my belly releases into a withering orgasm. I try to fight it, biting into my cheek, fumbling with my bag as it slides down my arm. But, the waves roll through me, a drench of shivers soaking my panties.

“Fuck.” I hear him groan, and his hand is on my elbow, holding me up, burning through my clothes. His arms encircle me, hot breath dances along the skin of my neck. Still trembling, he holds me against him, his body rigid, coiled.

I let the bag fall. My breathing evens just enough to open my eyes, meeting his. They’re a bottomless glacier lake of blue, tinged with spears of gold at the edges. Molten hands pull me closer. I can feel the tremor in his grip, his need against my belly. Heartbeats race past my ears. I can’t distinguish his from mine. The need to touch him overtakes me, driving my hands up his chest, feathering up his neck. His pulse beats against my fingers; the rhythm of his heart circling through me.

His hand traces my arm up, hot against my cheek. Every ridge of the calluses on his fingers strokes along my skin until he tilts my chin. Slanting his head, his soft lips find mine. I don’t know which of us is moaning. The vibrations dancing across our lips melts through me. The harmonics of our heartbeats drive us into a melodic dance of touching and exploring. His hot tongue burns across my lower lip. Gasping, I open to him, pulling his sweet taste into me.

Inciting a hunger in me, curling my fingers into the soft length of his hair, I want him closer, tighter against me. His breathing hitches when my nails tug against his scalp, pulling him deeper into a kiss that has my belly tightening again.

Stepping into me, the hard steel of the truck bracing against my back, Sam crushes me with his body. Every ripple of his

movement is driving him harder, and I want more.

Searching lips move down my jaw. His teeth nip along the sensitive skin of my neck.

“I want to make you do that over and over.” The heat of his words seeps into my ears, syrupy and thick.

My mind is dull, hazy with every fiber focusing on his body touching mine. “Do what?” I can barely form words with his tongue working broad strokes under my ear and the sound of his heavy breathing drowning every thought.

“Come for me.” His guttural response shivers through me, and I can’t fight the tremor that overtakes my body. My belly quakes as another climax seizes me, weakening me until he is holding me by the steady pressure of his hips.

The hardness of his own desire is undeniable, spurred I’m sure by my own hips grinding against him in my throes of pleasure.

With shaking fingers I lower the zipper on his heavy coat, pushing my hands into the blazing recesses along his ribs. Damp with sweat, his chest shudders with my touch. He exhales against the hollow of my throat, his hot breath simmering its way under my jacket.

I thought I would be stronger than this. But, I never accounted for him, in person, and how unbelievable he would make me feel.

CHAPTER TWELVE



SAM

The scent of her drives me to a fever pitch. I need to smell and taste every inch of her, and that isn't going to happen in my parking lot. Every time she comes and drips out another drop it's a blast of the sweetest whiskey and strawberry rhubarb.

Tart. Sweet. Smooth. And burns enough to want to lap her up and slake my thirst. My very survival hinges on being able to taste her.

I'm not taking her in the house, not while Becky is here.

"You have a decision to make," I rough out through my teeth. The delicate lobe of her ear is caught firmly between my incisors. Her breathing catches against my neck, distracting me as it glides down to her seeking fingers raking along my chest. "—I either load Thor into your truck, and send you safely back to town, or—"

She lets out a small whine that trickles down my spine. Disappointment tinges her voice. "Or?"

"—Or, I take you into the barn, and neither of us leave until we're both absolutely ravaged." Her heart rate accelerates,

drumming loudly through my head. A symphony I want to slam my hips in time to. The muscles in my thighs begin to spasm in rhythm to it

“Oh. I, I...” Her tongue escapes, flitting along her lower lip. My kneading against her isn't helping her concentration.

“Say it,” I grunt into the hollow of her throat. My fingers find the silken threads of her hair, weaving the fine strands in and out of the creases of my hands. With a gentle tug on the entwined golden tresses, I pull her face up so I can flatten my tongue to caress every node of her exposed throat.

She's soaked through her jeans. The head of my cock basks in the dampness working its way through the rough denim.

“Say it.” I drop my pitch, making her knees give out, her hips dropping firmly against me. I could fuck her through her clothes. My cock could rip right through the layers and sink into her. Her scent assails me, wrapping into my head like a haze of intoxicating fog.

“Yes,” she stammers out.

I can't fight the growl of frustration at her timidity. “Yes, what?” Loosening my firm hold on her locks, my teeth find her stubborn lower lip, drawing it out, nibbling my way back to her mouth. She opens for me, her tongue greeting me, begging me into her.

Resisting is the hardest thing I've ever done. Withdrawing my lips from her hungry little mouth, I tug so slightly back on

her hair again. Her frantic breath tickles along my jaw and her nostrils flare, I'm sure testing every scent.

I pull my hand back from the hot skin of her belly. Her hands search my chest, grasping at me, tugging at me to draw closer.

“Ravage me,” she begs softly.

Blood rushes through my ears, silencing the world around me until it's just her and her pounding heart.

Grasping both of the glorious orbs of her ass in my hands, I slide my hands down to cup her thighs, wrapping her legs around my waist. When her ankles lock around me her quivering knees frame my hips. As a shiver passes through me, a spurt of my own release presses into the dampness from her that has soaked through. It does nothing to relieve any pressure, the throbbing only invigorated by her movements.

Every step closer to the barn is agony, the tip of my cock rubbing raw in my jeans, her ass bouncing against my hands, and the embers of her hands coursing over my chest.

Flipping the switch on the tack room wall, the lights flood over the benches and saddles. A second switch turns on the heating system.

A kick with my foot launches the door toward the frame, latching with a slam.

One long stride carries us to one of the saddles on its stand. Sitting her atop it, freeing my hands to explore, they find their way back to her neck, cupping her cheeks between my palms.

My lips seek hers, urgently tasting, nibbling, until her tongue sneaks out and touches mine. Awakening a hunger, my fingers intertwine behind her head, holding her against the onslaught of my ravenous partaking of her welcoming mouth.

Her hot breath on my cheek hastens into short pants, and small moans escape, pushing past her lips, wavering through me, stoking my need.

Releasing her cheeks, my fingers trace the smooth contours of her nylon jacket until I land on the cold metal of the zipper pull. With a firm yank, it surrenders to my tug, spreading like a neon blue flower, exposing its exotic nectar.

Her scalding hands push along my shoulders, dragging my coat down from my arms until it's a crumpled pile on the floor at my feet. My skin prickles along my back. Damp fabric sticking to me pulls the chill of the room against my feverish flesh.

Peeling the thin fabric of her shirt away, my lips are drawn to the soft hollow of her throat, then drifting down the smooth skin to the gentle swell she hides beneath a lacy white bra.

“Mmm, I like this. A front clasp? Easy access.” I pinch the small plastic snap and her breasts bounce free, her gasp rattling a tremble through me. Jolts tingle over my scalp when her nails dig into my hair, my hat falling near the pile of my coat.

Oh, that noise she makes! I nip her tender flesh hoping to elicit another gasp from her swollen lips. Tiny pink puckers remain, marking my trail to her hardened red nipple. Her body

jolts with each taste, her nails digging harder into my hair. When my mouth encircles her tender bud and I roll it between my teeth, she fists my hair, throwing her head back, and comes for me.

“Sam!” she screams. She squirms on the saddle. I feel like I’m drowning in the scent of her climax. My name echoes in my ears and thrums a chord straight to my aching erection.

The elastic band of her yoga pants grasps my thumbs when I slide them down. I drag her little white panties along. They cling to her soaked center, like they’re hoping to drink up every last drop of her.

No longer, naughty panties, that is mine to savor.

Trembling, she perches naked before me, the saddle slick with her juices dripping down the smooth leather.

“So fucking beautiful, Dani. I want you naked all the time.” My knees hit the hard wooden floor before her. Diving between her legs, curling them over my shoulders, my hands find her hips and I drag her closer.

Nuzzling the trimmed little patch of blond hair, my nose is nearly overpowered by her intoxicating scent. I can feel the tightening in my belly at her aroma, and when my tongue touches her for the first time, my hips spasm a hard release into my jeans. As the taste of her floods my senses with her sweet flavor, like honey and cocaine, my body tingles in waves of numbing electricity coursing through my limbs.

As I groan against her sweet center, her fingers cling to my hair. Grinding herself against my face she screams in harmony with me, a rush of her orgasm washing over my lips.

Selfishly, I lap up the ambrosia of her, my tongue chasing each drop down through her folds, returning to suck another cry from her when I touch her sensitive clit.

The hot fluid of my cum dribbles down inside my jeans, following the crease to my thigh. Unzipping my pants, I let my stiff cock spring out, leaking drops into the puddle that is forming under the saddle stirrup from her.

“Are you on birth control?” I murmur out against her swollen clit before making a long pass with my tongue, up and down her soaking slit. I’m searching for each bead of her delicious essence. Sliding my tongue inside her sheath, I can feel the muscles grabbing hold of me, squeezing my tongue, trying to pull me into her.

What a perfect death that would be, drowning in her magnificent, little, wet pussy.

Snaking my hand up, I pinch one of the tight buds of her nipples. “Answer me,” I say as she gasps, her body shaking. So close to another orgasm. I can almost smell her tensing up under my hands.

Nodding, she half opens her eyes to focus on me. Her blown pupils tighten when she fixes her gaze.

Fuck, I love this view, my face buried between her legs, hers framed by her breasts covered in a red blush of lust and

ecstasy.

“Good, because I want to fuck every inch of you.” With renewed vigor, I attack her wet clit, watching her reaction.

Her eyes open wider as the sensation and my words move within her. Her lips make a perfect “O” shape that makes my cock leak again onto the floor. The knit in her brow fades when I slide my index finger into her tight little pussy.

Holy hell, I should have started with my pinky. Her body spasms and seizes me like a Chinese finger trap. Her hips buck as another orgasm rockets through her. The moans that loose from her throat strip another stream of burning cum from my cock.

“You’re so tight. I don’t want to hurt you.” Standing against her, I leave one of her trembling legs draped over my shoulder. The weight of her ankle near my neck draws me and I can’t resist nibbling on the soft skin of her achilles.

Kicking off my soaked jeans, my cock jumps in proximity to her. I can feel the weight of her eyes as she takes me in for the first time. A little flash of panic passes over her heated features, then her lids drop. A teasing smile turns up her lip.

“Maybe I want it to hurt a little.” She wiggles her bottom closer to me, brushing the tip of my dick with her wet folds. Shock waves roll through me at her words and the sensation.

Her heel digs into me, fighting to drag me to her.

Palming my leaking cock, I feel it’s as hard as granite. The head flares already, begging to lock into her, to fill her until

she explodes.

“Since you asked so nicely.” I rub my engorged head along her slit, slicking myself with her abundant juices, then grab her hips with bruising force and I slam my length into her tight sheath.

Lights flash behind my eyes, and my legs feel like they’re going to give out. My stomach tightens, and I can feel myself spurting within her. My hips jerk of their own mind, the friction rubbing fire along my length.

Her moans fill my ears, her body spasming around me. Like a vice, the muscles of her pussy clamp down on me, her pulsing walls milking me as I flood her.

The intensity is overwhelming. It’s like the shower all over again. My nuts ache as they pump into her, and searing ribbons of cum leak around my embedded cock and trickle down my thighs. I hear a low roar, and realize it’s me crying out. I can’t tell if it’s pleasure or agony anymore. Her body quivers and trembles beneath me, and wave after wave of gripping paralysis locks down on me and releases.

Weakly, she leans backwards, falling across a second saddle as her body rocks against me.

Like trying to yank a cork from a wine bottle, I finally withdraw my swollen cock, fighting the pull of her body as it fights against us to keep me lodged deep within her.

“Holy shit,” I hear her whisper. Her arm falls limply over her eyes.

Cum leaks from my raging cock, still rigid despite the gallons I feel I've lost. Waves of heat roll from her wet center, enticing me back for more.

"Oh, I'm not done with you yet." I murmur, my hands running down her shivering body.

Like an addict wanting more, I flip her over so she's on her stomach across the saddle. Her legs hanging, her perfect little ass sticking up into the air.

Kneeing her apart, I'm drawn to the husky pink rose of her folds, glistening from our combined pleasure. Diving my fingers back against her, she leaps when I find her sensitive clit. Tendrils of sweat cling to the writhing muscles of her back. Her shoulders arch, the blades cutting through the warming air as the trembling begins again.

As I stroke my palm up her supple back, she purrs a moan of pleasure that tickles into my hand. The pulse in her neck flutters against my finger when I arch her up and drive my cock into her soaking wet entrance again.

"Sam!" she screams, her walls stretching and crashing in a binding lock around me. Fighting through the spasms, I drive myself over and over into her. With each thrust, another release exploding from my loins. Sweet agony, each orgasm is stronger than the preceding until I feel like my nuts are cramping, my stomach is in knots, my chest aches, and I feel I'm going to pass out.

And still I drive my cock into her. My thumb works along the edges of her slit until I find the tight star of her ass.

Drawing her slick juices with me, circling her tight portal, I push into her.

She stiffens for a moment in spite of the tremors shaking through her body. The sensation kicks in when I flex beyond the ribbon of muscle.

Her entire body contracts and a surge of her juices flood over me in a wave of fire, dripping down my legs. “Oh, my god!” she screams as her legs clamp around me and her back contorts into ribbons of tightened lines as she reaches back, clinging to the saddlehorn.

It’s like every orgasm I have experienced suddenly pales in comparison. Magma erupts from me. My spine feels like it is being ripped through my body. Every fiber stretches and screams, sucked into the gripping violence of her climax.

We both slump forward, our bodies spent. Heaving breaths shudder through us. My chest is pressed against her back, sticking in our slick sheen of sweat. Small aftershocks tremor through us, but thankfully, my cock softens and falls from her now tranquil sheath.

My eyes trace the length of her side, following the curve of her hip, and back up over her glorious ass. She has two perfect dimples that crest right above the small of her back. My thumb is drawn to them, circling them in fascination. These two perfect imprints are like they are made for my palms to grip when I’m behind her.

Feathering my lips between her shoulder blades, I feel her quiver as a shiver runs beneath my kisses.

“How do you feel now?” I breathe into her ear, her face pressing against the seat of the second saddle.

“Ravaged,” she smiles.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALEXANDER

Muted sounds float in and out. My eyes are open, but I cannot focus. A wave of dark blue drifts before me. Struggling. Why can't I blink? My eyes are so dry. Churning in my stomach, but my body doesn't seize to purge it. My legs feel like they're breaking, my palms like they're bleeding. Why can't I see?

Pain envelops me as darkness welcomes me into its numbing embrace.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



SAM

“Mister Downing? Do you have a moment?” Becky is standing in my kitchen, her chapped hands wringing, pale movements against the dark blue backdrop of her scrubs.

“Of course, Becky, what can I help you with?” I’ve spent all morning pouring through paperwork. I’m so damned distracted I can’t keep a single decimal in place, so might as well help her. All I can think about is Dani and wanting her in my bed. She had to go home after Thor’s treatment, and all I can think about is seeing her again.

“Well, there’s something, um, strange with Alex.” I can hear her heartbeat rapidly pounding in her chest. Smell the sour dampness in her armpits.

She’s scared. Weird.

“I’m hoping to ask Miss Angela if she can come and see him,” Becky babbles as she takes hesitant steps back to Alexander’s room.

“What is going on, Becky? Why would Angela care?” Her entire mannerisms are unusual.

Stepping through the doorway into the room of Alex the Invalid, I suddenly see something very odd.

What the hell is wrong with his face? It's disproportionate. His normal gaunt and flaccid expression has shifted somehow. His eyes jut farther from his brow; his nose looks swollen, misshapen.

"What the hell, Becky? Did he get hit?" Are his ears swollen, too? Flattened? What the fuck?

"Oh, no, sir, I don't know what is going on." She panics, answering me quickly. I can smell her sweet breath of donuts and coffee pouring over us both as she huffs.

Some days I really dislike these heightened senses. The smell of Thor and urine is overpowering.

"This—" She pulls the covers down from Alex's chest, exposing his gown all the way to his knees. "—is the weirdest part. I went to check his catheter." She raises his gown up to his belly button. "This isn't normal." With shaking hands, she backs away, making the sign of the cross over her ample chest.

The tube to his catheter is laying next to his hip, removed. A leak of acrid smelling urine stains the sheet underneath.

But, it's his dick she is referring to. It's grown upward against his belly. A sheath of skin and fine dark hair is covering it.

Like a fucking dog.

"What the fuck?" I can't help blurting out, recoiling. "How did this happen?" I can't even wrap my head around what I'm

seeing.

“I, I have no idea. It’s why I wanted to call Angela. She’s overseen his case from the beginning.” Becky pales, holding her hand over her mouth, her pallor gray as she flees the room.

Alex’s eyes are unfocused, as usual. He just stares at the TV in the corner, no reaction to the fact he’s bare to the world.

Throwing the blanket back over him, I leave as quickly as possible. The room smells like dog, but now I’m starting to wonder if it’s just Thor I’m catching a whiff of.

Becky is trying to keep her voice low, but even two rooms away I can hear her entire conversation.

Angela thinks she’s nuts, but agrees to come and see.

I kind of feel bad for Becky. Of all the weird shit that could possibly happen, I’m sure this isn’t on anyone’s radar.

When Angela arrives an hour later, she’s a whirlwind of intimidating presence. I think it’s her wild blond hair with the shock of white at the temple. Becky cowers to the side, acting fearful as Angela assesses Alexander.

“Well, that’s fucked,” Angela says, her brown eyes scowling down at Alexander’s exposed midriff.

I don’t think I’ve ever heard her swear, but it doesn’t surprise me. His new appearance IS fucked.

“I’m going to call his doctor, and have him transferred to the hospital to get checked. This isn’t normal. Did you notice he has some deformities in his hands also?” She directs the

comments to Becky, but inspects his hands while she talks. The fingers have curled, and his hair has darkened and thickened on his arms, too.

I hadn't noticed either. Too distracted looking at his new doggie dick. Geez, what is wrong with me? I feel bad for the guy, once a respected judge, and now he will be poked and prodded like a science experiment.

Angela pulls the blanket all the way off of him, exposing his feet.

They've changed too. His feet are longer, the toes larger and wider spaced. The dark hair of his legs have grown down over the arches of his feet. He used to be all gray haired, but now I notice even his head has darkened. He even looks noticeably younger.

"His hair is darker? How?" I ask, pointing at his head.

Angela shakes her head. "I have no idea what is going on. I hope the doctor can offer some insight."

She pulls the blanket back up to his chest. A flash of disgust appears on her face which she quickly hides.

Not that I blame her. He's pretty disturbing right now.

It doesn't take long before a transport team arrives, and my house is filled with medical personnel and a gurney. They transfer him to the stretcher amidst exchanged looks of disbelief at his features.

Before long, it's just Angela and me left in my kitchen.

“Thank you for coordinating that so quickly.” It’s nice that I really don’t have to do much regarding his care. The trust takes care of paying her, and she’s always good about keeping everything on task.

“Of course. It’s my job. And I knew Alexander, before. So, I like to always be apprised of his situation.” She gathers her coat and puts it on before picking up her purse.

That’s the first I’ve heard that she knew him. And I’ve been working with Angela for six years now.

“I never knew that you knew him before?” From what I’ve heard, he’s been like this for ten years or so.

She rubs her temple with a pained look. “Yes, Alexander and I go way back. It’s why I make sure I remain his case manager.” She gives me a weak smile. “Thank you again, Sam. I’ll let you know when he’s ready to return.”

“Let me know what they figure out. I’d like to know if it’s contagious.” The thought of a dog dick. Fuck.

“I get that. I’ll be sure to let you know what they find out.” She leaves like she arrived, in a whirl of her long coat and her arm waving behind her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN





DANI

Sam: Steaks on the grill tonight. Boy, have I had a strange day.

Me: Me, too. Steaks sound amazing!

The cease and desist order came by certified mail. I can't believe they wouldn't call. But, I guess that's the government for you.

“Please refrain from initiating any more of the experimental protocols due to unforeseen side effects. Dispose of all remaining samples via incineration.”

What the heck does that mean?

The number on the bottom of the page disconnects me twice before I sit on hold for forty minutes listening to awful elevator music.

There's no doubt I look grossly unprofessional going in and out of patient rooms with my phone in the pocket of my scrubs playing hold music. But, I need to know why I have to cancel Thor's treatments, and what the side effects are.

I wonder if it's what caused Sam and me to get sick? It did happen the night after one of his treatments. But, I didn't get

sick last night, even though Thor got another dose.

After the barn. My cheeks burn as the memories flash. Mrs. Bellhouse is looking at me weird.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

Sure, I’m just having insanely sexy thoughts about a saddle. No biggie.

“Yes, just frustrated with being on hold. I apologize for being distracted.” Distracted by blue eyes and a deep voice.

I need to calm down. Her heart rate has jumped up, so I know I’m stressing her out.

“We’ll get your cat some of the constipation meds and she will be right as rain soon. Be aware that the meds may cause diarrhea, so keep her near her litter box, or perhaps consider kenneling her for an evening until she has regulated.” Nothing like discussing cat bowel movements to cool the steam in my veins.

“Thank you, doctor.” Her heart rate is returning to normal as she strokes her black cat.

“You’re welcome. Be sure to call the office if you have any issues.”

The music is still playing as I head back to my office. Just as I shut the door, I hear someone pick up.

“May I help you?” a nasally sounding woman asks.

“This is Doctor Danielle Michelson. I am a participant in the new hip dysplasia protocol. I received a letter today calling

for a cease and desist due to side effects. They were not listed, and I would like to know what they are and possible treatments.”

“One moment, please.” And she puts me back on hold.

Dammit. The same music even.

Twenty minutes of charting fly by before I hear another voice on the line. I give the same request, and AGAIN I am put on hold.

It doesn't last as long this time.

“This is Doctor Paulson. How can I help you?” a man with a deep southern accent answers. I run my spiel by him, expecting to be transferred again.

“How long have you been doing the treatments?” he asks.

“Three rounds, most recently yesterday.” I'm a little shocked that I found someone who is listening.

“Has anyone in direct contact had any side effects?”

“That's why I was contacting you. The information I received today indicated the potential for side effects, so I am hoping to find out more.” So much for getting help if he wasn't even paying attention to what I first told him.

“Well, the list of side effects seem to vary, but due to a higher than expected percentage of carry-over effects onto humans, we are suggesting at this time to suspend any further treatments.”

“What exactly does that mean, ‘carry-over effects’?” So, this IS affecting people?

He clears his throat. I can hear shuffling papers and his heart rate increases slightly. “Most side effects include muscle aches, aversion to bright lights, and chills.”

Shit. That sounds exactly like what Sam and I experienced.

“What other side effects?” I ask quietly.

“Well, there seems to be a gambit. Due to the use of certain DNA extrapolations, some are experiencing positive results.”

“I had to sign a non-disclosure contract to participate. What DNA was used?”

He clears his throat again. “Well, there have been some revolutionary breakthroughs in regenerative effects using *Ambystoma mexicanum* strands, also known as the axolotl. *Turritopsis dohrnii* is a particular species of jellyfish that has incredible longevity characteristics. And a recent viable sample from *Aenocyon dirus*, an extinct species, has proven to be impervious to hip dysplasia. We’ve seen great success in the laboratory.” He sounds genuinely excited about the information. I’m jotting down notes as fast as I can so I can reference them later.

“So, what are some of the negative side effects?” I almost don’t want to ask.

There’s a long pause. He takes a shuddering breath before continuing. “Well, we’ve seen some instances of hair growth, mutations and death.”

My hands are shaking. “Death? How long after symptom onset?”

“Instant. Once initial symptoms have manifested and resolved, the chance of death becomes minimal.” I must have been holding my breath. It comes out in a long sigh.

“Mode of transmission?” I hope it stays contained to just Sam and me. I think we’re the only people who have touched Thor. Well, maybe Jenny, too.

“There is the potential it has already shifted to airborne. I hope we caught it in time.” His voice has a tremor, but I can hear the truth in his words.

“Thank you, Doctor Paulson. This has been very, um, informative.”

“You’re welcome. Have a good day.”

Um, yea. Great.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ALEXANDER

A gnawing pain eats within me. Violent hunger possesses my every breath. My eyes finally respond to my thoughts, opening and focusing on the bright orb above me. Rectangular shapes flare in my view, a muted white ceiling abridged with bands of tarnished silver. Tiles. Industrial tiles.

A distracting beeping chimes in time with every beat of my heart. My neck doesn't want to comply with my will to seek right. Straining, I manage to move a breadth to see the corner of a machine looming over my head. A dark square box with a jumping line crossing the screen. Every jump in tandem with the sound.

Rough fabric stretches over my sensitive body. Gravel has infested my limbs; every joint cries in torment. Grinding, I flex the fingers of my right hand. Aching pain slows the reaction until a new sensation stops me. Sharp nails dig into my hip where my hand rests, drawing a hiss from my lips.

But, my lips don't draw back. Tight upon my teeth, my mouth feels swollen and sore. Tentatively, I explore my bruised mouth with my tongue to discover something foreign.

Sharp. Misshapen. My teeth are different, stabbing at me, pillars within my gums.

My stomach growls again. As it tempers, I hear another sound. A second heartbeat, separate from my own rhythm. A smell of coffee and donuts drifts from beyond my sight.

Creeping slowly, my hand learns to respond to my command. Bunching and relaxing, my fingers ease their prior stiffness. Yet dig mercilessly on the curl.

The pain sharpens my alertness. Steps beyond the room echo through linoleum halls. Hard clicks of fast paces tick my cheek in irritation.

A soft laugh rides a breath nearby, pulling my interest. Grudgingly, the stiff muscles of my neck relent allowing me to find the source.

Silvered hair sits in ringlets pressing over a blue top desperately holding back the ample figure of a woman. She's turned away, breathily wheezing over a lighted screen she obscures with her rounded body. Faster, her heartbeat flurries. A new scent emanates, hot, pungent. Alluring on a primal level.

My belly tightens in a strange way. The skin of my stomach grows taut, tugging at my flanks.

“Odd,” I struggle to say. A raspy growl is all I hear.

A cacophony of her heart thunders when she jerks in her chair, brown eyes wide locking with mine.

“Did you say something?” Her knuckles lighten as her grip intensifies on the wooden arm of her chair. Pushing herself up, another scent unfurls from her, dank and sour from beneath her arms. A sheen of sweat appears on her brow as her eyes pinch in the corners.

Yes, I want to say, with my throat not yet under my command. A nod instead suffices.

Tentatively she steps forward, with her fingers fervently moving over the glowing screen in her hand.

“Hi, Mister Alex.” I loathe that name. “My name is Becky. Welcome back!” She mimics a smile, but I detect the tremor in her lips, the waver in her speech. “You look even younger,” she says quietly, almost to herself.

She called me Alex. An ire I haven’t kindled in ages surges in my chest. Struggling, I find the blanket binds my arms beneath it.

“Miss Angela will be excited to see you’re awake.” She seems to finally register my frustration, and reaches forward to help free my arms from the restrictive covering.

Angela, why does that name have a ring of familiarity?

She is touching me entirely too much. I detest being touched. What is wrong with this dullard of a woman who speaks so brazenly and has no respect for personal space? She may know my name, but she clearly doesn’t know who I am.

I will teach her.

My left arm, now free, snakes out to grasp her throat. Changes in my structure offer a different sensation though. My reach is longer, my new fingers tear through the gibbering folds of her neck, clefting her windpipe. Her doe eyes widen when blood sprays over my face and chest in time with her frantic heartbeats. The screen she carried clatters to the floor. Her heavy body follows quickly.

The metallic stinging scent of her fluids wafts over me, but my attention is taken with the appendage I hold out. My arm is darkened with coarser hair, my fingers stunted. Oddest of all, I seem to have thickened nails protruding well beyond the tips. Those are what ravaged through her skin so easily. Both hands have changed, warped, my palms thicker, but soft.

Interesting.

My stomach grumbles again, motivated by the intoxicating smell of her spreading pool of darkening red. In all my years of playing with my prizes, I don't remember being hungry for them. Tired of them, bored with them, yes. But, hunger, that's new and exciting. She doesn't look like my usual trophy. I like mine younger, prettier.

The blanket pushes off, my legs swing over the side, but they lose purchase on the slick floor. My feet scream as my joints rebel against my heels touching the floor. Fighting to maintain my balance, I slump back against the firm mattress.

Dark hair covers my legs, thickly across my thighs. Why does it hurt to try and touch my heels down? My toes are longer, and have thickened nails, matching the new cuticles of

my hands. Hot sticky liquid soothes the cold of my feet on the tile. My balance straightens when I abandon trying to make my heels hit the ground.

I feel taller, and utterly ridiculous with this inane gown wrapped around me. The geometric pattern fades when it falls to the pool of crimson at my feet.

And what THE FUCK has happened to my cock? A layer of flesh and hair across my belly sheaths my length, hidden from the air. Careful of my new claws, I palm my length, slightly reassured at its hidden presence. It puzzles me what malady I have contracted that my cock now resembles that of a dog?

Exploring further, my scrotum still hangs as it always has, though the hair has thickened around my legs.

These claws will take adjustments. I nick my skin. A bead of my own blood mingles in the pool at my feet. The dart of pain springs into my belly. Another small nick twitches my cock in its sheath, a reminder I'm alive. How long have I slumbered that this woman felt such comfort in her actions?

I rake my claws across my stomach, enticing trails of fire surge blood to my loins as it spills over my legs. Another twitch, I can feel myself stirring, hardening. Palming the skin of my sheath, my lengthening cock firms until it breaches its moist slit.

The repugnant mongrel I am, the tip of my dick is flared, with small barbs encircling the mushrooming head. The cool air of the room is a shock against its entrance, yet it continues a tendril climb from my belly. Course are the pads on my palm

touching the smooth flesh now exposed. Too sensitive, the pain is raw when I touch myself, my hands too rough.

Soft hands lay at my feet. Stretching my back as I bend, my sharp nails rend through the soft skin of her elbow currying a soft ooze of clotting blood. It is surprisingly easy to twist the joint loose, to stand now with an arm and hand. The flayed flesh finds its way to my lips. Hot and smooth, the muscle still twitches against my tongue. Rich savory flavor floods into me, sating the rabid hunger that has twisted in my bowels. Reminiscent of my favorite rare prime rib, delicate nibbles of pale flesh go down quickly until nearly down to the wrist has been consumed.

