



Twisted

SAVAGE ALPHA SHIFTERS - BOOK TWO

DD PRINCE

Twisted

A savage alpha
shifters romance

Book 2



BY DD PRINCE

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Dedication:

If you've ever felt like you were the second choice, a consolation prize, this book is for you.

Also... for Benny.

Author's Note

This is book two of my Savage Alpha Shifters series. Though each story will be about a different couple, I highly recommend reading these books in order. Book one is called Wild. Chapters one to four in Twisted covers periods in Wild that you've read about, but from Mason's point-of-view (1-3) and chapter 4 is Amelia's first point-of-view chapter that you also read most of in Wild. While you could technically start at chapter five, you'd miss the foundation about the pack pre-Tyson, so I believe patience pays off if you start at the beginning. Kind of like taking the roller coaster from the beginning and experiencing that delicious, heart-pounding build-up instead of jumping on right at the moment it's about to fly down the hill. I hope you enjoy the ride!

Please note: This is a steamy paranormal romance series with lots of carnal behavior and over-the-top wolf shifter heroes who claim, bite, and knot their fated mates.

This isn't categorized under dark romance but does have some elements found in dark romance.

This story contains mature language and sexual encounters that are described in detail. My website, <http://ddprince.com>, has information for all DD Prince books for those who are sensitive to common triggers.

1

Mason Quinn

I bolt upright, jolting awake with knowledge that something is wrong. Very.

I know it and even more than me, my wolf knows it. His energy sparks and crackles in my blood along with the fierce urge to get home. Immediately.

I just don't yet know why.

The sleeping redhead beside me stirs and I'm hit with a sense of revulsion.

It's a strange thought. She's gorgeous. She's why I stayed in town tonight. The banter. The laughs. The booze. Slow dancing with her pressed against me, looking up at me with doe eyes while stroking my chest. She followed me back here to my motel and we fucked for hours. And it was good. Good enough I let her talk me into making plans for tomorrow.

But now? The scent of me on her strikes me as wrong, though not quite as wrong as the scent of her on me.

The digital clock on the night table tells me I've only slept a couple hours, but this won't wait. I know, bone deep, that I need to find out what the fuck is going on at home. My council co-alfas and I have a connection. We feel one another's distress and adrenaline spikes. When we're close, we feel it vividly. The fact that I'm hours away and feel it means that whatever is happening, it's big.

Her eyes open. A smile spreads halfway across her face at seeing my eyes on her before it halts, and her brows lift in question.

I need out of here. Need to know what's up. But first, I need her scent off me. Inexplicably. Urgently.

“Mason?” she asks.

I stride to the bathroom without answering.

Scalding water, soap, scrubbing, more scrubbing. The shower curtain moves. She’s about to get in with me, so I turn the water off before she drops the sheet she’s wrapped in.

“Hey, sweetheart, you okay?” she inquires, reaching out as if she’s about to touch me.

“Gotta go.” I wrap a towel around my waist, then move past her.

I dry quickly, haul my jeans up, get my shoes on, then throw on a t-shirt and begin to shove the tangle of clothing on the chair into my gym bag before I grab my electronics and head back to the bathroom for my shaving bag.

“Why?” She stands by the bathroom, still wrapped in the bedsheet, on the verge of losing her temper.

This isn’t going to go well.

“I need to go,” I repeat.

“What’s the matter?”

I feel disconcerted. I shake my head while I shrug my coat on.

“Intuition. Don’t know what; just gotta get home.”

It’s a good thing the situation that brought me to this town is resolved. I can go with a clean conscience.

“We had plans tomorrow,” she says, sounding hurt.

Except for that. We were going on a hike and a run together.

“I need to go,” I say again, feeling irritated at having to repeat myself.

“What is it?” She grabs my biceps. This makes the sheet fall. And seeing her nude, I feel nothing.

Her face changes. She senses something has shifted between us. And it has. I don’t know what’s going on, but I do know I’m gonna get my ass home so I can find out.

“Can’t explain. Just a feeling. I have the room until eleven. Stay. Whatever.”

She steps back. “Oh. It’s like that,” she spits, ticked. “Should’ve known better.”

“Renee.”

She lifts her hand. “Shoulda known. Broke my own rule. Like you just said, Mason ... *whatever*.”

She stares expectantly and when I don’t reply, because I have no clue what to say, she spins and storms to the bathroom, the slamming of the door making the cheap art hanging on the walls in here rattle.

She told me she didn’t date alphas who had never mated. She lost her alpha mate a few years ago and said she wouldn’t typically spend time with someone like me, someone unmated because she didn’t want to get attached only to have her heart broken because I’d find my mate after she developed feelings. It’s not the first time I’ve heard it, either.

We’ve all either experienced or seen it – a couple splitting suddenly because one of them found their true mate. We’ve had women shy away from unmated alphas, because though alphas can develop feelings, have relationships with anyone, when they find *that* one person, that *one* trumps all others.

I told her I had no plans to leave my pack, made it known I was only here a few days and was down to have a good time. Nothing more. She knows I’m a council alpha in the Arcana Falls pack. In no way did I lead Renee *down the garden path*.

If she wanted more than just a night of fun, why the fuck would she hook up with an unmated alpha from another pack? The pack I’m part of, our reputation, not to mention our conversation before we left that bar – she knew this was all it was gonna be.

Then again, there are women around these parts who just want to bag a super-alpha. Because we’re rare, we’re seen by some as a challenge. And also, there’s buzz about us – talk about the fact that all six of us are unmated in our thirty-third year.

Except Riley. Though that ended before it really began – consensus is that he’s still by all accounts a widower.

Most shifter alphas mate before thirty. Nobody outside our pack knows our seventh, our firstborn council alpha, is alive and that we’re convinced we’ll be in a position to pair up after he finds his mate. That’s what the history books suggest and other than the Riley anomaly, it’s all that makes sense to the rest of us.

I’ve been having fun in the meantime. And tonight with Renee *was* fun. She’s probably confusing the fact that I made her come four times for something with potential.

Now I’ve got a sickness in my gut, this feeling that fucking her was wrong. I’ve fucked a lot of women and I’ve never had this sensation before.

I don’t know what this intuition of mine is about right now; I only know it’s new and feels important. No – *vital*.

I need to get home; not argue with a woman I had no intention of anything serious with. I know better than to point that out at this juncture.

I grab my shit and get the fuck out of the motel room without looking back, dialing Riley’s number on the way to my pickup truck.

I traveled here with Sean King, a beta from our pack that I occasionally work with on gigs. We worked with two alphas from other territories on this case of a couple spotted shift-fucking in the woods, investigated, then discredited the witness and halted the gossip so the job was done and the guys from the other territories left.

Sean’s woman is expecting their third baby imminently and he was homesick when he talked to her on the phone, so he left right before last call. I almost left with him, but decided to stay one more night. The motel room was already booked, and Renee looked damn good behind that bar tonight, flirting as she poured drinks for me, making it clear she was willing to trade her usual rules for time with me.

I should've left with Sean.

Riley answers his phone on the first ring.

“Mase!”

If I didn't already know it by our pack connection, I'd be able to tell by his voice that something is up.

“Rye. What's goin' on there?”

“We caught Tyson's scent again. He's taken a mate. The scent is so potent we can smell it in Arcana Falls, almost all the way to The Hollow, too. Get your ass home as soon as you can. We wanna take a vote to make an approach. Tomorrow. Was gonna call you tomorrow but surprised you're calling me now.”

“I mean, tomorrow seems a little soon if he mated tonight,” I say.

“Agreed, but don't know how long he'll stick around.”

“Then my vote is yes. Woke from a dead sleep knowin' I needed to get home. I'm on my way.”

“See you soon, brother,” Riley replies, sounding excited.

I hang up, my blood warming with something new. Excitement. Not only is this a positive development in the sense that our missing pack member, the firstborn council alpha is back, but also the sound in Riley's voice has me feeling things, too.

Riley hasn't sounded like the old Riley in a long time. Too long. Not since before he met and tragically lost *her in the same day*. It didn't matter that it was mere hours, what mattered was that he felt it. That he *knew*. He knew he had his other half and then she was gone.

Riley Savage is loved. He has his pick of unmated or formerly mated women, but as far as I know he's touched nobody since he lost her. Anyone who meets Riley knows he's a good guy, has his shit tight. But anyone who knew him before... they'd

see the difference. The man lives in a world of hurt because a piece of his soul is missing.

I was born before him, but I don't care that most see Rye as lead council alpha. We've all got our strengths and we work together. I don't have an ego with that shit, despite that other packs with a traditional one-alpha hierarchy can't wrap their minds around it.

Ever since our unique pack was formed, it's gone that each Arcana Falls council consists of seven super-alphas born in the same year. For the current council, we don't see it that any one of us is supposed to be stronger or more suited to lead the pack than the others. Maybe because we're six instead of seven. Our birth order, to us, is simply how the older generation determined who would be in the next council. Though, for the last few generations, the first alpha has come from the same Savage family line and *that* alpha has been bigger, stronger. Until six years ago, we thought that branch of the Savage family line was gone.

It's other packs that get more caught up on first alpha, second alpha, etcetera. In their worlds, one alpha rules. It doesn't work that way in Arcana Falls. Riley, me, Grey, Jase, Linc, and Joel are like brothers, best friends, and our collective goal is to take care of our pack.

There's no power struggle with us, never has been. And we use our strengths for the good of the pack as well as the good of one another. That's what our team is – pitching in wherever, and naturally we gravitate toward our strengths. Rye works more closely with the people, and I work more in the background on planning. Linc works with our environment. Joel makes everyone money while we all work together to protect our secrets. Jase is the glue – puts everyone else first and has charisma that puts others at ease. Greyson's smart, persuasive, though he says the same about me. The way we work suits us all. We're protective over our people, our environment, and one another.

Will the dynamic of the Arcana Falls pack alpha council shift when Tyson finally joins us? We'll see what happens. But I'm not worried. In fact, I'm the opposite of that as I journey home. Because this is the way it was supposed to be. If things change, it's because they're supposed to change. Tyson is alive and in our village's vicinity for a reason, and I wholeheartedly believe he'll join us.

Though I woke feeling like something was wrong, it now feels like everything is about to be right.

The pack being complete will mean the rest of us could be able to identify our mates. Some of the guys are more anxious than the others. For me, I'm not an unhappy person, but I've felt for the six years since we found out he's still alive like I'll be happier when he's in the fold. And I hope it'll mean good things for Riley – all of us have that hope.

Not only is Tyson our missing alpha, but he's also blood relatives with Riley as Rye's parents are both siblings of Tyson's parents. His return will mean everything to the Savage family after the way they were torn to shreds, believing Tiberius wasn't just lost, but his bloodline, as well.

The old tales are sordid and heart-wrenching.

Catrina and Lucy mated with Tiberius and Atticus. Tiberius was our first Council Alpha, Atticus a strong beta that could've been alpha in any other pack. They had an omega brother, Cornelius whose wolf was disabled, and Cornelius swore Catrina imprinted on him as his mate – which showed how disabled his mind was because an omega male doesn't identify lifelong mates the way alphas do.

When Tiberius identified Cat as his, Cornelius lost his mind and plotted until he found the opportunity to murder Tiberius. Then Cornelius took his brother's infant son – one who'd already shifted as an infant, exhibiting strong super-alpha traits, and Cornelius disappeared with him. Tyson was presumed dead, his scent vanishing. Cornelius returned undetected a few times, only to terrorize Catrina. The pack has wanted his blood for years.

I vividly remember the day we caught Tyson's scent. The revelation that he wasn't dead rocked our pack in a big way. It took time for everyone to go back to regular life. This was during our first council of six meeting, several months after Riley lost his mate and not only did it perk him up, I'd go as far as to say it saved him.

And it's been six years of factoring Tyson Savage's return into all potential plans. We had to resist the urge to track him, approach, coax him home. The six of us felt his ambivalence the day he marked around the village and believed it'd be a mistake. I've never felt such hatred from a pack member. Never felt such crackling danger coming from someone else. It took a vote, a pack-wide vote when we wanted to be a hundred percent sure and it was decided after a speech by his mother to leave him be, wait for him to approach again.

Since then, we've hoped this day would come.

Grey's sister Bailey has been compiling everything she can get her hands on. Records, archives, all he'll need so he can catch up on all he missed for the past nearly thirty-three years. From not growing up in our pack, not sitting around learning the stories from the elders.

Tyson's mother Catrina Savage predicted he'd come home when he found his mate. He'd find a woman and he'd crave his pack or else she'd crave it and coax him home. We all believe Cornelius corrupted him against us and every adult pack member wants Cornelius Savage dead for what he did to our pack.

I push the speed limit to get home as quick as I can – stoked. I'm looking forward to meeting the eyes of our missing brother again. There's a feeling I'm expecting – that things are about to click into place. And what it'll mean to the rest of the guys who feel ready to start families... Greyson has made no secret of the fact he's more than anxious for that. Same with Linc.

This feels right.

My truck breaks down outside the village of Arcana Falls. *Home*. It stalls out and won't restart. It's just a couple months old, so I'm baffled.

My phone keeps dropping calls and text messages fail on me, so I leave my phone and clothes in the truck and shift so I can run to Riley's.

But something goes wrong. I don't know how to describe it other than to say I get lost. And it makes no sense.

I spent four years out of town for college, but this is home. It has been home all my life. I know every inch of the area both in and around both Arcana Falls and the nearest town, Drowsy Hollow.

How is it I can get lost in a place I know as well as I know the layout of my own house?

As idiotic as it seems, the road home never ends. The same mile of trees and road is on repeat. The moon is too large. The stars don't even look right. The smells are wrong, too. The air, the ground, all of it.

It should take ten minutes *tops* to run to Riley's house from where I broke down, but for what feels like hours, I'm running on the same mile of road as wolf, trying also as man, switching to and fro, while feeling like I've got the worst case of brain fog I've ever had. This goes on until I become so exhausted I have to stop to sleep.

I wake beyond parched. I'm disoriented, rousing under a tree just a hundred feet or so from the four corners of town. I'm still wolf, my back leg being nudged by a boot. I look up. Lincoln.

My head still feels fuzzy, and there's an unfamiliar scent hanging in the air. Tyson Savage. And his mate.

His mate?

“Mase?”

I shift to become man and scrub my eyes with my palms, confusion rolling through me.

“What are you doin’ here?” he asks.

“Broke down,” I manage to say, mouth feeling like it’s filled with cotton.

I don’t feel right. The feeling I woke with last night is back and it’s stronger. But it’s more like an extreme sense of ... doom. I think. I’ve never felt anything like it.

“Where have you been? We’ve been lookin’ for you. Didn’t sense anything was wrong,” Linc says.

“Truck broke down; couldn’t get a signal. Decided to shift and run to Riley’s.”

Fuck, I feel groggy.

“You smell that, Linc?”

“Smell what? You?”

I assess the scent. What is it? Why is my heart racing? Why am I sweating so profusely?

“You told Rye you were on your way home Friday night, Mase. Where were you?” Linc asks.

“Just told you. I broke down.”

“When?”

“I left in the middle of the night. Broke down just before dawn.”

Lincoln frowns. “Dawn Saturday?”

I look at him. His eyebrows are furrowed.

“Man, it’s Monday,” he says.

“Huh?” My eyes sweep the landscape around me. Nothing smells right.

“Where were you all weekend?”

“What?” I ask.

“You feelin’ okay, Mase?” He squats, nose wiggling as he takes my scent in. “You don’t smell right.”

I’m not feelin’ right. What the fuck?

“Where’ve you been?” he asks when I don’t answer because I’m trying to find my fucking bearings.

“Here, I guess. I don’t fuckin’ know. What do I smell like?”

“Like... not you. Like... an herb and something else. Someone else? Something...” He sniffs. “Can’t place it. Is that basil, maybe? Dunno. You haven’t been here though, man; I’ve been here. Spent yesterday out tracking and never caught your scent even once. Your truck’s parked five minutes up the road. Key fob’s in it.”

“What? Who were you tracking?”

“A rattlesnake. Long story. Let’s go to Roxy’s for some food and I’ll fill you in. Wait... where you goin’?”

I hear him, but the words don’t fully penetrate because I’m shifting, nose to the ground, following a scent. I follow my nose, Lincoln firing questions from behind me. But I’m unable to multi-task because a scent calls to me so strongly I can do nothing but focus on it.

I run.

Linc is behind me.

I’m at the clinic, smelling not only *that* scent but also my long-lost packmate, Tyson. And he’s definitely mated. The scent is unmistakable. His scent. And hers.

They’re no longer here. They left by car.

My body bucks, then I’m vomiting all over the grass by the door. That scent. The scent of them together. Her scent on him, his on her, my guts contract as I repeatedly retch, long after my belly is empty.

Linc calls my name, but my head is filled with static. So is my nose. Things don't smell right. Nothing does. Because my nose, my brain, they're filled with the scent of Tyson's mate with his scent on her and it's making me violently ill. And angry. Why?

I shift and open the door to the clinic even though I know no one's here.

Cat was here recently, so was Tyson. I know that scent as well as I know my own. Just like my co-alfas. His scent belongs with us; we all sensed it the day he returned, the day we saw his massive black wolf, even larger than mine and mine has been the largest in the pack since I matured.

I feel disoriented, drunk, more drunk than ever, even when I was thirteen and me and Riley power-drunk so much of my father's moonshine, we got alcohol poisoning.

Anger assaults me in the middle of Cat's spinning procedure room. I grip the wall, willing it to stop. She was in distress – the girl. Any alpha connected to the council would know that scent from miles away, the scent of a distressed pack member, or the mate of one.

Tyson smells like he did when I caught his scent over six years ago, but with the addition of the nuance of her. Her scent is heavily bathed by his. My head spins in the opposite direction of the room and I feel angry. Angry at what? At the fact she was here and distressed? At the fact that she smells like Tyson? That he smells like her? The thoughts are abhorrent, but I can't deny them. I'm confused. I must be. I can't pinpoint them, but I know they're wrong.

Did Linc say it's Monday? What the fuck?

I stumble out of the room and out the back door, Lincoln at my back, and as my gaze hits the sky, what I see sends me to my knees.

“See that, Linc?” I ask.

“What?” Lincoln asks. “I don't see nothin' but clouds. What's wrong with you, brother? Where have you been. We've been

worried.”

I don't answer, can't, because I'm taking in a swirl of moving clouds shaped like wolves. My white wolf circling with a black one, a woman-shaped pink-hued cloud on her knees between us. I can't make out her features. And I can't make out what it is about him that I can't shake – a feeling that he's meant to be connected to me, but that there's something between us. She is. She's between us. And that she smells like him makes me want to rip claws through the sky and shred that black cloud apart.

It doesn't make sense.

He's mated to her. Why am I feeling this... this... confusion? I can't even label it.

A pink lightning bolt slices across the sky, through all three clouds and as they disintegrate, Lincoln shakes me, gripping my shoulders.

“Mase, what's goin' on?” he demands with alarm in his features. “Your eyes!”

I shake free of him.

“Did you see it in the clouds?” I demand.

“See what?”

The clouds now just look like clouds. White, shapeless.

Joel and Jase are jogging toward us, then the three of them converse while following me.

I dash wetness off my face. Blood. I ignore it and follow my nose.

What am I looking for? I know that's her scent and I know where it goes. And as confused as I am, I know in my gut right now that I cannot go there. Can't.

I'm filled with a vivid sense of wrongness, can't put my finger on what or why it's wrong. Is it that she's his? It can't be. She's not meant to be mine. Is she? As I have the thought, I shove it away. Because I must.

I hear the guys talking about me as I roam in wolf form, nose to the ground, searching. For what? Answers.

I left in the middle of the night and got here not long before dawn when my truck broke down and then I got lost in my own fuckin' town. But this isn't hours later. It's days later.

There has to be something else. Some reasonable explanation for why I'm feeling both drawn to and confused about the scent of Tyson Savage's mate. And the visions in my head. Black wolf staring down white wolf. White wolf wanting what's between them. The woman. Wanting her? Do I want her? I don't know.

Is fate so cruel to bring our full pack together, finally, after all these years, only to throw this inexplicable twist into it?

And how did I lose the weekend? Get lost in my own town and just lose time like that? Something is fucked up here.

Something is very fucked up here.

I'm completely fucked up. And ravenous suddenly.

I look around and my gaze stops on the three co-alfas who eye me with concern. They aren't concerned with themselves. It's only me that's having an issue here.

What's my issue?

I spot a rabbit from the corner of my eye. I chase it, catch it, and devour it. And it's not enough to sate my hunger.

I haven't hunted animals in wolf form since I was a teenager, consumed by the surge in testosterone as I matured, the urge to hunt. But now – now there's a deep call inside me to bring down something bigger. A buck maybe. Or something that will give me a fight. A bear? I force my thoughts to lock on that instead of what my inner wolf tells me, that he craves battle with a large, black wolf.

2

Mason

Friday

The inner voice taunting me all week – it isn't my wolf. It's something else. The wolf in me feels muted right now, confused. Following his tail. The man in me feels much the same. This other sense in me – and that's what it feels like, an extra sense that I've never had before – not only is it foreign, but it's also not right; it doesn't belong.

My mother paces the length of my kitchen, a cleaning sponge in her hand. She's been here daily since Monday, checking on me, trying to push food at me. Hovering. Cleaning. I've barely had any appetite and I've been fucked up beyond all recognition. My father has been around but hasn't been like glue the way she has. I'm tight with my parents, but she's getting to me. Her hovering. Her incessant mothering. I know she's worried about me, but I need space.

Dad has been a quiet presence doing his best to be reassuring, but I've felt anything but assured.

I'm at my place on Chariot Lake, the house I started drawing up the plans to build just days after we first caught Tyson Savage's scent, right after we took over as the council. Everything in me knew that because he was alive, he'd be part of us eventually. When that black wolf showed at the four corners of our village during our very first council meeting, we knew it was fate. Time to get serious about the future.

I wasn't fixated on meeting my mate, knowing it'd happen when the timing was right, but I still had the urge to nest, get ready. Build a home.

Scents influence, hold significance; have a powerful effect on wolf shifters. Tyson's scent sent us all to a new place. A place of excitement. We were transported from a functioning pack

still mourning to a new hope. It was also a space of limbo in a sense because we had no idea when he'd join us, but every one of us knew it would mean good things for not just us as council alphas, but also the whole pack. And plans were made according to the belief he'd eventually take his place as first alpha.

So I designed and then worked on the build for this place, a home on the water's edge a short run from Arcana Falls or a quick boat ride down to the river which is fed from Chariot Lake.

I'm proud of it. I even let it be featured in a magazine after being anonymously nominated as a contest entry after it was built, which did good things for Savage Construction in spreading our wings into custom luxury homes.

I've lived here alone since building it and lived life enjoying myself, feeling ready for the future. It's now time for it all to fuse together, I know it, I feel it, but yet I'm fucked up. I'm more fucked up than I can even level with anybody about, because I can't articulate what the fuck is wrong with me.

This isn't me. I'm a logical, even-tempered, dependable guy. I've always been certain of exactly who I am and what I stand for. Until the past week.

Those close to me know I woke from a dead sleep out of town and immediately rushed home, got lost, lost time, and have been fucked up since Linc found me. But nobody knows just how fucked I feel. I haven't confided in anyone just how bad the past few days have been. Fending off a nagging shadowy presence and fighting urges that feel like instinct, but that I know would cause war. There's raging violence rattling the cages of my brain.

Tonight, there's a party. And though a party is the last thing I'm in the mood for, I need to attend. Because tonight, I'm meeting Tyson and his mate. Everyone is ecstatic that he agreed to come, meet everybody, and as much as I still don't feel right, I need to do this. Tonight needs to be a turning point for me; I need to snap out of whatever this is.

My place has been like Grand Central Station all week with rotating visits from the guys and my family. Cat Savage, who is not just Tyson's mother, but also our pack healer, doesn't have a medical guess regarding my symptoms. The only plausible suggestion that's been voiced repeatedly is witchcraft – though we can't fathom why that would be a factor, except it could explain me losing time. I've been more transparent with Cat Savage about some of my symptoms than anyone else and she's shown concern, likely not just as the pack healer but also as Tyson's mother.

I assured her I've waited for his return like we all have, and I wanted it. I left for home Friday night excited about it. But when I got here, things went sideways, and I can't get my head together.

I overheard my mother telling my father she's worried that this stems from me being at the top of the pack birth order with him having been away. I've heard her murmurs of worry that I'm rejecting my pack because of the shifting dynamic to come.

I'm not. And it pisses me off she'd even suggest it despite knowing me my whole fucking life. I'm not rejecting him as co-alpha. I'm not rejecting anything. If I didn't give a shit that many treated Riley as the pack's lead council alpha, why would I care now?

My mother is my biggest champion and her even suggesting these things is the biggest sign that something is wrong with me. Because a mother can sense that about her offspring, better than anybody else.

I just don't know what the fuck is wrong with my nose, my brain. I can't help but keep going in circles wondering what would have happened if I'd been here at home the night of their mating.

My senses are in overdrive and I'm having vivid dreams of my wolf challenging the black wolf and running off with a non-descript female. And I feel sick about it. She's already mated to him. A sane alpha doesn't go after another alpha's mate. A

sane Arcana Falls pack member, let alone a super-alpha doesn't covet what isn't his. Especially not his brother's mate. Not ever. It's grounds for expulsion from the pack. It's grounds for a challenge from the other alpha that would end the triangle by the elimination of one of those two alphas.

I've been told my whole life – not to mention seen couplings with my own eyes – that I'll know, indisputably, who my other half is when I catch her scent.

There's definite dispute here. She's his and I don't know if that's how it's supposed to be, if that's how it'd be if I'd been here Friday night instead of hours away in a motel, fucking that bartender. A bartender that has left me three voicemail messages that I haven't listened to and sent two texts that have gone unanswered, asking me if I'm okay, apologizing for her behavior when I said I needed to go home, asking me to call because she needs to talk to me.

Tonight is the strawberry moon themed party, but something I'm remotely interested in. This pack loves any excuse to throw a party and the moon phase along with the fact that Tyson Savage is back are more than enough reason.

A week has passed since Tyson claimed a mate and it's beyond time for me to show my face. Our entire pack is meeting our missing piece tonight and as second alpha and the only council alpha that hasn't met him, I need to pull myself together.

Will whatever this is pass or begin to make sense?

“Is she a twin?” Carrie, Greyson's stepmother, non-shifter, asked when we were all at Roxy's bar last night after they browbeat me until I finally left my house for the first time since Monday.

Bailey answered. “There have been cases where there are twins and the alpha chooses one, isn't attracted to both of them.”

“I never said I was attracted to her,” I put in, losing my resolve in not participating.

“There’s also the case of the lost days. Witchcraft,” Bailey added.

My mother piped up then with, “You said you smelled strange scents. What sorts of scents? Witches use herbs to cause confusion.”

“It has to be witchcraft,” Linc put in. “Couldn’t sense him at all. And didn’t sense his loss, either. Then when I did find him, his scent was under a heavy layer of herbs and his connection was barely there; it felt... frayed.”

“Which herbs?” Bailey asked, pulling a big book out of her bag. Bailey often has her nose in a book. Didn’t you say basil? Because it can be used in spells to create confusion.”

“Basil was one of them,” Linc nodded.

“And you smelled strange things,” my mother pointed out unnecessarily.

“Might’ve been just her I was smelling. But time will tell,” I said and then I changed the subject. Because I was sick of it. They kept whispering about it, so I made an excuse and went home. Linc came with me to keep me company.

I didn’t bother mentioning that I knew my co-alfas and my family were all taking turns babysitting me under the guise of keeping me company.

And the fact that my mother was questioning my motives weighed on me because what might others in the pack be saying if this was coming from the person who knows me best?

The consensus tonight is that I’m smelling like myself again, but I sure as fuck don’t feel like myself.

Despite sleepless nights, the constant agitation, and the fact that my wolf is pacing, none of it changes the fact I need to show my face tonight. And do it ignoring the shadowy presence in my head warning me I might want to attack him when I set eyes on her. Attack, then take.

People in the pack know me as a guy with my head on straight, my shit together, and that I put my pack first. If that wasn't the case, I'm sure those who have been around me this past week would've told me to stay away what with the fragile state of things. I've been told Tyson hasn't been around people or shifters in six years until this past week. His only known exposure to his own kind was the crazy Cornelius Savage.

Riley tells me he feels the familial and pack connection with Tyson a hundred per cent and that they went for a run together, which deepened it. Riley says Tyson seems together enough despite those circumstances, though he doesn't trust us yet. That said, he's curious enough to come. The others have all met him briefly and Greyson had a long conversation with him. The fact that his mate got saved from a venomous snake bite with our help seems to have opened this door. Tyson had the wrong idea about why he grew up away from us, thinking his pack murdered his parents and his uncle ran with him to keep him safe. From us.

The fact he's planning to be there tonight says good things about the future. And I'm sure knowledge his own mother is here and safe helps matters.

I can't get caught up in feeling good about all this with the underlying shit happening with me. I need this to go all right. The taunting shadow in me is telling me if I can't hold it together, it might be that I'm another Cornelius Savage in the making. I don't know if I can trust anything I'm feeling, smelling, thinking. I've been fighting the urge to get close to them – but not because I'm doing it to meet him, instead to set eyes on *her*.

“Most men would've acted by now and done something stupid. You've been smart. You've stayed back, talked to your pack, given it time. You got your shit together enough to do this tonight,” Riley reassures while I stand in my kitchen buttoning up my shirt.

I say nothing.

“Right?” He prods.

“Yeah, Rye. I’ll be good,” I assure without eye contact.