I wrap the cooling fingers around my hardened cock, and long strokes fill my tightening belly with pleasure. Too long it has been since I have felt this, the quivering in my thighs. My palm keeps slipping over the flaccid hand. Growling in frustration, I swipe at her other mottling arm, severing it at the elbow more deftly than before.

I like my new hands. Though not as nimble as the old ones, they certainly have their use. Two dismembered hands now corral my burgeoning cock. My pulse quickens as I alternate the strokes.

What is that? A node? A lump? I know I'm nearing release, and my cock has swollen a new feature. A knot near midshaft disrupts my rhythm, but feels so good when I brush it with the cold chubby fingers.

Crouching over the glassy eyes of the woman, I stroke myself to a harrowing release, squirting my seed across her gaping face. My climax rolls through me, I aim my cock for her open mouth, pushing the barbed end against her tongue. The barb grabs and moves her limp flesh within her jaws.

This is what I think of you touching me, my detested chopped name spewing from your lips.

Drained, I shove one of the useless hands into her mouth; the other I push into the cavity I created in her throat.

Now, to find a way out of this place.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



SAM

I've got the local TV news channel on low in the background to keep me from falling too deeply into my own head until Dani arrives. Some of the shit I've been hearing is wild. Giant wolf-like dogs attacking people in the middle of cities has panic stricken citizens crying too close to microphones held by bored looking journalists.

Smoke billows from the barbeque as it burns off the remnants of previous meals. Thor naps nearby, but one of his caramel eyes opens and follows me every time I go near the grill.

Smart dog.

I'm wrapping squares of aluminum foil around freshly scrubbed Yukon potatoes when her blue Toyota pulls into the yard. My cock snaps to attention and immediately starts leaking when I watch her climb out of her truck.

Maybe I need to start wearing adult diapers or some shit. The mess I make in my boxers when I even think of her is annoying. If there's any hope of regaining control of that function, please let it happen soon.

Did she just knock? That's cute. Like I didn't fuck her sideways yesterday.

"You don't need to knock," I tell her as I open the door. Her cheeks turn pink when she sees my smile.

"Hi, Sam. I, well, you never know. I might have been interrupting something, well, scandalous." Her big blue eyes shine mischievously over the smile playing along the edges of her pink lips.

Oh, she's a vixen. Her eyes look like they will envelope me when I step forward and thread my fingers into her loose hair, cupping her neck. "I can assure you, if I'm doing anything scandalous, I very much am expecting you to be a part of it." Tipping my head, I seek out her soft mouth with mine, a thrill racing through me as she tilts to meet me. Her heartbeat is racing with mine. I press her lips gently, tasting a tantalizing chocolate trace when she sighs against me.

Her fingers splay a starburst pattern of heat across my chest and my hand seeks the curve of her waist as she melts closer against me. The fire in her hands tugs at the heat in my chest, luring me to press her closer. A momentary surge in willpower separates my lips from hers, echoed by a rumbling in my belly. "I'd better get our dinner started, or I'll end up having dessert first."

Still gripping her waist, I pull her from the cold stoop and push the door closed behind us. Dessert sounds so much more tempting right now, especially when I can hear her shallow breathing, hear her racing heart, and smell her arousal soaking

through her tight pants. That scent will be the death of me, and I cannot wait to drown in it.

A steadying breath does little to slow my pulse, but I peel away anyways, returning to the small mountain of glittering potatoes. It's distracting watching her from the corner of my eye, seeing her peel her coat off. A soft buzz of vanilla drifts to me when she steps to the island counter, leaning her elbows on it.

Hmm, it makes her ass stick out, just the right height. I make a mental note to bend her over the counter, soon.

“What can I do to help?” She purses her pouty lips, her half lidded eyes watching me intently.

Balancing the potatoes, I head to the door to put them on the grill. “There are drinks in the fridge. Help yourself and can you pull out a beer for me, please?” The chill outside eats through my light cotton shirt, hurrying me back to the warmth of the house.

My timing is impeccable, catching a glimpse of the heart shape of her ass poking out from the refrigerator as she peers inside. The tight knit of her yoga pants leaves little to my imagination, including the very noticeable lack of panty lines. Naughty girl.

I'm debating wrapping my hands around each orb when she straightens, a beer bottle in each hand. She sets the bottles on the counter next to the fridge. “Bottle opener?” Her brows raise as she contemplates all of the drawers.

“Right next to you, left-hand side.” She pulls on the small brass handle, emitting a smile of victory when she unveils the bottle opener lying on top of an oven mitt.

Making short work of removing the two caps, she hands me a chilled bottle before taking a long swallow from hers. Watching her throat move like that makes my own go parched, so I greedily drink down some of the soothing liquid.

“So,” she begins, “I got a letter today from The Research Organization calling for an immediate cease and desist of Thor’s treatments.” She takes another long swallow.

This surprises me. The treatment seems to be working, Thor has been acting like a puppy again, bounding and running painlessly.

“Well, I didn’t expect that. Did they say why?” Setting my beer aside, I start pulling the steaks from their marinade bath and stack them on a tray to go on the grill next.

“Yeah.” She pauses, taking another long pull from the bottle. “It’s transferring to humans, causing side effects.” Paling, she stares at her beer.

“Whoo, boy. What kind of side effects?” I turn back. She has my undivided attention.

“It’s a spectrum, they said. Anywhere from no effects, all the way to death.” She frowns as her eyes meet mine. “I think it’s what made us sick.” Her bottom lip folds between her teeth. “I’m sorry, they never said it could transfer to humans.”

“Hey, that is not your fault.” I step to her, running my hands up and down her arms. A small tremble dances under her skin. “I regret nothing.” Folding her against my chest, my fingers find that soft spot of her neck, her golden hair lightly tracing over my arm. “Besides, without those meds, how much longer would it be until I got to hold you like this? I would have had to keep making up excuses to get you out here.”

My belly warms as I feel her relax against me. Yes, this moment is a good thing that came out of this. “Tell me more. What exactly were we infected with?”

She shifts in my arms, the pain in her eyes has transformed to worry. “I signed a non-disclosure.” She looks into my eyes, squinting as she stares. Her pupils dilate when she realizes I’m leaning closer until our noses almost brush.

“Feel free to kick me in the balls if I tell another soul.” My cheeks tighten in a grin before I kiss her quickly on the tip of her nose.

Her mouth makes a perfect “O” as her cheeks blaze red. “I would never...” She trails off, a smile flitting over her features. “Okay. The researcher I spoke to said it very likely is airborne now. So, I imagine pretty soon the entire country is going to know all about this.”

“Shit.” I stand up. “Airborne is bad.” My nose signals that the potatoes are getting close to being done. “Keep talking. I’ll get the steaks on.” Picking up the piled tray, I leave the door open so I can hear her easily.

“They said side effects, besides death, could also be heightened senses, body hair, and even mutations.” I can’t see her face, and for a moment, I’m glad she can’t see mine. Alexander. I bet he was affected by this, too. Holy fuck, I could have ended up with a dog dick. Nasty. I’m a lot more okay with long orgasms and leaking.

“Why does it cause mutations? That’s weird, isn’t it?” My beer is calling my name. I put the tray the steaks were on into the sink, and finish what’s left in the bottle.

“I think it has to do with the DNA they used for the gene therapy. He said axolotl for regenerative abilities, jellyfish for longevity, and a third.” Wandering back to her jacket, she digs a piece of paper from her pocket, along with her cell phone.

“It used a third animal, Aenocyon dirus. Now, what the hell is that?” She quiets as she types it into her phone. “Holy fuck.” Her mouth hangs open, beckoning to my loins.

“What is it?” My curiosity is piqued.

“Dire wolf.” She drops her phone on the island, both hands falling flat next to it. She stares at it like the phone itself is going to leap at her throat.

“What would prompt them to use dire wolf?” Unbelievable.

“He said something about it being impervious to dysplasia. That just seems so crazy, doesn’t it?”

With a flush of acrid smoke, I flip the steaks and roll the potatoes around. Everything smells delicious. I’m glad I spent the extra time scrubbing to get rid of the lingering dirt smell.

She finishes her beer and fetches another out of the fridge, offering me one with a raise of her brow.

“Sure, and how do you like your steak? I should warn you, my grill doesn’t know how to cook well-done.” I dig a tray from the cupboard while she opens the beers.

“Rare has been my favorite lately.” Pursing her lips, she takes a sip from the fresh bottle.

“Mmm, good girl. That’s always been my favorite.” I can’t resist purring in her ear as I walk by. The burst of pink in her cheeks and the hot scent of her follows me outside where I hurry to gather the food.

Twisting the gas off, I balance the tray back to the table before depositing it to the wooden top.

“I can set the table, if you point me in the right direction.” Her cheeks are still pink. My jeans tighten seeing the lingering blush. I wonder if she’s reminiscing about yesterday. My goal tonight is to add another repertoire of memories.

Struggling to not bely my thoughts, I indicate the cupboard where the plates sit while I dig out toppings for the baked potatoes. Scattering shredded cheese, butter and sour cream near the resting steaks, I take a moment to admire her stretching to reach for the plates. Her ass is poking up while she stands on her tiptoes, a bare tease of skin showing at the small of her back and a wider swath revealing her smooth belly.

Just when I've nearly given in to the urge to wrap my hands around her waist and push myself against her, she lowers herself down victoriously with two dinner plates.

"So, I noticed that Alex's room is dark?" she asks as she searches a series of drawers for silverware.

"Ah, yeah, he was transferred to the hospital so his doctor could assess him." I have no interest in talking about Alex's dick over dinner, especially dinner with a beautiful woman.

"Oh, no! I hope everything is okay?" We each stab a steak onto our plates. My stomach growls again, the savory smell nearly overwhelming me as juices pool along the rib of my plate. Unable to wait any longer, I slice off a piece, enjoying the caramelized crisp to the fatty edge. The smoky singe combined with the tender cut melts in my mouth.

She's lost in the flavor, too. Her eyes half closed, a soft moan escapes her throat. Now, I want to hand feed her morsels of ribeye while I nibble at her honey center, just to see what new sounds I can work out of her.

"He seemed okay. Just different. I don't even know how to explain it." Trying to distract myself from images of Alex, I slice off a couple of more hearty bites of meat.

Watching her brows furrow, I'm tempted to rub my thumb between them to smooth the worried looking knot.

"What do you mean, 'different'?" Sliding another steak onto her plate, she fixes me with her pale blue eyes. I don't think I'm going to get away with being vague with her.

“After what you’ve told me? I’m guessing he caught whatever the bug is. But, he got it worse. He has the mutations.” I cringe. Visions of his face flicker behind my eyes.

“Really? That’s terrifying! Describe them, please?” Her eyes are so large as she begs me that I feel as if I’ll drown in the bottomless blue depths.

The beer isn’t as cold, but it goes down quickly, followed by another bite or two. My chair is quite a bit more uncomfortable. I find myself shifting to relieve the pressure on my tailbone.

I really don’t want to describe what I saw. And I think she sees me procrastinating.

“His whole body changed. His nose and mouth stuck out, like a snout. His ears are larger. They moved up the side of his head, even grew hair on them. His hands are more like claws, the fingers shorter and stubbier.” The more I talk, the more her jaw drops. I can’t tell if it’s surprise or abject horror she has on her face.

“So, his whole body was hairy? Like, it added hair? Or just made his existing hair longer?” She taps her fork against her napkin while she asks, then stabs another piece of meat while watching me.

“He has quite a bit more hair. Longer, darker. It covered his arms, belly and chest. He smelled like a dog.” The refrigerator is calling me for another beer. I grab two. I think she’s going to want another one too if this questioning continues.

“So, his face and hands changed. Did anything else?” She squints at me. I know she can hear my hammering heart as I delay responding. It won’t do any good to try and deceive her.

“Well—” I find the back of my neck itches miserably all of the sudden. “—he had other changes, too. His dick grew a sheath like a dog’s.” I have a sour taste in my mouth that takes nearly the entire third beer to remove. Stretching my leg out, I cage hers against the chair. The heat of her calf radiating through my jeans is a welcome distraction.

“Wait. What?” Her eyes seem twice their normal size. “Like, attached to his belly?” When I nod in affirmation, her cheeks pale.

“I heard on the news that there is a big pack of giant dogs running around causing havoc. Full blown dogs. People were saying they were wolves, but bigger.” The fleeing news footage they had shown was a bit scary. The wolves are the size of motorcycles.

“Oh, my god.” She covers her mouth, her hand shaking, tears welling in her eyes. “I did that? Those poor people!” Her delicate fingers press shakily over her mouth. I can feel her tremble against my calf, and it sends a shiver directly up to my cock. “There must be something I can do?”

“You didn’t do that. That footage was from downtown Chicago. There were reports from all over the country. The government and their bizarre experiment did it.” I lean over the small table, my reflection filling her eyes as I draw near. “But, if you insist on punishing yourself over it, at least let me

help.” My voice drops as her eyelids do, fluttering over her cheeks.

“It’s just, all those people,” she stammers. The catch of doubt in her voice rings through my ears, and I want to make her forget about every single one of them.

“Danielle.” I draw her name out, caressing each syllable with my tongue. “Do you need to be punished?” Opening my palm to her, my elbow props on my knee, an invitation if she’s willing. A shiver of expectation runs up my spine as I watch her roll her little pink tongue across her lips. The burst of the sweet scent of her arousal toys with my nose. A blush working its way up her neck mimics the blood rushing into my loins. My exposed palm cools while she debates, but I can already smell her answer. Her heart is beating faster, her breath rate is increasing, that pink that drives me wild works its way over her cheeks.

She just needs to give in.

“I-I’m not sure.” Her hesitation pushes a rumble from my chest. Her scent grows heavier, flooding my nostrils with her heady honey.

“Are you saying,” I can feel a smile tugging at my cheeks, “you chose me to participate for completely chaste purposes? And not in the hopes that I would bend you over and fuck you until you screamed my name?” Her palms flatten on the table, her nostrils flaring as she breathes even faster. I can hear her heart rate, screaming in her chest.

She's close, the smile teasing her lips belies her. She's enjoying this as much as I am.

"Maybe I did?" she whispers, her hand raising tentatively to brush her fingertips over my palm. She releases a squeak as I jerk her from her chair and pull her across my knees. The softness of her breasts rub against my thigh, and her pert ass sticking up exposes me to a full onslaught of her damning scent and reveals the wet spot soaking through her dark pants.

Pinning her chest across my leg with one arm, my other circles the orbs of her ass, my hand kneading each in turn. "You wanted this. You want me to make you come, don't you?" She wiggles and moans on my lap, nodding at my words. A sigh escapes her lips as her first orgasm rolls through her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



DANI

The first wave of release is just peaking when I feel the stinging slap on my ass. Involuntarily, I jump forward, but he holds me firmly against him. A lightning bolt races through me and I nearly come again as he rubs the spot he smacked, his fingers tracing the crease between my legs. His rigid hard-on digs into my side. I can't help but shift against him.

What is going on with me? I've never been spanked before, but, holy shit, is it hot.

“So wet already, you came here tonight to get cock, didn't you?” Another smack, I can feel my belly tightening as I jump. The heavy rubbing he gives my ass cheek pulls them apart, exposing my hot center to a rush of air. The sensation has me quivering as another smack sends me over the edge, bucking on his knees with wave after clenching wave rolling through me.

His long fingers knot in my hair, I can feel his lips against the shell of my ear, and hot breath tickles against my cheek. “Your punishment is I'm going to make you come so hard you forget the world exists.”

“Yes, please,” I pant. The hairs in his fist pull tighter, little points of pressure extending into my scalp.

“What did you say? I couldn’t quite hear you.” The hot touch of his lips on the lobe of my ear lulls me into a false sense of comfort. Another jolt of pain and pleasure rockets through me as his hand snaps against my ass a second time. My belly tightens as I squirm against him, his hard thighs almost bruising when I try and rub my own together.

“Please!” The word falls in a half scream when his hand connects again sending an electric current coursing through my body.

“Good girl,” he murmurs. The rumble of his chest against my back vibrates down to my core. I can feel it lick against my center from the inside. His hot hand slides under my elastic waistband and pushes my pants down to my knees. Cool air kisses the heat of my skin. I can feel my slick juices running down my legs in tickling rivulets.

Burning fingers trace my trembling thighs, lightly dancing over my exposed slit. With each brush, fire ignites within me. Pushing between my legs, the tips of his fingers press against my lower belly and firmly path their way down. When he presses between my folds and finds my throbbing clit, I leap forward with the sensation like a live wire of ice jolting through me. The moment his hand disappears, I brace myself, a knot coiling in my belly of expectation that binds harder and harder, waiting for the spank I know is coming.

Shaking, I'm holding my breath, my limbs trembling in anticipation of the bite of his palm.

“Sam!” His name flies from my lips when he plunges two fingers into me, a third brushing my hardened clit, causing an eruption of pleasure to course through me. Rolling on the high of another climax, the stinging strike of his hand on my quivering slit kicks me to a higher level, every muscle tightening as my empty sheath clamps down. He groans when he pushes two fingers back into me while I'm clenching, and strokes me, extending the pulses in my body until I can hardly breathe. I can feel his legs shaking beneath me, his shuddering breath playing on the bare skin of my back.

Clawing at his leg, I try to drag myself forward. I need a moment, a reprieve, but his arm across my back holds me firm. Filling me with each thrust, he twists his fingers to push deeper, rolling his knuckles to rub against that spot inside that rips the air from my lungs in blinding contractions. Just when stars begin to pop behind my eyes, and my jaw begins to ache from clenching it so hard, he withdraws his fingers to knead my ass, leaving me gasping and limp upon his lap.

“It's so sexy to see you like this,” he growls in my ear. “You make me hard every time I think of you. I want you to see what you do to me.” Like molasses, his words pour over me. He thinks I'm sexy. A burning urge overtakes me to show him how he makes me feel.

His hand rubs against my ribs as he unzips his jeans. The full length of him presses into my side, laying across my back.

“Now, get on your knees like a good girl.” His hand is softer as he pats my ass encouragingly.

Wiggling my hips, I drop to the floor in front of him. He’s big. Bigger than I remember from my brief view yesterday. The purple throbbing head drips a bead of cum down his length.

Tentative in my inexperience, I gently wrap my fingers around him. He spasms with my touch. A low rumble vibrates from his chest. When I wrap my other hand around him, I’m a little panicked by how much still extends above my grasp.

Did he really have his entire dick inside of me yesterday? There’s no way. My fingers can’t even touch around his girth.

Operating under their own volition, my hands stroke him, my thumb smearing his beads of cum over the head. The salty sweet smell entices me to lean forward. I’ve never tried it before, but I want to taste him.

His fingers tangle in my hair. His thumb traces the length of my ear, sending a shiver through my body. “This is what you do to me.” His blue eyes are nearly closed. His jaw is clenching so tightly when I move my hands that I can hear his teeth grinding through his heavy breathing.

I do this to him. A surge of pride rolls through me as I flatten my tongue against him for the first time. His skin is velvety smooth, pulled tightly over the rigid steel of his erection. He tastes like a margarita with too much tequila. Salty, sweet, burning in a rich potent aftertaste. It makes me want more.

When I suck the tip into my mouth, he groans, throwing his head back. A spurt arcs down my throat, but I surprise myself by swallowing it greedily. I always thought this would make me gag, would be a turn off, but every drop he gives me just makes me hungrily seek more. Watching his Adam's apple bob and his hand gripping his thigh so hard his knuckles turn pale makes me squeeze my own thighs together. My clit throbs seeing him barely maintain control.

Seeing his chest heave forces a moan from my own throat. He spasms at the vibration, another hot ribbon of silky cum shoots down my throat.

Oh, my god, I want to suck him dry. Every drop I get from him rockets me higher until I feel my belly tighten and I cry out my climax around him. His fingers tighten in my hair and he pushes himself into me, nearly choking me with a flood of his release. Squeezing my hands around him, I try to curb his thrusts into my mouth, stretching my cheeks, pushing against the back of my throat. He pulses within me, and burst after burst of hot fluid burns its way down as his hips spasm on the edge of his chair.

With a roar, he pushes my head back and I gasp, swallowing the remnants in my mouth.

“Fuck, Dani, I’m sorry. I nearly drowned you.” He’s still leaking beads from his narrow slit, rolling down his wet hard length to gather around my fingers. He’s still rock hard.

I clear my throat. “I didn’t know guys had this much.” I can feel the heat on my cheeks when I look up at him, my hands

still stroking his rigid cock.

“I don’t think it’s normal,” he says with a panting grin, his dark blond hair falling over his eyes. His fingers loosen in my hair as he gently massages my scalp. “It only started doing this after I got sick. Now, it happens every time I think of you.”

Wow. My medically minded brain tries to kick in, even as I lean forward to lick around the lip of his mushroomed head. I wonder if it’s the regenerative ability that replenishes so quickly? Maybe that’s why our appetites are so much larger? Now, I wonder if I’ll get full before he stops coming.

I want to find out.

Wrapping my lips back around him, I ravenously start sucking again, twisting my hands up and down his length, now wet with my own saliva.

“Take off your shirt.” I hear him groan, his voice husky as his cock jumps in my mouth. Keeping my lips around him, I unbutton my cotton blouse and then my bra. The exposure makes my nipples harder as the fabric tickles down around my thighs.

When my fingers touch him he spurts again, the tangy hot fluid coursing over my tongue pulls another moan from my throat.

He pulls out of my mouth, mid-stroke, and his hot cum pulses over my neck. His eyes grow wide when we both freeze.

His thumb slowly rubs a bead into my sweaty skin, and his nostrils flare.

When he leans forward, his eyes are nearly black.

“Do you know how fucking good that smells? My scent on your skin is the best thing I have ever inhaled.” His nose is buried against my cheek, his heavy breathing coursing down my bare chest.

Suddenly, my arms are pulled up and he flings me over his shoulder as if I’m weightless.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



SAM

That smell. When my beads of cum hit her hot sweaty skin, it was a raging primal synapse that fired. Like baking soda and vinegar, a volcano of the most intoxicating smell exploding from the smooth skin of her throat.

And now I'm carrying her like a caveman back to my bed. Her breasts rub against my shoulder blade, each nipple grazing burning lines as she sways.

I peel her sneakers off before I hit the door, and stand her on my mattress. Her hands alight on either side of my neck with her beautiful trimmed pussy right at eye level.

Shedding my boots and my own shirt, I feel her hands trace fiery lines across my chest, her thumbs scratching the pebbles of my nipples with her nails.

I want her naked. Now. Fighting the urge to grab and yank her leggings off, I find one hand thrusting two fingers back into her wet slit, my other pushing down on the damp fabric of her pants. Nearly dangling in the air, her toes dance across the fabric of the bed as her fingernails dig into my shoulders. Her eyes are wide, and her mouth opens to match. Trembling

thighs grip my arm when I hoist her closer to me with my fingers still buried deep in the tight confines of her sheath.

“I should just carry you around with me all day like this,” I drawl. The blush of red that flares up her neck is mine now. No longer resisting the urge, I pull her against me, latching onto the hollow of her neck like a vampire. I leave a trail of glaring red marks on her skin. She whimpers and rolls her hips on my hand. Her gyrations intensify as I work my way up. A final hard nip, her soft flesh between my teeth, my nose pressing against the velvet lobe of her ear, sends her crying out in shuddering spasms, her hands clinging to my neck. Her pussy is clenching my fingers so tightly I don’t know if I could free them.

“Holy shit, Sam,” she moans against my neck. “Everything you do feels so good.” Another shiver runs through her making her hard nipples press against my chest.

“Then I want to do everything to you, Dani. I want to fuck every inch of you until my scent oozes out of your pores.”

She stiffens in my arms as her head flies up, wide eyes meeting mine. Her perfect thighs tighten again around my arm as her heartbeat quickens, thundering in my ears. “I’m, um, I’m not very, um, experienced.” She chews on her pouty lower lip. Ribbons of white and pink flicker across its petulant surface as she presses.

With her feet still floating in the air, I walk closer to the soft embrace of the heavy comforter, lowering her down with my

hand still lodged firmly between her legs, my fingers rubbing the soft cords within her.

“You aren’t a virgin.” Her pussy may be as tight as a boa constrictor on its fatal squeeze, but I know she wasn’t a virgin when I sank into her yesterday.

Freeing my hands from her luxurious hot confines, I push my jeans to the ground and crawl her up into my bed. I have dreamt of this day for months, having her here, naked and willing. And now, my nose seeking the steaming honey of her clit, I feel drunk on the euphoric scent emanating from her.

“No, but barely,” she stammers. Another flush crosses the round swells of her breasts, spreading up to her delicate collar bone drawing my lips. Devouring each of her swollen nipples until she moans, I work my way down to seek out the nectar she emanates for me.

“It’s a good thing.” I breathe against her folds before me. With a long languid taste of her, it stirs a tremble that has her dropping to the pillows behind her. “It means I get to have so many other firsts with you.” My fingers slide back into her like she was made to glove them. When she squirms beneath me and her cries reach that level that tells me she’s on the edge, I suck her firm clit between my teeth and press my knuckle against the star of her ass.

Writhing through the throes of her climax, her body clenches my fingers and grinds her hips against my hand, begging for more.

“Tell me about your first time,” I rasp out before curling my tongue against her again.

Her brows furrow in confusion, her head still thrashing a wave of blond across my pillows. “Why?” she pants. Her legs press against my shoulders, her heels into the bed beneath me. I tighten my grip around her hips, dragging her tightly against my invasive hand and mouth.

“Because,” I groan against her, “after tonight, every time you think about losing your virginity, you’re going to remember me fucking you in the ass for the first time instead.” When I push my soaked finger past the tight muscle ringing her ass she jolts up, her nails scraping my scalp when she grabs my hair.

“Sam!” she screams. But, I relentlessly push into her, taking particular glee watching her eyes unfocus and roll backwards in her head, her mouth dropping into a silent scream. Her entire body tightens. Shuddering pulses grip at my hand as she soaks my bed with squirts of her juices and she collapses backwards onto the pillows.

I knew she’d like it.

“Tell me his name.” My hand moves in and out of the tight confines of her body, strumming an invisible line that draws her chest upwards, her neck pressing toward the dark sheets until she is a perfect arch. Her heaving ribs cresting, the orbs of her breasts float beneath a sheen of sweat while her quivering thighs struggle to push her hips higher.

Slowing my strokes, I uncouple my lips from her swollen clit to reach up and fill my other hand with one of her firm breasts. I pinch one of her pink beaded nipples. A soft cry tumbles from her lips, and her tight little virgin asshole squeezes my finger so hard that it's difficult to move.

“Tell me his name,” I repeat.

“Who?” she pants. The flush across her pale skin almost appears feverish as she thrashes and moans.

I loose a heavy breath that is saturated with the flavor of her. “I’m going to make you come so hard you forget your own name.” I slide my pinky into her ass, so each of her tight little holes match, two fingers to each.

“Clint!” she gasps. “His name was Clint!” Her hips writhe when she comes again, clamping around me and squirting against my neck as she screams.

I slide up her body, slick with sweat. Tasting and savoring every inch, I’m leaving a trail of teeth marks in my wake. The urge to mark her is nearly overwhelming, I know I’m almost breaking her skin, but it’s so hard to hold back.

She jerks with every nip, and her sheath tightens around my fingers with every jerk. Her hands seek out my neck, her nails pulling at my skin sending shivers through me. My cock is so hard it hurts, she is sweet pain that has me teetering on the edge of a precipice. I want to savor every hitch of her breath, every moan, every screaming orgasm that leaves my sensitive ears ringing. I want to push her higher until my hearing is shattered and her trembling cleaves the earth in two. And I

want to join her, to tumble a mass of disjointed limbs into the oblivion of space.

Freeing my hands I grasp hers, dragging them above her head. Giving her a brief respite, I cage her with my body, kneeling between the shrine of her legs. My dripping cock poised at her entrance, it's everything I can muster to rein myself. Her face is flushed, her hair clings to her damp skin, and she has never looked more beautiful than now.

My lips seek hers; my frenzied path of hunger up her body slows into a gentle kiss. Her body melds against me as her lips press mine. The tiny soft probe of her tongue beckons me to open, drawing an appreciative groan from my chest.

Oh, this girl. All I've done and she still pushes me for more. Her silky lips reach and nibble mine while her sinful little heels wrap around my hips, tugging me closer. I can feel her needy little pussy rubbing against the tip of my cock, and I can't hold back any longer. Rolling my hips, I pierce her exquisite heat, reveling in the shivering hold her body places around me. I've barely broached with the tip, and already I can feel the tightening in my gut as she pulls me deeper.

With a whining moan she arches her back, sinking me further still. Her heart ramps again, a frantic pace in time with her hips twisting against mine.

"Sam," she begs. "Please."

One hand still locking her wrists, my other floats down her hip, gathering the back of her bucking thigh in my grip and pulling her knee up to marry my chest, opening her to accept

me more easily. But, I still measure myself. I'm not ready to erupt quite yet. I think I enjoy seeing her on the edge of ecstasy almost as much as the thrill I get by pushing her over.

“Tell me what you want,” I breathe into her ear. My body is trembling, so close to the brink myself.

Her lids appear heavy as she drags her eyes open. Pools of black shallow into the brightest of blue rings as she focuses on me. A small teasing smile dances across her lips as she throws her head back, exposing her neck and its rapid pulse to my lavishing tongue.

“Fuck me. Please?”

My ass muscles twitch at her command, driving into her final depths. Without a pause, I withdraw, nearly to the end, and fill her again. While I'm gaining speed and veracity, her eyes fall closed as I assault her with my cock. The knot in my belly releasing, groaning, I pump into her while ribbons of cum that burn out of me. Her clenching body joins me in climax, both of us riding an ever growing wave after wave of rolling orgasms.

She makes me lose control. I can't hold back as my hips slap against her. Her shuddering with each stroke, her heel pressing against my back, drives harder and more intense spasms through me. Moaning between every tightening of her body, her pitch rises, constricting harder with each octave.

An urge to spank her in rhythm to her alluring sounds overtakes me. When my hand stings on the flesh of her hip,

her body spasms so tightly I can't move, like she's squeezing my cock right in two.

“Oh, god!” she squeals when another snap of my hand follows the first. She arches so high, only her head remains on the pillows, the proof of the intensity of her orgasm spraying across my belly. I can't hold back, seized within her, the pulsing of her body rips another climax from me.

“That's it,” I barely rasp out. “Come for me.” She shudders as I nibble my request across her ear. Sealing the demand, I angle her hips, driving myself deeper into her quivering center.

The ability to come with her, to roll through the waves of release in time with her, is the most magnificent gift I could ever imagine getting. No longer a bystander, no more holding back. Being able to dive headlong into the passion she surrounds me with, unrestrained, is the most amazing thing I've ever experienced. I've flooded her, filled her, the rolling beads that trickle down her ass careening an alluring scent that drives me rabid.

I've never felt more naked than the moment I slide myself out of her. Withdrawing from her heat is a douse of cold water. My cock is still rigid, its leaking head begging to seat itself deep within her again.

Finally freeing her hands, I raise myself above her, rolling her hips to press her thighs against her chest.

She's soaked. Palming her damp folds, I slide a wet finger past the tight ringed muscle of her ass. I can hear her gasp, her body tightens when I push into her. Her fingers dig into my

arm, but she doesn't push me away while I work my finger slowly in and out of her.

“That’s my good girl, just relax. I want every inch of you, and I promise, you’ll enjoy it.” The muscles give slowly when I hear her take a steadying breath. When I slide in the second finger and keep up the slow rhythmic movement, the heat on my arm disappears when her hand slides down to fist the blanket.

A long low moan builds in her chest as I churn my hand and stretch her little virgin asshole.

“Oh, god. Oh, my god. Oh, my,” she chants to herself. Her moans grow deeper and her hips start to rock to meet the thrusts of my hand.

“That’s it. You’re such a good girl.” My lips find her tender clit to press light kisses against her. She smells like the sweetest of nectar; the combination of us is a heady chemical. She gives small squirts against my chin as her first orgasm starts. And when I push the third finger in, stretching her wider, her hips jerk and she screams, her body clenching around me. Her head throws back, her blond hair knotted on my pillows, sweat beads at her temples, her body shivering against me.

I know she’s ready.

Rolling her onto her side, I spoon myself against her back. Pulling her leg over my hips, my throbbing cock eagerly seeks her softened ass. Slickened with her lustrous juices, I use short tiny movements to gently push the head past her tight ring.

Her hand finds my hip, pressing me, holding me from moving forward. I keep up the slight movements, not pressing, but letting her adjust to my girth. I'm not a small man, so I give her time...even if the pressure in my belly is screaming to drive into her.

"Tell me his name," I whisper in her ear. Her hand eases, and I gain another inch. Wrapping my arms around her, pulling her tightly against my chest, I can feel her trembling with every movement. Slightly longer strokes, my thighs are quivering to hold myself back. She feels like fucking heaven on earth, and I've only got the tip in. I can feel myself leaking within her, adding to her heat, slickening her further.

"Sam..." she trails off into another low moan. Her fingers are now pulling me instead of slowing me. I push farther in, gaining with each slow thrust of my hips. Her hard heel digs into the back of my thigh, spurring me deeper, but I fight the urge. I know she still needs time.

Slowly I piston into her, deeper and deeper. Getting closer to filling her, to sinking all the way to my aching nuts. Each stroke gains in speed now. My reserve is breaking down. I can feel a momentous tightening in every limb. My hands rove her supple curves, landing on one of her tight nipples with a small pinch.

"Tell me," I pant. "Tell me who's your first." I can barely rumble out the last of my words. My cock flares within her tightening walls. She loses a long cry as she digs her nails into my thigh, pulling me to go faster, drive deeper. My hand

follows her shuddering belly to find her wet clit, my thumb pressing against it as I push two fingers deep into her clenching pussy. “Tell me who makes you come harder than you’ve ever come before.” I slam against her, my thighs slapping against her ass, my cock buried to my belly.

“Sam! You! Oh, my god! Oh, my—” she screams. Her entire body goes rigid. She clamps my fingers within her, and she has a vice grip around my swollen cock that causes the coil within me to shatter. Another sound fills the room. My own voice echoes back to my ears. My body locks up, every muscle splintering into pieces and pouring into her. Stars pop behind my eyes and I force them closed. I’m drowning in the waves that crash over me.

She has utterly destroyed me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ALEXANDER

What a fortuitous turn of events. My warehouse still stands, bound with my locks, untouched for what I now know is years. It took patience I nearly lost to manipulate them to open, but I'm not ready to rend the doors apart quite yet. The silence of the insulated walls is a comfort to my overwhelmed ears. Ironic that I had this built so long ago to harbor the screams of my trophies, but now I embrace the isolation it provides from the outside world.

Nearly all of the lights seem to be functional, only a few bulbs fail to luminate.

I'm not entirely confident in my new hands enough to warrant the hassle of the delicate glass. My eyes see much better than they did previously in the dim lighting of the tunnels below the warehouse, so I decide new bulbs are unnecessary.

A dank musk fills the air as I draw nearer to the end rooms. My memories preceding my long sleep are foggy at best, but I vaguely recall using these rooms last.

The smell intensifies, the air heavy with mold and fungus. An acrid bite of mouse urine entrenches itself in my sensitive nostrils, burning my eyes in its density.

Pushing the heavy door open, the weak flicker of the aged bulb illuminates the small space. A single twin bed rests against the wall, the fetid smell radiating from the lumps upon its mattress. Dark stains envelop the blanket that hides the shapes.

The flash of a memory skirts my thoughts. A face. Blond hair knotted around my fingers, her features contorted in the beauty of pain.

Her name eludes me. Perhaps a glimpse will stir it loose from the cobwebs that plague my mind.

Flaxen hair protrudes from beneath the rough cloth as I pull it down, affixed to a darkly stained skull. The sockets are focused on the cinderblock wall behind the bed, but it doesn't take much to wrest it from the vertebrae of the neck.

She's much lighter than the last time I caressed her face like this.

My lips twist over my enlarged teeth at my humorous observation.

Pity, she likely starved to death. I missed the moment her eyes would have bulged, and her cheeks would have glowed in burgeoning shades of red. I should have been the one to have squeezed her last breath from her body. It's a beautiful end,

when I push their last breath into their lips from my lungs, then trap it within their supple neck.

They love it. They really do, when they can fade from this world with a piece of me within them. It's a sweet comfort when their pleasure with me is over. When their bodies give out and can no longer sustain the pleasure I inflict, they beg me to release them.

The skull and her blond locks will go into my trophy room. But, first to collect the other two. I always keep three prizes at a time, so while one receives her pleasure from me, the others can recover their strength. They always give so much of themselves that it can be exhausting.

A second skull, with its similar blond strands, tucks against the first. The hair has lost its sheen, but still rubs seductively against my chest as I walk, the soft tendrils tickling the hairs of my belly. Crusted bone brushes my nipple sending a small ripple of warmth through my loins. My pretty prizes.

Pushing the third door open shatters me. It's empty. No scent, no remains. This one was so special, too. I remember her, the white shock that grew in her hair within her first weeks with me. The defiant set of her jaw. The beautiful moments when she would break and scream her lustful cries of agony when I spilled her blood.

My angel is gone. Angel. Ah, Angela. I remember that. She was to earn a top spot in my trophy room. Her unique blond hair a testament of her love for me.

Muscle memory carries my tiptoed steps down the bricked hall to the blinding lights of my trophy room. My sensitive eyes struggle to adjust to the multitude of lights I have focused onto the back wall. The smell of dust burning off of long neglected bulbs drifts in the air.

Trailing my clawed finger carefully, lest I accidentally shear any of the delicate fronds, I wander my way along the glistening variations of blond I have arranged in rows. Darker on the bottom, lighter on the top, each is a trophy from one of my prizes, scalped after they received their final gift of breath from me.

My beauties.

The two skulls in my hand go onto a small showcase I have near the end. This is reserved for my prizes that left without me. There are only four others here. I learned after each of them better ways to keep them safe, lest tragedy befall any others early.

A growling knot rumbles my stomach, echoing in the silence of the room.

Burying my nose once more in the golden wave, letting the strands flow over my elongated snout, I work my way back outside.

I need to find food, and I don't think I'll be sauntering into my favorite Italian restaurant anymore.

Through the darkened alleys of the industrial buildings, I practice moving from shadow to shadow. The early morning

hours still offer paths of light and dark between the buildings. Cat piss hangs pungent in the air, with occasional pools of dog markings on corners and garbage cans.

Filthy vermin.

My ears rotate to a new sound, a movement I haven't learned to control yet. A soft melodic humming comes from just ahead. Padding silently on my toes, I round a dilapidated foul dumpster and catch sight of heaven.

A petite girl, hair of honey blond, is swinging a black garbage bag in time with the sweet thrumming sounds vibrating from her perfect throat.

My clawed fingers twitch to wrap around it, to feel her trembling at my touch. To see the sweat sheen across her body as she fights me.

Shivers of anticipation run through me and I can feel my cock harden in its sheath, pulling the skin of my belly taut.

I want her. She is a delicate prize that is to be coveted.

As she rounds the corner where I'm crouched, she releases only a gasp before I have her. Her heartbeat is a new exquisite layer as I hear it pounding frantically in her chest. The sweet smell of panic accentuates this, a heightened level I never knew before.

Careful of my sharp claws, I manage to surround the soft tissue of her neck without slicing deeply. The rhythm of her heart slows as consciousness fades. What a perfect metronome of control I'll have, now that I can savor every beat.

Hugging her tightly to my chest, this new stronger body of mine makes easy work of carrying her slight frame back to the secluded warehouse.

But, my heavier hands slow me when I bind her on her belly to my bench. Her thin arms pulled beyond her head, her delicate feet spread and tethered. It's a measured distance, wide enough for me if I choose. I thank an earlier me for taking the time to make it as easy as possible to work quickly lest they struggle and try to flee.

It always takes time for them to learn they can't escape.

She appears to be wearing some sort of blue medical scrubs. From the lingering scents of so many animals in the fabric, I'm guessing she doesn't work in a hospital. One of my clawed fingers tears through the thin material easily; like a razor blade I stream it up the back of her leg. It peels away, revealing the soft pale skin of her calf, then the hollow behind her knee, the smooth arch of her thigh. I dig too deeply when I reach the rise of her bottom, cleaving the tender flesh in a clean slice.

The groan that she gifts me pierces my chest.

Too much to resist, the sweet smell of the dark ooze of her blood beckons me to taste her. My rough tongue laps the crimson drops, sating the growl that previously rumbled through my bowels. I must find food soon, as tempting as my new prize is, she will not sate me completely on an empty stomach.

Following a similar path on her other leg, I let my wonton claw dig deeper into the meat of her thigh, leaving a ribbon of red marking my trail up to her waistband. A pair of white panties reveal themselves. What a sweet and childlike surprise they are.

Her heartbeat quickens, as does her breathing, and I know that consciousness has found its way back. When the scream starts, deep in her chest, she proves that the veil of sleep has now been lifted.

I love this moment. The first time they try to fight. To pull free of the restraints. When their skin slickens with sweat, when the corded muscles knot and band beneath the skin.

Her thigh tightens, the red strip of broken skin flexing, pushing out rivulets of blood.

Demanding her body to show me more, I spread the fissure to press more of the beautiful color from her. She bleeds for me, sharing her most secret treasure. The hunger it raises is new, but I'm happy to indulge. I've never before wanted to feast on my cherished prizes, satisfied to simply paint their skin and have them sing their songs of screaming worship. Nothing would be an homage more than to consume that which I hold so dear.

Resisting the urge to devour the hams of her leg, I think I'll enjoy this one for a while. It's been too long, and she's too perfect to be rid of so quickly.

Her violent thrashing has subsided. Panicked breathing still hangs heavy in the otherwise quiet air.

Too quiet.

My hands find her shoulders, the hard edges of the scapulas pushing through her shirt like ridges along her spine. I want her bare before me. Fingers splaying across her thin shivering back, I dig my claws down just enough to erupt through the layer of her shirt, slicing through the elastic band of her bra, lightly fileting through her fragile skin.

Ah, there's the scream. The testament of her passion. Filling the room with her accolades, I drag my hands down her back. When my nails bounce off her ribs as I pass over them, a new chorus of sounds punctuate her cries.

A spreading veneer of crimson tints the canvas of her skin. The mosaic of red, white and the blue of her clothing should be patriotic in its inspiring beauty. Countries should fly this flag above their capitals. Children should salute this glory in their classrooms.

I show my appreciation with a long sweep of my tongue, the sweet smell of her panic only enhancing the euphoric taste. Tickling over the smooth bones of her ribs, the taste differs where the hard shell is damaged and the savory butter of her marrow leaks through.

When I struggle to say how delicious she is, it comes out as a low hiss, words still not forming true in my strange toothed mouth.

Curse this mouth! How can I vocalize my appreciation, tell them how sweet their pain is?

Frustration flings me from her side, seeking my vestibule retreat. My trophy wall offers respite to my lamentations. The soft tendrils of my lovely prizes cascade with my touch, caressing my skin. Reminding me of their devotion, their love they expressed to me. My damnation is in not being able to return that adoration. It's trapped silently in this guttural throat that growls and roars the words I wish to express.

Regaining my senses, I return to my pixie and her dainty whimpering.

Her toes curl, digging into the thin vinyl cushion. The movement flexes her calves, the muscles bunching through the slits in her clothes. The pale skin of her thighs flickers between the stained edges of the fabric.

Whole.

Unblemished.

How can this be?

Brushing back the tatters of her shirt, her bare torso heaves and writhes. But, it does not bleed. No mark carries on her skin. No rib is exposed to my affection.

Giddy with realization, I pour myself a full glass of my favorite scotch, and sit against her hip on the bench.

Unfazed by her fear, I'm quickly fascinated with tracing ragged patterns in her skin, like doodles in the sand.

Her screams are lyrical. I can draw out a rhythm with embellished dots and dashes that I tear into her soft flesh.

And it heals, before my eyes. Before I can enjoy a sip of my burning liquor, the tissue begins to knit at the fringes, drawing itself tight, and disappearing without a trace.

Curiosity draws the best of us, and I can't deny the urge to render a small scrape upon my own knee to gauge my ability.

It heals, but fractionally slower than my sweet prize. My special girl. She is made for me. A repeatedly blank canvas to do with what I will.

My stomach grumbles again, impatient. I remember the brutish woman from the hospital, wishing I had the foresight to bring some of her thick flesh back with me.

Another experiment floats into my thoughts. Taking one of her small palms in mine, I see her eyes widen in panic as she watches me. Separating the fingers on her hand, I siphon her tiniest finger into my mouth. My tongue rolls it between my canines, even as she struggles to pull it free.

One tiny bite, a morsel really. A snack for my next expedition. Leaving her moaning wails, with the blood still running down her arm, I wonder if that delectable digit will grow back?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



DANI

I've never woken up in someone else's arms. I don't even remember doing it as a child. My mom has always been an "arm's length" kind of parent, and my dad passed when she was still pregnant with me.

It's a new sensation, enveloped against Sam's hot body. His strong arms encircle me. His leg intertwines with mine. The soft movement of his breath over the top of my head is feathering my hair with every soft exhale.

I didn't know it would feel like this. Comfortable. Safe. Wanted.

Sticky.

My knee is in a wet spot, stuck to the bed. Opening my eyes, the room is too bright. And I realize, seeing the distance to the far side of the bed, that Sam must be barely clinging to the edge.

Because there's a lake in the middle of it.

I can feel my cheeks burn remembering last night. Never, in a million years, could I have ever pictured doing what we did.

Even the few romance books I've read, they've never done anything close.

But, holy shit, did it feel good. When he pulled me over his knee and I felt his hand for the first time...

My belly tightens, and I can feel the tickle of dampness between my legs. My center throbs, but I can't rub my thighs together because his knee is between them. Closing my eyes, I try to black out the memories, and maybe I can go back to sleep, to enjoy this moment of warmth for a little while longer.

But, I remember my feet, dangling in the air, while he held me up with only his hand buried inside of me. It almost brings a moan to my lips. I am my own worst enemy. The harder I try to clear my mind, the more images sweep in.

His chest expands against my back, and his arms tighten around me. I can feel him hardening against my hip.

"I can smell you, my horny girl." His deep voice vibrates me from the inside out. "It's a very nice way to wake up." His hot hand covers my breast in a slow sensuous massage. He rolls my nipple between his fingers, then lightly traces it in small circles. Little bolts of electricity flare through me at his touch. My hips move of their own accord, pushing against him. He's already fully hard and pressing against my back.

His hand drifts down my belly that's already quivering in anticipation. The calluses on his palm offer a friction I didn't know I needed when he brushes the trimmed hair between my thighs. With a single finger, he tickles my slit, drifting up and down, just skimming the edges. Teasing me, torturing me.

My leg moves on its own, pushing my knee higher on his hip, opening myself to his exploring hand.

His touch dances above me, so faint I can barely feel him. But, just enough that I know exactly where the tip of his finger sits at any moment.

My body feels like it's filling with static electricity, the white noise from the radio.

His leisurely strokes follow the full length of me, but still there are only feathery touches against my slick slit. My belly is shaking, and my breath is fast, just little pants. I can't handle it anymore. I follow the length of his forearm with my hand, trying to push him against me.

He resists easily, a soft chuckle rumbling against my back, pushing a little whine of frustration from me.

"You want it?" he murmurs in my ear.

"Yes, please." My voice quivers.

He rolls his hips, freeing his steely length from between us and rests himself against my entrance. His fingers finally break through the edges of my folds, running firmly over me, spreading my hot wetness onto himself. When he touches my clit, he rolls his hips, filling me in a single stroke.

I come immediately as my body stretches around him. When he groans and I feel his hips jerk against me, it kicks me even higher. It heightens the wave knowing he's enjoying it just as much as I am.

His muscular arm grips me tightly, and he rolls me backwards so I'm laying on my back still pressed against his chest.

"It's yours," he grunts. "Ride it like you stole it." When his feet brace on the floor, his large hands grip my waist when I sit up.

"Oh, fuck," I moan. He's so big. He sinks so deep that it almost hurts. But, when I put my hands on his thighs and rock forward, he rubs against a spot inside me that has heat ballooning through my body.

Straddling him, I raise up until he nearly escapes, then let myself rush down, relishing the feel of his girth stretching me. His fingers dig into my hips as he helps guide my strokes. I can feel the heat coiling where he touches me, his longing evident in his trembling legs. When I sink back onto him, I can't hold back against the shudders that take over my body. The wave of release is only amplified by his iron grip as he continues to pump into me, groaning as he joins me in euphoria.

Still shaking, my hips jerk when his fingers seek out my clit. I'm still so sensitive from my last orgasm, I cry out as the shock races through me, grinding him deeper into me. His hot back nests against mine, his lips following my shoulder while I writhe against him. Chaotic bursts of pleasure combine with such intensity under his fingers that it almost stings.

"Come for me again," he croons in my ear. His arm wraps around my belly, pushing me onto him, and I can't stop myself

from arching into his fingers, obeying him. My body seizes in another harrowing climax that leaves me limp against his chest.

“Good girl.” His hand pats my hip gently before gathering my thighs in his hands and sliding himself out of me. I feel empty, hollow, without him.

“I’m going to make us some breakfast, and then I have to do chores. I wish the animals would understand why I don’t want to get out of bed this morning.” He stands up cradling me against his chest. Lighting a small kiss on my temple, he lays me onto the bed, pulling the blanket over my cooling body.

I nestle in until my elbow hits a cold wet spot and I jump.

Rich baritone laughter fills the room. “I think we made Lake Okeechobee.”

My cheeks burn and I cover my eyes with my hand. “That’s so embarrassing,” I squeak.

His rough hand grabs my wrist, pulling it from my face. Sapphire blue eyes pierce mine. “It’s fucking beautiful, Dani. I’ll buy a dozen beds so we have a new one to drown in every night.” He brings my palm to his lips, my fingers brushing the stubble on his jaw as he grins wickedly down at me.

It makes my insides feel all weird, like climbing the rope in gym class.

Watching him walk away, the embers fan in my belly seeing his naked backside. His broad shoulders tapering to a narrow

waist, the muscular curve of his ass over long lean thighs. What was that word from the romance books? Oh, yea, swoon.

When he disappears into the bathroom, I hear the shower start. Throwing my arm back across my eyes, I try to shut out the invading morning light.

What am I doing? I've never done anything like this before. It was never on my radar through school, or while starting up my practice. Now, all I can think about is wanting to be around him. Or on him. Under him.

Geez.

I'm glad I asked if he would participate in the trials. Even if the side effects are wild. Like what happened to Alex. How insane is that? I can't even wrap my head around the kinds of changes he underwent. Fur, claws and a sheath like a dog's?

That reminds me that I forgot to tell Jenny Mrs. Clark emailed asking about switching her dog's spaying procedure to Monday morning. Damn, tomorrow is Monday.

Jenny should be at the clinic today, since she had to take off Tuesday for a class. I better text her to ask her to prep the operating room.

Where's my phone?

Flinging back the covers, the chill of the room hits me as I stretch. I'm actually a little surprised; I almost expected to be sore after last night. During a pointless search for my shirt, I see Sam's lying on the floor near the bed. Slipping it over my head, I find it hangs down to my thighs, but at least keeps me

from shivering. And it smells like him. The leather and pine washes over me making me almost lightheaded.

The cold floor bites at my feet as I tiptoe briskly into the kitchen to retrieve my phone. It's still sitting on the island where I left it when I was looking up dire wolves.

Of all the crazy DNA to include.

When I unlock the screen, it starts buzzing like crazy with notifications. Amber alerts, silver alerts, missing persons, and more all flood across my screen.

What the hell?

I start swiping them off the screen, and more keep appearing. They're all for this area, too. Here's an emergency alert warning of an unknown pathogen, urging people to stay indoors and avoid contact.

And here's an alert from Idaho Fish and Game warning that there is a large animal attack in my area.

Finally clearing all of the official notices, I see I have hundreds of social media notifications next.

Every group I seem to follow is making posts tagging all of the members. The interesting ones are in my veterinarian groups. They're posting pictures and videos of giant dogs unlike anything I've ever seen before.

Clicking on one of them, I see it looks more like a jackal. Long, lean, with fur that is dark on the legs fading to a lighter color over the back. But, it's probably four feet tall at the shoulder, if the car next to it is any comparison.

The next picture is a little more disturbing. It's like a morphed picture of a jackal and a human. I can see a woman's figure, but it's like she's three-fourths animal.

I'm trying to zoom in on her features when I feel warm hands slide up my hips beneath the hem of the shirt. His clean smell of body wash envelopes me, and my phone drops to the counter.

"If I had known you were going to be in here, leaning over the counter like this, I'd have skipped the shower." The fire that follows his hands when he runs them up my body immediately wipes any thought of weird animals from my mind. He cups my breasts, tugging me against the rough denim of his jeans. I can't stop my hips from rubbing against the growing bulge pressing from behind his zipper.

His nose buries into my wild hair at the back of my neck. "And you have my shirt on. It should be a crime how fucking good you look in it."

I don't want him to stop. He's running raw coals of heat over me with his hands. Throwing my hair over my shoulder, I turn to look at him. "Maybe I should be punished." I can hardly catch my breath, but I can't stop the smile pulling at my lips.

His damp hair is dark and falls over his brow, but it doesn't hide the fire that ignites in his eyes. "You're right. I'm going to punish your tight little pussy until you scream."

A burning palm follows my ribs, his thumb grazing the hollow at the base of my spine before he dips between us,

freeing himself from the confines of his jeans. Hot pressure flows through me when he brushes his swollen head against my wet clit and he pushes into me.

Shit, he's so big. I can feel my walls quivering as I stretch around him. The thin fabric of the shirt tightens around me, he's knotting it in his hand. Sliding nearly out of me, he pulls firmly on the knot in his hand, yanking me backwards against his hips, slamming his length back into me.

"Oh, god." The moan slips from my lips. Bracing my hands against the island counter, he pulls his hips back and yanks us together again, our thighs slapping with the violence of his thrust. One hand on my hip, pushing me away, one hand tied into the rein of his shirt, yanking me back. Each plunge feels deeper, bigger. Faster he pushes and pulls me, like a locomotive building up steam. The shirt tightens around me as he drives in. Every time he sinks, I shiver harder and harder as orgasms ripple through me. They elevate with each powerful jerk against his hips into a larger one. My arms shake with every impact. My legs feel like they'll give out as he pistons into me.

A long moan breaks from my lips as each crest breaks higher, my body clenching around him, trying to lodge him deeper, hold him tighter.

Cymbals crash around us, and through the haze I realize it's his phone on the table. He doesn't falter in his manic rhythm, pounding into me, the pressure building in my limbs, an eruption drawing near in my belly.

Everything within me grows so tight that I feel like I'm suffocating. My arms weaken. My head drops below the counter. My fingers are barely clinging to the smooth surface as the staccato of our skin slapping rockets through my ears. With a low roar rumbling from his chest, I can feel his thumb work over my ass and push into me through the ring of muscle, pulling the trigger on this mass of pressure within me. Screaming, my own ears rebelling against my sounds, my body explodes as he spasms within me. Our hips jerk and twitch as rivulets of our combined release run down my legs.

Cymbals crash again.

When he withdraws, I again feel empty, but completely satisfied. How does that work?

His firm grip on the shirt is probably the only thing holding me up right now. My legs feel like noodles.

"My critters are going to be so pissed at me," he rasps. When he loosens his hold on me, I slump against the counter trying to regain strength in my knees.

Holding his jeans up, his dick still half hard sticking out, he sits heavily in the chair next to the table. His long legs sprawl in front of him, his blond head thrown back against the wall, a small smile playing across his full lips.

Finally catching my breath, I realize I have layers of stickiness on me now. Maybe I should ask him to spray me down in the barn again. He can run the hose up and down me like he did last time, but maybe this time I can get his hands to follow. The idea of him taking me out in the barn has my belly

fluttering, and it's barely stopped quivering from a few moments ago.

“Seriously?” I hear him growl. Glancing at him again, I see his elbows are on his knees, eyes boring into me, nose flaring, a wolfish grin now on his lips. “I can smell you. What were you thinking about that has you insatiably aroused?”

Heat creeps up my cheeks. Nibbling on my bottom lip, I lean against the counter. “Well, I was thinking I need a shower, but then I was thinking about you spraying me down in the barn again, and then...” I end in a shrug and turn back to idly mess with my phone, too embarrassed to meet his eyes.

Deep laughter caresses me as he stands, tucking himself back into his jeans. “I’ll be more than happy to spray you down.” He smacks me on the butt as he walks past me to the coffee maker. The light sting sends a sizzle through my body. “Or you can take a shower where the water is a bit warmer. I’m hoping one of these days, I’ll be able to take one with you, but they still kick my ass on their own.” Topping the coffee maker off with water, he flips the button and turns back to me, grinning. “Did the shower kick your ass that first day?”

I know exactly what day he’s talking about. I think the calendar has been reset, with *that* day forever becoming day zero.

“Yea, it was brutal. My abdomen ached afterwards. I’ll be honest, I still struggle. I haven’t tried a bath though.”

He pulls a white wrapped package from the refrigerator and peels it open before grabbing one of the cast iron skillet

hanging next to the stove. When the smell of cooking bacon hits the air, my stomach immediately starts growling.

“Damn, that smells good.” My stomach motivating me, I track down my discarded shoes and slip them on. When I crack the door outside, a blast of freezing air reminds me all I’m wearing is an oversized damp tee shirt.

“Running away before breakfast?” He laughs at my gasping.

“I have a bag in the truck,” I admit sheepishly before I sprint through the frozen grass. The crisp frost on the door handle pulls on the skin of my fingers when I open it. It’s like carrying an ice pack against my back as I dart back inside.

“You brought a bag.” His eyebrow raises over a smirk.

A shivering shrug lifts my shoulders as I prance toward the bedroom. The chill has hardened my nipples so much they ache. “I was hoping I’d need it.” Giving him the most lecherous grin I can muster, I kick off my shoes and head for the shower.

Getting the damned tangles out of my hair takes longer than the shower. Maybe it’s because I’m hurrying. The smell of bacon, eggs and coffee is physically trying to lift me up and drag me to the kitchen by my stomach.

When I make it back to the kitchen, he has a heaping plate already dished up for me. It would have fed the old me for a week. Now, I’m wondering about seconds before even starting.

“There’s plenty more.” He must be reading my mind. But, I see his plate is piled just as high when he sets it down across from me at the table.

“I started you off with black,” he says as he places a large mug of coffee next to my plate. His chair is still set away from the table. My shirt and bra from last night are still crumpled around one of its legs. He picks them up before moving his chair, handing my clothes to me with a slow grin. “But, I have cream and sugar if you want it.”

Heat moves up my neck to my cheeks and down into my belly remembering last night. I can’t stop myself from jumping up and grabbing my discarded clothes to stuff into the sleeve of my coat still hanging on the wall nearby.

His nostrils flare, his strong jaw sets a little tighter, and his hooded eyes dilate as I sit back down.

I just need to give up on hiding how horny he makes me. It seems there’s no hiding it from him. “Black is perfect.” And the perfect excuse is to occupy both of my hands and glance away from his gaze.

Cymbals crash from his phone and we both jump. “Fuck,” he grumbles. “I have it on the lowest volume even.” He picks up his phone and unlocks the screen. It starts vibrating non-stop.

“Notifications? Mine was nearly overloaded with them,” I say before stuffing another piece of mouthwatering bacon in my mouth. It’s a beautiful blend of smoky and salty. And he even cooked it perfectly, crispy but not burnt.

He stops chewing, his eyes focusing on my throat.

“Something wrong?” I swipe at my neck. Maybe I dropped a bit of egg on me.

“Those sounds you make. I’ll just say, I’m glad you like my cooking.”

“It’s amazing. I’ve never had bacon taste this good.” I’m a little disappointed to see I’m holding my last piece.

“Family recipe.” His brows furrow as he continues swiping on his phone. “I’m sorry, I’m not trying to be rude. Did you see all of these missing person notifications?” He turns his phone so I can see the top to bottom bulletins filling his screen.