Yeah? No? Fucked if I know. Our pack has been waiting for this day for six years since finding out he’s not actually dead. Everyone I care about will be there tonight, celebrating this occasion. Everyone that cares about me will be there, too, and if I were him I’d wonder why the second alpha in his pack’s council hadn’t come forward yet.

Rye slaps my back. “You will,” he declares.

So, I head out with him. He drives. I head out on almost no sleep, something in my blood that has me feeling like I can only imagine someone going through drug detox feels like when heading into a rave.

And then I get to the town hall for the strawberry moon party, and everything goes wrong. Worse than wrong.

They say hindsight is 20/20, and I wish I knew what I could’ve done differently.

3

Mason

We're in the town hall, music playing, and the buzz in the air changes as those scents – the ones taunting me all week, get stronger. His. And hers. The neck of the beer bottle in my hand cracks under the weight of my grip. I set the glass down and swipe my hand on my jeans. I didn't break the skin, surprisingly. Joel catches this and his brows jut up. I shake my head, trying to show I'm good. But am I?

Joel jumps up and gets rid of the bottle that's now leaking over the table, shooting me a look of concern.

The fact that he saw it with his eyes but that none of the others sensed it is concerning and makes me feel further disconnected from them.

I'm at a table with all of them; that was my third beer and now it feels like I need something stronger. They've been talking casual, but nothing has felt casual all night, nor all week. Until this past week, I've always felt like I'm *one* with my wolf. This disconnect is as if he has been pacing inside a cage. And now, he's not only pawing at the cage lock, he's ready to howl at the pink moon as well as tear his teeth into something.

Her scent isn't something I should feel proprietary about. It's not meant to be mine. Is it? The confusion amplifies as the fragrance of her grows stronger, as they get closer. I can smell that they've recently fucked and that's got my agitation ramping up, too.

But I'm determined to get through this, to be stronger than whatever *it* is. Yeah, I'll work to get through this, but I might need a little help. Joel drops a stack of napkins down with a glass containing two shots of whisky, as if reading my mind, resting his palm on my shoulder for a minute before he sits down.

I drink it back.

“Easy, brother,” Jase mutters as I set the glass down and our eyes meet.

He’s a good-time guy and he’s giving me *the look*. I should take it seriously if even Jason Creed thinks I should slow down.

My nose tickles and I’m sure they’ve stepped into the building. There’s a crowd, but it doesn’t take long to see them given Tyson looks as tall as Joel. Closer to six and a half feet than six. This puts him at about three inches taller than me and I already know he has a larger wolf than mine and this suddenly bothers me. I see the top of his dark head and then I catch the blonde at his side. A tiny thing. Pretty face. Blonde hair with purple highlights. People swarm them, excited to meet them. She’s shy, looks nervous, but happy. Leaning into him, looking up at him with lavender doe eyes. The buzz in the air is almost deafening to me, ramping up my irritation.

If she were mine, I’d know it right now. And I don’t know it. I don’t know what I know.

“You good?” Greyson asks, touching my arm.

I jerk my chin up, but it takes everything in me to refrain from hauling off and decking him or anyone else who lays a finger on me. My agitation is bubbling, hitting the rim.

I’m not okay. I’m certainly less okay than I’m pretending because the notion of inflicting bodily harm on one of my closest friends, one of my pack council co-alpha brothers – it should be abhorrent to me. But I can’t process that, can’t think straight except to think it’s too late to do anything about this. His eyes just clocked me. His nose would’ve done it before he even stepped foot in here tonight. I know we met as babies. Our mothers put us together at stages of our infancy, there’s an annual party where infants born each year are put together to gage their connection, to see if they might be the next generation of council alphas. And my mother told me this week that when Tyson, Riley, and I were put on the same

blanket, Tyson and I both shifted and played as pups. They had to get Riley out of the way as he didn't shift, and we spooked him.

Since I'm the only Council alpha he hasn't met, of course he's looking at me first. It's what I'm sure I'd do in his shoes.

I follow my brothers who move in to take turns greeting them.

Our eyes lock and something crackles in the air. Something ugly. Dangerous. I look away. But too soon, it's my turn. I shouldn't meet his eyes again because of what he'll see. But I can't help it. There's not a submissive bone in my body. I'm alpha down to my blood, a super-alpha which doubles the alpha traits, and I need to meet his eyes regardless of the fact that I'm so very fucking divided inside right now.

I step up and get introduced by Riley. And despite the noise, the crowd, if I knew nothing else, I'd know by Riley's tone of voice that something is off. But I know more than by that voice, I know by my *blood* that something is very, very fucking wrong. Riley senses the wrongness in me. So does Tyson and the other four. All of us together, I feel a new connection snap into place.

"This is Mason. Mason isn't feeling his best. Mase? Hold it together, brother."

I extend my hand, knowing by Riley's expression, by Tyson's, that they both sense something wrong in me. Something I can only describe as foul, as if something ugly is there with my wolf, in his shadow. An unnamed, indescribably dark force of energy.

He takes my hand.

That dark energy wants to emerge. It's not coming from him; it's from me. I'm the one that's wrong. He's not. The sense of family, of rightness I feel from him nearly knocks me over, but the thing that keeps me upright is that other sensation in me. It feels like I'm about to split in three. Mason the man. Mason the white wolf. And the angry, entitled shadow that has moved in and wants to come out of the darkness.

The connection I feel with our hands joined is familial. There's the thread of what I feel with Jase, Linc, Joel, Grey, and Rye – but there's also that something else I've been grappling with all week and it's bigger, stronger, darker.

Our gazes are locked and the thing in me wants something from Tyson. Wants what's his? Is that it? Is it because it's not supposed to be his? Is it because it's supposed to be-

I feel a sense of warning come at me with a rumbling growl, a threat that comes from Tyson's mouth. This isn't just a warning, it's his wolf, it's his very essence. He knows something in me is wrong. The warning comes before that dangerous word forms in my mind, the word that would likely cause an eruption of anger. Rage. Fur. Fangs. Blood. Chaos.

“Good to meet you,” I somehow manage. “And you,” I add, greeting her without looking at her. I can't set eyes on her. If I do, I know bone-deep it'll be seen as a direct challenge to him.

Is that what I want to do?

My brothers and I all feel equal in my mind. But in past councils the firstborn alpha has always had a size advantage plus a combination of skills that elevate him just slightly. And I sense that in Tyson. I know to my core he's our pack alpha. If we had no council, if we were a typical pack, it'd be him. If there were a challenge to the death like many packs still believe in, it might also be him, I don't know about that. The rest of us aren't remotely beta, but we might be tagged that way in a typical pack. And that's strange to me. Foreign.

An alpha doesn't submit. Doesn't show his weakness. He also doesn't challenge someone unless he means it. I know from our brief meeting that he deserves my respect. I need to get the fuck out of here before I do something stupid.

Like challenge him? I don't know. Just don't fucking know.

Instead of making eye contact with the delicious-smelling little female at Tyson's side, delicious other than the fact she smells of him, I stare at the ground. I have no choice. It says nothing good when a man won't look another in the eyes, especially

not when we're as connected as Tyson Savage and I are, but there's no alternative. If I make eye contact again, something bad happens. Something I can't undo.

I back away and head for the back door. I need air. I need sky. I need to get away from the tension in the space. Tension that's all down to me.

Linc and Joel follow me.

"Need booze. Bring me a fuckin' bottle," I mutter.

Joel doubles back.

I lean against the wall beside the back entrance of the hall, a converted barn. A group of half a dozen teenagers mull around beside a new sports car belonging to Evander Creed, Jase's nephew. Evander just turned eighteen. Kid is alpha and a little shithead who hasn't got the brain capacity for the strength and urges he's developing ahead of schedule. He's shooting his mouth off at a female of his age who has angry tears in her eyes. Linc walks in their direction.

"Here," Joel says, uncapping and passing me the bottle of Maker's Mark.

I tilt it back and swallow a healthy swig. Or not so healthy.

"Well?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Can't you tell?"

"Worse," he states. He can tell.

I take another mouthful.

Lincoln is back and the crowd of teens are moving away.

Linc's hand lands on my shoulder. "We'll figure this out, brother."

I take another swig.

The sourness is rising in me. Sourness. Entitlement. Irritation. Irrational irritation. If she were supposed to be mine, she wouldn't be his. I've lent a hand on cases for other packs where there's confusion over a mating. Where someone tries

to claim someone that's not supposed to be theirs. Where someone rejects someone that's supposed to be theirs. But this doesn't happen with pack alphas unless there are extenuating circumstances, such as that the alpha is ill. This shit doesn't happen with the Arcana Falls council alphas.

This shit doesn't happen to me.

Unless it's all down to witchcraft, which it has to be. Because the alternative is that there's something wrong with me, something wrong with our pack – a sign we shouldn't be complete, that we were better off as we were. But were we? I don't want to believe that.

Alphas mate their one and only by marking with their teeth, by taking in their woman's blood through that bite, and by releasing a knot inside her, locking her to himself while they mate. You can't knot inside someone who isn't yours. An alpha can't knot anyone but their mate unless their mate is dead and even then it happens rarely. Knots are meant for mates. The way she carries his scent, he's not only taken her he's absolutely knotted her. He owns her and she him.

So, what the fuck is wrong with me?

“The fact that I lost time, the fact that I got lost at all in my own fucking village – there has to be witchcraft at play here,” I tell Joel.

“I agree. The question is *why?*” he asks.

The moon was too big. The stars were wrong. It's the only thing that makes sense to me.

There have traditionally been witches in Drowsy Hollow. Or there were. They had a hefty population here at one time that dwindled. They were heavily involved in helping us form our pack. This entire area holds a lot of history and magic. Our council has no relationships with witches. The last council told us when they handed things off to us that there hasn't been a need in years, decades. It has to be witches. If it isn't... I'm damaged.

Last year, we were informed that the last local elder witch died, leaving the area without any witches for the first time in generations. But she kept to herself. Our retired council members told us if the need arose, we would have no problem reaching the coven still assigned to this territory.

Right when she died, we were concerned though, because Graydon Blackwood, Greyson's father and sixth alpha of the previous council, advised that there were murmurs about the evil presence around Drowsy Hollow and the legend was connected to that witch. A year after her death, the evil got loose, and her relatives had to deal with it. And we surmised it was related to the serial killer murder spree that happened in The Hollow. We were on standby to intervene, but they dealt swiftly and Graydon said they didn't need our help.

What if it's not witchcraft? What if I'm just broken?

"I don't know what the fuck is at play, but I know something is very wrong with me and I need to fucking fix it."

"We'll make some calls. We'll figure it out," Joel assures.

"Tomorrow. We'll make the calls tomorrow."

"I need to run," I declare.

"We'll-" Linc starts.

"Alone," I cut him off, and then I'm passing Linc the bottle and kicking my boots off, undoing my fly, ripping my clothes off before sprinting through the parking lot as wolf to head to the woods beyond it.

I run for a good hour and when I'm back in the parking lot, I feel a little more centered, a little more myself. Tomorrow, we'll make calls. Inquiries with witches. It's a plan and though tonight hasn't gone the way I had hoped, and I've made a shitty first impression on Tyson, at least it's a plan. Until then, there's nothing I can do, so I'll just dig deep and hold my shit together.

I shift back to man where I left my clothes and boots, then dress and head back inside through the back door, which is propped open just a few inches. Tyson and his mate's scents linger even though they're not present and I'm relieved that they've left. I move over to the bar and grab a drink. My eyes meet with Greyson's. He's talking to his father, who gives me a nod and moves away.

"I'm good," I mouth.

Grey jerks his chin up but then tilts his head with confusion. He's trying to get a read on me.

I turn my attention to the fact that the younger pack members have cleared out and this has transitioned to the adults-only portion of the evening. Women are dancing. Men are watching. Food, drinks, and music fill the space.

Tyson Savage and his woman's scents hit me hard a minute later and knowing they're back, I try to breathe through it, ignore it. I've said hello. I've made a shitty impression. The best thing I can do is ignore them the rest of the evening. I'll get myself one more drink, then go.

And then I catch sight of her without him at her side. Her ankle is bandaged but she looks beautiful. Red dress. Dancing gracefully, hair swaying along with those hips as she moves to the music with a couple of our women.

I find myself fascinated by the way she moves as I sip my drink.

I'm thinking about moving with her. Putting my hands to her hips, inhaling her scent at her throat where my mark would be, where I could graze it to remind her who she belongs to.

Brakes squeal in my mind. Because she doesn't belong to me. She's not mine. Why am I craving putting my mouth to her throat when there's already a mark there? His mark.

If I'd scented her first, maybe it'd be mine. If I'd come back with Sean, would I have claimed her? Taken her, marked her, knotted her? Maybe there's confusion because I've been the eldest council alpha. If he wasn't here, I'd mate next. He was

born one day before me. One day. One day or I'd be first alpha. If I were first alpha, would she be mine? If he hadn't come back when I was out of town, where would I be right now?

I didn't mate before Riley, which some argued meant the dynamic of our pack had shifted. Without our seven-alpha council, the fact that Riley Savage had found his mate before me, maybe it was all signs pointing to the fact that we weren't going to be the same pack as we had been for the last six generations.

But if Riley didn't knot his woman, and it's crossed my mind this week that we don't know if that happened. If not, maybe she wasn't his. Maybe he was just infatuated. None of us has suggested this to Riley and that it even occurs to me should jerk me to reality, because if Riley says he identified his mate, I shouldn't doubt his word. But I'm doubting everything right now; I'm sinking into a vortex of *what ifs*.

If I'd come back with Sean... if I were here when she got to the area... I don't know much about how they met except that she's been reluctant. And this suggests he found her and identified her as his mate, but what if I'd found her first? Before he marked her. Before he knotted her.

The air in the room changes more than subtly. Static fills my head again and I tear my eyes away from the beautiful blonde in the red dress and meet the eyes of my long-lost co-alpha brother. The man who owns her. The man who is connected to us, who we've mourned, but who knows while approaching me that I'm coveting what's his.

Would she resist me? Is the reason she's reluctant with him because she's meant to be mine?

Despite that we're all alphas in this pack, despite that there's not a submissive bone in any of our bodies, the sensations coming at me from him bother me. I feel irritation as he demands in a guttural tone, "Why are your eyes on what's mine?"

Jase and Joel are moving up on either side of me. Tyson is in front of me, blocking my view of Ivy. Riley and Grey step up on either side of Tyson, and dangerous energy in the space has spiked.

Tyson's eyes change. They glow before they dim and then darken to coal black as I resist the urge to scoff.

A song ends and there's a shift as her scent grows closer. I hear her voice and it's like music.

"Hey handsome, wanna dance with me?"

Her voice penetrates the stare-down and I'm hit with confusion for a moment, as if she's talking to me.

In my head, a shadowy voice that's not my own growls *yes* and I imagine feeling her in my embrace, as I flex my fingers with the urge to grip her tight, the desire to pull her close to my body, my body that's now hardening. My blood is warming, too. But before the word *yes* comes out of my mouth and before I reach for her like I feel the urge to do, I know Tyson Savage has read me. And he wants blood.