Just then, his phone rings. The name that flashes across the screen makes my chest hurt. Angela. Who is Angela? And why did seeing her name cause me physical pain?

He turns the screen back and frowns before answering. “Hi, Angela.”

I can hear her voice, tinny through the speakers. “Oh, thank God, I’ve been texting you.”

“Yes, I was just going through them. What’s up?” He gives me a shrug, but doesn’t move to get up.

I feel weird. But, he didn’t get up to talk in private. That means something, I think?

“Has Alexander been there?” I hear her say.

“No, how would he be here? Wouldn’t the transport have called?” Sam’s perfect features twist in a look of confusion.

“I think we need to talk. I’ll be there in an hour.” The phone clicks when she hangs up.

“The hell?” He looks at his phone and then at me. “That’s Alex’s case manager. It sounds like she’s coming over.” He tosses his phone on the table, clenching his jaw.

Case manager. The weird feeling in my chest dissipates a little. Is that what jealousy feels like? “Does she come over often?” Why did I ask that?

He stabs at the last of his eggs before glancing up. Dark blue eyes soften and then crinkle at the corners when he gives me a soft smile. “No, usually just a couple of times a year. But, she came over to check Alex before having him taken to the hospital.”

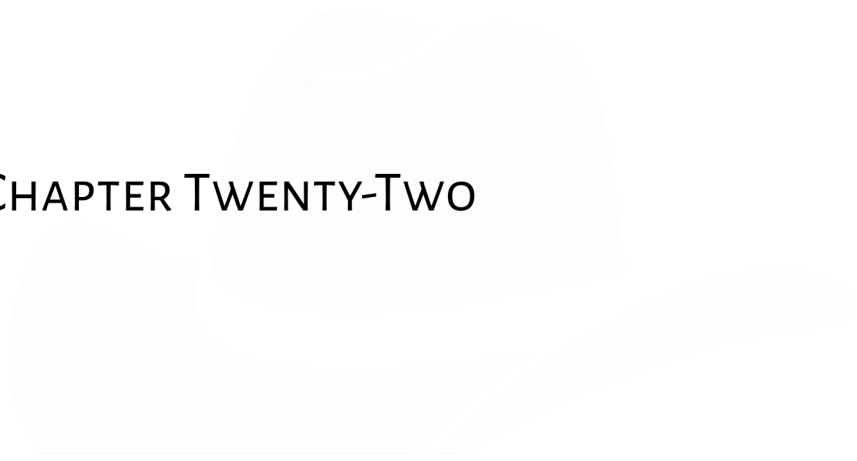
“Isn’t he in a, well, catatonic state?” The brief glimpse I got of him previously was of a haggard old man, gaunt cheeks, and a vacant fixed stare.

“Yea, that’s the part that’s confusing. I guess she’ll fill us in when she gets here.” He stands up, picking up both of our empty plates and depositing them into the sink. “I should get my chores done before she gets here.”

“How can I help?” I don’t want to just sit in here while he’s out there. I’d rather be where I can see him. All of the missing person notifications put just a little hesitation in me to want to be alone right now.

“Well...” He slips his arm around my waist, and pulls me tightly against his chest. “How about you run the hose?” Grinning, he leans down to meet my lips with his.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



SAM

I didn't want to have to hurry any part of today. It's Sunday, the first full day we'll have to spend together. Her clinic is open six days a week, so it doesn't leave much uninterrupted time. I had visions of keeping her in bed all day. Now that I've had her I don't want to stop.

And it was a reprieve from the constant traffic I've had to endure for the last few years of care takers in and out of my house. A day without Alex. Or Becky. It was supposed to be a day completely alone with the only person I've chosen to spend time with in years.

When Claire begged me to watch over him, when she was really sick, I would have promised her the moon to see her smile. I never expected him to last for years after her. At first, I was too grief-stricken to care, and his presence still tied me to her.

But, now, I'm ready to build another life.

Claire was tall, dark and quiet. We were practically forced together by our mothers who were friends through work. When Claire's mother killed herself, I felt bad for her, bad

enough I felt obligated to take care of her. We were friends, so it was a marriage of convenience. Though I did grow to care very much for her, there was always a distance between us.

But, Dani is different. I have this insatiable need to touch her, to possess her. She is in my every thought and decision now, even if she shouldn't be. It's been barely three days since I first had her naked body wrapped around me, but she already has me thinking insane thoughts like selling the ranch and whisking her away to some remote island.

My sister would fucking kill me. Elly does the retail side, negotiating the deals with the processors, getting our beef into grocery stores. Her livelihood is just as wrapped up in the ranch as mine.

A wild part of me doesn't care. I'm watching Dani help me, by my side working just as hard as me. It's twisting my insides in a way I hate, because I want more.

I want Alex out of my house. It's time.

When she entwines her fingers in mine as we walk back to the house, she may as well be threading them through me. Petite little tendrils weaving into my thoughts, wavy ribbons looping through my chest, high tensile cable constricting around my cock. It's been throbbing the entire time we've been in the barn, reminding me that the tack room is so close. My saddle still has a damp mark down its side that I don't want to buff out.

Being buried in her seems to have at least relieved some of the damned leaking. If that's the trick to relieving the

symptom, kill me with the cure.

We hear Angela's car before Misty or Thor does. They're stretched out sleeping against the steps leading to the kitchen. Both furry heads pop up at the sound of the speeding car. Thor jumps up and gives a loud bark, as if I didn't already know of the incoming vehicle.

Mid-afternoon sun bounces off a fresh dent across the hood of her silver Mercedes as she skids to a stop. A cloud of dust and exhaust struggling to catch up before she flings her door open and launches herself toward us.

It's hard to miss the addition of a large pistol strapped in a holster across her chest or her craning neck looking in every direction.

"Hi, Angela. Come on in." I beckon from the door. Dani is tinkering with the coffee maker when Angela bursts in, coat and wild hair flying around, a walking miniature tornado.

"Have you been sick recently?" Angela asks directly, squinting one of her brown eyes as she looks back and forth between us.

"Last weekend." I gesture between Dani and myself. "We both had it."

"Good. Well, not good. I'm sorry you were sick, but good you don't have fur. Or didn't die." She pulls one of the chairs from the table and sits down, her shoulders dropping noticeably. "People are dying in the streets. I saw three just dropping on the sidewalk on my drive out here."

“Oh, my god!” Dani gasps, nearly dropping the coffee decanter as she pours. “Did you call 911?”

She shakes her head. “I tried with the first one. No answer. Here’s the kicker though. I stopped to help. Before I even got to them, the dogs came.” Angela goes pale. “Fuck, I wish I hadn’t stopped smoking. I could really use a cigarette right now.”

“Do you mean, like the dogs I saw on the news? The ones that look bigger than a Great Dane?” I’m seriously contemplating adding a heavy shot of whiskey into my coffee.

Angela nods, taking the offered hot mug from Dani. “It sounds like Alexander was one of the early ones. I talked to his doctor. He said they’re seeing almost a quarter of the people are dying from whatever virus this is. A big chunk get through it okay. But, a bunch change. Into *DOGS*.” She emphasizes the last word, slamming her cup down on the table hard enough to send a wave of coffee spilling onto the wood surface.

Dani meets my eyes, her face pale. Her blue eyes are so round that I worry they’re going to pop out and roll across the floor.

“But, what about Alex? Do a lot of people get stuck in the middle like him?” I can’t get the image of his doggie dick out of my head.

Fuck it, I’m getting the whiskey.

“Doesn’t sound like it. Very small percentage according to the doctor.” She gulps down half of her scalding cup before holding it up to my offer of Jameson. “All the way to the top.” She urges me to continue pouring. “You’ll need it too, I promise.”

“Why?” I give myself just a shot, and pour some into Dani’s when she holds her cup out.

It’s going to be one of those days.

“And why did you ask if he’s been here? How is that possible?” Trying to picture Alex up and talking is so foreign to me. I might as well be picturing my lamp walking across the floor.

“Well, he woke up.” Angela takes a long drink from her mug, barely grimacing as she swallows the potent liquor.

“That’s incredible!” exclaims Dani as she sits in the chair opposite of Angela. “That’s the best news I’ve heard today!”

The look of pure disgust that flashes across Angela’s face is hard to miss. “No. No, it’s not.” She throws back the remaining liquid in her cup and holds it out for me to fill again.

Just when the amber whiskey is threatening the lip of the cup does Angela give me a curt nod, stemming the flow.

“He was a judge, wasn’t he?” I’m trying to remember other details about him, but Claire had rarely talked about him or her childhood. When I had asked, she wouldn’t answer, so eventually I had stopped asking.

“Yes, he was a judge. But, that doesn’t make him a good person.” She sits back in her chair, staring into her cup with a sour look. “He’s actually fucking evil incarnate.”

“What exactly does that mean?” Dani asks. Her small hands are squeezing her cup hard enough that her knuckles are white, but her face is neutral as she stares at Angela.

Angela unleashes a long sigh and sits forward, taking another long drink.

She’s going to be hammered in no time at this rate.

“Alexander had a thing for petite blonds. A bad thing, bordering on obsession.”

“I don’t understand. His wife was neither petite or blond.” I remember Claire’s mom.

“You do realize he never loved his wife?” She shakes her head, her cheeks beginning to show the effects of the alcohol with a flushed hue. “Probably the only reason she survived,” she mumbles. “He had this place he’d take his girls. He called them ‘prizes’ like he earned them at a fair.” She empties her coffee cup and gestures to me for a refill.

“How about some more coffee?” I offer, taking her cup. I take her shrug as acceptance and fill her mug back up before handing it back. She gives it a half frown before putting it onto the table next to her. “What did he do with his ‘prizes’?” I almost don’t want to ask the question.

Angela’s face pinches, her eyes squint closed. “Tortured and killed them.” The sentence tumbles from her lips as if it pains

her to say it.

I can hear Dani's sharp inhale like her lips are against my ear. Her heartbeat doubles in speed as does my own.

"How do you know?" This calls for another shot. The burning swallow does little to dull the words.

She opens her brown eyes, now brimming with unshed tears. "Because I was one of them."

My head hurts. Squeezing my temples does nothing to relieve the sudden ache behind them. "I don't understand. How is this possible? Why isn't he in jail?"

"He would only take girls who didn't know him already. I just...woke up there. He always kept three. Sometimes, when one disappeared, another would take her place."

"How did you get away?" Dani asks, pushing her own blond hair behind her ear.

"A mistake. He never slipped up, but he did that night. I got in a lucky hit, then ran out into the night. When someone found me, I was naked in a dumpster and nearly frozen to death."

I'm still confused. "Why didn't you say anything? About him?"

Angela laughs, but it has no humor in it. "I didn't even know his name. I ran that night for miles in any direction I could. I didn't find out until weeks later when I saw his picture in the newspaper. He went out that night searching for me and

had a stroke in the streets.” She twirls the cup on the table, making a soft grinding sound that fills the silence.

“I wish I had killed him that night,” she says, still staring at the cup. “When I spoke to the police, they fucking laughed at me. Didn’t believe a word I said.” When she raises her eyes, her lips press into a thin line. “So, I made it my goal in life to watch over him, to make sure he never hurts anyone else.”

“Didn’t they do a, well, an exam on you when you were found?” Dani chews on her lip as she asks.

Angela shakes her head. “They asked about doing a rape kit, but he never did that. He always finished himself once his hands were nice and bloody.” She shivers, her eyes unfocusing for a moment as she stares at her hands.

“Why are you telling me this now? What changed?” My head is reeling. I’ve been harboring a monster for all these years.

“He woke up. He killed Becky. And now he’s gone. I wanted to make sure you knew in case he came back here.”

“Oh! Becky? I liked her. She was very sweet.” Dani’s lip pouts as her eyes drop.

I hate that my cock twitches seeing it jut out. Damned thing has a mind of its own.

“Since he isn’t here, where do you think he went?” I’m starting to think I need to dig my guns out of the safe and make sure they’re handy.

“I bet he went back to his building. If it had been discovered, it would have been all over the news. So, wherever it is, it’s probably still usable for him.” She shivers and stands up, walking to the door. “You have a good spot out here. I’d suggest staying out of town if you can. The dogs are getting braver, attacking people in the streets. Shit hit the fan today.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive?” I ask as she’s heading out the door. She’s had two coffee mugs of whiskey.

“I hope like hell I wreck and die on the way back. I never thought I’d see a day like this. I might head back this way if town gets too crazy. Be safe.” Her tires spin just as fast in reverse as they do when she’s buzzing down the driveway back to the main road.

I feel like a hurricane just went through. Dani works her way into my arms, and we just hold each other while we piece together everything that Angela dumped on us.

“Do you really think it’s that bad in town?” she asks against my chest. I can hear the hesitancy in her voice.

“I don’t know. It’s not bad here, I know that much.” I touch her chin, threading my fingers into her hair and turn her face so I can meet her eyes. “You can stay here as long as you want. I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe.” When her eyebrows draw together and she looks away, I feel a pinch in my chest. She’s going to go.

“I can contact everyone on my appointment calendar to reschedule.” Her hands circle my wrists. “But, I can’t just stay

here forever, Sam. I mean, I like it—you—this.” She flicks her fingers pointing between us. “It’s just, well, a lot. All at once.”

Fair enough. She isn’t running away. I can feel the tension in my shoulders leave a little.

“But, you can stay for a little while.” This whole situation is insane, but her just not wanting to rush, I can live with that. It won’t stop me from ramming my cock into her every chance I get though.

At that, the rebellious appendage pushes between us.

The blush working up her neck when she feels me pressing into her stomach has me throbbing. My lips find the smooth skin of her pale unblemished neck. I thought I bit her last night enough to leave a mark, but I’ll happily attempt again. Nibbling the tendon of her delicate throat, she moans, melting against me.

“Sam?” Her breathing quickens, her fingers move down my arms.

“Hmm?” I rasp before my tongue teases the soft hollow below her ear, gloating to myself when her legs tremble as I brush the lobe of her ear with my cheek.

“I’ll need more clothes. It shouldn’t take too long. I’ll just run home and be right back.” Her hand touches my cheek and she pulls away. She rips the oxygen from my chest when she does. I don’t want to stop. It takes all of my willpower to let her step back.

“I’m going with you. We can take my truck.” I have a big one ton for the farm. Brush guard, heavy skid plate, steel doors. It would take a lot to stop it. And it sounds like downtown is already going crazy.

“Thank you.” Her relief is evident. I can’t believe she thought I’d let her go alone.

Time to dig into the gun safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



DANI

My stomach is in turmoil as we pull out of the driveway. The revolver that Sam showed me how to use hangs heavily in its makeshift holster across my chest. It embodies the weight of the situation, bearing down in cold steely reality, suffocating my every breath.

I just can't imagine things are that different from yesterday. Granted, I left directly from the clinic, having already packed my bag. And it was dark when I drove here. Searching my memories, do I remember seeing anything strange on the way? Maybe just that the traffic was less than normal.

Does that mean people were home, sick, dying, changing? While I was focused on just getting to Sam?

A little flicker of guilt flashes through me. I know there's nothing I could have done. And this is happening all over the country. I shouldn't feel responsible for all of those people.

But, I do.

Poor Becky. It's so weird to think Alex was so evil when he looked so fragile in that bed.

There is so much to wrap my head around. And all interspersed with my overwhelming thoughts of Sam. What he does to me, how he makes me feel. And so confident asking me to stay. It makes me feel like I'm on a high speed merry-go-round. At warp speed.

The stiff suspension of the truck makes the gun bounce painfully against my ribs, a constant reminder that I need to be watching around us.

We don't pass a single moving vehicle. The streets are dead, empty. Cars sit quietly in the driveways. Windows of businesses are dark, even now at midday.

"I never thought I'd see the day there isn't a line at Starbucks," Sam says ruefully as we pass the empty coffee shop.

"Maybe this was a bad idea." The words leave my lips a half comment, half thought to myself. I can't believe how quickly everything has changed. It's like driving through some bad movie set. Surreal.

I tried calling my mom and Jenny. Neither one answered. I leave lots of messages and just hope that they call me back. Jenny made it through the illness; she caught it early like me.

A station wagon rolls by, the first car we've seen. Boise is a huge city, often with bumper to bumper traffic. One car is almost more disconcerting than none. It's packed to the top, overflowing even. There are garbage bags and boxes strapped to the roof, with more people than seats crammed inside. The driver gives a small wave as he passes.

“I think this was definitely a bad idea.” I slump in the seat, my eyes just high enough to see through the window.

“Do you want to turn back? I don’t mind you running around naked,” Sam offers with a large grin. His blue eyes sparkle mischievously as he glances my way.

I can’t help but smile. “That is great and all, but it’s a bit chilly outside for naked.”

“I will make it my personal responsibility to warm you up if you get cold.” His hand is hot when he rests it on my thigh, his pinky brushing against the apex of my legs, sending a shiver of electricity through me.

When I rest my hand over his, it’s one of those moments when you realize you’re comfortable. I like how good it feels to have him touching me. To have him here makes me feel a little safer.

A flicker of movement has me rocketing up in the seat, just in time for the seat belt to tighten hard against me as Sam slams on the brakes. His hand flies up, bracing my shoulder, holding me from lurching forward.

“What the shit?” he exhales.

Two of the dogs are in front of us, running at a mad pace along the road. One seems to be chasing the other, nipping at the heels of the first. They pass in front of a Jeep, parked to the side. They’re taller than the hood. Huge doesn’t begin to describe them. They are big and muscular, like a Great Dane and a Mastiff had a baby and it grew twice as large as either of

them. Broad chests, powerful shoulders, long legged, and *fast*. My guess is they're easily passing forty miles an hour because they're eating up the ground in a blur. They're more like small horses. Terrifying, powerful, predator horses.

As they draw closer, I'm struggling to see anything human in them. Fully furred, markings like a coyote, they look completely like dogs. Were they really people? I just don't even understand how they could have been.

That's when I see it. I'm going to be sick; my stomach cramps with a wave of nausea. Bile lodges in my throat when I see what they are fighting over. Hanging from the mouth of the lead dog looks to be a human leg. A small human leg. It's hard to tell exactly how old the owner was, but it wasn't an adult.

"Oh, fuck. We need to get in and get gone." Sam downshifts and punches the accelerator. The truck lurches forward, pushing me back against the worn seat.

"I can't believe it. This is insane. How could people do that?" My head is still reeling as I direct him the last few turns to my street. The parking lot in front of the apartment building is three-quarters full, but my designated spot is open.

As the engine rumbles to a stop Sam reaches out and puts his hand on my arm. "Before you open the doors, I think those dogs are dogs. I don't think they're people anymore. If you see one, don't try to reason with it. Shoot at it, and get the fuck away." He glances around through the windows before meeting my eyes again. "You know how we're hungrier now?

I bet they're fucking starving. Please, be careful and stay close."

He's right. I offer him a small nod of acceptance. I took a couple of semesters on wild animals, thinking I wanted to work with a zoo some day. Wolves are smart and eerily intelligent. They're a force to be reckoned with as a pack.

"Do you think they've learned how to work together?" I muse as we hurry to the main entrance of the building.

"From what I saw there, it didn't look like it. But, it'd be fucking terrifying if they did." Sam carries his pistol low, but drawn. His eyes are bright blue as he watches around us while I push the door open.

The small foyer is empty except for the wall of brass mailboxes and the concrete stairs leading to the second floor. Our shoes seem to boom with every step going up the stairs.

Crying echoes down the hall. I can hear people behind the doors talking in urgent tones. Many are discussing leaving.

The sour smell of decomposition seeps under one of the doors we pass, gagging us in its pungency.

My neighbor's door has an odor emanating, too. A dank heavy smell of urine and feces. Metallic overtones remind me of the raw steaks we had last night before Sam cooked them. The blanket of ammonia rips my sinuses apart as I slide my key into my door.

Stepping quickly down the small hall, Sam follows right behind me. He brushes the door as he passes, and the knob

bounces lightly against the wall.

We both freeze when we hear a low whine emanating through the wall, followed by a scratching sound.

“Hurry!” he whispers, pushing the door closed behind him.

My apartment isn't big, and it takes only a few rushed steps to get to my bedroom. Grabbing a duffle bag from my closet, I frantically start tossing clothes from my drawers into it. Practical choices, jeans, shirts, sweatshirts, coat, boots.

The scratching sound grows more persistent, combining with a low growl.

My apartment isn't fancy. The walls aren't thick to start with. I think the exterior is cinderblock, but the interior is just wood and sheetrock. I know, because I accidentally put a hole in it once when my desk chair tipped over.

I lug the heavy bag over to Sam who's busy staring at the living room wall where the sounds are centered. A heavy thump rocks the pictures on my wall. Another makes the framed picture of my college graduation day fall to the floor and the glass shatters.

We both freeze and stare at each other, Sam breaking the moment by giving me a wind up gesture with his hand.

Darting to the bathroom, I start throwing my toiletries into an empty garbage bag. A heavy gnashing sound comes from the living room.

“Dani!” Sam calls in a loud whisper. “We need to go NOW!” Rushing from the bathroom with my bag, he's

standing with his pistol pointing at the wall where there's a large vertical gash in the sheetrock. Another thump and a gray claw busts through the slash, pulling and tearing at the crumbling wall.

The smell rolling from the shredded hole curls around my throat, defiling it until my stomach begins to spasm. I am fighting to keep from expelling my breakfast as I push past him for the door. It stinks like the animals we've had come through the clinic from hoarding situations, ones caked in rot and filth.

I'm nearly out into the hall before I remember my laptop. I need that. It has not only work information and research, but it also has photos of my dad.

When I stop mid-stride, Sam nearly knocks me over. "Keep going. We gotta get this door shut!" He pushes me into the hall, tossing my bag down so he can pull the heavy door shut behind him.

"I need my laptop!" I try to push the door back open before it clicks shut, but I'm a moment too slow. The doors lock automatically.

A reverberating growl and a crash rattle it on its hinges. The creature has broken through, and is now behind the very door I was trying to push back open.

Shit. How could I have forgotten to grab that first? Will those pictures be lost forever?

Another shudder ripples through the thick wood as a weight bounces off of it from behind.

“I’m sorry, but we need to go!” Sam stands in the empty hall, beckoning me to hurry away. The murmurs of panicked voices slip into my attention, spilling from other apartments. I can hear them growing frantic after another crash on my door resonates through the building.

Resigning myself to abandoning the last tendrils of attachment to my past, I hustle with Sam back toward the stairs. Just as we reach the top, a piercing noise erupts from behind us. A howl. The long and mournful cry prickles the flesh on the back of my neck and carries us out into the parking lot, punctuated by the slamming doors of the truck.

The roaring engine dulls the howl, but doesn’t erase it. Spinning tires spit gravel on the underside of the truck, Sam’s long fingers cup the back of my head as he reverses from the parking spot.

“I’m sorry, Dani, maybe when the dust clears we can come back for it.” His hand drops to my knee as he throttles us back to the highway. The warmth in his hand does little to dissipate the cold that has settled around my bones.

“Yeah, when the dust clears.” In a few days, maybe?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ALEXANDER

Days I've been able to enjoy her. The remarkable gift she holds is a constant lure for me. It doesn't seem to matter the ravaging her body undergoes, she is pure, whole and perfect again and again. Her appetite matches mine. I've found myself fetching food for her like I am her dog, her mongrel. Seeking out finer fares because I want to keep her satisfied, healthy enough to heal. And, in return, I release her inner symphony.

The terror in her tearful eyes now that she faces me only enhances my lust. I want to draw her screams from her like plucking notes on a violin.

My clawed fingers twitch, missing the nimbleness to play has been the hardest thing to get over. Or not being able to talk more than guttural sounds.

But, I can make her sing for me. I can make her hit the high notes that elude me. The enticing cognac of her fear radiates from her pores.

She doesn't know that the more she screams, the more she pulls on the bindings, the more it writhes her stomach, the more it calls to an animal urge in me.

I want to hear her cry for me to stop.

Pushing back the tattered remains of her shirt, I can see her full breasts, her nipples are tight and begging to be sucked and eaten.

My tongue rolls with the delicious rush of hungry saliva. My cock thrusts my hips unwittingly into the heavy air around her.

I want to eat her and fuck her. Her scent drives both ends of me insane. I've never indulged in my prizes before, but her perfection does something to me. I want every part of her.

Her squirming hips beg to wrap around me, the sheen of sweat pooling on her smooth belly.

I can't resist lapping it up, my tongue teasing the soft flesh. The salty sweet of her quivering away from me only enrages my hunger.

Tasting her belly, licking with rough strokes at the underside of her round breast, heaving against her panicked chest.

The reflection of my wolfish face in the pooling tears sends a spark into my gut I need to fill. My throat rattles, unable to form the words, so I bite. I want her to feel the anger and frustration I feel. Gnashing against her stiff nipple, the blood pours into my mouth in a soft ooze. Like melted ice cream, it coats my lips and I want more. Lapping the open wound, I can taste her, the lattice of tissue below peels a flower of nectar to my tearing mouth. Her screams blanket me in a predatory invitation.

I want to claim her. My own rules be damned. I want to spray her with my seed until it is all I can smell.

My hardened shaft stretches against the longer foreskin, bursting from its hairy sheath. The sensation is still new for me, like it seeks the cold air before thumping against my stomach in longing.

Streaks of blood decorate her belly, her flayed breast draws me back for one more nibble, exposing the white bones of her ribs beneath.

Her thrashing enhances the throbbing in my loins.

Another bite into her sides, I can see the muscles twitching and moving when I peel back her tender skin. It's supple and sweet, soothing the fire in my throat that my ragged breath creates. The torn edges draw me. I can't resist slipping a finger inside. The resistance of the skin peeling from the muscle is tight, virginal.

My pulsing erection leaks in need, and I find myself repositioning. She needs to be below me, she needs to know I will mark her everywhere, inside and out. I will devour her and watch her heal and do it again and again.

Pushing against her wound, I slide the sensitive barbed tip of my cock under her tight skin. I tear into her, watching the shape of my length driving under the skin of her abdomen. Her flexing and screaming below me massages it in a way I never knew I wanted.

Thrusting into her belly, she tears apart at my ravaging, but I keep pushing, working my way up her abdomen. Fucking the tight skin between her breasts, my shaft rubbing against the bared bones of her sternum sends ripples of pleasure into my belly.

The lust burns within me when I look into her eyes. Open fear brightens them, her tears a testament to the release of her beauty.

An open river of tattered skin trails behind me. My hips thrusting, I can see the tip of my length beneath the skin, and the outline of how hard she makes me. I tear it into the softness of her throat, the knot building inside me, the swelling of the head of my cock filling the space under her jaw. The agony reflects in her eyes even though she can no longer scream. I press harder, the barbed end of my cock piercing the muscles of her throat feels like bursting into a warm bowl of pudding, and I can't hold back any more.

I spurt into her, my release seizing my body, my hips jerking against her, my hands digging into her scalp.

The barbed head of my cock flares, locking within her mouth, pulling her jaw with me when I try to withdraw. I can't move without fire coursing through me.

She does this to me. This overwhelming need. A driving infatuation that has never consumed me before.

When I soften enough that I can finally extract my flaccid head, her jaw hangs loose, disjointed, but I know it will heal.

Her breast is already beginning to knit back together.

She can't scream now. I'm sure my ravaging of her throat caused it.

She is made for me. My perfect beauty. My greatest prize. Her body is a temple I want to worship over and over. My ministrations can be endless, drawing her exquisite passions from her whenever I desire. A burning primal need boils within me, one that I've never experienced. I've never had a prized possession so capable of handling my affections before.

The thought of pumping her womb full of my seed cultivates within me. A luxury I've never indulged in the past. A part of my forensic training ingraining in me the need to keep my fluids separate.

But, now, no more rules, no more restraint. I'm in charge now. And she is mine forever. I've waited my entire life for a prize such as her.

I don't need other girls to occupy my time, trading my affections while waiting on their fragile bodies to recover. She can enjoy the full force of my adorations, and thrive.

My other rooms now fill with bumbling fools, useful idiots who provide me the sustenance to continue.

I've seen others like me, more animalistic in their appearance. They seem to respond to my guttural calls, but are often quickly distracted when they spot a human to give chase to. I need to find a way to control them before they become a threat to my most prized possession.

Perhaps I can use my mewling food supply as a lure to join forces?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



SAM

Every day starts this way, breathless, spent, panting in each other's arms. And as I squeeze her tighter, flirting with the idea of making her come just one more time before we crawl out of bed, I realize I want to wake up every morning like this. I've become addicted to her legs sprawling around mine, her nails digging into my skin, my lips tasting the sweet salty sweat that seeps out of her as I make her body clench and tremble.

Relinquishing control to my desire, I tighten her back against my chest as my hips begin to move again, my sensitive cock hardening within her, long slow strokes rekindling the forge within me. The shiver of friction works its way down my spine, spiraling through my limbs. It pushes my fingers to seek out her swollen nipples, still dark from my hungry suckling a few minutes ago.

The gasp that she rewards me with when I find them makes my hard length twitch within her. The throaty moan she follows with quickens my thrusts.

“Come for me, baby, one more time before breakfast.” My belly slams against her ass, curling my cock deeply into her, hitting that spot that makes her spasm. I’m burying my nose against the nape of her neck, my fingers are digging into her hips as her back arches, and the tension in her body coiling around me has me spurting into her already.

Her nails rake across the back of my thighs as she tries to claw me closer, deeper. Her moaning changes pitch angling into a scream as she climaxes around me. The walls of her pussy flutter and begin to pulse tightly around me, clamping down so fucking hard I can hardly move, but milking me for every gushing drop I pump into her.

Breathless again, panting again, I withdraw my softening dick and roll to sit up on the side of the bed. With a big sigh, she flattens herself against the pillow, careful not to put her knee in the wet spot from the night before. My sheets are going to disintegrate with how often we change and wash them, but I don’t give the slightest fuck. It’s worth every frayed strand.

Cold morning air prickles my skin as I slide on a pair of jeans and head to the kitchen. Clicking on the news is almost a habit now. I never used to pay much attention, but with all hell breaking loose it’s good to keep as up to date as possible. And every morning the news is worse.

—Doctors have identified the virus markers and are now able to run field tests to check for a previous infection—

—Safe zones have now been established in most major cities. Mandatory testing has been implemented for anyone entering—

—The death toll keeps rising as fatality rates hit nearly twenty percent of those infected—

Holy shit. Twenty percent.

I'm glad Dani and I both seem to have beat the odds. Trying to determine which would be worse though, death or turning into a monster, that's a hard choice. Like there is a choice.

A soft bell sound breaks the monotony of the television when my phone rings. Damn, there's almost enough coffee for a cup. There should be a rule; no phone conversations before coffee. The rule changes when I see the name on the screen. It's my sister. I've been trying to reach her for days.

I hurry to answer the phone before it rings a third time.

"Hi, Elly, how are you? Everything okay?" She never takes days to return a call. Her phone usually lives in her hand.

"Sam." Her voice is high pitched and breathy.

"Elly, are you okay?" Worry has my heart racing. I slump in the chair next to the table.

"I am, I think. Sam, something happened to John," she says quietly.

"What happened?"

"Can I stay there for a few days?" She sounds like she's holding the phone away from her, and weird sounds are in the

background.

“Of course! Shit’s crazy right now. Do you need me to come and get you?”

“No. I’ll be there in a little while. Thank you.” With a click, the line goes silent.

Warm hands caress my neck. “Is everything okay?” Dani presses her lips against my temple. “I could hear your heartbeat from the other room like a snare drum.”

“I don’t know.” Turning, I pull her to me, my arms wrapping around her waist as she nestles between my legs. She’s no longer naked, clothed in jeans and a light hoodie, and it makes me a little sad I can’t nuzzle against her bare chest right now. Nipples fix anything.

“That was my sister. She said something happened to her husband, and she wanted to come and stay for a few days.” I sigh into the thick fabric covering her breasts. My hands slide beneath her layers; I just need to feel her skin for comfort.

Her fingers tangle in my hair as she holds me against her. “I’m sorry,” she whispers into my hair, her lips following with a gentle kiss. When she pulls away I feel cold, a shiver tingles up my spine.

“You said her old room is this one behind Alex’s?” She doesn’t wait for my answer, instead disappearing down the hall.

Torn between pursuing the intrigue she stokes or fresh coffee, I relent to the need for caffeine. I’m just hitting the

brew button when I hear a loud thump from the back of the house.

Following the echo down the hall, I push open the door to see Dani dropping another box onto the floor. I forgot that Elly's room has turned into a quasi-storage closet, a perfect place to stack all of my old receipts and records.

"For some reason I never expected that your sister would like boy bands," she smiles, gesturing to the faded posters that still adorn the walls.

Another thump as the last box finds a place in the corner.

"My sister was a boy band freak when we were teenagers. I swear she spent more time sneaking out to concerts than she did sleeping here." When she grabs the corner of the blanket and rips it from the bed I jump in to help, gathering the dusty linens in a pile to launder.

"I kind of doubt that she'd want to sleep in a dusty bed after what happened." Dani stops. Her lips purse. I nearly throw the blankets down to nibble on them. "She didn't say what happened?" She cocks her head, exposing the side of her perfect unblemished neck. I've determined she's immune to my teeth. My marks are always gone by morning.

Shaking my head with a grunt, mostly to deter the distraction she always offers, I take the bedding to the washroom and load it into the washer. Hopefully the comforter is dry by this evening. We've gotten snow the last couple of days and the nights are certainly colder.

Meeting her back in the kitchen, I'm grateful that she already has coffee poured for both of us and is heating up a pan for scrambled eggs and bacon.

I sit down on the chair to pull my boots on and the news, still on low in the background, catches my ear again with another sound byte.

—Grocery stores are already running low while the transportation system is at a full stop. Officials blame lack of drivers—

—The President is considering calling a National State of Emergency and implementing martial law, more on this at six —

Damn. I'm glad the freezers are full. Unless the power goes out.

“What do you think the odds are that the power stays on with everyone being too afraid to work right now?” I muse, dropping my pant leg over the high tops of my worn leather cowboy boots.

Her eyes grow large when she looks at me. “What will we do here?”

I shrug. “Same thing people always do in the dark I suppose.” I toss her a hungry grin. The heavy scent of bacon almost covers the smell of her arousal drifting to me. Almost. “Bet that's why our grandparents had ten kids, no late night movies.” I'm getting a kick out of making that blush spread up her neck.

“Well,” she says quietly with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. “The practicing part sure is fun.”

“Practice makes perfect.” She jumps when I give her ass a playful spank as I step past her. Pulling the plates from the cupboard, she carries the loaded pan to the table. It’s heaping with at least a dozen eggs and maybe two full pounds of cooked bacon.

I think we both eat three times what we used to. “I wonder if everyone experiences an increase in appetite?” I ask her while piling my plate high.

Her laugh is music, a light and sensuous melody. “So, you’re saying you haven’t always been so, um, voracious?” She pushes a lock of blond hair from her blushing cheek, tucking it behind her ear while taking a bite from a piece of crispy bacon.

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “I can assure you, I had many sleepless nights after I met you thinking about all the things I wanted to do to you.” Her knee is penned between my thighs, my thumb idly tracing circles around her knee while I eat. Our chairs have drifted closer with every meal, our hands rarely straying far from each other’s warmth.

“But, I was actually thinking about food, at least for that very moment.” My hand trails up her leg, my thumb buried in the tight crevasse at the top of her thigh. “And now I’m just voracious again.” I can feel the heat emanating from her, her legs quivering around my seeking fingers.

“I found a site online yesterday that has been diving into the research on this whole phenomenon.” Her voice tremors through her smile as I press against her.

“Tell me about your research.” I push her legs apart so my knees are between hers, my hand cupping her center, her tantalizing smell completely distracting me from the food cooling on my plate.

Her blue eyes drop nearly closed as her nostrils flare, her heartbeat thundering loudly enough it nearly drowns her words. “Did you know they’ve shown the dire wolf is closely related not only to the timber wolf, but to the golden jackal, also?” She rolls her hips, her body relenting to my eager strokes. “Do you know what’s interesting about both of those species?” The black pools of her eyes shrink when she focuses on me, the light blue swirling around the edges grows as she struggles to open them farther. My long strokes press against her. The damp is soaking through her jeans to meet my palm. When she bites on her lower lip, I can feel my hard cock leaking again.

“You tell me,” I coax her. Gripping the backs of her knees, I slide her up my thighs until her hips settle over mine, my engorged length pushing against her through our jeans.

She tosses her head back when my teeth find her neck, her words floating to the ceiling between her shuddering breaths. “Both of those species,” she gasps, “are one of only a handful in the entire animal kingdom—” A long moan escapes her lips

when my hands find her breasts beneath her sweatshirt and lightly pinch each nipple.

“Don’t stop or I will.” My tongue finds her fluttering heartbeat that pulses beneath the tender skin of her neck. As she burrows her hands beneath the collar of my shirt, her nails digging into my shoulders, I begin to doubt I’d be able to stop if I wanted to.

“They mate for life.” Her hands grasp my jaw, tilting my chin to find my eyes with hers. “They are manically monogamous and fiercely protective of their mates.”

Is she trying to tell me more than just about wolves? My stomach feels like it’s a washcloth being wrung dry.

I know I’ve been thinking about her for months, obsessing over her for weeks. I’ve been enjoying every minute she’s been here. This past week hasn’t felt like an apocalypse; it’s felt like a dream. We hardly leave each other alone, one of us always trailing after the other.

Touching. Tasting. Embracing.

A driving hunger to be with each other.

I never felt that with Claire. She was a calm companion, each of us content in our own company.

But, with Dani, we are a tornado and a hurricane colliding, ravenous to consume the other. I want to embrace her, join her gale winds, meld into her torrents, and create a storm so powerful that no force on earth can sever our bond.

“I need you.” My voice comes out hoarse. There’s so much more I want to say, but I let my body convey my thoughts. I want to grip her so tightly my fingers absorb into her skin. Our lips meet in a devouring kiss, nipping, sucking, until we both nearly suffocate. She peels away from me, gasping, and slides from my lap. There’s not a pause before she’s flinging off her jeans, her movements hurried, frenzied.

I barely have time to unzip my jeans, freeing my throbbing cock, before she’s straddling me again. Her hips settle over me and she lowers herself in one movement.

Now, she pauses. Her body trembles around me, light panting moans escaping her pouty perfect mouth. She buries her face against my shoulder, her entire body shuddering. My belly clenches. I can feel my nuts contracting as the first small orgasms take me. I lose little spurts, even as she sits still. The quivers of her walls contracting feels so good, I just wrap my arms around her, hugging her tightly to my chest, my nose nestling into my favorite spot behind her ear.

Our pounding hearts and heavy breaths mingle and coalesce into a muting fog, clinging to us, drowning out any proof of existence beyond this moment.

Slowly, she begins to move her hips. Her shaking arms wrap around my neck, her fingers kneading my scalp as she gyrates. Rolling me within her, rotating her taut sheath around me, she’s a sultry witch stirring her bubbling cauldron, tempting me to boil over.

Small movements and sensuous rhythms brew the coil of pressure within me. My hands find her fluid hips, guiding her, confining her to stay deeply impaled on my hard length. I can feel myself bottoming out inside of her, pushing against her cervix, the head of my cock engorging and thrusting against her fluttering knot of muscles.

My mouth finds her shoulder, lips sucking at her smooth skin, teeth nipping at her straining neck. The small cries she pours against my ear send beckoning shivers into my cramping thighs which are begging to hasten the pace.

Our movements are small, yet the intensity nearly blackens my vision. Stars form behind my eyes as the slow roll of her hips drag me in a spiraling vortex within her. Tighter and tighter she squeezes me, her panting growing heavier in my ear.

“Sam,” she whispers, “come with me.” Her teeth find the soft lobe of my ear making me groan against her neck. What control I had maintained shatters as she raises her chin to the sky, arching her back. Her clit rubs on my shaft and she explodes in a soaking climax. Her tight pussy locks closed, battering my cock with her pulsing walls like a ship in a storm until I’m a tsunami flooding her with my hot seed in a crushing tide.

Spent. I am weak, my limbs heavy, my eyelids droop as I tilt my head back against the chair. Her flushed cheek meets my shoulder as her hands slide down my chest until they lay in a puddle on her lap.

A chime from the table jars us both. Dani stands up as she kisses me softly on the tip of my chin before retrieving her phone. Her hoodie slides back down her body, half hiding the round pale globes of her ass cheeks.

“Oh, my god!” she exclaims, furiously typing on her phone. Her heart rate spikes and mine matches, bolstering me to action.

“What’s wrong?” I jump up from my chair reflexively pulling up my jeans. I’m getting used to them being damp, so it’s easy to ignore.

She hands me her phone. Her eyes are already welling with tears.

Unknown: Dr M, this is Jenny, please help!!! I’m trapped by some sort of monster. I can’t get a hold of my mom. I tried 911 and no one answers! Please!

Dani: Where are you???

“What can we do?” Dani pleads.

“Not much until we know where she is. Do you have her mom’s number? Maybe you can try that. I’ll try the cops.”

I google the phone numbers to the local precincts and start calling. No answer. I try the next, and again no answer.

“Shit.” The next one, the call doesn’t even complete. Three more precincts, all the same.

The pale look on Dani’s face as she lowers her phone tells me she was striking out, too.

“What can we do?” she asks. “I don’t have any other contact numbers for her.”

“I don’t know,” I say softly. “We might have to just wait until she tells us where she is. Maybe ask her for GPS coordinates? Or a description of where she is?”

A thought hits me. “Is that her phone number?”

“No, it’s an unknown number.” She flicks back to the message and types another quick note.

“Maybe we can do a reverse search on the number to find out who it is?”

“That’s a good idea!” She moves to her chair and sits, but jumps back up with a small cry.

“The chair is cold with no pants on.” A soft blush hits her cheeks.

“I’m okay with the no pants.” I grin while putting on my coat. “I’m going to go feed the animals, so if you figure out where she is we can head out.”

She slides her jeans back over her slim legs. “That sounds like a good idea.” She sits back down at the table, her brow furrowing as she starts working on her phone.

Grabbing my cowboy hat and firmly pushing it onto my head, I snag the shotgun leaning against the door frame and head outside to the barn.

I’m not used to doing chores armed, but now I’m a little more wary. I worry it’s only a matter of time before the dogs

start working their way out of town.

The shock of the cold hits me just as Thor jumps up from where he was snuggled against the steps. I'm glad to see he's limber, even in the winter chill.

"You know you can sleep in the barn where it's warmer." I pat his heavy head as he falls in step next to me. He has snow hanging from some of his long white guard hairs and on his tail.

Misty comes prancing from the barn and nips playfully at Thor's legs before running ahead of us. Thor loves the cooler temperatures. Misty, not so much. Lately she's been choosing to sleep inside near the wood stove at night, but prefers to stay out all day.

The little bit of snow we've gotten daily is starting to accumulate in drifts near the doors. I might have to fire up the tractor to move snow before too much longer. With getting into town being so sketchy, I've been avoiding using it except when necessary.

Milk cows are in the big bay stall to the left. It looks like their foster calves are doing well. "Morning, girls. Calliope, it looks like you're going to be popping soon! Good, might have to start milking you for the house." Forking fresh hay into their feeder, I smile at the older calves trying to push in with the cows.

I'm glad Elly will be staying here. I hate leaving Dani alone in the house. And Elly is much faster at milking than I am. Maybe she won't mind? She's always had a love-hate attitude

toward dairy, even though she used to specialize in it when we were young and in 4H.

The feed bin for the pigs is still pretty full. They don't eat as much in the winter. I'm heading to the chickens when I hear a low rumble of a growl from Thor.

He trots over to the rear door of the barn, his hackles raised. Misty cues off of him and starts her yipping sporadic bark, pacing between Thor and the front door of the barn.

"What is it, boy?" I ask, my voice low. Trying to move quietly, I make my way to where I had leaned the gun up near the hay bin.

The wind shifts and I catch a new scent intermixing with the heavy scents of the livestock.

It's a dank dog smell, tinged with rot and dirt.

Fuck.

The cows must pick up on it. Their heads toss up and their eyes go wide. Vibrations run through the ground when their heavy hooves paw at the dirt.

Finding little reassurance in my weapon, I move to stand behind Thor, peering into the heavier woods, my ears straining for any noise. Soft creaking of cold wood whispers back.

A flash of brown flickers between two trees. I think Thor saw it too because he pauses in his growling, his ears perking in that direction, and lowers himself into a crouch. Misty lets out a low whine behind me.

I can't see it, but the smell grows stronger. It's getting closer and is smart enough to stay hidden. How much humanity remains within them? Can they plan? The ones I've seen so far have been completely animalistic. But, are all of them?

Panic crawls up the back of my neck and my heart races, almost drowning out the cows nervously stamping the earth behind me.

Another flash, this time further to the left, like it's aiming to skirt the barn and head to the house.

Toward Dani.

The overwhelming need to get back to her, to protect her, has me running back through the barn. Hugging the exterior, I slink along the wall to the corner closest to the house. I can't see anything in the open area, but the generator shed almost completely blocks my view of the woods with only a narrow gap allowing me to see just a glimpse.

I have to get back to her.

In a hastened, but wary, pace, I start crossing the open ground to the steps leading into the kitchen when a growl behind makes me pause. I'm suddenly on my face, a heavy weight on my shoulders, claws digging at my back. A hot breathed maw opens and clamps over my shoulder. The searing crushing pain tears through my thick coat, rending my flesh beneath.

A thump and a shift of the weight lets me roll on my side, struggling to free the shotgun I had landed on. I see a flash of

dark near me as Misty growls and barks at the legs of the giant wolf on me. Its wide claws press against my hips as it turns and snarls at Misty.

Another vicious bite tears into the back of my thigh and I can't hold back the scream that burns from my throat. Its bloody teeth snarl over me as it turns again to snap at my heeler.

She darts nimbly away from it, years of practice with asshole cows paying off.

Sharp claws dig into my calf, but I'm almost able to raise the gun. Rolling over, I try to kick it back as it fights with my much smaller dog. A large flash of white transforms into Thor leaping at the snarling beast. His heavier size is a better match against the enormous shaggy creature.

My injured arm doesn't want to cooperate. A slick pool of blood forms beneath me making the gun slippery in my fingers. I manage to get the barrel pointing at the animal, but with the flurry of brown fur and white in a whirlwind fight over top of me, it's hard to get a shot without the chance of injuring Thor.

Daggers of claws pierce the front of my thigh and drag downward. Agony seizes my body as the muscle is shredded nearly to my knee. My vision begins to haze and a brief lucid thought tells me it's probably because I'm losing too much blood.

Squinting through the threat of double vision, I zero the barrel on the largest patch of brown I can see and pull the

trigger.

A scream that sounds almost human emanates from the creature as it falls on top of me. Still writhing, the horrendously jagged mouth lands around my arm, gnashing it between the spires of its teeth. Green eyes meet mine, but I can't see humanity, just rage. Kicking with my good leg, I manage to push it down just far enough away I can drop the barrel down to line up with the wide muzzle.

I pull the second trigger on my double barreled shotgun. The back of the creature's head erupts into a spray overhead, raining down blood and gore over me and my two dogs that still furiously bite and tear at the thrashing corpse. My leg gets caught by the reflexive spasms, and I know I'm being injured more, but a numbing feeling is taking over my limbs. I feel like I'm floating as I weaken, blackness covering the edges of my sight.

Sounds begin to grow fuzzy. Strangely, I'm drawn to the warmth of the body crushing my legs. A frigid cold overtakes me, but I'm too tired to shiver.

I need to get to Dani.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ALEXANDER

Obsession. That is what this is. An obsession with *her*.

I have learned she loves chocolate. And that, for a moment, when those brown little bites disappear behind her trembling pink lips she has a serene look on her face. A contentment. A peace that she hides when I have her bound on my table.

But, in my inept attempt to show compassion, I allowed her to dig through the pile of scavenged goods that my dogs have been returning with. Little did I know she would slip one of those glowing little rectangles away. It was mere luck that I entered her room while she was using it, her thumbs tapping against the screen with a rhythm that called me from the hall.

After flinging it against the concrete wall, the sharp shards were useful for the tiny fissures I sliced into her skin as punishment.

She denied me a sound. Refused to release her hidden scream, even as I peeled the flesh from her defiant arm. Resolute frustration threw me from her side, slamming the door behind me.

I know she won't flee. I've an army now. Dogs of size and girth that rival horses, all with just enough intelligence to know to defer to me and my whims.

They follow my commands, like the good little mongrels they are. Finally a purpose for the useless fodder of humans I used to wade through daily. The scourges of half-witted drivel that used to pace before me, declaring their innocence, pleading their case, begging for mercy.

Now, they obey me implicitly. I am not only judge and jury, but also executioner for any who stray from my wishes.

I should be gloating over my newfound kingdom, the reign of which I have always felt I was destined for. The total control to allow or deny anything to exist. To be the master of life or death of any I deem fit.

Instead, I find myself groveling, consumed by my petite, little, honey haired prize, my most coveted possession. I have begged her with my claws, devoured her with my teeth, fileted her with my cock, and now she withholds the one reward I crave.

Her scream. The sound of her music is mute. I know her throat works. The string of archaic curses she throws at me are a testament.

I miss her glorious song, the sweet sounds that pull at my loins, filling my cock with longing. The melodic trilling of her throaty screams sends electrifying shivers through my body.

Without them, I feel vacant, empty.

My prized wall of golden tresses feels dull, the tendrils coarse and stiff. Lifeless.

Trailing my stunted fingers through their lengths, they fall in somber bunches. Not even as vivid as they were a few weeks ago.

Pressing my lengthened cheek against their locks, I wonder if perhaps I need to try a different approach. Tender is how I treat my wall of prizes lest I sever their tenuous ties. I've already lost too many delicate strands to the hard floor below.

Stalking back to her door, I beckon her to the chamber. The pallor of her skin fades as she compliantly matches my pace. Never allowing her to follow is a lesson I learned from a mistake long ago, one I shall not repeat.

“You know I fucking hate you,” she hisses.

Yes, her lovely voice does work, even with the coarseness of her choice of words.

She earns a derisive growl. I wish I could expand my response, but I've abandoned the hope to ever form words again. With a gesture, I indicate for her to lie on her back.

Obediently, she extends her arms above her head where I wrap the bindings. Not too tightly, but not loose enough that she can escape.

The clenching defiance in her jaw does little to hide the mottling in her cheeks as the tears brim her eyes. With the smooth side of my knuckle, I gather one of the salty drops and bring it to my tongue. It tastes like fear and opposition.

Unable to resist, my mouth finds her quivering neck. Resisting the urge to tear into her quaking skin, instead savoring the hot syrup pooling into the hollow of her throat.

My claws skim beneath the fabric of her shirt, cleaving it in two. But, I'm careful, leaving her beauty contained. Her chest heaves in small gasps when I peel back the thin cotton. I have a never-ending pile of collected clothing because my dogs are eager to please, and bring me anything I desire.

Ironically, I can communicate better with them than with her. If only I could tell her how I cherish the rare gift that she is to me.

Her nipples tighten when I expose them to the cool air. Tight pink tips that I lavishly taste, swirling and suckling, yet gingerly, careful of my elongated canines. I have already sampled the depths of her flesh, the nectar she hides. Now, I want to draw the quiver from her, to challenge myself to make her scream without beauty. To sing without pain.

What sounds will fill my ears if I can succeed? I crave the opportunity.

When I inhale against her belly, she sucks in, pulling the tiny retreat of her navel from my whiskers.

Her fear is intoxicating, pressing me to continue my exploration.

The oversized sweatpants that hang low around her hips fall victim to my scythe-like claws. A curly tuft of blond hair

springs loose, wafting her ripe smell in a heady aroma that hardens my cock.

I left her legs loose, an illusion of freedom that she tries to take advantage of, twisting her thighs, trying to close me off from the sweet scent of jasmine that emanates from her. She brings back memories of my childhood in Georgia, back when I was innocent.

Before I was broken into the man I became.

Pressing her tightened knees apart, I settle myself between her pale perfect legs. My hardening length rubbing against the cool bench, the tip protrudes from my sheath in earnest interest at her shy flower opening before me. Her heels dig into the bench, her efforts to push herself away only opening her thighs wider.

My gnarled nose buries into her soft curls, and I taste her for the first time.

A small surprised cry escapes from her lips when my tongue flicks to dampen her slit. I cannot hold back the groan of pleasure that rumbles from my throat at the sound she gifts me with.

Delving deeper within her folds, I discover the small node of her clit. I've not been one to pay them much attention in the past, gaining my satisfaction by other means. But, now, under the quick movements of my tongue, it grows and firms at my strokes.

“Why?” she whines. The tremulous sound tickles down my spine, rushing the blood into my cock for it to fully free itself.

She tries to pull her legs away, but I hold her firm. Twisting her hips only rubs her center against me. Now thankful for my longer tongue, I embark into the unknown, wishing to savor regions I’ve never experienced.

Why do I long for her so? I should just find a new prize, one who will scream me to ejaculation. Instead, my cock begs to be seated within her.

I haven’t indulged in that since my wedding night, the need to copulate to reproduce the only driving force. Having to reach fulfillment without making her bleed was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. The public eye had requested a child, a proof of my “normalcy” that was critical for my role as judge.

One child was enough.

But, now, I’m buried in the sweet ambrosia of her, her juices coating my face as she writhes and mewls below me. The sounds that spill from her lips, the panting that she fights, it stirs a need within me I’ve never felt. I want to flood her with my seed, to create the perfect collage of our bodies.

My lengthened tongue pushes into her. Another cry she bestows upon my ears. A sweet symphony vibrates from her delicate throat. I can see the battle she wages, the flush in her cheeks, the fear in her eyes. Her heart is hammering louder and faster within her delicious ribs.

In and out I push myself to taste her, deeper until I hit a wall. A membrane.

A virgin.

Determined to not cause her pain this time, I satisfy myself with quick shallow strokes, interspersed with flicks on her engorged clit.

Her breathing becomes sporadic, her hips grinding against my muzzle. Soft moans escape her as her thighs quiver beneath my stumped palms.

My own hips buck against the bench, pinning my cock beneath my body. I can feel the drops of precum lubricating me with each twitch. Her musical sounds are thrumming against my loins.

Faster my tongue works upon her, within her, lavishing her inside and out until her hips rise to meet me, her back surging from the surface of the bench, her hands twisting in their bonds. A cry blends into a scream as her body arches and tightens around me. Her walls squeeze upon my tongue as if she wants to tear it from my mouth. A rush of her sweet essence floods over my canines and I erupt. My hips convulse, pumping my hot seed against my belly. The tight pressure in my loins spills to the ground beneath me.

I never knew it could be this way.

The soft moans of earlier turn into quiet sobs, a sound I am much more familiar with.

Extracting myself from the bench, I loosen her bonds and release her. The shirt hangs open around her shoulders, the pants in tatters on the floor. Walking slowly back to her room, her hands are completely covering her face as she continues to cry.

My dogs back away, their wariness of me apparent. Feeling benevolent, I motion them to one of the injured humans tied to the far wall. As a pack, they descend. The wails of pain echoing through the room do not stir me as they once did. My cock shrivels into its sheath. I don't get the rise of pleasure shivering up my spine at the dying sounds.

All I can think of is her scream and her taste flooding my mouth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



DANI

Doing a reverse number search, I manage to learn that the owner of the phone is named Kelly Shaffer. There are about two hundred Shaffers in the Boise area. I think I'm somewhere around number forty or fifty when I hear a thump loud enough to raise me from my chair.

The scream that follows has me flinging open the door to see my worst nightmare.

Sam is pinned to the ground. One of those giant wolfish dogs is standing on his back, tearing into him. And I'm standing here in bare feet, with nothing but a phone in my hand.

I have a nearly overwhelming urge to dash out into the snow to try and tackle that giant beast down. My foot even lands on the front step, the cold shocking a glimmer of common sense through me.

The gun. I need a gun.

Running down the hall into the bedroom, I hear a gunshot and a scream. My stomach rolls and twists. My breath stops in

my throat.

It sounded human. Was it Sam?

The pistol is on the nightstand, still in the holster he fashioned me with last week.

Yanking it free, I run back to the kitchen, and hear another shot. Through the open door I see Sam lying on the ground, the giant dog still above him. Thor and Misty each have mouthfuls of brown fur and are tugging at the weight of it.

Blood. That's all I see. It's everywhere. The face of the beast is missing. A mix of blood, tissue and bone hang in pieces. Sam's in a slowly spreading pool, with ice crystals starting to firm the edges as it filters through the frozen grass. A heavy metallic smell hangs in the air that grows more dense as I get closer.

How much is his?

Rushing to his side, I can't even feel the snow on my bare feet.

"Sam! Sam! Talk to me!" I can hear his heart, not as strong as normal, but he's still alive. I wish the ambulances were running. I wish the hospitals were open.

I have to stop the bleeding and get him inside. The ground is freezing, and his jacket is in ribbons, but the cold will help slow the blood loss—even a little will help.

Running back up the steps into the kitchen, I rip open the hand towels drawer and grab a large handful. The top has a roll of duct tape. Far from a perfect situation, but my

veterinarian trauma kit is lacking in major blood control supplies.

Back to his side, I peel his torn jacket back, stuffing the towels around his shoulder. I push the shotgun out of the way and another towel goes around his forearm. I just wrap it tightly right around the sleeve for the moment.

Tossing the stack of remaining towels on his chest, I know it's time to move the beast off of him. The long guard hairs are stiff and prickle against my arms, but it's surprisingly soft against the still warm skin.

Its smell, on the other hand, is awful. Rot, and earth, and the pungent smell of ammonia overwhelm me as I push against its large weight. Gore is spattered over the muscular shoulder, smearing across me as I manage to rock the lolling carcass back and forth enough to free Sam's legs.

There's so much blood. I want to break down and cry, but, instead, I run back in for a knife to peel his torn jeans back. His thigh is shredded, blood oozing out steadily. The wounds run the length of his entire leg. I'm wrapping as quickly as I can, taping the soaking towels around him, but they're already so saturated the tape barely holds.

Sobs tear at my throat as my hands work in a flurry.

"Sam, please hold on! Please don't die!" I beg him. I hope there is a place inside that can hear me.

Both arms and both legs. I can barely see through the tears overflowing my eyes to keep wrapping the towels around his

wounds. His thighs are the worst. The back of one, the front of the other. They're both spilling blood so fast I can barely stem it. Luckily, neither of his femoral arteries seem to have been hit or he would be dead already.

Oh, fuck. The thought chokes me up. My chest spasms as it refuses to work right.

My bloodied hands find his cheeks, my lips finding his crusted ones.

“Please, baby, wake up. Please!” His skin is so cold, I need to get him in the house now that he isn't pouring out into the yard.

A slam startles me. Looking behind, I glimpse a black sedan parked in the driveway. A slim woman in a red ski jacket and matching wool hat hurries over to me.

“Oh, my god! Sam!” She knees down next to me, her hands resting on his chest.

“Elizabeth?” She nods. “Can you help me get him inside? I think he's going into shock.” I notice her blue eyes are already red rimmed when they meet mine. She's been crying, but new tears are welling.

Another nod, and she gets up to grab his uninjured shoulder. I gather the back of his jacket in my freezing slick fingers, and we tug him slowly up the steps and into the house.

“Let's put him by the fire,” I grunt. He's so heavy, even with both of us. Twin trails of blood follow his limp legs through the kitchen.

It's now I realize my feet have been bare this entire time. The warm floor sends prickles into my toes as the feeling returns.

“What can I do?” Elly asks, a tremor in her voice.

“Try calling 911. And he'll need blankets. We need to keep him warm.” My trauma bag is next to the door. Dragging it to him, I don't even need to look where the supplies are, I've used it so often on field calls. I just don't have the clotting agents and bandages on the scale that he needs right now.

Usually when a large animal is bad enough to warrant it, euthanasia is the ethical choice.

Dammit, Dani, stop thinking that.

Squinting back the dark thoughts of losing him, I pull out the iodine, gloves and a suture kit. His right thigh is the worst bleeder, so I need to start there.