My blood.

He grabs me with both hands, lifts me clean off the floor and throws me.

I'm six foot two, two hundred and fifteen pounds. He's got a couple inches on me and probably thirty pounds. Yet he's thrown me like I'm the size of a child. I land on a table with a crash as the room collectively gasps.

I'm soaked by drinks and there's broken glass embedded in my elbows.

Retired council alphas as well as other non-council alphas and betas move in, moving the vulnerable out of the way. Except her. Ivy's there on the floor by his feet. No one would dare touch her. Except, perhaps me. My eyes move to her briefly and I see shock on her face.

As my eyes hit her, he's reaching for me, hauling me up in the air, roaring into my face with power that makes the building

quake. His enraged energy ripples throughout the space as Lincoln comes up behind Tyson, meaning all seven of us are here. Us, the six retired council alphas, several pack alphas and betas. All the alphas are instantly tethered.

Tethering is rare among a pack our size, but it's exactly what I feel. Over a dozen alphas are lending their strength and will to combat the dangerous energy in this barn.

And Tyson Savage is exerting his absolute dominance over his entire pack as lead alpha and every fucking one of us feels it under our skin, in our blood, down to our marrow. This is his birthright. We are his pack. Every one of us, council alphas past and present, pack alphas, betas, and omegas – we all know this is our returning lost king and he is absolutely fucking furious. He's furious at me. Rightfully.

If I fight back, if I give the barest notion of a challenge, I'd break the bond with my pack. I'd be done – I know this. I can't do it, I won't. And this might be the first sign that I haven't entirely lost my mind – the fact I'm thinking clearly enough to realize this.

But fuck, does that dark shadow of entitled confusion inside me want to. It wants me to fight back, go rogue, and die if necessary, to make sure I show that I *would* fight to the death for what's mine.

But is it mine? If I knew beyond a doubt that it was...

I hear gasps of the females that are near the front of the crowd and feel the heat coming from my eyes. My eyes bleed now as blood vessels have popped – a sign of an absolutely enraged alpha wolf shifter who can't exert his dominance because he's being oppressed by something. And that's infuriating, too, on an entirely new level. I'm not just suppressed right now by Tyson; it's all of us holding me back. And the tether is gripping him, too.

But he wants me dead. I feel it as clearly as if it's my own thought It's taking all their power to hold him back. To stop Tyson from fulfilling his deepest wish right now – to kill me

because I've challenged him by wanting to put my hands on his mate. To bring her close so that I can know for sure if it's my arms she's meant to be in.

Against everything I want and for the first time in thirty-three years, I bare my throat. It's not a full-on submission, but enough of one to show him and them that I defer to his claim on her, that I know what I've done is out of line and I'm acknowledging it. And I loathe that I do it, but feel marginal relief at the same time because I know that all of us working together will mean I survive this moment not just in terms of walking away to keep breathing, but also walking away without being shunned. Because if they wanted to, they could cast me out for this. And without my pack, I know I'd lose everything, lose myself.

Though the alphas in our pack hold us both with their power, Tyson's teeth extend and it's as if he's about to shift.

I hit the floor with a thump as he releases me, then there are collective female gasps as he reaches for his fly.

My first thought is he's going to shift, and the black wolf will come at me, intent on ripping my throat out, and I'm about to shift, but then I realize he's not shifting, not reaching for me. Instead, he reaches for the woman on the floor at his feet. The source of our confrontation.

Confusion, then horror register on her face as he pushes her to her belly and then his eyes are on me, not her, as he takes her. He catches and pulls her back by her underwear as she tries to get away from him and the room can do nothing but watch as he fucks into her wildly, rutting her while staring into my eyes, teeth extending, thick black hair springing forth on his body, nose beginning to elongate as if he's shifting to wolf in slow motion. But he doesn't finish. He doesn't finish shifting as he takes her.

My body trembles with my rage, but I'm frozen, immobile as she cries out in distress and he roars as he continues to take her, doing it staring into my bleeding eyes. The rest of the

world has gone still as our lead alpha shows every one of us that she's his. Only his.

Not a soul would dare move right now. This is how it is. Some things in our pack are progressive, most things a democracy, but when it all boils down to the alpha and his mate, nobody steps in between them unless they're ready for their pack to splinter apart. Whether it's taught or innate, I don't know. Whether I remain still because it's who I inherently am or if it's the invisible force of the pack's tether holding me in place ... it doesn't matter.

His wants penetrate through mine loud. Clear. He wants me dead. He wants to kill, end, and devour me while continuing to rut his female. She's his and he wants everyone to know this.

He flips her to her back, not looking at her, still eyeballing me and then he shouts, "Mine!" in a guttural tone that sounds like it's coming from the depths of hell.

A strange sensation explodes in my gut, my chest, as her body convulses, vibrates. He's knotting her.

He's knotting her because she's his. He wouldn't be able to do it if she weren't. Bile bubbles at the back of my throat.

It's clear. Crystal clear. She's not mine. She's never been mine. She's his. I'm wrong. My head is wrong. My wolf is wrong. I don't want to fuck up my pack. Don't want to hurt the pack that I love. Don't want to fuck up this reunion. But I have. I own that. I've done this. I don't know why, but I accept blame for my actions.

The rest of the room remains still as this plays out. As clarity keeps washing through me.

He's reminding us who he is and what we all are to one another. If the others weren't here reminding us we're a family through this tether, and if I didn't feel it and want to preserve my pack, we'd likely be battling. Battling, bleeding, and one of us dying.

He shows me her throat, still halfway between man and wolf. Shows me his claiming mark on her. And then finally, his gaze

moves away from me. He flexes his hand and then his partly-showing wolf recedes as he shifts back to full man.

He withdraws from her and fluid pools around her body, filling my nose with their combined essences. The scent is a primal one that every one of us knows.

Our eyes are locked, and I have no desire to look upon his mate right now. He knows I regret this. I know he'd try to kill me if the others weren't here reminding us we're all the same pack. And the strong bond we have today shows him who we are. I'm sure in this moment he feels that and it's what prevents him from lunging for me again.

I blink and red droplets hit the floor just feet away from her.

The tether between all of us loosens and immediately, I shift. I shift and leap in the other direction to run straight to the woods.

I run at full speed. I run like I can outrun what I've done, what I've caused. I need this.

I'm sick about it. Sick that it happened. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me.

Lincoln and Jase are running with me. They're just behind me, giving me space, but showing they're here. With me. That they support me. I don't deserve it, but I'll take it.

I'm at the riverbank, a few miles from the village, staring into my reflection in the water. White wolf with red streaks down my face. I shift back to man and collapse onto the ground, winded, devastated.

Though they've followed, shown me through our connection that they're here for me, they're both also infuriated with me.

"I don't fucking understand!" I shout at the sky. In the shadows of the pink moon I see a female form. I blink at it for a long moment as if it'll give me answers. It grants none.

My eyes meet Jase's. He's also shifted back, and his arms are folded over his chest. He stares me down with questions in his eyes. Anger. Disappointment. Confusion.

Lincoln shifts back to man and takes the same stance.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Lincoln demands, angrier than I've seen him. Ever.

"I don't. Fucking. Know," I growl.

"You want this to be right?" Jase demands.

"I do," I grind out.

"Let's go to the Savage house. I heard they're spending the night. Maybe they're there now. Let's straighten this out." Jase dusts his hands off and jerks his chin to the side, then shifts again.

He's right. I have to fix this. I have to fucking fix this. The sooner the better. I don't want the pack to have to choose between us because he wants nothing to do with me. I've fucked up and they'd choose him. I shift again to wolf and break into a run. Jase and Linc follow.

We're outside the house and he's not coming out. He's tending to his mate, that poor fucking girl. She's not a shifter and with no knowledge of our existence before Tyson claimed her, it's going to be hard for her to understand all this. Not a surprise; we guard our nature carefully. Despite that, I'm well-aware of mainstream culture after spending four years in a mainstream university, so I can imagine how ugly this is going to be. He'll have his work cut out for him. I feel her distress from outside, like I'm linked to her. Not because she's mine. Because she's part of the pack through her link to Tyson.

"Do you feel that too?" I ask Jase.

"What?"

"Her distress. Her pain."

He nods, blowing out a long breath.

I'm still questioning my emotions and I'm relieved it's not just me.

Lorenzo, retired second alpha, steps outside and comes to me. He's always treated me like a favorite, likely because he not only has daughters, no sons, but also because of being second alpha in the last council, same birth position as me.

He drops his large hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

"Let's go talk. I'll follow you home."

"We'll come," Linc says, Jase beside him.

"I need to talk to him. Explain," I say. "This shit might mean our pack stays incomplete. There won't be trust. It won't work unless I fix it. She's not mine; I'd know it, right? If she were mine, I wouldn't be fucked up like this."

"What is it you're feeling for her, Mason?" Lorenzo asks.

"That's just it. I don't know. I just don't feel right, and I feel like she's something between us, like there's a curiosity about her, some urges to get closer, visions of challenging and fighting him, but something stops me, even before everything tethered in the hall. All along I've been conflicted. If she were mine, nothing would stop me. Right? What the fuck is this? Is it the man in me or the wolf that's broken? That shadow that's moved into me with my wolf, is it trying to edge us both out? My connection to the pack is in the way. Ask Tyson to come outside. I don't want anywhere near his mate. I just want to talk to him. Just him. See if that disconnect is gone if she's not there."

"Wait," Lorenzo directs and heads back inside.

Lincoln rests a hand on my shoulder. "It'll get sorted out. It will." He squeezes reassuringly.

"He's right. We didn't come all this way for nothing," Jase adds.

I rake my fingers through my hair while filling my lungs with air before emptying them slowly.

Riley, Grey, and Joel come outside and the six of us stand together for a moment, saying nothing but feeling distress from Tyson inside. He's in pain. He's angry. He hurts for what has happened. All of us do.

"Fuck, guys, I don't..." I let that hang, unsure of what to say.

"We know," Joel says. "Got to be witchcraft."

"Must be," Greyson says. "Though we don't know why, we're gonna find out. My father is reaching out for us."

I sigh.

"Go home," Riley suggests. "Get some sleep. Ty is more focused on her right now."

"And rightly so," Grey puts in.

We're all quiet for a moment.

"I need to run some more," I say as Lorenzo rejoins us with a tight smile. I already know by his eyes he wasn't able to convince Tyson to talk to me.

"Let's all run," Lorenzo suggests. "To Mason's place."

"I'll stay," Riley states.

"Me, too," Grey puts in.

They both clap my back as they pass. Support. Support that's not deserved. Though I can't pinpoint why I've behaved this way, I'm grateful they're not turning their backs on me. It's good we're splitting up, showing Tyson support. And I'm lucky it's not all of them showing it to him instead of me.

"We're in this together," Jase mutters, showing he knows how to read me. "Let's run."

We're in my kitchen. My mother heard about what happened and is already here, making food for everyone, telling me Catrina Savage is on her way to get a urine and blood sample from me. My mother says Cat will talk to the university hospital in Scotland that specializes in shifter illnesses.

They know this isn't me. I know this isn't me.

Graydon Blackwood already started the ball rolling to make inquiries with the Young coven. He managed the coven relationship during the previous council and said the meeting request is formal, sanctioned by the supernatural council. In a case like this, they have to respond and they're required to disclose what they're playing with and why, otherwise face being called before a tribunal.

I dream of what happened over and over, but with different perspectives. Once from the perspective of my wolf it circles the perimeter of that scene, separate from my human form, his wolf on the inside with them and my wolf on the outside, baring teeth at one another while Tyson takes his woman and my human form helpless.

I'm on the outside, clearly, because I know how important Tyson is to our pack and because I'm the one that's off base.

I'm the one that needs to fix my shit.

The urge to not submit, the urge to go for Tyson's throat to change the ending, to prevent what he does to her, to show my dominance wakes me up.

In not one of my dreams was she mine instead of his.

The house is quiet. Joel and Jase stayed last night; Lorenzo left but said he'd be back. My parents are also here, my mother was immovable.

I'm anxious for solitude all day Saturday but I don't get it. Council and retired council members stop by, as do other good friends. Everyone talks, asks questions, some drop unhelpful theories. They're all unhelpful because words do nothing for my state of mind, my state of anger and confusion. My father is a quiet, strong presence that simply tells me it'll all work out with surety in his eyes that helps for a minute, but my mother is hovering, fretting, and frankly driving me half mad, so by Saturday after dinner hour, my father mercifully takes her home.

An hour later, I've showered and managed to get some food into me and then she comes back. Adamant. She's staying the night again despite me saying Jase is already staying. Dad shows again and carries her fighting-mad to the car, smacking her on the ass while reprimanding her for ignoring his wishes. Dad tells me to go for a run and assures me she won't be back tonight.

It's a good idea, so I take his suggestion, Jase insisting on coming with me and I'm grateful because having him with me probably keeps me from giving in to some urges.

It's a long run that starts off as man but that transitions to wolf where, despite Jase running with me, I have to convince my wolf to resist the urge to run to the Savage house or to Tyson's cabin to try to explain myself, which is a stupid idea because I have no explanation. It's a run where I don't stop until I'm exhausted, hoping I'll have a dreamless sleep.

The sleep isn't dreamless.

I'm hunting, I never get to my mark, only get taunted by scents on that endless road to town. The dreams haunt me all night, making me wake three or four times and I'm sent right back to where I left off each time.

Monday Morning

It's the crack of dawn when I roll out of bed. Instead of going for our usual run, I say bye to Jase who heads out to meet the other guys, telling him I'm going to work out and do some work afterwards. I assure him I'm fine.

I work out for two hours punching my heavy bag until I'm not only drenched in sweat but until my knuckles are also bleeding.

I shift, then shift back and they're healed. Still restless, I decide to go to the office early to work my mind since keeping my body busy isn't doing the trick. I've got to get started with

working on a proposal for a customer who wants a new ranch build. He wants the house plans and the outbuildings drawn up, so I decide that's a good start. I have a drafting table and home office here on the third floor of the house, but I need a change of scenery, so I drive to Riley's, where his garage has been converted into the Savage Construction office.

Savage Construction was founded by Tiberius and Atticus Savage over thirty-five years ago. It's across from Roxy's Bar. Behind the garage is a workshop and warehouse for equipment and construction materials. The company began with carpentry work and renovations and today has grown to also offer design and build services for residential, industrial, and commercial spaces.

It's me and Riley that run it full time, though all of the council have worked here and sometimes hop on for bigger jobs. Joel has been growing his tech company. Some of us consult for other pack problems, particularly me, Grey, and Lincoln. Linc offers those same investigation and tracking services to other packs and when that's slow he's either working with us or he's been known to take occasional projects as a bounty hunter, most often for other supernaturals but sometimes with mainstream clients. Jase and Grey are also into real estate investment and development.

I'm hoping work lets me escape my misery for a couple hours.

When I arrive, I see Riley's motorcycle is gone. It's early, he likely drove to meet the other guys for a run, and that suits me just fine. I've had enough of people this weekend and am looking forward to some peace and quiet.

4

Amelia Brennan

I pull into the gas station and turn my car off. A woman somewhere in her early thirties, I think, with clear blue eyes and great skin steps outside, eyes on me, filled with suspicion.

I smile in the hopes of putting her at ease. “Hi,” I greet.

“Need directions?” she asks.

It’s probably obvious that I don’t need gas since I haven’t stopped at the pump. It’s strange that she greets me outside though, as if assuming I don’t want to come in and buy something from the store or use their restroom or something like that. Very strange.

“Actually, I’m looking for Savage Construction. I’m told it’s somewhere around these parts.”

Her head tilts sideways and she wrinkles her nose. Like she’s sniffing the air. She’s a suspicious one. Her eyes move from my face to my feet and back up.

“You related to Ivy Savage?”

“Ivy what?” I gasp.

I’m here because my sister is gone. Again.

She wasn’t answering her phone and she told me in a phone call right after her snake bite incident that the guy she met up here was named Tyson Savage. After what I found at her place last night, I stayed the night with Mom and at dawn, snuck out to drive to Drowsy Hollow.

Someone in a little diner, where I dropped the Tyson Savage name mentioned there was a company not far away called Savage Construction. A bunch of big, strong men who built

homes and commercial buildings. No one knew where it was. I was directed to a website. I called the phone number.

“Is Tyson there please?”

“Tyson?” The man’s voice went strange. “Did you say Tyson?”

“I’m looking for Tyson Savage,” I said. “Is he there?”

“Who are you?” the husky male voice asked.

Something didn’t feel right. Something felt *very* not right.

“Is Tyson Savage affiliated with this company? I’m trying to find my sister and have reason to believe she’s with him.”

“Your sister?”

“Do you know a Tyson Savage or don’t you?” I demanded.

“What’s your name?”

“Amelia,” I answered.

“Amelia.” His voice was strange. Or stranger.

Way weird. I hung up, feeling odd. Feeling panic, I think. A minute later, the phone was ringing with ‘private caller’.

I rejected the call for some reason.

And then I regretted it. I don’t know why all the hairs on my body were standing on end from that phone call. I should’ve answered the phone, I was sure it was that same guy. I should’ve answered and demanded more information.

I searched the phone number I dialed with a map search, and it came up with Savage Construction listing with a PO Box address. I went to the map to pinpoint the zip code and it brought me to this corner, to the Arcana Falls General Store and gas bar, which has a post office kiosk.

Ivy was a mess yesterday and I hated letting her go back to her place. I got home after dinner and my fiancé was just like sandpaper on my nerves for some reason, so I packed an overnight bag and told him I was going to stay with Ivy until Tamara got back from Jamaica next week. He wasn’t happy

about it, but I told him I'd call him later, that I was too worried about my sister to not be there for her. I loaded up my car and went to Ivy's. But Ivy wasn't there. Neither was her car. Her upstairs neighbor came down and started spouting off to me about the commotion a while earlier, about three giant men being there and making all sorts of racket and pissing him off. This guy went on about complaining to the landlord and not so that he could alert me that my sister might be in trouble, because he didn't like that my lights shined in his window when I pulled in.

"My sister was here in an altercation with three men, and you complain and threaten to call the landlord and don't offer to help or at least call the police in case my sister is in trouble?" I was flabbergasted.

"I mind my own business," the guy said, putting his hands up in the air.

What. An. Asshole.

"You're a fucking tool," I told him. "Maybe you should get some blackout shades instead of putting sheer curtains on a window overlooking a driveway."

"Fuck you, bitch," he replied and slammed his door.

Moron.

I have a spare key for Ivy's, so I went inside, and the kitchen was a mess. There was a plant and table toppled, a pile of mail scattered, too, and a really unusual cologne-like scent in the air.

My body broke out in goosebumps, and I immediately dialed Ivy's number. No answer.

I text-messed my mother.

"Did Ivy come to your place?"

My mom phoned me instead of replying. "She's not here. Why? Why?" Mom sounded panicked.

“I just got to her place and she’s not here. There’s a mess and her upstairs neighbor said something about three big guys being here and there being some sort of commotion.”

“Oh God. Oh God. Did you call her?”

“No answer.”

“Oh Jesus! I’m coming over. Wait there.”

Mom came over and while we cleaned up the mess in Ivy’s and Tamara’s place, Mom told me what she said she’d told my sister that morning while I was at the supermarket. That she thinks Aunt Nelle set some strange supernatural shit in motion and she doesn’t know what sort of crap is going on but thinks my sister got stolen by either a vampire or maybe a shapeshifter who wants to keep her.

Shapeshifters? Vampires?

My mom is not crazy and despite how batshit crazy that sounded, she seemed like she was totally serious. Like she believes every word she’s said to me. I’m not sure what the fuck is happening but all I know is that I need to find my sister.

Mom made me go home with her and spend the night. I called the cops from her place, and they were no help. I couldn’t rest. I was just freaking out. At dawn, I snuck out, deciding to drive to Drowsy Hollow to see what I can find out. Ivy still isn’t answering her phone. I left before Mom got up because she was just hysterical until the wee hours when she finally conked out on the couch telling me that Aunt Nelle had plans for all of us, Mom included, and how crazy it is that this all happened right after she and Dad split up.

I know how nuts people think Aunt Nelle was. I also know she wasn’t nuts. Not at all. She saw things in her life. Wild things. We had our secret chats and she told me stuff I’ve never repeated to a soul. She never told me, though, that she’d done some crazy thing with a fortune teller.

“I pulled my sister’s letter and all the cryptic stuff she said lines up with your dad and I splitting up too.”

“God, Mom, you think you’re about to be whisked away by a were bear?” I laughed.

My mom’s face went stone serious. “You didn’t grow up where I did, Amie, hearing the stories, talking to people who said they saw things. Did you see how purple your sister’s eyes were?”

The eye thing was definitely very freaky.

She gave me Aunt Nelle’s letter and I read it.

And then I made Mom crack open the bottle of vodka in the freezer and read it a second time.

I tried to call the cops but after calling off the search last time when they’d begun putting resources into looking for Ivy they suggested, grouchily I might add, that we wait until Ivy’s been gone 24 hours to see if she isn’t just off on another adventure.

No, I didn’t mention anything about supernatural stuff or witches or my aunt who’s been dead a year. I tried to reason with them that my sister was keeping something from us about why she went missing last time and that I thought maybe they should go interview her upstairs neighbor about what he told me.

They told me they still wanted me to wait 24 hours.

I was pissed and went up the food chain two levels and got nowhere.

So, since I don’t want to wait until tonight to make another report and it’s been six hours since I had a drink and I definitely didn’t get drunk, I’ve thrown my overnight bag into my SUV, armed myself with bear mace from the garage (Dad hasn’t cleaned his stuff out yet), and headed the three-hour drive to Drowsy Hollow to find Tyson Savage and see what the fuck is going on.

“Come in and sit down. I’ll call somebody to talk to you,” the lady at the gas station says.

“I’ll be right in,” I tell her.

I go back into my car to grab my purse and put it on cross body. I have my hand inside it, gripping the can of bear mace inside because something is definitely weird about all this, her attitude included.

I step into the store and she’s on the phone with a strange look in her eyes as she tracks me coming inside.

“Almost her double. Brunette though,” she mutters into the phone.

I meet her eyes with challenge.

“Who’s that? And where’s my fucking sister?”

“I was just on the phone with someone who’s coming here to talk to you. Have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, thanks. Who’s coming here? Is it Tyson Savage?”

“No. It’s someone else, but he’ll be able to help.”

5

Mason

I've been pacing for the half hour that's passed since that call. I'm questioning myself. Trying to decide if I should hunt down this girl.

Amelia.

My mind has been racing, racing because of the sensations I felt at the sound of her voice. And swirling around the fact that she's Ivy's sister.

My wolf has been pacing, too, wanting to take in the scent behind that voice. Badly.

The phone rings again, caller ID listing it's our general store. I'm about to let it go to voicemail, but catch a new scent in the air that makes my knees buckle before my cock turns to steel.

I hesitate, bracing with a palm against the wall, wondering if things are about to make sense. I briefly mull over whether or not I should follow my nose. Very briefly because my gut is telling me the new aroma has to be the girl on the phone. That aroma belongs to the Amelia that phoned me. I don't question my instincts – not ever – except now because of all that's happened the past week.

The scent isn't the same as what I smelled from Tyson's mate. But I know they're related. And I'm thinking, is she the one? Correction: *The One*.

The fact that I haven't felt right for a week weighs on me.

Though, for the past half an hour it's felt different. Much different. Almost like I've been gathering my bearings again, like puzzle pieces are fitting into place. But I don't know that I trust it. Not yet.

After answering Cicely's phone call on the third ring, she hesitantly asks for Riley and then she's hesitating some more

before I order her to spit it out.

There's a girl there. Nearly the spitting image of Ivy, but brunette. Asking for Tyson.

"Keep her there. I'm on my way," I say.

And it feels like everything is about to be right.

When I pull up to the general store, I see a pearl white Nissan Rogue parked beside the door and not only do I know it's hers, I already know – she's *mine*.

Without a doubt. I feel it in every cell in my body. That scent. That scent belongs to my mate.

As I get out of my truck, which has been mysteriously working just fine since it broke down, the door to the store opens and not only do I get assaulted by her scent at full-strength, I also get an eyeful of her.

Curvy, a few years younger than me. Dark brown wavy hair that's halfway down her back. She storms out, Cicely on her heels.

And immediately, my sense of self, my human side *and* my wolf side snap into place – the right place.

No, it still doesn't make sense that I was confused about Ivy, but that pales in comparison to this sensation, pales so underwhelmingly that it no longer factors.

When an Alpha knows his mate, he knows it. No confusion.

Setting eyes on her for the first time, I'm struck with something stronger to alpha wolf shifters than anything. It's stronger than the urge to run. Than the urge to eat. Drink. Sleep. It's primal need. To claim. Claim, bite, mark, rut, and knot.

She's stunning.

Flawless skin, perfect pink mouth, an hourglass figure, wearing skin-tight jeans, a pink double-breasted jacket, ample

cleavage on display peeking from a pink blouse, a black leather bag on cross-body and a can of something in her right hand that she points in Cicely's direction, trigger finger on the nozzle.

Cicely was trying to stop her from leaving and she's ready to defend herself.

Amelia's head turns and she looks directly at me with angry blue eyes. They're so piercing, they cut straight through me from a hundred feet away as she eyes me while moistening those full pink lips with her tongue.

She smells better than anything that's ever hit my nose.

She's mine.

I don't know how, why, or what the fuck has been going wrong, but: the fog has evaporated, the agitation is also gone, the confusion has lifted, and I'm filled with absolute certainty - I've found her.

No confusion. Zero doubt. *This* is my woman.

Cicely's mouth is formed into the letter O. Her eyes are dancing with happiness. She's delighted for me.

My mate's eyes are still on me. She's taking me in. With lust in her eyes.

Fuck, she smells incredible. I'm salivating.

I move purposefully in her direction, seeing the flash of Cicely's smile before she twirls and goes back inside.

"Amelia," I say, taking her into my arms, my left hand wrapping around her waist, right palm cupping her jaw. I move in to kiss her. She feels right in my arms. Very fucking right.

I haven't ever felt anxious for this stage of my life, but now that this moment is here, the moment where I'll first taste her? I know it's worth everything I've gone through to get here.

Her thick, dark lashes lower, her bubblegum pink lips part, and I move in until our lips connect.

The sweetest taste I've had in my life surges through me. Happiness like I've never felt floods me.

Her hair is silk. Her lips are heaven. Her full tits are pressed into my chest and it's time to take her home, rip these clothes off her, and sink inside her while my teeth puncture and mark her. My fingers move to the spot where I'll do that. I feel her pulse. She whimpers into my mouth, melting into me as our tongues touch and as it occurs to me that this is the sweetest sound my ears have ever heard, she abruptly pulls back, shoves me and I hear a hiss as a thick stream of wet coats my face.

Immediately, my vision blurs and the burn hits. My skin. My nose. My lips.

Mace.

I roar out my reaction and do the only thing I can do to take the excruciating pain away. I shift to wolf and back in three quick rotations.

When I'm man again after the third shift, the pain has dissipated. Not completely, but significantly. Fuck, that smarts.

She's on the ground on her ass, looking up at me with absolute horror. The can is still in her hand, pointed at me.

I lean over, grab it from her, toss it, then scoop her up over my shoulder and storm toward my truck.

She's kicking, fighting, slapping, and screaming the whole way.

"Cicely!" I shout over my shoulder.

By her expression and how fast she's poked her head out, I know she's watched the entire thing from behind the glass.

"Have her stuff brought to my house. Leave it on the porch and spread the word – nobody disturbs us."

She smiles wide and gives me a salute. "Congratulations, honey."

“What the fuck?” Amelia shouts. “Let me down. Put me *fucking* down!”

I open the passenger door of the truck and set her inside.

She lunges forward, hands like claws and aiming for my face, my face that’s still burning.

6

Amelia

So... this stuff is real. Really real. It's not that I doubted it when I read Aunt Nelle's letter, but I guess I didn't fully comprehend it either. Right now I'm doing my best to get my brain caught up with all I'm seeing and feeling.

And now it feels like I've seen it all. I've seen a man, the most potently male man my eyes have ever touched – storm up to me heaving breaths out like he's run a marathon, a look in his eyes like he wants to rip my clothes off and ravish me, and then he actually does. The ravishing part.

The stranger, the gorgeous dark-eyed stranger grabs me, utters my name, pulls me tight against his rock-hard muscled body and lays a kiss on me that makes me go temporarily insane.

I kiss him back for a good two hours (probably not, but that's what it feels like) before sanity returns and I mace his face.

He roars out what very much sounds like a wild animal growl before he turns into a wild animal.

An *actual* wild animal.

I know I've been lamenting on the fact that there are supernatural things happening since I read that letter, but now that I've seen it – *actually* seen a shapeshifter with my own eyes?

One second he's reaching for his fly, which was alarming enough, but then he kicked his shoes off and a wild animal burst from his body.

Just... *burst*. A massive pure white wolf exploded from the guy.

It knocked me on my ass. Literally.

I fell onto my rump on the pavement and stared in shock, sure my eyes were playing tricks on me.

The wolf standing there was absolutely stunning. A massive beast with a thick, fluffy coat as white as a blizzard and as he came into focus, dark and glittery eyes. The t-shirt he was wearing fell off his body in tatters and the rest of what he had on pooled at his back legs.

And suddenly the air smelled different – a mixture of all sorts of delicious holiday scents. Similar to what I smelled in Ivy’s apartment. But better. Stronger. Trees. Fresh snow. Sugar cookies.

But then the white fur was as if it peeled away without hitting the ground, instead disintegrating and he was himself again. His naked self. He was angry, in pain because I Maced him. He was squinting and huffing while trying to recover and then he did the man/wolf switcheroo thing again and again while I just sat on the pavement staring in wide-eyed horror (instead of running for my life – like I should’ve done).