“There's no answer. I tried the police, the fire station and three different clinics. No one is answering.” Her voice is muted as she disappears down the hall, still talking, but I can't understand the words.

Elly reappears with a large armful of blankets from the hall closet. She works on spreading them out over Sam while I start peeling back the towels and duct tape from his leg.

Tears keep rolling down my cheeks, making me keep having to wipe my face on my sleeves until they're soaked. I feel like I'm not moving fast enough. Every beat of his heart is pushing blood out of his wounds.

“Please hold on,” I murmur to him. After the fifth suture pack, I have finally finished the front of his leg.

“You’re doing a good job,” Elly says quietly. She’s kneeling next to me, helping me by handing me the various instruments when I ask. A few squares of gauze and some tape, and I’m ready to go to the next wound.

“I’m not fast enough!” Panic skirts the edges of my concentration, tugging to hasten my heartbeat and adding a tremble to my hands. Rolling back onto my heels, I take a steadying breath. I need to focus on what I’m doing. I can break down later.

“I need to roll him over. The injury on the back of his other leg should be next.” Fighting to keep the tremor down in my voice, I busy myself with arranging the blanket so we can get him onto it and provide a little cushion.

She moves his shoulders while I move his hips.

“One, two, three!” We heave his heavy limp body over, pushing a groan out of him with the movement.

Peeling back the blood soaked towel, I see he has a large chunk of flesh missing from the back of his thigh. A slow seep slowly fills the hollow with crimson. Throwing a few quick stitches around the jagged edges, I try to draw it together as best I can, then pack it with sterile gauze and cover it.

I bet he will always walk with a limp from that one. But, at least he will be alive, I hope.

Elly sits back against the couch, her face pale.

Moving down his leg to his calf, I can see this isn't as bad, just a few long, but shallow cuts.

"Are you okay?" I ask her as I stitch, noticing from the corner of my eye her hand covering her mouth.

"This is just all so much. I thought it would be safer out here." Her voice trails off, her eyes unfocus as she stares at the fire flickering in the wood stove.

I can't imagine what she's going through right now. Just losing her husband, and now seeing her brother like this. I'm a wreck seeing Sam like this, and he's only my, well, we haven't even said what we are.

What are we?

I don't know. I just know it feels like my chest is being ripped out right now, like I'm bleeding out next to him. It's only been a few days that I've been here, and already I feel like I don't want to be away from him. That I can't be.

That I would do anything right now to save him.

A fresh wash of tears runs down my face. My cheeks are raw from wiping them.

With his calf finished and bandaged, I move up to his shoulder. Fortunately, his coat is heavy enough that it helped to prevent most of the tearing damage he might have suffered.

"Can you tell me a funny story about when you and Sam were kids? Maybe that will help us both right now." It looks like she's shutting down. I don't know how to deal with

people. I'm so much better with wounded animals. At least their reactions to pain are predictable.

She takes a deep breath and gives me a grateful smile. Pulling her jacket off to reveal a dark blue sweatshirt, she sits up on the couch.

“Our parents are old movie nuts. So, when Sam was born, my mom insisted on naming him after her favorite movie star, Sam Elliot.”

That brings me a smile. Sam has a little of the swagger of his namesake. And I remember seeing some of his movies from when he was younger. That is definitely a charismatic man.

“What about your name?” I don't look up from trying to piece together the tattered edges of his shoulder.

“Ah, my dad was infatuated, well, is still infatuated with Elizabeth Taylor.” She laughs softly. “He even tried to hang up a poster of her. My mom was so pissed.” With a sigh, she pulls her hat off, revealing short, messy, brown hair. “Do you want some tea or coffee? I feel like I should be doing something to help. Is there anything I can do?” She leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees.

“There's fresh coffee. I'd be fine with either. I think I still have half a cup on the table.” The morning seems like it happened years ago. All I know now is fear and pain.

Elly steps carefully past me and picks up my coffee cup from the table on the way to the kitchen.

“So, Sam told me you’re a doctor?” she says as she pulls a cup down for herself.

“DVM. I’m a veterinarian. I wish I was a people doctor right now.” Sam told her about me? I can’t stop myself from brushing a loose lock of his hair back from over his eye. He’s so pale. It makes my stomach ache seeing him this way.

“I’d say you’re a people doctor. I’m glad you’re here.” She sets the mug on the floor next to me just as I’m finishing taping down his bandage. “Do you go by Doc, or, it’s Danielle, right?”

“Dani is good.” I try to flash her a smile, but I’m sure I’m some crazy caricature of the Joker right now. “Do you go by Elizabeth?” I brush another errant tear from my cheek. What a day to meet his family.

“Elly, usually. Easier to say.” She sits on the edge of the couch, her hands twisting around her coffee cup.

After cutting his jacket and shirt off of him, I check the rest of his back for wounds, my fingers tracing his broad shoulders, the defined muscles along his spine, and the narrow “V” of his waist. “Can we roll him back? I need to patch up his other arm and start an IV.” There are three liters of saline in my trauma bag. They’re made for humans, I just repurpose them for animals when I need to. Now, I’m glad I spent the little bit extra.

Getting all the torn bits of his clothing out of the way, I smooth out a clean blanket beneath him before we roll him gently onto his back.

It doesn't take much longer to get the rest of his smaller injuries cleaned up and bandaged. The large rubber tourniquet makes the veins on his arms bulge, popping from beneath his cool skin. Tracing the bluish lines, I slide the needle in with a practiced movement, but still gritting my teeth because, well, it's Sam. This is so much harder on a person, especially one I care about.

"Will you bring one of the chairs over, please? I'm going to hang his IV bag from it." Flashbacks of that first night giving Thor his treatment, sitting on the floor with Sam, flicker behind my eyes as she drags the wooden chair over. The same one Sam and I rode on just a few hours ago.

"That's clever, using the chair." She gives me a weak smile.

"Thanks, it works well." I don't really want to elaborate. If she lost her husband to the dogs, the last thing I want to do is volunteer that I may have been one of the ones to cause the mutations.

I get him covered up tightly, and check the flow before standing. Tingling floods through my feet as the circulation is restored. Dang, that hurts! It feels like ants are crawling under my skin.

Elly helps me to get the rest of his tattered clothes gathered up into a garbage bag and puts it by the door. A hollow bang of the closet door, and she returns with the mop and bucket. "I'm going to clean this up." She gestures at the long slick of blood trailing from Sam to the door. Tears stain her face as she

bites her lip, but her hands stay busy filling the bucket and then working the mop in long arcs across the wood floor.

Perching on the edge of the couch, I catch a glimpse of my stained clothes. My legs are a roadmap of every twist in the grass, slide in the mud, and kneeling in the puddles of Sam. Wrapping my stained hands around my abdomen, the full weight of his injuries crashes down on me. My stomach twists and rolls like a snake writhing on hot asphalt.

A knot forms in my throat while staring at him. He's so pale, his breathing is so shallow, and his heartbeat is still weak. It's a blessing and a curse being able to hear it. I almost wish I couldn't for a moment because I could maybe delude myself into thinking he is better. His face is so serene, his full lips parted above his strong chin. The little dimple in his left cheek is hidden, but I've seen it when he laughs and it lights up my chest in fireflies.

Agony rips a sob from me. I might never see his dimple again. How can I hurt this bad? Why do I feel myself wishing it was me instead of him? But, I don't want him to feel this helplessness either. There's an ache that feels like it's ripping me in half, that tries to drag me to the floor and shred me from the inside out.

"Is there anything else that can be done?" Elly asks as the mop pulls her closer.

My voice doesn't work, so I just shake my head.

"Why don't you go get cleaned up? I'll keep an eye on him and let you know if anything changes." The dripping mop

head brushes the edge of the blanket on the floor as she makes one last pass.

With stiff legs, I nod, stand and head into the bedroom. Not even bothering with closing the door, I just strip clothes until I'm shivering and naked standing in the bathtub waiting for the frigid water to warm.

Scalding water melts the dam holding back the deluge of tears. I have never cried this hard or this violently. Wracking sobs shudder through my body until it hurts. I can't gasp enough air, my lungs seizing with every keening wail.

The worst passes. My throat is too raw to make a sound. I can't breathe through my nose, it's so stuffed, even with the heavy steam from the shower.

Even with the tears, I try to keep it short. I know his IV will be running out soon, and I don't want that to happen. After sliding on a pair of clean yoga pants and flannel shirt, I find Elly sitting on the couch, her knees hugging her chest, with a cup of coffee clutched in her hands.

Changing out the flaccid IV bag, I listen to his heartbeat. The rhythm I've grown so used to sounds foreign now. Weak.

But, louder? Slightly? Or is that wishful thinking?

The second bag, I don't leave quite on full blast like the first. I don't want to blow his vein by pushing too much too quickly.

"How many of those do you have?" Elly asks, her eyes fixed on the dripping in the tube running into his arm.

“I have one more. We should have a better idea then, I hope.” Another thought hits me. “Do you know if Sam has any allergies to antibiotics?” He has a stash in the refrigerator for his livestock. But, something is better than nothing right now.

“The only thing I know he’s allergic to is bananas.” Her eyes never waver from the IV. I didn’t notice the heavy bags under them earlier, but now I see her face is gaunt, almost haggard, and she looks exhausted. “There’s no one left to help. Sam’s very lucky you were here.” She looks down, picking at the skin on her thumb. “There was no helping John. It happened so fast...” Her voice trails off as her eyes unfocus.

I’m not sure if I’m supposed to ask her what happened or let it go. Maybe I’ll let her tell me when she’s ready.

I do find some antibiotics in the refrigerator and add some to his IV. Who knows what kind of nasty bacteria the mutant dogs are carrying. I wonder if they have bacteria like us or if they have some of the antibacterial properties of dog saliva?

The chimes of the ringtone on my phone breaks the silence, but it isn’t on the table.

Where in the heck is it?

It takes me two rings to track it down, glowing and vibrating on the floor near the bed. Hurrying, I swipe accept on the unknown number.

“Hello?” My throat is still sore. My voice comes out hoarse.

“Is this Dr. Michelson?” a man with a deep voice clips.

“Speaking, how may I help you?”

“My name is Captain Russo of the Idaho National Guard. We have been mobilizing here in Boise, and I was wondering if I could ask for your help with some of the medical needs that we are experiencing.”

“I’m a veterinarian, not a human doctor.” Standing over Sam, watching his chest rise and fall, I hope like hell my medical skills were enough to save him.

“I understand that, Doc. We have a serious shortage of any trained medical personnel right now. The overwhelming majority were on the front lines when these, um, creatures mutated.”

“Oh, my god.” The thought of the entire city without a doctor is daunting. There are hundreds of thousands of people who live in this area. Even on the best days, it would take so many doctors to care for them all. Not to mention nurses, assistants, supply staff, home health care.

People like Becky. And Jenny.

“What are you wanting me to do? I could lose my license for administering care to humans. Unless something has changed recently, I can only offer cursory help.”

There is no way in hell I would stand by and watch Sam bleed to death. I don’t care if I lose my license over it.

What does that mean? I’d sacrifice my career for him?

Catching a glimpse of Elly, it looks like she has the same question. Her eyebrows shoot up as she glances between Sam

lying on the floor and me. A small smile lifts the corner of her lips.

Yes, I would, and did, sacrifice my career for him. I'd go back to my old high school job of working at McDonald's if I could guarantee he would be fine.

"We need essential services. Treating injuries and wounds. We are working at creating a safe zone at the prison compound. I can get the governor's office to sign off on your help."

"The prison is on the other side of the city. I can't go there right now."

"We really need the help. People are dying." His voice is heavy with desperation. "What if we came to you?"

Watching Sam's IV dripping, this bag is half empty. The last bag will be empty within an hour.

"Okay, bring extra medical supplies, and guards for the property. I'm not leaving."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



SAM

Muffled voices of men. I feel myself moving. Why don't my eyes open? My legs fucking hurt. My thighs feel like they're on fire.

A cushion absorbs me. I must be in bed. The pain of movement fades.

Dani. I heard her talking. I know she's safe. Worry flecks her voice, but it reassures me. I'm alive. I am just so tired.

Darkness. I can't hear her heart, but another beats nearby. Who? I try to turn my head. Where is Dani?

"Sam, you're okay. It's me, Elly. Dani's outside. She'll be back soon."

She holds my hand. Her fingers are cold on the back of my arm.

"You're lucky, Sam. She patched you up well. I'm glad you found a good one."

It's quiet for so long. Darkness takes me for a while. Her voice startles me back.

“I saw John die, Sam. There was a whole pack. He never had a chance.”

Crying. I can hear her crying and I can't console her. Why can't I move? I'm just so tired...

Something wet lands on my hand. Her cold fingers are still there, wiping it away.

“Don't wait to tell her, Sam. I know you love each other. Time is so short. She loves you, too. I saw it today.”

Her forehead touches my wrist. My arm is shaking from her sobbing.

Elly, I'm so sorry. I wish I could wake up...

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



DANI



I feel like I'm being torn in two.

One half of me wants to curl around Sam's unconscious body. The other half knows I need to be out here in this hospital tent helping treat the wounded as they arrive.

It was only an hour after the phone call yesterday before the first truck arrived. They had a tent erected in the front yard soon after, just as another truck rolled in stocked with medical supplies and personnel.

There's now a full time sentry on every building keeping eyes on the surrounding areas. A series of motion detecting cameras added to the woods nearby now keep a set of invisible eyes on the hardest areas to watch.

Captain Russo isn't as old as he sounded on the phone, but the exhaustion rimming his eyes surely adds ten years. His gruff manner is tinged with patience as he explained to me his expectations and presented me with a signed letter from the governor's office exempting me from any ramifications for helping outside of my license.

“Boise and the surrounding areas have a population of roughly half a million people. We’re looking at a conversion rate of between fifteen and twenty percent.” His gravelly voice isn’t smoothed by his constant sips of scalding coffee. He wipes an errant drop from his unshaven face. His dark beard looks as old as this new hell.

“Conversion rate. That’s an interesting term. Nearly a hundred thousand people changed? What have you estimated the mortality rate of the virus to be?” I ask as I peel off another pair of exam gloves. The patient’s vitals seem to be stable, and he is ready to be shipped back to the prison safe zone.

This has been my first chance to ask him questions. Yesterday was a flurry of making sure Sam was okay and moved comfortably to his bed. Then, I was up until well past midnight working through an onslaught of wounded patients.

“Well,” he grumbles, “that’s harder. We estimate twenty to thirty percent, but we’re seeing higher losses due to the dogs...” His voice trails off. The implications constrict my throat.

“So, you’re saying at least fifty percent of the population is just, *gone*?” I stop moving and look at him. His khaki uniform is dirty and disheveled and he has dried blood crusted to the left side of his neck. It’s been there since last night when he helped to carry an injured man to one of the stretchers.

He moves to take another drink from his cup, then just stares into the bottom of the empty vessel.

“Yeah. The Governor is gone. Most of the state congress. I heard they squirreled the President away, but scuttlebutt says he turned.” He continues to stare into his cup. “Too many have turned,” he adds quietly.

He fidgets with his hand and I realize he’s twisting a wedding ring.

I can’t resist asking. “Is your wife okay, Captain?”

His brown eyes are hollow when he glances up. “She was pregnant with our first child. We were waiting until it was born to find out if it was a boy or a girl.” He pauses, habit drawing his cup partway to his lips before he sighs. “The baby turned and she hemorrhaged internally. The tech who checked her out said the anatomy just wasn’t compatible.”

He turns on his heel and walks over to the smaller mess tent before I can reply.

What the hell do you even say to that?

I scrub my hands under the small foot pump fountain and head back into the house with a handful of clean bandages. Elly has breakfast cooking, a heaping pan of eggs and hashbrowns.

“Any change?” I ask her as soon as the door latches behind me.

She knows exactly what I’m talking about. “No, but I haven’t checked on him in about an hour.”

“Okay, I need to change his bandages anyway. I’ll be a bit.”

When I step into the bedroom he's sprawled across the bed. His IV tubing is wrapped around his arm and the stand is leaning precariously over the bed.

"Well, it looks like you moved at least," I say quietly. It's a good thing, albeit a little taxing on the equipment.

"Dani..." he groans. Then softly snores.

A soft warmth spreads through my chest and lifts my lips in a small smile. He's thinking of me in his sleep. It makes me feel, well, special that such an amazing man dreams of me.

His heartbeat is strong and steady, nearly back to normal. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I gently pick up his arm and unwind the tubing that has encircled his wrist.

It surprises me when his long fingers snap around my palm and pulls it to his mouth, gently kissing the pads of my fingers.

"Dani, I love you. Marry me." His words spill across the pillows, but he doesn't turn his head.

I'm stunned. Speechless. And doubtful. He has to be sleeping or delirious.

"Shh, Sam, go back to sleep. I'm glad you're feeling better." I brush his hair back from his eyes. It's already longer than it was at Thor's first treatment. That seems like it was a lifetime ago.

His color is better. He isn't nearly as pale as he was last night. The additional IVs that the captain brought seem to have really helped.

Trying to pull my hand away proves useless as his fingers tighten around mine.

“Come here, please. I need to hold you.” He tugs my arm until I find myself kicking my shoes off to crawl over him.

“Sam, I’m filthy.” I’m sure I have blood and dirt splattered on me from the last patient.

“I don’t care. You can be my dirty girl and I’ll spank you for it later.” His arm wraps around me, nestling me against his chest, and my nose tickles against the hollow of his neck.

The bandages on his shoulder crinkle as he leans his nose into my hair and feathers light kisses on my temple.

A huge weight lifts from me. He’s alive, he’s awake, and I’m right where I want to be, in his arms.

“I do fucking love you. I’m not dreaming it. All I could think about was getting back to you.” The rumbling from his chest vibrates through my body while little starbursts explode in my stomach.

He really did say he loves me. “Sam, I, I…”

I don’t know what to say. I do, but is it true? We have only really been together a couple of weeks.

“Dani, I’d die a million times to save you. If that isn’t love, I don’t know what is. You’re my sanity in this crazy world, and if I die today, I wanted to make sure you knew.”

I can’t stop the giggle that erupts, the crazy, giddy feeling from his declaration and just from him being alive.

He tilts his head back and cracks one glacier blue eye to look down his nose, his brow lifting along with the corner of his lip. “It’s funny?”

“I willingly threw my career out the window for you,” I admit. “I didn’t even think about it. I was so scared I was going to lose you,” I add quietly.

His smile grows as he folds back around me. “See? I knew it. I’ll just buy more cows. We’ll stay busy preg checkin’ them and spraying each other down with the hose.”

Smiling against his throat, I pepper his Adam’s apple with soft kisses as my hand snakes around his ribs. Being wrapped in his arms just feels, well, perfect. We lie in silence, our hearts beating in rhythm, pretending the world doesn’t exist for a few minutes.

“Dani,” he breaks the silence. “I have to piss like a racehorse.” He chuckles over the top of my head, his whiskers scuffing my forehead as he gives me one more hard kiss before rolling onto his back. “And I feel like I got hit by a freight train,” he groans. He starts throwing his arm over his eyes, but stops to inspect the bandage.

“You were torn up pretty good. I think that coat saved your life.” I run my fingers lightly down his arm. “I went through nearly all of my suture packs.”

“Sounds like you saved my life.” His thumb rubs circles on my lower back, but he puts the other hand across his eyes. “My head is killing me, too. That dog did a number on me.”

“I can give you some pain pills now that you’re awake.” I prop up on my elbow and press down the corner of the bandage on his chest that is rolling up. “I need to change your bandages, too.”

When he nods, his arm over his face moves, too. “Okay, but bathroom first. There’s no way I’m sleeping in a lake of my own piss.”

Giggling again, I scoot out of bed to help him sit up.

A copious amount of groaning and cursing later, he successfully makes it to the bathroom and back to bed.

“Now, you’re going to hate me. I need to change your bandages.” I have everything arranged on the nightstand.

“Okay, on one condition.” His blue eyes sparkle over a smile teasing up the corner of his full lips. “I want you topless.”

Heat flushes across my cheeks. “Sam, I—”

“Baby,” his voice drops. His thumb brushes against my burning lips. “Your breasts could cure cancer. I’ll be so distracted by them, I won’t feel a thing.”

He’s sitting on the edge of the bed and he motions with both of his hands, encouraging me to take off my shirt.

Well, it is dirty.

“Good girl,” he murmurs as the soiled garment hits the floor.

My nipples harden in the cool air and I feel a rush of heat into my stomach.

His nostrils flare and he leans forward. “Oh, yes, that smell is distracting, too. Fucking intoxicating.” He holds out his arm for me to remove the first bandage.

Grabbing the corner of the tape, I start peeling it back. It tugs every arm hair as I do, but I can’t just jerk it. I could open up his wound again.

So, I get to watch the corner of his eye tick every few pulls, and sometimes his cheek twitches. That’s when his gaze flickers to my chest and he smiles again.

“Tell me why I hear so many people milling around outside,” he says. I’ve nearly removed his first bandage.

What the hell? The wound on his arm is almost completely healed. This one wasn’t as bad as the others, but he did have open lacerations and long scratches. They’re completely closed over and fresh perfect skin now extends nearly across his arm. Not even a scar. There are only a few small spots that still show signs of injury, but they’re closed and look more like papercuts.

“That doesn’t look that bad. An awful big bandage for a tiny scratch.” He gives me a lopsided grin and rotates his wrist to look at both sides of his forearm.

“It was much bigger yesterday. You had long nasty lacerations that ran the length of your arm.” I’m completely perplexed.

“I’m not surprised,” he says nonchalantly. “I have left marks on your neck that should have lasted for days, but you are always perfect every morning. I think it’s a perk of the virus.” He looks back up at me, idly scratching his two day growth of blond whiskers.

“And the people?” he prompts.

I’m still flustered at this miraculous healing revelation, so it takes me a second to catch up to his question. “A captain from the National Guard called me yesterday. They’re desperate for medical staff, so he asked if I could help treat their wounded.”

“Okay, why are they *here*, though?”

I meet his eyes. “There wasn’t a chance in hell I was leaving, so they brought a med tent here. And,” I add with a grin, “a written exemption from the Governor’s office so I can work on people.”

“Good. I know you love your career. It’s a win-win. You get to save the love of your life, and your license.” His hot palm cups my cheek as he pulls me close, his lips soft against mine in a lingering kiss.

“The love of my life, huh?” I ask him as he pulls away. There’s no hiding my pounding heart.

Shrugging, he moves his shoulder bandage closer to me. “Tell me I’m wrong.” His dark blond hair falls across his eyes as he watches me silently begin peeling the tape from his chest.

When I don't answer, I can see his teeth flash in a broad smile. "See, I was right."

"Cocky much?" I tease. I can feel the smile dancing across my lips.

Grabbing my hand, he moves it quickly to press against his crotch. His boxers are stretched by his hard length that he guides my hand up and down. "Yes, my cock loves you, too," he growls.

I can't help myself. I wrap my fingers around him and continue to stroke, a bead of precum soaking through the thin fabric. "You feel good for someone who was nearly dead just a few hours ago."

"I can assure you, I am very much alive. And willing to prove it." Large hands grab my hips, and he drags me onto his lap.

He only winces a second when he slides me over his injured thigh, but I still catch it.

"Baby, you're hurting. Let me at least check your stitches. I don't want you to open up your wounds." Memories of his muscles laid open and the pool of blood Elly and I pulled him out of flicker through my thoughts.

I hug him tightly against my chest, his lips nibbling my neck. It terrifies me that I almost lost him. The pain returns. The agony that I suffered resurfaces twisting in my abdomen. His broken body, his screams are on replay in my head.

A shudder grips me. The tears stream down my face as a sob locks in my throat.

His hands frame my cheeks and pull my lips to his.

“Dani, baby, what’s the matter? It’s okay. I’m okay. I’m right here.” He wipes away one of my tears with his thumb.

“Oh, Sam. I really do love you. I don’t ever want to lose you again.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

ALEXANDER

My legion grows. An army of my fiendish creatures now obey me. I've found others like me, trapped between man and beast. All leaning heavily toward the animal, but smart enough to follow my more complex orders.

They are to avoid the open where the helicopters can hover and pick them off. Be watchful of rooflines where snipers and gun toting fools take lethal aim. They've learned to coordinate their actions to open doors or breach windows under my tutelage. In return, they eat. Food is the resource we seek out. Sniveling humans hiding in their hovels. My dogs can bring them to any of the depots I've created where they can be contained and utilized. They gather other foods as well, but it's fodder for the captives. If they're restrained and fed the grotesque packaged products, they can be fattened and softened.

I am planning a new way of life. An empire I control is erupting around me. With a flick of a finger, a raise of my lip, or a rumbling growl, my every wish is followed.

As it should be.

Now, if I could just get my queen to concede to me as the others do. I no longer seek her screams of pain. My walls now echo with those constantly. Although a delightful background noise, it doesn't stir my loins as her screams of passion do.

I have anticipated this day. I have been stoking the flames within her, plying her with pleasure, convincing her with my tongue that I desire much more than just exposing her inner beauty. My claws encased safely behind heavy leather gloves, I can touch and caress her without marring her perfect skin.

She doesn't balk as quickly, but the fear still flares in her eyes when I reach for her. My patience is thick, strong, and as hard as my cock every time I so much as think of her.

I will win her over.

But, it will not be today. Today, I can smell the estrus on her. It's saturating from her pores, the cloying perfume of her body begging for me.

There is a driving need in me to see her heavy with my child, to create a greater being who will rule this new world. A prodigy I will guide to greatness. A strong brilliant child with my strength and her constitution, it will be unmatched. She is my perfect mate.

Even her fortitude draws me closer. Her resolute hatred of me will fade. The challenge is a lure, the tantalizing carrot that dangles just beyond my grasp. It is disguised in honey blond hair, round blue eyes, and wide full lips that she bites nearly to bleeding before she screams in orgasm.

She is my challenge, my obsession, my every thought. And today I will make her mine.

Though she doesn't cower, her movements are still hesitant as she walks the hall by my side.

Her scent is smothering. It drives my blood to my loins, coaxing my cock to burst from its sheath. Only through sheer force of will do I keep its moist barbed head from breaching into the air.

The periphery of the chamber is now filled with the milling beasts. Many move with purpose, leaving or returning from retrieval missions.

One of my half-breed commanders watches us approach. He's enormous, even by the others. He must have been a brute of a man before the change. Although he favors walking on four legs like the mongrel he's become, I've seen him lumbering on two. His short snout wrinkles in our direction. His humanoid eyes widen and focus on *her*.

There's enough man left within him that he flashes a toothy grin. He must expect me to cower, and when it fails, his snarling smile broadens into a threatening grimace. His canines bulging past his tight lips do little to threaten me, but his hardening cock waving free as he stands upright shows he is unfettered in his lust.

The growl that emanates from my bowels leaves no doubt as to my claim of her. But, the lack of my scent upon her tantalizing skin argues my ownership.

These new rules of possession are based on bodily fluids and posturing.

Perhaps not so unlike the old world.

The heat of her body grows closer to mine, and I feel a timid hand wrap around my furred arm. She clings closer, perhaps choosing the lesser of two evils. She has seen the chaos of two males fighting over a female. She has also witnessed the ravaging that shreds the unclaimed women. Torn apart without a male to protect them. Used and consumed by the hordes of ravenous maws.

A gelatinous slick of stinking gore clings to the walls and floor, a reminder of bodies long disappeared. I only have two rooms untainted, hers, and my trophy room.

It splatters beneath the heavy footsteps of the brutish creature hulking toward us. His fingers are just long enough to curl menacingly as he stoops into a prowling stance.

He will not touch her.

I can feel her trembling touch, and I push her behind me, the leather gloves falling to the fetid floor. My claws are bared. My wrath is unmatched. He will not threaten what is mine.

When his next step lands, I launch.

Martial arts training from a life forgotten flows through my limbs as muscle memory moves my body in a whirlwind. Sidestepping and deflecting his slow blows, my claws rip into his muscles, slashing across his stomach and opening his

bowels to join the crust at our feet. He stumbles forward, his gnarled palms sliding to the floor.

I leap onto his back, my clawed toes gaining purchase in the thick skin of his flanks. One swipe under his throat and he collapses below me, blood surging in a wave, a bubbling carpet spreading toward my trembling mate.

Rage erupts from me, roaring into his lifeless ears, to the huddling throngs of panicked dogs that scurry to flee my sight. It draws into a howl that echoes from the concrete walls and ricochets into the streets. I hear the joined cries of my loyal subjects mimicking my call, their voices carrying across the city beyond the reach of my sensitive ears.

I am in charge. I will not be threatened.

Nor will she.

Jumping from the broad back of the carcass, I signal to my next in command to remove the body. Within seconds, the massive shape is being dragged into the streets by half a dozen snarling beasts where it's quickly encapsulated by a mass of writhing fur and limbs.

The crunching of bones and wet sounds of tearing flesh cloak me with their comforting sounds as I step down the hall back to her.

She huddles near her door. With wild rolling eyes, she reaches for my arm as I draw close.

Seeking safety with me is a welcome change from her previously fearful and disdainful attitude. A shift I hope she

continues after today.

As she's hiding behind me from the frenzied dogs, I can smell the cloying scent of fear nearly covering her estrus. The combination sends a riotous surge of blood to my loins, nearly causing me to relent to the torrent of adrenaline still coursing through my veins and take her right here in the hall.

My nostrils flare, gulping her intoxicating smell. I can taste her in the air, heavy, alluring. The stifling weight has me gasping in the heady perfume of her.

Corralling her with my arms, I carry her lightly to her room as I did that first day I found her. Her lithe body pressing against mine, the soft golden sheen of her hair skimming against my cheek causes my cock to kiss the air as it pushes free of its sheath.

“You have to, don't you.” It isn't a question that she whispers against my neck.

Today is not the first day I have fought to protect her. My queen has seen the carnage that ensues over an unclaimed female, how their refusal can be lethal. She has also bore witness to the claimed ones, safely strutting through the fray of posturing males, their scent saturated with the smell of their mate.

When I drop her to her feet, I simply nod. Squatting, I pull my knees to my chest to cover my erection thrumming against my stomach.

Why I care what she feels baffles me sometimes. I never once stopped to consider my prize's perceptions of me before. Now, I covet every soft look she slips my way, every momentary lapse in her hatred.