I have no idea what it feels like to get Mace in the face but clearly it’s not nice. And he’s just stopped as the guy and in a squat, reaches for me, giving me a reprimanding gaze.

He’s tall, muscled, with short dirty-blond hair and his eyes are the color of the night sky; a clear night sky with stars twinkling. He’s got a cut jawline, deliciously muscled pecs, large biceps, and his naked form can only be described as ... *wow*. Lean, strong. Muscular without being bulky.

I couldn’t help but notice that he’s endowed like a horse. Or... a giant white wolf I guess. And it’s not one of those icky doggy lipstick dicks either. Nope. Thank God. Wait, what? Why would I care? It’s not like I can let that get anywhere near me. Red rocket or not.

A shapeshifter kissed me. And undoubtedly, signs are pointing to another shapeshifter being the one who has my sister.

On that thought, I’m about to spring into action, knowing I need away from this guy instead of sitting here with my brain

moving at warp speed and the rest of me frozen. But by the time this thought occurs, it's too late.

He's taken my can of self-defense away and thrown me over his broad shoulder like I weigh nothing, scooped up his boots, jeans, socks, and torn t-shirt and he's carrying me to his pickup truck while shouting orders over his shoulder at the gas station lady that's obviously in on this ... this racket.

That's what this feels like. What do these people do? Kidnap whoever shows up here? Is that what happened to Ivy?

Is Arcana Falls like The Bermuda Triangle? Instead of being lost at sea, though, you're whisked away by a hot wolf shifter never to be seen again. Or, like the Hotel California where you try to check out, but the rule is you can never leave, so three giant men bring you back?

A little voice whispers the truth. No, Auntie Nelle is the one that's responsible for this. My aunt did this because... because it'd make me and Ivy happy? Though Mom said she originally chalked some of the contents of the letter up to the tumor my aunt had, Mom was connecting the dots between the letter and what it seemed might be going on with my sister. And now the contents make absolute sense based on what's just happened to me!

Bottom line, Penelope "Nelle" Jenkins, my beloved Auntie Nelle, spent most of the money she won in the lottery to buy supernatural happily-ever-afters for us. I shake the thought off because I'm so caught off guard, so flabbergasted at being manhandled by a gorgeous naked stranger – who took one look at me, kissed me in a way that could get most girls pregnant, and then I watched him morph multiple times into a giant, beautiful white wolf. And now I'm fighting like a wild banshee, kicking my feet, slapping what are proving to be useless girlie slaps on his back while he tries to contain me because I'm frantic. Frantic is an understatement.

He is freakishly strong. I can't budge out of his grip.

“No!” I try and then I scream louder as he gets his truck door open, shouting, “Help!” I haul off and slap his bare butt (because it’s directly in my line of vision) with a wallop while kicking harder.

“Oof,” I hear from him as the toe of my boot connects with some part of his body, but he doesn’t let go.

I can’t let a shapeshifter put me in his car and take me to his house! He just told the gas station chick that he wants my stuff brought there and that he’s not to be disturbed.

No. Hell, no!

By the way he strutted up to me and started ravishing me, I have a pretty good idea why he doesn’t want to be disturbed.

“Let me go! Somebody help! Stranger! Stranger danger!” I scream. And then I let out as loud a blood-curdling scream as I can.

He sets me in the passenger seat of his truck and then he winces like I’m hurting his ears.

Good. I haul air into my lungs and scream louder, hoping he’ll back off. I try to kick, punch, scratch, but he’s too strong.

I stop screaming so I can refill my lungs with air yet again, but instead of screaming again, I’m instead gaping at the sight of two more giant wolves running in our direction. I remember my quest to scream my head off, and that makes them both stop and tilt their heads.

But when I need to pull air into my lungs again, instead, I watch in shock as their fur splits away and vanishes like cotton candy dipped in water and they turn into naked men! One of them, a huge lighter-haired guy with muscles, tattoos, and dimples reaches out and slaps the back of the guy that kissed me. The other, an insanely tall, crazy-hot dark-haired one with piercing blue eyes smiles a wide smile at me.

“Good goin’ brother,” he calls out.

The tattooed one then laughs, “Looks like your hands are full, my man. Want me to drive?”

I'm now slack-jawed, faced with three naked, massive men who look like they could be part of the Magic Mike troupe of male entertainers. And dildo models, because... can you say *huge*?

"Where's my sister?" I spit.

Naked guy that kissed me and put me in this seat reaches for me again as tatted-up naked guy climbs into the driver's seat. I'm then pulled into the back seat with him and put on his lap. His *naked* lap. Eep!

"Let me go!" I demand before belting out another blood-curdling scream.

This has all three of them plugging their ears and wincing.

"Joel!" he calls out instead of responding to me, while he pulls my handbag strap up over my head. He tosses the bag at the dark-haired blue-eyed guy who is now standing in front of us. "Her keys're probably in there."

"Hey!" I shout and try to fight harder, but it's fruitless as he pins my arms to my body. "Gimme that back," I demand.

"She's related to her," the tattooed guy in the front says as he starts the car.

"Yup," the guy that has me replies.

I writhe and grunt with effort, trying to grip the doorhandle while fighting to get out of his hold, but he's incredibly strong.

"Let me go! You! Get back here with my bag!" I call out to the bare backside of the guy with my purse heading toward my car.

"Sister," the guy who has me states.

"Yup. Doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but at least you have answers," Tattooed guy in the driver's seat replies.

"The fog, the shadow? They're gone," the guy that has me adds.

“Good news.” The one in the front looks over his shoulder, looking pleased. “The best news.”

The one who has me empties his lungs like he’s filled with relief and then he runs his nose across my throat and inhales my hair, murmuring, “Yeah. Gone.”

There’s a weighty, strange silence in the confined truck space for a moment before I break it.

“Uh, excuse the interruption, but could you kindly let me *fucking* go?” I demand this despite the goosebumps rising on my flesh, “And get my sister here right now?” His grip on me goes tighter. One arm is wrapped around my waist, the other a steel band across my chest.

Neither of them respond.

I continue to struggle. I’m grunting, cussing, and now panicking because the driver has turned this truck around and we’re on the move.

“Let me...ugh...go!” I try again, digging my fingernails into the guy’s wrist, trying to get him to release me. “You’re gonna be in so much fucking trouble if you don’t.”

I see my car getting smaller as we move away. The naked Joel is standing there talking to the gas station attendant. He’s casually gripping the strap of my purse. Like they’re shooting the shit, talking about the weather or something while I’ve been abducted!

I cry out in distress.

The driver says, “Really fuckin’ pleased for you, brother.”

“Amen,” replies the guy who has me. “Drive faster, Jase. Unless you wanna witness the mating.”

What? WHAT?

“You’d better let me go, right now, Doggo,” I warn, “I’ve already told the cops you people took my sister and they’re not far behind me. Tell me where she is and let me go now before you make this worse on yourselves.”

“Doggo,” the driver, obviously Jase, repeats, laughing.

I feel the one that has me shaking with laughter.

“Oh, so you *can* hear me. How rude,” I chirp. “Ignoring me while accosting me with your mouth and then kidnapping me, robbing me. Are you ready to be sent to jail?”

I’m full of baloney. But I need to do something. The guy who has me buries his nose into the crook of my neck and inhales me again, bringing out more goosebumps and sending a butterfly nest free in my belly. I push those odd sensations away, brain running a million miles a minute.

I’m defenseless. Where is he taking me? Is Ivy there, too?

“Faster, Jase. I can’t wait much longer.”

The truck speeds up and Jase is laughing. And this makes me angrier. And a little scared. But I hide the scared.

“I swear to God...” I threaten, continuing to try to struggle my way out of his hold.

“Amelia,” he whispers into my ear in a commanding tone, “Stop squirming on my cock or I’ll have no choice but to *take* you right here.”

I freeze in horror and twist my neck slowly until my eyes meet his. Mistake! The heat simmering in his dark gaze makes my entire body feel like it’s about to burst into flames. I can’t tear my gaze away. Our eyes are locked for what feels like a long time as I take in the slightly blacker variation of his pupils versus his irises, with even darker flecks in them. The truck slows and I manage to look away from him and take in the surroundings as the truck winds through a narrow road with nothing but trees on either side for a minute. There’s water straight ahead. And a massive three-story house with an extra-tall, pointy peaked roof with dormers on either side. As we get closer I continue to take in the oddly familiar house.

I shrug that thought off as I try to calculate my surroundings so I can make a run for it as soon as there’s an opportunity.

He runs his nose up the side of my neck again.

My calculations go nowhere because not only is what he doing beyond distracting, also because I have no sense of direction, never have, so despite efforts, it probably won't be helpful. I should've paid more attention, but I was too busy trying to struggle my way out of the naked abductor's grip. And getting lost in the bottomless depths of his dark eyes.

Oh boy. I'm in trouble, I think.

7

Mason

Jase gets out of my truck, waves with a wide grin on his face, shifts, and runs back up my driveway. This leaves me and my angry, feisty mate.

Time to explain.

Quickly, so we can get to the fun part.

I take in the fragrance of her hair again, and then her throat, my nose running up the side, drawing another shiver and more goosebumps from her. I chuckle.

I'm itching to sink my teeth in and give her my mark. To taste her mouth again. Her tongue tastes like berries and I'm looking forward to finding out what she tastes like between her luscious thighs.

First, I'll get her in the house. It's been a self-control exercise to get to this point without ripping her clothes off and making her mine in the backseat of my truck, regardless of Jase being with us.

She's staring after Jase with the same kind of shock on her face she had when she watched me shift.

Our eyes meet again as I reach for the door and she's shooting daggers from her beautiful blue eyes. And I can't say I blame her for being unamused, but I can't help but chuckle, because I can't believe I've just snatched up my unsuspecting mate, carried her to my truck, and brought her home without saying a word to her. Even after she Maced me. Well, other than to warn I might claim her in my backseat.

I'm not laughing because it's funny that I've frightened her; I'm not reveling in that. I'm laughing because first, joy. I'm happy – ecstatic that things make sense right now. Clarity feels like freedom. I feel like I'm finally myself again. And also, it's

funny to me that I've done this. I'd have said this was uncharacteristic of myself despite knowing it's the precise modus operandi of an alpha who identifies his mate. That moment of the imprint takes priority over logic or manners. I need to get her inside so I can explain my behavior. And then get down to the business of making her mine. As much as clarity and logic has returned to my head, the claiming urge is fierce. It's on me and I need to do something about it.

I hear her heart racing. She's still squirming in my lap, trying to break free, but since she's sitting halfway on my hard cock she's been oblivious to the fact that her squirming feels great. It's about to feel great for the both of us.

I know she's panicked. But even more than that, she's angry. Furious, actually. And this says a lot about her. A lot that I like. Surprisingly. I typically avoid angry women like they're contagious. And though she's angry, I smell arousal. And it's making my mouth water. She might not yet know she's mine, but it smells like her body does.

I shove the door open and bending out of the truck, secure her in my arms.

She struggles to get out of my grasp. She's wild-eyed.

"Settle down there, wildberry. Let's go inside, and I'll explain," I say as I straighten up.

"Explain? Explain why I've been abducted and..." she stutters out breathlessly, "how you accosted me with your mouth?"

Her eyes drop to my mouth, and I see lust blended with anger.

"This oughta be good," she adds with an eye roll.

"Oh, it *is* gonna be good," I promise and loosen my hold on her to close the door. This gives her the opportunity to squirm out of my grip. I release her, but reach out to catch her hand.

She eyes me from head to toe and then her eyes bounce back to my pelvis and then she spins and breaks into a run in the direction opposite the house.

Running from me? That won't do. Running after a full-on appraisal of my cock? Really won't do. My cock is about to be *home* for the first time.

She doesn't run fast. Not only is the incline toward the main road steep, but she's also wearing high-heeled boots and by the way she struggles, I suspect my Amelia isn't someone who typically runs.

I follow at no more than a brisk pace, resisting the urge to chase, pin, and conquer. I still catch her before she's halfway up the driveway, my arm wrapping around her waist, hauling her back against my front, then I put my mouth to her throat and feel my canine teeth elongate just slightly.

Not yet. Inside first.

Fuck, I'm hard.

They recede as I scoop her up into my arms. This is a new sensation, like I'm shifting but only inside my mouth. My wolf wants to taste her.

"Wrong way," I inform and head back for the house. She pounds on my chest and writhes unsuccessfully, screaming, "Help! Stranger danger!" And then she headbutts me and winces in pain, hurting herself way more than me.

"Let me down!" she demands, holding her forehead with her palm.

I kiss her fingers while striding to my front door, then I fling the door wide.

"Should be carrying you over this threshold anyway."

Her eyes widen as I step inside. And I feel pride swell at her expression as she takes in the front foyer. I follow her gaze up to directly above us to the glass lined peak with exposed gleaming beams running to the back of the house.

I close and lock the glass and wrought iron door without setting her down.

Fuck, she's beautiful. And she's mine. This is really happening.

She's stopped struggling and is taking in the space with a strange look on her face. And her heart has picked up pace even more.

Stepping in, the lake and sky are visible because the rear wall of the house is mostly glass.

The open wood and iron staircase divides the space, winding up to two more floors while separating the living room on the left, the eat-in kitchen on the right. The stairs also lead down to the ground-level walk-out basement, which I've finished as an extra recreation, entertaining, and guest space. Patio doors downstairs open up to my large yard and private beach with the long dock where I park my speedboat and the cabin cruiser.

I look around at what she's taking in, that the house is finished in wood, iron, glass, and stone, capitalizing on the view of the lake. Comfortable furniture. Colorful rugs. And I hope she likes it.

I now know I've been nesting, carving out this space for her, for us, and I'm glad I got a home ready for her. Furthermore, I'm suddenly pleased my mother hovered so much the past week because my house is spotless thanks to that, making an ideal first impression.

Well, the house made a great impression even if I didn't. Though that's my M.O. these days, evidently.

As I set Amelia on her feet, I say, "As much as it pains me to not take you to my bed this second to make you mine, I owe you an explanation. Sit. What can I get you to drink? Water, coffee, wine?"

She stares at me as if I have three heads.

"Beer?" I try.

"Make me yours? What are you smokin'?" Though she says this, she doesn't look shocked at what I've declared, more like she's painting on a tough chick attitude. Interesting. Especially interesting that her heart is racing despite the fact that she's trying to exude nothing but anger.

I move to the fridge and as soon as my head is in it, I hear the rapid clicks of her scrambling feet on my floors before the door is unlocked and thrown wide. She's not interested in my explanation; she's trying to sprint again. Not three paces off the front steps and I've hooked an arm around her waist and scooped her up to bring her back inside. She struggles and grunts.

"Amelia," I murmur against her earlobe, pulling a shudder from her. "Let me explain."

"Fuck off!"

"Stop tryin' to run, baby, or the predator in me will have no choice but to take you down."

"What does that mean?" she asks, winded, body as tight as a bow string.

"You wanna find out?" I challenge, touching my tongue to her collarbone. Fuck, she tastes good.

She goes lax in my arms, melting into me and it feels fucking great. I bury my nose in her hair and feel that pinch in my gums again. The desire to bite. To claim. She's now even more aroused. I smell it. Fuck, I can't wait to taste it.

"Where's my sister?" she demands, going tight again, chest heaving.

This time, I'm bringing her directly to my bed.

"Do you have her here? Are you Tyson?" she adds.

"No," I say.

"Where are you taking me? No. Not up your stairs. Let me down!"

She grips me tight as I climb and closes her eyes and blows out a few slow breaths, trying to calm herself. It's obvious by the way she clings to me that she's afraid of being dropped. Afraid of heights?

"I won't drop you. Promise," I murmur against her jaw.

Her piercing blue eyes are wild with a combination of fear and fury, her mouth contorted into an adorable scowl as I take her to my bedroom, which takes up three quarters of the top level. When I set her down on my bed, she's immediately trying to roll off, so I pin her with my body and hold both wrists above her head in one hand.

Fuck, yeah. Under me. And I'm already unclothed. Perfect.

She writhes and grunts. "Let go!"

She feels so fucking good underneath my body. My cock has never been this hard. It has me warring between the urge to use manners and do what I have every instinct and every right to do.

I want what's mine. Now.

Her chest heaves up and down from her exertion and the angry look in her eyes? It's a direct line to my cock. I can't wait to watch that anger melt off her face when I impale her.

"This can't be happening," she whimpers.

"This is happening," I correct her.

"Where's Ivy?"

"Not far. She's *with* Tyson Savage," I manage to say as my eyes travel her body.

"Is she okay?" she asks and the concern on her face hits me in the chest.

I don't know the answer to this, but I'm sure Tyson will make sure that if she's not fine, he'll get her there. He might have some work cut out for him but if he's anything like me – which biology and pack mechanics says he should be – he'll find a way. "If she's not, she will be."

I let her wiggle her wrists out of my grip but keep her pinned with my hips.

"What does that mean? And back off!"

She pushes my chest with both hands. I don't budge. Instead I soak in the feel of the heat from her palms.

I beat back the urge to take her here and now, though I know I can't hold off much longer. I fully understand now what it means when men describe the rut that comes on when they identify their mate. I need to get this explanation out, succinctly, and quickly so I can get on with this.

"Your sister is Tyson Savage's destined mate. In your world, you'd call her his wife," I state.

She glares at me but doesn't look surprised, which surprises me.

"And you're about to become mine," I add.

A swallow works down her throat and she paints on more bravado. Again, not surprise, which is curious to me.

She flips her left hand and holds it in front of my face. A massive diamond ring sits on her finger. She wiggles her fingers for emphasis.

"One ring? Not two," I say. "You're not married. Yet. Give me a few minutes, though."

"I *will* be in a couple weeks," she replies shakily, chin quivering, suddenly not looking so tough. "Everything is booked."

Irrelevant.

"Even if you had two rings on your finger," I continue, "it doesn't matter. Fate has spoken." And it has. There's no doubt in my mind. "Though obviously that you're not married makes this less complicated," I add.

"You're wrong about that, Doggo. Very wrong. If you're gonna have a conversation with me, how about you get off me and put some clothes on like a civilized person?"

I smirk. My blood is hot, my cock is hard, and I need her. Badly.

“Though, civilized? That’s obviously not what you people are. People,” she adds under her breath, rolling her eyes.

“Now that I’ve explained myself, I’m ready to be the opposite of civilized, Amelia.”

She shakes her head. “You haven’t explained yourself and I don’t need you to, because this is not gonna happen. I’m engaged and this is only happening because of...” She doesn’t finish, just stares at me.

“Because of...” I prompt.

She shakes her head instead of replying.

“Amelia, you’ve seen with your own eyes what I am. And you know it’s not a dog. A wolf shifter identifies his mate by scent. He identifies his mate and then he takes her.”

“You’re smelling my perfume. It’s known for being sultry. That’s why I wear it. Besides, this is down to something else entirely. Not to mention you probably smelled the beef jerky in my purse.”

I chuckle, but shake my head. “I smell what’s underneath those artificial fragrances. That’s how I know. I felt something on the phone and then caught your scent. You smell fucking delicious.”

The flush in her complexion deepens.

“No,” she denies. “Let go of me and tell me where to find my sister. Right now! Do that and I’ll give you your explanation for this crazy behavior. Now, up! Off!”

“Aren’t you a bossy little thing?”

“You have no idea,” she says, blue eyes narrowed. “I highly recommend you stop fucking around here.”

“If you’re taken, why do you wanna smell alluring to everyone? Are you a little tease?”

“Fuck you,” she snaps.

“As you wish,” I say, smiling wide.

8

Amelia

He puts his nose behind my earlobe and inhales me again.

I dig my nails into his chest. Hard.

A rumbling sound rises, getting louder and louder. It's as if it's coming from under the bed we're on. After a split second of confusion, I realize it's coming from him. He's still a person, not a giant white wolf, but those are wolf noises. Fear prickles, and I freeze, wondering if he's about to turn into a wolf again and rip me to shreds.

But there's wetness on my neck. Sensation sparks through me. Desire kicks up a notch as he licks my neck.

But despite how great that feels, I'm still digging my nails into his skin. He lifts his head and looks directly into my eyes with those dark eyes of his. Their depth this close shakes me to my core; it feels utterly...odd. I drag my gaze away. That aroma hits again.

Whatever it is, it's as incredible as Christmas morning, and suddenly, my mouth is watering. Not only that, my nipples are erect and it's not because I'm cold. In fact, I'm the opposite of cold, I'm toasty warm. And the fact that this gorgeous, naked man is on top of me? Somewhere between the time he lifted me over his shoulder and now, my underwear became drenched.

Or, oh... maybe it happened back in the parking lot during that kiss.

He inhales deep and chuckles. "Mm. That smells good."

I don't know if he means that aroma in the air or if he means me.

“Can’t wait to taste it,” he tacks on and now I know he thinks that smell is coming from me.

As a wolf slash man I’m guessing he can smell things I probably can’t. I should feel embarrassed, but instead I’m turned on. And having trouble tearing my gaze away.

He’s leaned on his forearms, hands framing my face. He lifts one, balancing on his elbows, then his thumb glides slowly along my cheekbone.

His expression goes from cocky and heated to gentle.

“Didn’t know it’d feel like this.” His voice has gone huskier, too. “Didn’t know how real, how overpowering it’d be. You hear about it, but until you’re face to face with it – you don’t know. But it is. I believe it now, that it’s the most potent drug in the world.”

I flinch. His words, his tone, and his expression are a trifecta that strikes a match and lights a flame deep in my chest, making my whole body feel strange. Out of tune. Craving something...

“I’m gonna make you mine now,” he informs and then his head descends – in what feels like slow motion until his mouth touches mine briefly. “Can’t wait, Amelia. This is instinct, fate, and hunger and it’s all stronger than my self-control.”

In my head I scream, *it’s not... it’s voodoo*, but for some reason, I don’t say it, don’t even fight. I feel intoxicated. And there’s a throbbing between my legs, extreme... like nothing I’ve ever felt. That scent in the air – *is* it a drug? Is it part of this spell that Auntie Nelle paid for?

I lick my lips and warmth radiates through me, starting at my mouth, blazing a trail down to my boot-covered toes. My belly dips, my limbs tingle underneath a sizzling hot, dark shapeshifter gaze. He stares so deep into my eyes, for a long, frozen moment. I bite the side of my bottom lip and it makes his eyes drop to my mouth as he twists sideways so he’s no longer on top of me, instead on his side. My zipper goes down. I swallow at the same time as his hand slides into my jeans,

fingertips going straight into my panties. I drag oxygen into my body.

He growls, low in his chest, then whispers, “Yeah. This is mine. My Amelia,” he says, eyes sparkling like a sexy villain who is about to plunder some treasure.

“What’s your name?” I ask, trapped under his heated gaze.

He smiles wide and then his shoulders shake with silent laughter. “Probably important, isn’t it?” He doesn’t wait for me to reply. “Mason. Mason Quinn. Ready to become Amelia Quinn?”

The way he says it is like James Bond would say it, with an arrogance to it, like I should know that his name is important.

But also...

Amelia Quinn? Sounds heaps more like me than Amelia Bullock. I try to shake that utterly bizarre thought off. And with it, the odd urge to grab a pen and write that down to see how it looks on paper. Would I choose the number two cursive letter Q or do something more calligraphic? A big O with a fancy squiggle at five o’clock. *Hm. Definitely a nicer ring to it than...*

Now is not the time to let my mind wander to Rick and the fact that his given name is Richard Bullock, also known as Dick to some.

Guilt assaults me at thinking of Rick as Dick. He told me he got teased with that when he was a kid, so started working out and bullied the bullies who called him *Dick* Bollocks. The name has been in the back of my head a lot the past while since Ivy called him *Rick the Dick* during an argument we had.

It bothers me that my sister doesn’t like my fiancé. Because Ivy doesn’t generally dislike people. She’s kind. Sweet. Hates hurting people’s feelings. And she even tried to stage a light intervention with some friends of ours to make sure I know what I’m doing. I joked that Rick is my starter husband and waved off her concerns, but truthfully that night was the start of me looking at Rick differently. Since she said that, every

time he gets irritating, which has been often the past few weeks, I'm thinking 'The Dick' after I think of his name. And then I'm assaulted by guilt because it's disloyal to think of him as the name he told me he got teased with.

My body suddenly goes cold. Yeah, I shouldn't be thinking about my fiancé while another guy's hand is in my pants, or should I? Of course I should be thinking of him right now. I can't let this thing happen with Mason Quinn – I'm getting married in less than two weeks!

"Stop," I demand as I reach for his wrist, but then his fingers go deep, curl in for a second, then pull back out and plunge fast into me again. My eyes roll back. Before I can verbalize my denial any further, his lips are on mine and he's kissing me. He's kissing me and instead of me slapping him away, my hand grips his wrist to keep it there.

My other hand finds its way into his hair and what I'm doing can only be described as hanging onto him.

He pulls his hand out of my underwear and I almost protest, but then he's sliding down my body and pulling my boots off while putting his mouth to my navel. He tosses the boots and peels my jeans and socks down, dropping a soft kiss on my hip.

My eyes bulge, but instead of speaking, I fall under a spell or something. Yeah, it's the only explanation – that I'm spellbound. Because I lie still while a stranger undresses me. Even if he is a beautiful stranger, I should be doing something to stop it.

I don't.

Instead, I watch as he undresses my upper half. It's a fascinating display because he does it slowly, reverently, touching me, kissing my shoulder as it becomes exposed. It's like he's savoring every inch of skin he uncovers. He has a serious expression on his face, deadly serious. And I should say something – protest, fight, move, something... but I don't. Instead, I watch, fascinated by his every move, by every inch

of his gorgeous body. By the way his eyes ... maybe the sexiest eyes I've ever seen... drink me in. I'm enthralled by the way his muscles bunch and flex with his movements. I'm mesmerized by the attractive, strong, warm hands that move over me.

His tongue flicks the tip of my nipple after my bra gets unfastened and then after tossing it, he nuzzles against my breasts like a cat would rub heads on their owner. Our eyes meet again, and he smiles. This smile makes it feel like there's a herd of cattle stampeding inside my chest.

I'm down to just my black lace underwear and then those are peeled away too, leaving me just as naked as he is.

"Fuck, you're perfect," Mason tells me, putting his lips to my hip and I'm thinking *far from it*, but I don't verbalize that.

He's looking at me as if I am. And maybe I also say nothing because his head then moves, and his cheek grazes my thigh before his movements halt. His face is between my legs. As my jaw drops, his tongue swipes over me, slowly, making my body jolt, making me forget what words even are.

Strong hands grip my hips, which makes my heart skip a beat.

That tongue slides through again before he groans. "Mm. I'll save that for later. Just needed a taste to hold me over."

He's rising up my body, smacking his lips as he's lining up, rubbing the tip of that thick cock over the seam of me and I'm swallowing, thinking that this feels incredible.

Light catches the diamond on my finger and as my eyes hit it, I wince.

"Wait. I'm-

"Too late," he grinds out, slamming in, to the root, making me gasp hard, because I'm fuller than I would've even thought possible. "Can't fight fate, Amelia. You're mine now."

"Engaged," I manage to whimper. "I'm engaged."

But it is definitely too late because he's already inside me. Instead of pushing away, instead of protesting because I've never been this stuffed, I grab his shoulders with both hands, mouth dropping open as I absorb sensations. He leans over and pulls my engagement ring off my finger and I hear the ping of it landing somewhere in the distance.

"Not anymore you're not," he says.

"What?" I manage.

Did this shapeshifter just rip my engagement ring off me and throw it after plunging his huge cock into me? I'm pretty sure he did.

"It doesn't matter," he tells me, caressing my face and staring deep while pulling back until he's almost all the way out. "If you were meant to be his, we wouldn't be here right now. That was temporary. *This* is real." He slams his hips forward and keeps talking, "*This...* " *another slam* "is what matters. You can call him when we're done and tell him it's off. Then, baby, you never even need to think of him again." His fingertips stroke down my hairline, stopping at my jaw. "After this, he'll just be Whatshisface, someone you used to know and barely recall. I'm already there with anyone before you."

Of their own volition, my legs wind around his backside as he flexes his hips again. Our tongues dance, our hips move, and then I'm just taking it because he's slowly, purposefully fucking into me with power, with arrogance, with a sense of entitlement in his eyes. And it's incredible.

He's the most beautiful male specimen I have ever seen. Touched. His body is ridiculously beautiful, hot to the touch, and it feels amazing to touch it. And I feel like I'm on the verge of tears and I don't know why. Because this feels so good? Because of Auntie Nelle doing this – showing me what I've always known but maybe forgotten? That magic is real. Because of the way Mason Quinn is looking at me right now? Like I'm the only woman for him? Like I'm his dream girl? Or am I about to cry because I'm cheating on Whatshisface?

Cheating? Oh my God...

What am I doing? What am I doing right now? I'm a cheater.

"You're so fucking beautiful, Amelia," he says, "and you're mine," he adds, then he pulls out, turns me to my belly, hauls me up onto my knees by my hips, and slams back inside. I wobble and fall on my face, but he tugs me back up, then puts his hands to my breasts. I grab his wrought iron headboard with both hands and as his nose traces along my shoulder up to my neck as his fingers move to my clitoris, I swallow down a lump along with a huge helping of emotion. He circles my clit while sliding in and out, slowly. I close my eyes, soak it in, tightening my grip on the iron, hearing a low vibrating noise. Has he pulled out a vibrator? No... he's making a growling sound again, though this doesn't sound angry – it's sensual instead. Lower. More like a motor, or the purr of a large jungle cat. And this sound makes me feel all gooey and happy while he fucks me. I'm fucking a stranger. A supernatural stranger. This is amazing. This is delicious. This is lewd and dirty and... bareback. Oh shit! Bareback! I blink a couple times and decide that's probably okay, as long as he doesn't have diseases.