Digging through the pile of retrieved items within my reach, I find the chocolate I could smell hidden, and offer it to her. A consolation in its most rudimentary form.

The quivering of her bottom lip betrays the inner struggle she is fighting. A glistening of tears bead against her big blue eyes, but no drop breaks free. Instead, they gather into a frail ribbon upon her lower lids.

With a resolute tightening of her brows she reaches for the chocolate, admitting her acquiescence. Turning on her heel, she walks stiffly to the side of the bed. It's adorned with a fluffy pink comforter I had selected just for her.

She had cried then as well. And angrily screamed "Why?" repeatedly at my kind gestures.

I cannot explain why something shifted within me. The obsession to keep her to myself, at all costs, burns in my chest with such a fierce intensity I suffer to breathe. I wonder if she knows I have long abandoned sleeping in my trophy room, instead choosing to prostrate myself outside her door, guarding her slumber from the lurking dogs who may be tempted to test my command.

She tosses the chocolate bar onto the nightstand and begins undressing herself, folding the clothes neatly and placing them next to the chocolate.

Her heart races, a mix of fear and arousal seeps from her pores. I have been dedicated to bringing only pleasure the last few times, and her mixed reaction is a testament to the lure of my tongue.

The perfect skin of her body reveals itself as each layer is removed. Smooth curves and lean lines prickle in gooseflesh in the cool air. I catch a silhouette of her rose colored nipples tightening when they pull free of her snug shirt.

Cascading blond tendrils shimmer across her shoulders sending a shiver of anticipation through me. My hips try to jerk of their own volition at the thought of burying my face against her golden locks while I'm seated deep within her virginal body.

My cock leaks against my belly. Her shivering naked form is too inviting to ignore any longer. The musk of her scent invades me until I'm drowning in it, saturated in the essence of her filling this room, digging into my skull and dragging me to her.

She trembles on the bed, her knees hugged tightly against her chest, the glistening between her thighs begging to slake my thirst.

I needn't worry about hiding my lust from her. She squeezes her eyes shut, her tears forced out, streaming silently down her cheeks.

She offers little resistance when I push her clenched knees apart, letting herself fall backwards onto the bed. Throwing

her elbow across her eyes, soft sobs hiccup from her heaving chest.

The last time my cock touched her was not pleasant for her, and it suddenly sours my stomach at what I have done. Giving in to my own carnal desires with disregard of the trauma it inflicted.

I had no idea then how much I would grow to cherish her. To worship her. To long for her. I am still bewildered at my own reaction to her fleeting smiles, how it creates a need in me to see it again.

I may never be able to erase the memories of what pain I have inflicted, but I can make sure they fade with time.

My tongue finds her, hot and wet already. A dichotomy to the fearful crying that seeps into my ears.

Tension in her thighs relaxes with my gentle long strokes, my mouth greedily lapping on her engorging clit. Unfurling the length of my tongue, I push into her, caressing the membrane of her virginity with the tip.

Her cries change, the quiet sobs mellowing into short panting gasps with my ministrations. The soft, downy, blond curls tickle my nostrils as I bury my face against her. Sounds of tentative encouragement sneaking from her arching throat grip my scrotum, begging me to release against her sheets.

Her heel digs into my back, tilting her hips harder against my mouth, opening herself wider to accept my exploration.

Then, I feel it. A soft tickle. A flickering of electricity shivering down my spine when her finger touches my ear. Untethered for the first time, her hands are free to reach out, to light upon the downy fur of my long ears. Sensations I never knew I could experience ripple through my body, a rush of heat flows through my limbs, and a wall in my chest I didn't know I had shatters. An overwhelming flood of raw emotion rips through me. A violent ache that never before existed rends through my heart at the thought of leaving her side.

The groan that escapes my lips against the slick heat of her slit cannot express the feelings her gentle touch unleashed.

Invigorated, I dive against her, my tongue working feverishly, lapping and curling, flicking her tight clit. The thighs framing my head quiver. Her hips roll and buck beneath me as a moan teases from her full lips. Her fingers thread into the fur of my neck and she pulls me closer. Her body raises from the crumpled sheets as she rewards me with the shuddering screams of her release.

I can't fight the spurt that leaves my cock, staining the side of her bed. That sound she makes is a symphony. A cry of an angel that showers me with an addictive pride. It is the voice of the heavens pouring in a golden wave through me.

The juices of her orgasm garnish my wolfish lips in a delectable slick prize worth fighting for. Savoring her delicious taste, I'm slow with my touches until the jerking of her hips subsides.

With tender strokes, I begin again. I'm building her passion with my loving worship of her sensitive folds. When her breathing hastens, her breasts rising and falling in rapid hitches, I know she is near again.

I can't wait any longer, so I peel myself from the luscious heat of her center, and slowly lick my way up her body.

Perfect and unblemished from the ravaging of my cock that seems like a lifetime ago. The sour feeling returns. Self-loathing slicks like oil over me. Knowing I'm preparing to hurt her again builds a knot in my stomach that mirrors in her eyes flickering to meet mine. It manifests in a low whine sneaking from my churning gut that draws her brows together in a confused look as I pause over top of her.

"You don't want to hurt me?" I can hear the doubt in her voice. The incredulous fear tinging her words makes me wince. No longer the aphrodisiac, now it digs into me.

Shaking my head, frustration wells in me at my inability to verbalize, to apologize, to rationalize with her. How the very base unit of my being has changed since I met her.

The heat of her body framed beneath me is a vortex, sucking me closer until my chest rests against hers. I nuzzle her neck, the beating of her heart a musical rhythm against my lips.

"If you hurt me again, I'll throw myself to your dogs and let them rip me apart." She whispers it, but she could have screamed it, the effect was the same. An arrow of ice

plummets into my chest at the thought, cleaving through my stomach a pain so real I wonder if I'm bleeding.

Rolling onto my knees, I sit up between her thighs. I pull her hand to my chest and press her palm over my heart, wishing she could reach in and hold its control in her hand.

How do I tell her I'd rather die than let that happen?

Biting her lower lip, she stares at our hands. The contrast is jarring, the dark long fur, the sharp nails of my gnarled fingers covering her delicate pale flesh.

“This is going to hurt though, isn't it?” Her voice shakes, her eyes well with fresh tears as she glances down at the head of my hard cock bouncing in the space between us. The small barbs around the head are still soft, only stiffening on the brink of release.

Another small whine works its way from my throat as I nod. She has reduced me to a groveling sap, and strangely I long for nothing else but to be here between her naked thighs, the heat of her center radiating against the sheath of my cock, her soft hand resting against my chest.

Dropping her hand, I swoop my mouth back to her downy center again. I want to stroke her to the brink, let the edge of ecstasy dampen the pain that I hope I can make brief.

Her eyes squeeze shut, fresh tears leaking from the edges as her hands fist the sheets. It is only a few quick flicks of my tongue before her hips are grinding against my muzzle, small mewling cries slipping from her lips.

This time, I move without hesitation up her body, the tip of my cock at her entrance. My lips find the pulse in her neck, my tongue makes a long rough sweep to her ear, burying my nose in the golden tendrils of her hair.

With a roll of my hips, I sink myself deeply with one hard fast thrust, then freeze. She loses a small gasp as her membrane tears against my invasion. My claws dig into my own palms as the sensation of her body gripping me nearly drives me into a frenzy.

Neither of us move. Barely breathing.

My body shakes with the restraint, but I refuse to move until she is ready. I know how quickly she heals. I just need to be patient until the wound knits.

I am dying in slow agony, with deep gulping breaths I purge into the bed near her shoulder. A few seconds feel like hours, and then she shifts her hips, adjusting to me.

“It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be,” she murmurs in my ear.

A light shines behind my eyes at the revelation.

‘It wasn’t as bad.’ I feel nearly giddy that I haven’t unleashed the pain on her she was prepared to bear.

Her fingers move to my ribs, then my waist as I withdraw in a slow pull. Her touch is fire and ice. I now know why I always had an aversion to contact, loathing anyone touching me.

I was waiting for hers.

The sublime feeling of her fingers floating over my skin, digging into the long hairs of my back, it is what I've always craved. I will be her dog, happily lolling for affection, begging for the lightest brush of her palm.

My hips move with full strokes, gaining veracity as I feel her heels gripping my thighs, urging me deeper. Her chest flushes in her passion as the pain melts and her body accepts my full length.

Deeper and faster I plunge into her, feeling the tightening in my loins as her walls quiver around my length.

A moan spills from her lips and her head thrashes upon her pillow as her pitch rises, crashing into a scream. Her chest presses against mine as she lifts from the bed, her body clenching around me, drawing an explosion from my loins that has my shaft swelling in a knot, my barbed head flaring to tie deep within her, spurting my seed in burning waves.

I hold her tight, silently begging her not to move, knowing my barbed cock has buried in the tender flesh of her sheath. But, she tilts her hips against me, the rolling pulses of her tight pussy drawing ever exhausting shuddering streams of cum from my cramping scrotum.

What a strange hell this is, frozen in my movements so as not to hurt her, locked in place by the very weapon that longs to shred into her. Every breath she takes tries to pry a quiver from my belly.

When I finally soften enough to withdraw a metallic smell of blood spreads into the cool room. A remorseful grumble

leaves my throat as I seek the sweltering heat of her center, but am surprised to find only the slightest of taint upon the sheet.

In my movements, I discover the source. Bloody smears outlining her shoulders where my fisted hands had rested.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



SAM

I never expected to see Angela climb out of one of the military trucks. She's still in her whirling dervish long coat with the pistol strapped across her chest.

“Sam, I was surprised to hear this medical post was at your house! So, I knew I needed to volunteer when I did.” She only comes up to my shoulder, but I still feel like I should be looking up to her. The wildness of her hair is tamed with a thick black wool hat.

“Angela, it's good to see you. It's been a while!” The last time she was by was right after the “Change” as everyone calls it.

Well, that's the official name. Most of us call it Doggy Day.

In the last few weeks since the military has shown up, they've managed to put up a tall chain link barricade around a good section of the property. Regular patrols and the motion detectors help to keep it safe, as do Thor and Misty, who are like local celebrities in their own right.

Thor seems to have made it his personal responsibility to patrol the fenceline regularly. Misty just loves running from person to person for the treats they sneak her. I think her plan is to become the fattest heeler in Idaho.

“A lot has changed in the last couple of months.” She shakes her head while looking around. “How has this place become a post? It doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“Dani.” I say, shrugging my shoulders. “I got hurt a while back, and she wouldn’t leave. So, they brought a hospital here.” I rub my short beard. “But, we may have to leave before too much longer. There’s been a lot more pressure lately.”

Nodding, she digs a pack of cigarettes out of her jacket and lights one. The acrid smoke burns through the freezing December air.

I don’t say anything, but I can’t stop from raising an eyebrow.

“Yea, yea, I started smoking again. I hope I live long enough to die of cancer,” she says gruffly. “The dogs are running out of people in town. That’s probably why they’re pushing out.”

Captain Russo has said as much. I like to think it’s because people are finding safe zones. “They should just carpet bomb the fuckers,” I grumble.

“There are still people in there though. Have you seen the drone footage?” She stabs out her cigarette in the snow, then

picks it up and tosses it in the garbage at the corner of the tent we pass.

“Some of it. And yea, I’ve seen where they’re herding people. It’s fucked.” I open the door of the kitchen for her. All of the extra people on the property stay outside. The house is still just for my family: Dani, Elly and myself. The added security is reassuring though.

“Hey, babe, can you help me? Cap was just telling us there’s a c-section patient on the way over from the prison, and I might need your help.” Dani stands from the table where Captain Russo and Elly are still sitting. “Oh, Angela! It’s great to see you again! Let me get you a cup of coffee.”

Fuck, I wish all these people weren’t here. I love watching Dani reaching into the cupboard, the way her ass pokes up when she leans against the counter.

“Thank you, Dani. A c-section? Why are they sending it here? Isn’t there an OBGYN at the prison?” Angela asks as she takes the steaming cup of black coffee.

Captain Russo leans back in his chair. His beard is coming in thick and black, a sharp contrast to his pale olive skin. “Well, this one is tricky. The woman changed, but apparently the child is still human.” He clears his throat and stands up, then pushes in his chair.

Dani told me how he lost his wife. This one might be hard on him.

“I need to go and check in the new guards, so let me know if you need anything, Doc.” He grabs his heavy coat from the back of his chair and steps out the door before I see him put it on through the window.

Did I catch Elly watching him leave?

Her eyes shift from the window and fix on Angela. “Angela, good to see you again. Sam told me about Alexander. I admire the hell out of you for what you lived through.” Elly has met Angela a few times through the years, but I’ve never seen this look of admiration in her eyes before.

“Well, he’s kind of why I’m here, too,” Angela says between sips of coffee. She pulls out a folded piece of paper from her coat and smooths it onto the table.

It’s a grainy picture. It looks like one of the drone shots. I can make out a few buildings and a small pack of dogs with a person. I’ve seen a lot of those lately.

She pulls another picture out and lays it next to the first. This one is closer. I can clearly see the upright form of one of the half-breeds, and it looks like it’s directing a dozen of the dogs. There’s a small human standing next to it.

I pick up the copy paper print. I can easily recognize the familiar features of Alex, although he does look much younger now.

Wait.

“Dani? You need to see this.” Handing her the picture, I watch her face carefully.

The recognition is instant.

“Oh, my god! It’s Jenny!” With a paling face, she clutches the picture closer to inspect it. “When was this taken?” she cries. Her heartbeats become deafening as she looks at Angela.

“Wait, you know the girl?” Angela shakes her head, her brows draw together in a confused look.

“Yes! She’s been my vet assistant for almost a year! She texted me the day Sam got hurt, said she had been taken by a monster.” Her blue eyes widen and pool with tears. “She was taken by *him!*” Her pouty bottom lip sticks out farther as she clenches her jaw and a tear sneaks down her cheek.

In a rush, her arms dive around my waist and her face presses against my chest. “Oh, Sam, we have to save her!” Wrapping my arms around her trembling shoulders, my eyes lift to meet Angela’s.

“What else have you found out?” I ask her over Dani’s head.

She takes another swallow of coffee.

I glance at Elly. Her eyes are wide as well and her hands shake holding her coffee cup.

“They’ve narrowed down the area of town he’s in. The common consensus is he’s in charge.” Angela’s lips purse as if her coffee is sour. “Of course he’s in charge. I’m surprised that the girl is still alive after this long...” Her voice trails off as if realizing what she is saying.

She never gave a timeline of how long Alex had held her. “What do you mean by that?” My voice comes out at a rasp.

“He only had me for three weeks, and I was almost dead. I outlived at least five other girls in that timeframe.” She carries her empty cup to the sink and sets it inside. “Maybe I need to talk to that captain a little more. If we can take out Alexander, maybe the others will be easier to neutralize. It isn’t safe in the city. They’re organized and smart. I know it’s because of him. The bastard.” She spits the last words out and flings herself out through the door, slamming it in her haste.

Dani pulls back from my chest. “I think Jenny heals faster. I’ve seen it in a couple of the patients. You healed fast, but some, it’s insane. I watched someone grow a leg back in a week.” She wipes her cheeks on her sleeve before stepping away to get her coat. “My god, what kind of hell is he putting her through if she heals from him?”

Rubbing the back of my leg reflexively, I remember how badly it was torn up by that dog. The missing chunk grew back, but it did take almost a week. Dani was fascinated by how quickly it healed. I told her it was because I kept asking her to kiss it for me.

The sound of a truck pulling in through the gates rumbles through the quiet kitchen. Thor and Misty bark, making several of the other guard dogs join in.

“Looks like your doggie momma is here.” I give her a lopsided grin.

Elly gets up quietly from the table, heading to the sink as I follow Dani out the door.

Damn, I need to make sure to sit down and talk to her. She usually hides in her room, but I do notice Dani and she are really close. It makes me feel a little better.

One of the guards is in my skid steer unloading a large cage from the back of the flatbed truck. A very unhappy tan shaggy beast is growling and snapping at the bars as it's being moved. The heavy collar around her neck keeps her head in the corner, but her gnashing teeth and throaty growls bring flashbacks of a similar creature standing on my chest just a few short weeks ago.

Fuck those teeth. Just because the injuries have healed doesn't mean that shit didn't hurt like hell for a few days.

"I thought you said she was pretty gentle." I glance at Captain Russo standing next to me, watching the irate animal being carried into the med tent opening where the forced air heater struggles to maintain the temperature.

It takes him a moment to respond. It's hard not to watch the beast biting at the bars as the machinery backs away. Her teats are full and hanging from her belly, rows of nipples leaking milk on the bare floor of the cage.

Huh, for some reason I expected just two.

"Just what I was told. Guess her husband managed to tie her up when she changed. He's supposed to be here on the next truck. Their older kid didn't change, so I think he was holding

out hope this one would be the same. He managed to sedate her enough they could check her with an ultrasound. Just one very human looking baby.” He takes a drink from his filthy coffee mug.

I don’t think I can remember ever seeing him without coffee.

“It’s fucked how the dice rolls, isn’t it?” he grumbles before walking away.

I feel for the guy. This whole world is fucked.

“Genetics seem to play a big factor,” Dani says, appearing by my elbow. She’s replaced her coat with a surgical apron and has a mask hanging from her right ear. The metallic smell of fresh meat fills the cold air as she shoves a few pills into the handful of hamburger in her hand. “I’ve been researching it. In most cases, if both parents haven’t changed, the baby will be normal.”

My chest tightens a little. “So, if you and I had a baby...?” I can’t stop the tug of a smile at my lips, or my cock tightening in my pants. I’ve been having dreams that she and I filled the house with children until it was bursting at the seams.

I fucking love those dreams. It always has me hard and leaking in the mornings when I wake up, wanting to practice.

“Good chance it wouldn’t be puppies,” she laughs before a worried look passes over her face as she glances back at the receding figure of the captain.

Leaning into her, my lips find the soft pulse in her neck. “Maybe we should take our chances.” Her heart beats faster, a rhythm I wish I could match right now, driving into her in tempo.

A pause before she answers. She’s thinking about it. “We aren’t even married yet.” Short shallow breaths punctuate her words as I nibble down her neck. I’m wholly addicted to her.

“Then, let me marry you now. You’ve already said yes.” I didn’t stop asking until she did. From the day I regained consciousness, I asked until she finally relented in the throes of naked giggles. My secret weapon is knowing that the backs of her supple knees are ticklish. I had used that valuable discovery as the final successful attack on the last of her reservations.

She tosses the drugged meat into the cage. The wild-eyed dog slowly calms enough to sniff it.

Dani turns her big blue eyes to me. A tease of her blond hair pokes free of her ponytail. “Sam, I’d marry you today. But, do you really think kids right now are a good idea?” She gestures at the creature gulping down the ground meat just a few feet away.

My hands find their favorite spot encircling her waist. “Baby, these dogs won’t last forever. But us? What we can create? That can last forever. Just imagine decades from now, our great grandbabies talking about how brave you were saving hundreds of lives.”

“Great grandbabies, huh? Well, let’s make it past our first Christmas together, maybe?” A smile plays at the corner of her mouth before she gifts me with a tender kiss on my scruffy cheek.

“New Year, new baby. Sounds like a deal to me.” I give her ass a firm pat as she gasps, then turn to follow where I saw the captain disappear to.

“Sam, be ready in twenty,” she calls after me. The twinge of exasperation I hear in her voice brings a smile to my lips. If I were a betting man, I’d be saying she’s tossing her pills in the garbage tonight.

I manage to find the captain and be back by Dani’s side before the twenty minutes are up. Soft snores are the only thing coming from the cage now. The crazy bitch is sleeping, the meds finally kicking in.

“Can you hold her paw while I shave it?” Dani asks me, squatting next to the cage. Kneeling next to her, I pull a giant foot through the bars. It’s wider than my palm, with nails almost two inches long. Much larger than Thor’s feet, at least three times as large.

This is the closest I’ve been to one since that day. The guards have killed several, but they’re either left outside the fence or burned near the gate. I haven’t had to touch one since I almost died.

The raw power that it exudes is intimidating. Thinking of those long claws tearing into me runs a shiver down my spine.

When the dog sighs and stretches in her sleep, the toes splay out and a cold chill settles in my gut.

After the IV is in place, she administers the heavier anesthetics to keep it sedated while I signal the guards to come in and help.

One fastens a heavy-duty muzzle while the other chains the legs together. We don't want to take any chances.

Her tongue's lolling when they open the cage and drag out the unconscious creature. I can't even think it used to be human. There's zero sign left. Not a shred of humanity. From its long pointed nose and ears to the long flag of its tail.

Dani presses against my back as we wait for the guards to finish fastening it down to the table. As terrifying as it is, I'd still rather it take me first before getting to her.

Two more men flank us, weapons ready and watchful.

"It's funny, I'm more nervous about working on an animal than all of the people I've treated the last few weeks," she says quietly from behind me.

Angela appears along with Captain Russo. He's shadowed by two nurses who will be in charge of the baby.

The guards give the nod that the beast is properly restrained, and I double check to make sure. Moving to the back of the table, I have a clear view of Dani and Angela. The captain and the nurses stand behind, and a shadow of movement at the door turns into Elly as she ducks in.

Dani gets quickly to work, shaving the bulging belly of the animal and then sterilizing it before she begins her incision.

“Dani, Sam tells me you want to marry him. Is that true?” Captain Russo interrupts.

Her startled eyes fly up to mine over the top of her mask. The scalpel is poised an inch above the skin of the resting beast.

“Well, yes, of course. But, Captain, really?” Her light brows draw together as she focuses again and begins a long slice down the belly.

“And, Sam, you want to marry Dani?” I’ve never seen the captain smile, but the small twist of his lips through his dark beard is the closest yet.

“I do,” I answer. Dani’s eyes are nearly violet in color, burning holes into me as she pauses again.

“Very good. I’ll have you sign the marriage certificate when you’re done. Congratulations.” He turns to the door, pausing just long enough to say something to Elly, but the heater masks the words.

“Sam.” Dani’s words are low, her eyes back on the patient before her. “What just happened?”

I lean over the slow breathing mass of an animal between us until my face is inches from hers. “You just made me the happiest man on earth.” I can’t resist giving her a little wink as I watch the blush grow up her cheeks from under her mask.

Elly moves up from the shadows of the door and rests her hands on Dani's shoulder. "Congratulations, welcome to the family, sis." She gives Dani a little peck on the cheek, and leaves the med tent with Angela who simply flashes me a thumbs up before disappearing.

In a burst of fluids the baby falls from the belly of the beast. The nurses move forward to help clean its nose and tie the umbilical cord.

Its first cry fills the room. Dani and I lock eyes. I can hear her breath catch and see the tears brim, so close to spilling.

Flailing arms are swaddled and the nurses take the baby through the door to find the waiting father.

She pulls down her mask, revealing her trembling smile. She's fighting the tears but she continues her task, lifting the large syringe and injecting its solution into the IV of the giant dog.

The heavy breathing slows, and stops.

I reach for her hand and pull her to the house, leaving the guards to deal with the carcass of the creature.

Through the empty kitchen I take her straight to our room, kicking the door closed behind us.

"Sam, did we really—" My lips hungrily attack hers, cutting off her words. I want her so badly my hands are trembling untying the apron around her waist.

The heat of her mouth intensifies as she falls into the kiss, opening her soft lips to accept my tongue that I feverishly

combat against hers, like it's my own mouth I'm laying claim to.

Because it is. She is mine. Always and forever.

My hands work over her, stripping her methodically. It's only in pushing her pants to the floor that my mouth finally leaves hers. Gasping, she stands while I reverently pull one shoe off at a time, licking and tasting the smooth skin of her belly that I want to pump full of my seed. My foot lodges on the crux of her pants so I can pull her up, shedding them like a skin, and her bare legs are exposed before I carry her to the bed.

She giggles at me wildly. Her eyes widen while watching me strip quickly before her.

“Are you really mine?” she asks, a quake in her voice.

A knot forms in my throat, raw emotion binding me so tightly I can barely talk. “I fucking love you, Dani. I'm yours.” Seeking the sweet nectar of her juices to slake my parched throat, I slide her legs over my shoulders and suckle on her hard little clit like I'm siphoning water from a spring. My cock is already leaking against the edge of the bed in anticipation.

Her moan throws her onto the pillows behind her, her hips pushing against my face. She's already getting so close to coming for me. I can feel her thighs tightening beneath my palms.

“Sam?”

“Hmm?” My lips never stop as I vibrate my reply into the wet folds of her tight little pussy. My tongue dives into her, stroking her ever closer.

“Are we really married?” Her belly raises above the bed as she writhes beneath me. Sliding two fingers into her clenching sheath, I raise my eyes to watch the first climax roll through her body.

She’s so fucking beautiful.

“Yes, my wife. Now, come for your husband.” The flat of my tongue finds her wet center and laps up the spilling orgasm, driving her higher. Her body grips at my fingers, drawing me deeper within her until I feel like I’m having to fight to withdraw them.

Slick with her release, I slide one out to slowly push my index finger through the star of her ass.

She gasps as I push past the ring of muscles that spasm around my knuckle. “Your pussy is mine. Your ass is mine.” My hand works both of her quivering and pulsing holes as I lick her to another screaming orgasm.

“Yours!” she cries, her fingers knotting in my hair, her head thrashing on the pillows.

With an uncontrollable growl, I move her leg over my head until she’s on her belly and raise her ass from the mattress, never loosening my grip with my fingers firmly inside of her.

Her ankles wrap behind my thighs and her hands claw at the sheets while I pump my hand against her, faster, until I can

feel her walls beginning to flutter again. In a single movement, I remove my hand and sink my cock deep within her.

She screams again, burying her face into the pillows. Her hips are bucking against mine, guided by my palms squeezing each perfect cheek, my thumbs resting in the dimples that were made for them.

Guiding her up and down my cock, this is where I want to die, buried deep in her, my nuts slapping against her thighs, the bloom of pressure building in my loins as she drives me closer to the brink.

Folding over her, my hands seek out the soft curve of her lower belly. I can feel the tip of my cock pushing against my palm, filling her so deeply and yet she takes every inch of me. My other drifts under her, finding her full breast bouncing with each thrust of my hips.

The feel of her body, flexing and rolling beneath me is almost too much. I lose control and start spurting into her as her sheath quivers around me.

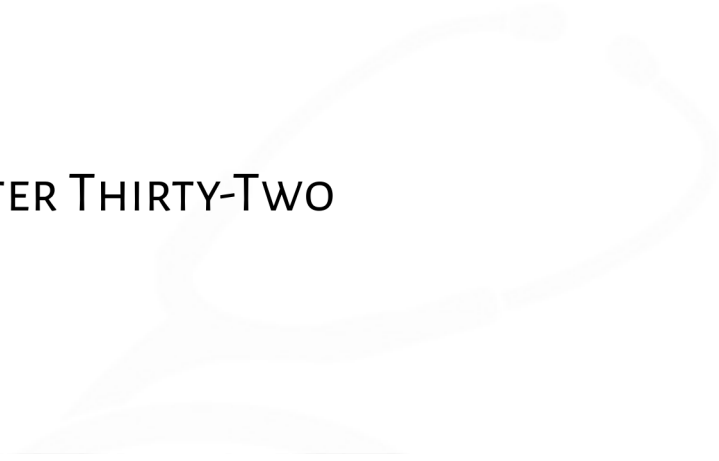
“I love you so much,” I groan into her ear. “I want to flood the world with our children so everyone can see I can’t keep my hands off of you.” The head of my cock flares, dragging along her walls, pushing deep until I feel her flower of muscles pulsing around me. Pressing her stomach tilts her hips up. Hitting that spot inside that makes her explode.

“Yeah, oh...oh, God...” Her words end in a moan, muffled by the pillow.

I ram into her, ribbons of cum bursting from me. Her body seizes, paralyzing me within her. My teeth find the soft flesh of her neck as we shudder through the intensity of release.

Fuck the rest of the world. All that matters is her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



DANI

How Sam knew Captain Russo was a pastor outside of the Guard I'll never know. Paperwork seems so moot with government buildings shut down, but we still signed our names to make it official. It may not even be necessary. Red tape and paper trails seem petty in comparison with fighting for survival.

The country is in a complete standstill as people everywhere battle the hordes of creatures that appeared nearly overnight. I've heard most of the major cities have been completely abandoned, with only handfuls of survivors. The mutation rates took so many, and their voracious appetites have accounted for untold losses since.

Humanity is struggling to survive.

We're feeling the pressure, too. Captain Russo has suggested that we fall back to the prison. More and more dogs are appearing at our perimeter. The last drone reports show that nearly all of the cattle have been decimated in the surrounding pastures.

Sam and I agree it's time to fall back. Livestock trailers have been brought in to haul off the last of the surviving animals. They'll be vital for breeding stock since the roving bands of creatures have been stripping the land of every living animal. Two legged and four.

Raised voices drift across the compound in the chill of the February air. After a warm January, it feels like winter is back with a vengeance.

Walking through the drift of diesel exhaust powering the heaters, I see Captain Russo and Angela in a fierce discussion that has her waving a handful of papers into his face. Readjusting the bag on my shoulder, I step closer to see what has her so riled.

“—I don't think that it's necessary. That's all I'm saying! There is a way to take him out without killing all of those people!” Her normally low voice raises an octave or two before she steps back to dig a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket.

Captain Russo drags his hand down his face. “Do you really think it's what I *want* to do? We *have* to. Their numbers are concentrated, but they're kicking our ass. They're doing the same thing in other cities to curb the numbers.” The chrome color of his coffee mug reflects the cold winter sun into my eyes as I get closer.

“New coffee mug?” I can't help but notice that this one is actually clean.

He answers by simply raising one black bushy eyebrow before frowning at Angela.

“He was out again! More footage shows him herding people. They aren’t just killing them. They’re farming them!” Angela waves the stack of papers that are actually more photographs.

My chest tightens. “Did you see Jenny again?” I almost don’t want to know. There haven’t been any other photos of her pop up. I hope she’s still alive.

Angela shoves the wad at me, her eyes still digging into the captain.

“Look! She’s in this one!” I wave one of the clearer shots at him. “She’s right next to him. We can’t just bomb her!” Panic grips my stomach. “She’s still alive! Angela’s right. We have to try something!”

Captain Russo drops his head and shakes it. “I don’t know what to tell you,” he says gruffly. The vapor of his breath trickles through his beard. “We have to take drastic action. We’re losing.”

“In most other wolf species, if you take out the alpha, the pack disbands or falls to infighting. It would be easier to reduce their numbers quickly if we could take him out.” I’ve been trying to research as much as I can. Thankfully, many veterinarians seem to have survived, and have been gathering critical data about this new species. For the most part, they tend to follow similar traits.

“We need to kill this bastard,” Angela hisses. “I need to kill this bastard.” She pokes her fingers into Captain Russo’s chest emphatically.

I wonder if the captain knows her history.

“Fine, we can try before the planes come in. Come on.” He gestures with his coffee cup for her to follow.

Sam’s voice drifts from the barn where he’s directing the loading of the livestock. The deep baritone tickles through me, stoking the ember that burns for him with the force of a bellows. Every day I love him more.

Thor slips from between two of the tents and falls into step next to me. “Hey, boy, let’s go find Sam.” Heavy pants are his only reply as he stays close.

I wonder if he realizes we’re leaving today. Maybe that’s why he’s so clingy?

“Dani, push that door around, please?” I can hear Sam call out to me, but can’t see him within the shadows of the barn. The heavy door of the trailer is wedged open. It rocks against the frame of the barn from the shifting weight of the cows inside.

Swinging easily on greased hinges, I’m able to push it around and latch it, confining the bull in with his harem.

“Perfect timing, babe. He wanted to wait until all his girls were loaded and I didn’t want to spook him out.” Sam’s hands find my waist as he places a light kiss on my temple. Alfalfa and manure cling to his coat; the smell is nearly overpowering.

“Well, it was pretty tough closing that door,” I giggle.

The vibrations from his deep laugh bounce through my chest making me feel giddy. I’m like a damn school girl around him.

“Is that the last of the stuff?” His thumb traces the strap of the bag over my shoulder.

“Yea, I know the captain worked hard to get my laptop back for me. Even though I’ve copied the pictures, I couldn’t leave it behind.” I’ll forever be grateful to him for retrieving it. I’ve printed off a few of the pictures of my dad and my mom so I’ll have hard copies. The main electrical grid fell last month, but the prison has a solar system set up.

Yet another reason we’re leaving. No one’s making fuel runs right now, not when it isn’t safe to leave protected encampments.

“Go ahead and put your bag in the truck. Cap said it’s going to still be a couple of hours until the choppers can babysit us.” He tilts his head as he looks at me, the corner of his lips falling into a small frown. “Do you hear a ticking sound?”

His jaw twitches beneath his dark blond beard, and I’m momentarily mesmerized until I hear a low thumping that grows louder with every breath.

“Huh, chopper already.” It’s loud enough now I can tell which direction it’s coming from and spot the small black speck to the east.

“I thought they were a few hours out?” I still have things I need to pack up in the med tent. Elly is still gathering things from the house, too.

“Let me go find out.” He brushes his lips against my forehead and steps past me into the sunlight of the yard in the direction of the captain’s tent.

Thor whines softly and looks to the east. The helicopter’s close enough now that it’s noticeable.

I better hurry and pack.

Angela meets me halfway across the gravel driveway, her arms reaching out and grabbing my shoulders. “I have my chance. He’s giving me a couple of guys. I’m going to kill that son of a bitch.” She pulls me into a fierce hug and turns on her heel, heading to the supply tent near the main gate.

She’s chaos, that woman.

Shaking my head, confusion tosses my thoughts around in a jumble until I focus on the order of packing the supplies.

The roar of the helicopter dulls out any order of thought I might have as I hear it landing near the gate. I jump when a hand touches my waist.

“It’s not often I can sneak up on you.” Sam’s hand curves around my belly, hugging me against his chest.

“It isn’t often we’re standing just fifty feet from a helicopter,” I laugh. “What did you find out?” I keep boxing the sterile bandages while the warm comfort of his hands roam up and down my hips.

“Get this, it’s for Angela. She convinced the captain to give her a handful of guys to go after Alex.” I can’t tell if it’s awe or confusion in his voice.

Turning in his grasp, my hands find his cheeks. “She had new pictures of Jenny. She’s still alive! And Cap said that there is going to be a bomb run on the city!” The blue pools of his eyes narrow as a cloudy storm of anger darkens his features.

“They’re doing what? There are still so many people there!” His hands tense around me, pulling me tighter to the heat of his body.

His soft shirt rubs on my cheek as I burrow against him. “We’re losing, Sam. I’ve been reading that they’re saying that there’s only twenty percent or less of the population left. They’re eating us faster than we’re thinning them out.” I can’t look at him. Guilt still pulls at me for the role I played in this. How many people died because I brought this illness to our area?

A heavy whine of the engine revs as the chopper takes off. The walls of the tent billow from the down thrust before it fades away to quiet.

“She was on that, wasn’t she.” It isn’t really a question. I already know. I’ve gotten to know her pretty well the last couple of months. She wouldn’t be the type to say goodbye.

A low rumble from his chest mimics the engine that just left. “I think so. She’s on a mission. Been on it her whole life it sounded like.”

Crunching gravel signals someone else approaching the tent. Captain Russo pulls the door open just enough to stick his head in.

“Our escort will be here in an hour. Let’s get it buttoned up.” With that, he disappears.

“He seems like such a hard ass, but I’m glad he’s giving Angela a chance.” Sam loosens his hands and picks up one of the boxes I’ve already packed.

“You know, I learned something the other day that I think he’s already figured out.” I say quietly so only he can hear me despite the thin walls of the med tent.

He raises one eyebrow at me expectantly.

“His wife’s baby wasn’t his. There haven’t been any other cases where both parents remained human and the baby shifted.”

Sam’s lips harden into a thin line. “Poor bastard. No wonder he’s grumpy.” His perfect lips soften as he purses them, then shifts them into a smirking smile. “So, I guess when we have babies, we won’t get puppies for sure.”

“No puppies. Maybe we can find Thor a girlfriend at the prison if we want some.” I give his hard muscular ass a playful spank as he heads out the door. His hands are too occupied by the heavy box to retaliate.

“They better hope the rooms they put us in are soundproof because I’m going to make you scream tonight for that one.” He smiles as he lets the door fall closed behind him.

“Promise?” I say loud enough I know he can hear me.

It doesn't take long to get the rest of the gear loaded into the back of the cargo trucks, and everyone begins climbing into their spots in the various dozen vehicles.

I'm a little surprised when Captain Russo is sitting in the passenger seat of Sam's truck. Sam is standing next to him with a sour look on his face.

“Captain, I thought you were riding in the armored truck?” I'm completely confused. It's only a bench seat, so I guess there would be room for all three if I squeezed into the middle.

“I think it's best if you ride in there. You're the entire reason this camp exists, Doc. It's safer there than in this truck.” He gestures to the windshield, unprotected by the heavy bars like the armored one.

“Sam?” I don't want to be apart from him. It's scary enough having to leave.

“I don't like it either. I suggested you just ride in one of the helicopters, but Cap said they're delayed, and we need to head out now so we can be sure to be clear before the planes turn downtown Boise into a parking lot. I'd ride with you, but apparently none of these assholes know how to drive a stick.” His eyes are so dark I almost swear he's possessed.

Captain Russo takes a drink from his coffee mug. This one is purple.

Sam pulls me close. His body is shaking, the anger rolling off of him palpable. He feels like a coiled spring ready to

explode.

“I’ll be right behind you, baby. I won’t take my eyes off of you. There are four armed guards in an armored truck. You’ll be the safest one of all of us.”

Well, that didn’t make me feel any better.

“What about you?” I can’t stop the tremor in my voice. It’s just an hour drive. I should not be feeling this kind of panic. “You won’t be protected!” I don’t know what I would do without him now. Elly still hasn’t recovered from the loss of her husband.

“I’ll feed the captain to the wolves, baby. He’s so sour they’ll run away dragging their tongues to get the nasty taste out.” He tries to smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

A glimpse toward the captain shows he heard Sam, but is just clenching his jaw pretending not to listen.

Sam cups my cheeks, turning my teary face to his. “It will be okay. It’s only an hour.” Gently, he gives me a soft kiss, and then urges me to walk away. “Just think, in an hour, we’ll have a new bed to break in.”

I turn back in time to see the wink he sends before he walks around the truck.

Captain Russo offers me a small salute with his purple coffee mug.

The armored truck is like a cave. Bars on the windows and the heavy grate over the windshield shadow the inside so much I feel like it’s dusk. I’m wedged tightly into the back

seat between two heavily coated guards. They're men who have been working around the camp for the last few months, and they have repeatedly proven their abilities keeping me safe.

I just hate being away from Sam.

Squeezing my eyes tightly closed, I fight the knot in my throat of being separated from him.

Stop being ridiculous. He's only a few feet behind me.

My eyes flutter open when we lurch forward. It looks like this guy can barely even drive an automatic. I'm not sure why, but a little surge of anger rises within me at him. He should know how to drive a stick, so I don't have to be stuck in here without Sam.

A small jeep with a huge gun on the roof leads us out the gate. Twisting in the seat, I can see Sam's truck behind us, but the sun catches just right so he's just a shadow gripping the steering wheel.

"They're coming, ma'am," the guy to my right says. I'm trying to remember his name. Because of his big handlebar mustache, Sam nicknamed him 'Stash so long ago that I can't remember his given name.

"Thank you." I know he's trying to reassure me, but it doesn't help.

As we roll through the chain-link gates, I feel naked, vulnerable, like there's a pack of rabid beasts waiting behind every blade of grass.

It only takes ten minutes or so before the buildings begin to grow in frequency as we creep into the city limits. The streets are deserted. Garbage is strewn everywhere, debris from gutted buildings litter the grounds. Everything I can see has teeth marks where it has been chewed or torn apart.

The first floor windows are shattered. Doors hang from their hinges.

And the smell. The burning pungent smell of dog feces permeates the cab of the truck.

“Fuck, that’s rank,” says the driver. He knocks down the vents closest to him with his gloved hand and motions to his passenger to do the same.

It doesn’t help. The bare patches of asphalt are smeared with it. I bet it’s coating the bottom of the truck already.

My guards stare out the window around us, and I find my gaze drawn to the rearview mirror on the driver’s door. I can just see the edge of Sam’s truck and I fixate on it.

A rhythmic deep resonance grows within the truck, getting louder as we get closer to a series of apartment buildings.

“Sounds like the calvary is here, y’all,” the front passenger drawls as he looks up through the side window. “Yep, I can see the choppers coming. Good.”

The tall buildings surrounding us drop to long covered parking areas, so a little more sun plays through the window, brightening the dim interior.

Squinting with the bright reflection in the mirror, I see a silver colored line appear above it in front of us.

Weird.

“Oh, shit!” yells the driver. A heavy cable pulls taut in front of us, leaping from the ground after the jeep rolled past it.

“Fuck, on your right!” yells Stash. I look over in time to see that the heavy cable is tethered to a large truck. It’s barreling directly for us.

“The fucking dogs!” screams the man to the left of me. Flitting my glance away from the oncoming truck, I see a pack of the giant beasts pulling the cable in unison, one of the half-breeds barking with its arms raised.

We all heave forwards as the driver slams on the brakes.

But, it’s too late.

The truck collides into us from the right. I’m thrown against the man next to me, tumbling into the spinning cab as the truck rolls. Grinding, rending metal screams into my ears.

“Sam!” Where are you?

Another hard crash. Something hard hits me in the head.

Everything goes black.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



SAM

“What the shit?” A flicker of movement catches my eye. It looks like a silver line appears in front of the truck with Dani in it.

“Yea, sounds like the choppers finally caught up,” Captain Russo says, his face turned to the right, watching for dogs.

“No, what the hell is—” A box truck appears from the right, and it’s going fast.

Dani’s truck locks up the brakes, and I barely have time to stop. The cows shift in the trailer, bouncing us in the cab as their weight changes.

The large box truck, with its dull white paint and blue trim, speeds directly at them.

No!

“No!” I scream into the windshield. I’m fucking helpless watching the collision, the crumpling of the grill, the folding of the side of her truck. Shock freezes me watching the slow motion roll of my entire world rotating into an unnatural angle.

Screeching of metal dragging across the asphalt shreds through my chest, grinding my heart into paralyzed crumbs.

A wave of tans and browns appear from the left almost instantly. Moving in concert, a small army of the dogs surge over the upturned truck. In seconds, the only thing I can see are the wheels still turning idly in the sun.

Scrambling for my seat belt, I try to jump out, but Captain Russo stops me.

“It’s suicide to go out there!” he yells, grabbing my hand.

“There’s no fucking way you’re holding me back!” Panic creeps into my voice as I shove his hand away.

Gunfire erupts from the upturned truck. A spray of red drifts over my windshield as a dog flies backward from the fray.

“They can’t get in!” the captain yells at me, fighting with me over the buckle.

Machine gunfire rattles the windows as the fifty caliber mounted on the jeep fires at some of the oncoming dogs.

That stills my hand for just a moment. If I can get out of the line of fire, the jeep can clear off the truck.

Slamming the gear shifter into reverse, I start weaving the long trailer backwards to the right, hoping like hell the trucks following us figure it out.

“Tell them to get the fuck out of line!” I yell at the captain. He grabs his radio and starts directing traffic around me.

The staccato of gunfire continues, the tracer rounds zeroing in and picking off some of the approaching dogs. But, not all of them.

They set a trap. That's not dog intelligence. There has to be a half-breed directing them.

My eyes flit between my mirrors as I careen backwards, to watching the sides, looking for Alex, or something like him.

It doesn't take long to spot it.

He's an ugly bastard, but it isn't Alex. Upright, it looks like a dog on two legs, but a short snout, the ears are low on the side of its head.

It blends with the other dogs when it drops down and I lose track of it while watching the trailer winding behind me.

"Fuck! Cap! Tell them to shoot! Kill that fucker!" It's crouching on the upturned side of the jeep, wrenching the door open. Another flurry of gunfire knocks a dog back, but another takes its place.

The guard gets ripped from the vehicle. They're dragging him through the street back to where the horde had appeared from. The half-breed reaches in, and when he straightens, the horizon tips sideways. Gravity loses its hold on me as I see Dani's limp body being jerked from the open door.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot her!" he yells into the radio.

My heart is ripped from my chest, and is bouncing on the back of the massive creature carrying my wife through the throng of writhing dogs.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ALEXANDER

I can hear the screams of my dogs as the helicopter hovers nearby, releasing troops onto a nearby building. The fighting draws nearer as the sounds of the chopper fades into the distance. Gunfire and howls of pain punctuate the morning air. Into the alley near my domain the battle finally wanes, a lone survivor neutralized.

A signal from me has them dragging the spoils for my inspection.

Her mangled arm dangles beneath her. My dogs stretch her legs, delicate ribbons of flesh threading into their snarling mouths.

The blood pools in a shimmering dark mirror, rippling with her heavy breathing. Dark accents mark the thickened edges, the clots decorating the uneven areas of the floor.

Her defiant jaw I find intriguing. This woman who recklessly charged in, fighting to the end, and now she will succumb to me. I will show her.

Her scent is palpable. Hot. Musty. Cigarettes. But, I cannot scent her fear.

Interesting.

I want her fear. Tasting her sweaty flesh, the smooth skin of her cheek rolls under my rough tongue.

The simmer of a growl stirs unbidden from my bowels. Her adamant rejection of fear perplexes and infuriates me.

Grabbing the dark hat frees her hair to my claws. A white shock within blond pushes from where it was nestled.

I know her. She was once mine. My most prized possession.

“Hiya, Alex,” she sneers. “Bet you didn’t expect me?”

Hot weight of betrayal settles into my limbs. Memories of a night so long ago flicker in snapshots, the unexpected attack, the pain I felt at her loss, the sorrow of searching the streets for her. Finally, agony as fire ripped through my head before everything went dark.

She caused me to lose years. Years of beauty and symphonies of pain that she denied me.

Anger boils a sulphuric geyser until I cannot contain the roar that flutters the marked hair I once coveted. The fear that was missing now shows its pale face, a grimace at the realization she has lost.

Another pack of my dogs return victorious. One of the traps I have set seems to have worked.

Ignorant humans, creatures of habit. Sticking to the main roads in their travels. They still aren't learning that my communication network exceeds theirs.

Parading their spoils before me, I send the four men to be held in the adjoining building for later meals. The unconscious woman has the familiar ticking sound that sends her into the pen my queen loves to attend. Her choice of past times is fraternizing with the breeders.

Now for this one. My soured prize. The rotten apple I had once thought golden. She will not stay.

Twice I've caught her, but only once will she escape.

Unable to resist the lure, my claws trail through her faded hair.

"Don't you want it for yourself?" I hear her mutter. Her sharp inhale when I thrum the silver line woven into her braid gives me pause.

Do I? I haven't broached the door to my trophy room in weeks, choosing to sleep instead in the chambers of my queen.

Her gritting teeth jar me back. I see my claw slicing a line along her brow. Instinct is pulling me to take her golden mane and add it to my wall.

My abandoned wall. Dusty and dry in comparison to the honey hair and sweet cries of my mate. Withdrawing my claw, my interest wanes.

Resolute in my decision, I back away, gesturing for my dogs to have her.

“Alexander, you son of a bitch! Fuck you!” She struggles against the vice-like grip of their teeth as they drag her into the parking lot, a frenzy of growls as they tear at her limbs. Her screams die quickly as the flesh is torn from her body. One of them goes for her throat, strong jaws cleanly severing her neck from her body.

A metallic click reaches me a split second before a concussion wave of shrapnel shreds the frothing dogs fighting over her. Yowls and cries of pain fill the air as the dead and dying dogs lie in a halo around her obliterated remains.

Clever girl.

My faithfulness to my mate is my salvation. That fallen angel had a trap laid preying on my weakness for her.

The rising plume of red smoke is a shrine of my devotion. A testament to her failure.

My victory over temptation gives me a rush of euphoria, hardening me in selfish pride. My cock pushing from its sheath has my feet racing to her in frantic need. Finding her in the hall, my impatience has me pushing her against the wall, framing her with my arms as my tongue finds the warm skin of her neck.

I know she likes it there when I suckle below her ear. A soft nuzzle has her melting against me, and I revel in how compliant she is. Giving in to my desires. Rewarding my attention with her melodic sounds.

Crouching as I taste her, I lift the long woolen skirt she favors. Perhaps she wears them to easily succumb to my lust, or perhaps she grew tired of retrieving the torn and filthy pants from the slime of the floor.

At this moment, I adore the long skirt. It billows around my ears as I dive under its layers to find her pantiless, her thighs already parting to my searching muzzle.

The dying sounds of the injured dogs fade as they are utilized to feed the healthy. Soon, the only background music to her growing moans are the incessant crying from the breeding pen.

I drown them out with her thighs around my head and the ticking reminder of our union, a rapid metronome. Long rapid licks spread her delicious juices. Her tiny hard clit swells beneath my strokes. Her cries grow in volume, rewarding me for piercing her inner folds, thrusting the length of my tongue deep within the tightening walls.

Bringing her to the brink of her climax, I withdraw. The recent flirtation with my utter demise has me riding an intoxicating high that already has my hips thrusting in the air, my scrotum full and begging for release.

Turning her to face the wall, I brace my arm for her to cling to. The billowing layers are a sudden obstacle. I find myself growling in momentary frustration.

Her small hands gather the fabric, easing my turmoil as my cock thumps impatiently against my abdomen.

I need to be inside of her. I need to before my barbs flare and my shaft swells, locking me out.

My momentary panic fades as I slide into her slick entrance, my palm wrapping her waist and finding the swell of her belly, holding her firmly so I can push deeply into her.

She is my choice. My perfect match. Her hips push against mine as my fervor increases. I can feel the pressure growing within my loins as I rut into her. Her fingers wrap around my arm, squeezing as her body tightens around me. The scream of her impending release builds, reverberating off the walls of my castle.

My teeth find the soft nape of her neck and I break her tender flesh, tasting the savory beauty of her spilling into me. She allows small nips in her passion, and it sends us both over the edge. Barbs flare into her most vulnerable center, my shaft swells, seizing me in place as I spurt my seed endlessly in groaning contractions.

Heaven and hell fight over me, each warring to claim me. She is my heaven, my universe. The empire I build is for her. But, my very empire is the hell. The fight to remain in charge. To beat back the challenging beasts. The constant obsession of her safety. It wars within me.

Today was sobering. My own mortality was glimpsed in a silver thread.

The knot of my cock softens, my seed spent. Withdrawing, I attempt to straighten her rumpled skirt inadequately.

When she turns to face me, her cheeks still carry the blush of her climax. A twinge of adoration leans me closer and a low whine escapes my throat as I lick the last drop of her beautiful blood from the curve of her neck. Perfect skin bares itself, already whole.

“Was there a new girl brought in?” she asks timidly. She’s always so eager to go to the pen. Her smile has grown wider since she’s found comradery there.

With a nod, I step back. Other duties are calling me, temporarily postponed with the overwhelming need of her. The howling calls tell me that there are other humans still roaming free within the city.

“Jenny?” The newest girl cries out the name my queen uses. Curiosity pulls me closer, and I see my mate fall to her knees, clutching the new woman to her chest.

“Dr. Michelson! I never thought I’d see you again!” Excited tears tremble her voice. I feel a tug at my conscience that she has been separated from her friend for so long. I’ll be sure to bring all new humans past her perusal, in hopes of seeing that reaction again.

A change in the warning howls turns my ears.

Encroachment.

Someone draws near.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



SAM

Hollow and yet filled with agony. How can I feel both at the same time? Watching her be carried off has to be the single most painful experience I have ever endured.

Even worse than Claire dying.

I feel like my insides are out of me, like a great hand has reached into my very soul and has strewn it on the shit covered ground to be trampled on.

My ears are deaf. The sounds of the captain screaming into his radio don't register. I'm blind to the disappearance of the beasts. I just keep seeing her being carried away.

Over and over.

Her limp body bouncing on the shoulder of the oversized half-breed. More beast than man.

A jarring fist finds my shoulder, and I'm rattled back into reality.

"I'm going after her." My voice feels disembodied, like they're words from another man, another time.

“I know,” Cap says quietly. Why that whispered phrase makes it through when the yelling before didn’t, I don’t know. “I have a suggestion for you, if you’re ready. Angela’s marker grenade went off. We know where to go.”

It doesn’t take long to put his plan into action.

The circling choppers keep lingering dogs at bay. Their damage already inflicted, they tease along the alleys and under eaves, dancing just outside the access of the miniguns mounted above.

Unloading the bull was easy, and with Misty’s help, the cows quickly followed. She’s pushing them at a frantic pace ahead of us as we follow in the jeep. Thor remains behind in the truck, I hope the others can keep him safe.

Cap is manning the 50 cal. I’m in the passenger seat. A pile of M4 loaded rifles and pistols sit between us, and the driver is white-knuckling every turn with me yelling directions at Misty through the open windows.

I want twenty of these rifles. They drop the dogs that are brave enough to be drawn to the cows with just a shot. Cap is keeping the way cleared as we push toward the red cloud of smoke dissipating ahead of us.

Rounding the last corner, we see a spray of dead dogs encircling the dying canister of smoke. A weak tendril still wisps into the air near the large bay door of a warehouse.

The giant half-breed that carried Dani off appears, roaring to an army of dogs, pointing at us.

With screams and howls, the dogs descend on the small herd of cows.

“Misty! Come!” I call her back frantically. She jumps gracefully into the back window of the jeep as Cap opens up with the massive gun on the roof. Armor piercing and incendiary rounds spew forth in a haphazard spray before us, mowing down the masses of flesh. Brown shaggy fur and black sleek skin alike are shredded before the terrorizing attack.

The writhing wall of wounded animals parts for just a glimpse, and I can see inside the warehouse. Humans sit just inside the door. I’m paralyzed when I see her.

Dani.

She’s alive!

Relief and abject horror strikes me simultaneously.

Too late, I scream at Cap to stop.

An industrial sized propane tank sits adjacent to the building.

Before I know it, an errant round releases a jet of pressurized gas filling the area. The wall of noxious fumes billows out in a visible wave until a spark hits.

Transforming into a fireball before us, the wave of flame and heat blocks all view of the building. Beasts run in every direction, their fur burning on their backs, charred flesh falling from their bodies with every step.

A hellish inferno blocks my path.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

ALEXANDER

A wave of heat fills the building, choking the air with pungent fumes. Panic races through me.

My mate. I must protect her.

Seeking her through the raging heat, I see she clings to the woman who had just arrived. Their tears match in paths along their cheeks as the air grows too hot to breathe.

My clawed hand pulls at her arm, but she hangs desperately to the woman. Growling my frustration, I pull harder, uncaring at the marks I leave in her skin. I will grovel for forgiveness later, but I must get her out, and my patience is wearing thin.

She jerks her arm from me, opening her wounds, but hugging the newcomer with such fervor I wonder if they're sisters.

Damnation!

My chest heaves with its quest for air. Does she want to stay and suffocate? I must get her free from this new hell!

Relenting to her demands, I scoop them both into my arms. The woman ceases her struggles upon the soothing words of

my queen.

Curling them tightly against my chest, I find a small break in the blazing wall before us. The corner farthest from the source, which is billowing with black smoke, offers the only chance of escape.

Lamenting my choice to not have a secondary exit, I take a deep breath, and run for the gap.

Pain.

My skin is burning, blistering from my side. Excruciating heat pummels against me, melting the flesh from my bones that I struggle to keep between the torment of fire and the delicate skin of my mate.

Each step falters, but I push through. I must save her!

Bursting through to the other side, the cooler air is a temporary relief as I crumple to the ground. My legs are scorched and mutilated, no longer able to carry my weight.

Slowly falling, my most precious cargo tumbles free. Safe.

“Dani!” A human male appears before me, a rifle in his hand, reaching for the woman who pulls herself from the ground.

I can just make out the shimmering image of a vehicle through the waves of heat emanating around us. The air is still hot, thick with the burning gas.

Broken and feeble, I lie before them. My legs uselessly push upon the softened asphalt. The remains of the woman who

evaporated just a little while ago is the fresh gore in which I roll.

“Jenny?” the man asks. How dare he address her. I will feed him to my dogs next!

She stands. My mate. My queen. I reach out for her. A soft whine falls unhindered from my throat. My ruined ears cannot make out the sounds that she makes to him, but he nods his acceptance to her words.

A pistol appears in her hand. My beautiful queen. The bearer of my child. She turns to face me. And places the barrel squarely against my forehead.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



DANI

It's getting harder to walk through the cool halls of the prison. I'm still trying to treat patients as efficiently as possible, but it's hard this far along in my pregnancy.

Sam doesn't make it easy either. He would carry me everywhere if I let him. I keep trying to explain that wrapping me in bubble wrap isn't the best option. I need to be up and moving.

And today, I have a very important patient to care for.

Jenny's contractions started yesterday. I never would have guessed though because she's been completely silent in her pain this entire time.

Her ordeal has changed her. The smiles are rare. She still cries out at night, her terrified screams echoing through the building.

She maintains a small memorial, and adds names as she remembers the women who had been prisoner with her.

In confidence, she told me that she had finally relented to "The Beast" as she called him, deriving what little pleasure

she could from him. I don't think she knew his name until after we rescued her.

Warm hands find my waist. "Sam, you know we talked about this. I don't think she will be comfortable with you in there, too."

"I know. I have a pig in labor anyway. Maybe you'll get to put the swath of your skills to use today." He gives me a lopsided grin and kisses my temple. I can hear our baby's fast ticking heartbeat accelerate when he rubs my belly. "We'll have babies popping all over soon." He murmurs before taking the next hallway, leaving me to continue to Jenny's room.

As always happens when he leaves my side, my heart does a double beat and my stomach rolls. I feel a little more vulnerable when he's out of my sight, but maybe it's just the lingering effects of what happened on the trip here so many months ago.

Pushing the door open, I see Jenny is laying in her bed, sweat caking her brow.

Glenda, one of the nurses, is holding her hand, softly talking her through the contraction that shivers her small body.

Besides a tiny grunt, Jenny is silent. She mentioned once she had to learn to be quiet when it hurts.

My god, what that poor girl went through I'll never know.

"Oh, Doc, just in time! I think she's close!" Glenda pushes her glasses up to meet my eyes.

“I’m going to check you, Jenny, okay?” She gives me a small nod before straining into another contraction.

When I lift the blanket, I can see the top of the baby’s head.

“You’re doing great! One more good push, and you’ll be done!”

With another imperceptible grunt, a new life falls into my hands.

“Congratulations! It’s a boy!” I can’t fight the smile that tugs at my lips. New life is a sign of hope.

With the falling of the bombs on the city, we’ve been able to hold the dogs better at bay. Their numbers seem to be slowly receding. Perhaps one day humans will retake earth as the dominant species.

His tiny face crumples into a magnificent cry, his dark hair a contrast against the red screaming face.

“He’s adorable, Jenny!” Cleaning him up, I swaddle him in a soft blanket before laying him across her chest.

Tears stream down her face, but her expression is hard to read. She pulls him close and holds one of his tiny hands in hers.

“Ow!” she exclaims, pulling her finger back quickly from his grasp. A frown draws her mouth down as she stares at him.

“What’s wrong?” I glance at Glenda who shrugs, a confused look on her face.

“He stung me.” She pushes the tips of his fingers, flattening his palm.

Small pores pock the surface of his hand. She gingerly touches one, and pulls back quickly. Only a small grunt signals the pain she felt a second time.

“How could he sting me?”

My mind races, landing back on the source.

The virus carried three strands of DNA. Dire wolf, axolotl and jellyfish.

THE END

AFTERWORD

If you enjoyed *The Dire Reaction*, and want to experience more of this crazy new world, be sure to pre-order book 2!

The Dire Legacy

Available October 20, 2023

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<https://www.amazon.com/B0BZNCKGB8>

ABOUT M.A. COBB

M.A. Cobb is a lover of all genres, but in particular horror and romance. All varieties of macabre are welcome. Any type of post-apocalyptic and dystopian are particular favorites. You can find more at <https://www.lintr.ee/m.a.cobb>

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