Fuck this feels good. It's been so long since I've felt anything remotely resembling this.

He picks up pace, fucking harder, fucking faster, and then he slows again, with his lips moving from my shoulder to my neck. That feels good. More than good – great.

But then I feel his teeth as his pace quickens on my clit, as his deep strokes in and out of me cause a surge of wetness I can hear – like stirring macaroni.

"You feel so fucking good, baby," he tells me, pressing a kiss to my throat. "My cock is finally home."

As if I wasn't already wet enough. *God...* I'd be mortified if I had the chance to be at that noise – but instead, I'm lost in sensation, coming hard, whimpering, but then I jerk in surprise

and I could swear there's a vibrator inside me. Vibrations are coming from his chest as well as from his dick.

The thrusting stops, but he stays seated in me, and declares, "Mine" in a guttural, rasping tone before he sinks his teeth into my flesh where my neck meets my shoulder and *holy fuck...* I scream. Loud. This is a scream of part pain, part pleasure as the orgasm unravels while he's got a chunk of me in his mouth, while he vibrates inside me in a way that has my body bucking, wetness leaking out of my eyes not to mention between my thighs. I'm so fucking full.

I've never had a climax like this. Not ever. It's like he's growing bigger inside me while fluid spills from me and someone has a remote that's taken that vibration from a level ten, which was incredible, up to a six hundred.

What in the ever-loving...

I'm sobbing, making crazy-loud sounds that feel like they're echoing across the lake behind this beautiful house. I collapse to my belly again, but I keep whimpering sounds of ecstasy that are muffled by the pillow my face is smushed into.

He keeps going. His teeth still have me. And I'm pretty certain he's broken the skin on my neck where he bit down. His mouth is there, suckling, and I can't speak, all I can seem to do is keep crying, clinging to the sheets, because the climax continues rocketing through me for a long time... forever. I cry, tremble, and *feel*.

In a strange state of euphoria braided with disbelief, I do something I've never done during sex. Finally able to speak again, I cry out his name ... and I do it loud.

9

Mason

For an instant, I could swear my cock splits apart, detonating, and my first thought is concern for her, that I released a storm of shrapnel that will harm her.

It feels like a release of power, of strength, of everything I am. Everything I am floods through her. She gets all of me because she's mine.

She's mine; I'm hers.

Realizing what this is, I'm flooded with a sense of victory. Though this is sensation I've never come close to experiencing, I know what it is.

My first knot.

Power surges within me at the first sensation of her milking my knot and it's so intense, so hot and tight that I roar as I release into her, feeling my canines elongate just slightly, signaling an urge so strong it's as essential as breathing.

I declare her mine as I give her my mark, sinking my teeth into the side of her neck above her collarbone, the seal of our connection surging through every cell in my body with the small taste of Amelia's blood. It's the best thing I've ever tasted, the best gift I've ever received.

She's crying, loudly, and while she does I feel our connection click into place, in a place deep inside my chest. She's mine. I'm hers. This is real, this is right, and nothing will ever make me question it. I know I'm mated for life, down to my bones.

"Mason," she cries out, and fuck it feels good, sounds like an angel singing.

Her whimpering my name? The way it sounds, the way it reverberates through me, something inside me unfurls and my

wolf wants to howl in triumph.

Shockingly, I very nearly shift and manage – just barely – to hold it back.

It takes half a dozen beats of my heart before I'm able to speak and when I do, I do it with meaning.

“This mark on your skin, this knot inside you, they mean you're mine.”

I press my lips to her skin for a kiss.

Mine, Amelia,” I say as she continues to whimper against the vibrations from my knot. “You're mine. And baby, I'm yours. Starting now, you're everything to me. And everything I do from now on, it's done not only for my pack, but first – for my mate. You. You're the most important thing in my life.”

And she is. Even more important than my pack, and that revelation shakes me. I never imagined feeling like this. And it's been moments, not years, months, days, or even hours. If love grows stronger over time like I've been taught, how strong will my feelings be in years?

She's trembling, weeping, clutching the pillow with both hands, her glorious mane of dark hair spread across my pillow. That she cried out my name elates me. I kiss the fresh claiming mark and then graze it with the tips of my fingers, which makes her shiver.

Our combined essence pools between us as the knot ebbs, then grows again. The pulsations don't stop. And not only can I not pull out, I would not fucking want to even if I could. This is heaven inside of her. I continue to rotate my hips against her luscious backside, rutting her into the mattress while listening to her sounds, while feeling her body convulse around me, while taking in the sight of her curves, her skin, her pretty mouth, her eyelashes.

A car pulls down my driveway, causing me to go still. I then stretch my neck and sniff out the scent. Joel has brought her car. I hear the door slam and then the sound of his wolf's paws hitting the ground as he runs back toward the village. I could

swear my hearing is more acute right now. Is it? Have my senses sharpened as a result of mating?

“Ah, baby,” I press my mouth to the back of her neck as I gather her hair into my fist. I jet inside her again, with more cum than I’ve ever released, then my knot slowly abates.

Fuck, that was good. Fuck, that wasn’t just good; it was everything.

I can’t wait to do it again.

I turn her to her back and lavish attention on her gorgeous breasts. They’re full, perfect, with silky though erect nipples. Her eyes are closed, her cheeks tear-streaked, her perfect pink lips formed into a small letter o as she blows out a slow breath while grabbing me like she plans to hang on forever.

“You feel so, *so* fucking good, Amelia,” I say.

No, she’s not looking at me, but grips me even tighter. Clinging like she needs to.

“Happy wedding day,” I say.

And the way her body jolts, I know I’ve slid out too soon. I immediately grow hard again, so I slide back inside.

This is where I belong. Inside this woman. My woman. Mine.

Her eyes bolt open and stare directly into mine. I watch as they fill with panic. She grabs her neck and then looks at her fingers, likely expecting blood. She’s not bleeding. She pulls her lips tight and looks like she’s about to speak, protest, but I swivel my hips and pinch her nipple while my lips touch hers. My tongue then dips inside to touch the tip of hers and she whimpers around it.

I feel her everywhere. This, with her – it is the most perfect coupling I’ve experienced. I can’t just call it sex, because it’s so much more than that. And anything sexual I’ve experienced before today pales in contrast. I’m not sure I could conjure up a comparison if I tried because nobody has mattered until now.

She matters. The way she feels, smells, the way she tastes – I know nothing else about her other than the fact that she obviously loves her sister, she’s feisty and brave, and that she tastes and feels like I’ve found my heaven without having to transcend. It’s all I need right now. The knowledge she’s mine. I’ll look forward to getting to know her. Everything about her. Every inch of her, every strand of hair on her head. And we’ve got a lifetime for that.

I piston my hips as she milks my cock and I knot again, coming inside her, marveling at how good this feels, listening to her cry out in ecstasy while I spill into her. My orgasms with her last several times longer than any others I’ve had, several times more intense. Feeling her tight, hot walls convulsing around my knot is my new favorite thing. My mouth finds hers again. Her lips have tears on them. She’s weeping.

When my knot releases, I flip us so I can gather her on top. We’re on top of the blankets, so I yank the side of the blanket to drape it over her. Her arms are wrapped around my neck, her face buried under my chin, her body trembling as she cries.

A rumbling noise comes from my chest while I stroke the silky soft skin of her back. An alpha’s purr. It’s something I know but also something I’ve never done before. It was dormant in me and has been woken. Like the claim bite. Like the knot. All of this was inside me waiting for the woman who is mine.

And I’m relieved at the clarity I feel. I feel like myself. Only more. In the best way. No confusion. Zero shadows. No preoccupation with another alpha’s mate. No doubt in my mind that this woman is mine.

I’m so fucking happy.

She’s crying for a long time, not pushing me away, letting me comfort her with my purr, and it feels like a gift. The tears dripping on me aren’t pain. This is something else.

I think she feels the significance of this. Her tears seep in through my pores and it feels like any part of me that was

broken the past week has now been fused back together.
Fortified and stronger than ever.

I roll us away from the damp section of the bed, purring while I rub my hand over the swell of her sweet ass, kissing the top of her head and bringing us to the opposite side. Finally, the sniffles and shudders stop and her breathing evens out. She's fallen asleep on me. The ultimate sign of trust. I empty my lungs of breath and kiss her head again, soaking this in.

I haven't been sleeping much this past week, so I take advantage of the moment, of the quiet, of how perfect she feels on me, at how my world is perfect – what a sharp contrast this is to how I felt just hours ago. This is real, it's right, and it's everything I never knew I was waiting for. I drift off, too.

10

Amelia

I'm on my hands and knees on the shapeshifter's bedroom floor, looking for my engagement ring. While freaking out.

I can't believe I've done this. I'm not a cheater! I've never cheated on anybody. I've been the one to get cheated on, and it feels so shitty I vowed I'd never do it.

But I have.

So, I'm gripped by guilt.

Deep down I'm telling myself it's because of the witchcraft. Maybe it's not *completely* my fault, but I should've tried to stop it. I clung to him! I have the overwhelming urge to flee. But I can't do that just yet. I have to find the engagement ring and then find my sister.

And then flee.

I look over at the bed. Mr. Stranger Danger is sound asleep. Naked. Gorgeous. What a trip – I shake my head, having trouble believing this.

Focus, Amelia.

Where's that stupid ring? I need it. And that's not because I love it, believe me.

But *Whatshisface* had it custom-made for me by his sister, a jeweler. He said she took one look at me and knew the perfect ring setting.

Let's not talk about the fact that I think it's gaudy and audacious. It's really not my taste, but I kept that to myself. I didn't want to hurt his feelings. Or his sister's.

He told me it cost him four months' salary and that was getting it at *cost*. He made that grand gesture known every

chance he got, never dialing in to the fact that he turns people off when he brags like that.

I've recently noticed how much he brags. Either he's gotten worse lately or I've just started to take notice. The past week or so, his constant monetary references have been grating on me like sandpaper. Nevertheless, I need to find that ring.

I've got my clothes back on, my boots nearby so I can slip out of here covertly, though it seems like the wolf/man is in a deep sleep. He was holding me so close I'm surprised I got out of his embrace without waking him.

My mind has been racing with potential plans to rescue Ivy. And I can't execute any of them if I'm here getting screwed senseless, so I need to hustle.

Screwed senseless. Sounds about right. Because my senses are scattered all over this gorgeous place.

This room is spotless, which made me think it'd be easy to find the ring. I was sure I heard a ping when it landed, but this is a large space, and it could've pinged off one of the many iron railings and landed somewhere down below.

Like downstairs, this level of his home is beautiful. Gleaming wood floors, though his bed sits on a colorful area rug next to sliding doors that lead to a balcony with a lake view. The entirety of the back of this house is mostly glass and decks, clearly designed to let you enjoy the reason you'd build here – that lake. Two comfortable-looking lounge chairs and a table sit on the deck outside this bedroom, looking like the perfect place for a morning coffee or a sunset cocktail. I bet the sunsets here are spectacular. I haven't had the opportunity to watch one in a while. Too bad I'll be out of here before sundown; I'll have to just imagine how pretty it might be.

Thinking the ring might have fallen through the railings up here, I peer over the side and my belly swoops. It's as if I've temporarily forgotten how much I don't like heights. The room leads to a bridge with banisters on either side. If I look on the other side not only will I see below to the main floor, but part

of the view also shows the drop down to the basement level, so it's belly-butterfly city in most directions for me.

I backtrack and tiptoe through an open door, finding the master bathroom next to a set of double doors that I'm guessing is a closet.

This bathroom – also a dream. Massive shower, soaker tub, double raised brushed bronze sinks over a humongous granite vanity. And the bathroom has panoramic views overlooking forest straight ahead and the lake off to the side. I see no other homes out there, just trees and water. It's still early spring, so the trees are sparse with mostly buds getting ready to sprout into leaves; I bet it's breathtaking in full bloom. And in the fall with the leaves changing color.

Fall colors and sunsets have always been a thing for me, part of the reason I'm indifferent toward Whatshisface's house.

Shit. *Rick's* house (I correct myself, pushing away thoughts of annoyance at myself for thinking of him as nameless).

When we started dating, I told him I've always dreamt of living somewhere with beautiful views, with lots of trees that change color. He was apathetic and talked about how much value his house has risen since he bought it. When I saw his mostly white home, it was clear he liked clean lines and uncluttered spaces. I like having the things I love surrounding me – in full color.

I never envisioned myself living in a place like that. He's a numbers guy, a money guy, so he convinced me to give up my apartment, told me it wasn't a good investment, and then he took the proceeds when I sold it and invested it for me. He moved me into his house when we got engaged. He told me to sell all my furniture, because he was set for all that, but I kept my things in storage, figuring later we'd see about a cottage somewhere quiet, with trees, where I could bring out all the things I loved at our retreat.

This house is insanely beautiful. The sort of place that would be beautiful all year long. Colorful but in a way that's serene,

not too busy. And surrounded by what I know would be lush greenery if nature wasn't just waking up from a winter sleep. Even the comforter on Mason's bed brings the outdoors inside. A midnight blue bedspread with a pattern that mimics a star-studded sky.

Rick's all-white brownstone-like rowhouse looks the same day after day, all year-round. There's almost no yard, zero grass and just a couple of shrubs. He got it in his head that pavers and Astroturf save time and effort on landscaping. His street is high density and way too many people, too much traffic. No nature, barely even any birds or squirrels. But it's prestigious and rising in value; he brags that bidding wars start whenever someone in that community lists their house for sale.

This place with all the warmth, the rich wood, the character – with four seasons – *much* more my style. And I've been quietly screaming "serenity now!" in my head the past few months and despite my current predicament, this is the first time in weeks I don't feel like I'm running on empty with energy drink jitters. It probably helps that this place is secluded and surrounded by nature without that endless city *white noise*. Not to mention all the orgasms I just had.

Most brides-to-be look forward to destressing on their honeymoon, but I already know I'm not getting that. Rick is "surprising" me with a cruise for our honeymoon. His mother told me about it, acting like it'd be a great retreat and super-relaxing after how busy I've been getting the wedding planned in record time. She told me about it to do me a "favor", recommending a tanning salon so I won't look like a ghost for my honeymoon. I failed to hide my disappointment, which made her silently judge me yet again. She looked at me like I'm an ungrateful brat.

But a cruise won't make me relax. I went on a cruise a few years ago with my friends Caroline and Sally and it wasn't my jam. So much so that I woke up in the middle of the first night on it panicked at the idea of being in the ocean with no land in sight. It was a long night of panic and the next morning when we finally stopped at an island, I abandoned the cruise and

flew home. I told Rick as much and he said I should give it another try, that cruises were great. I disagreed vehemently, telling him the last one I went on made me the most claustrophobic I've been in my life and that I had no desire to live through that again.

To try to do damage control after his mom let the cruise cat out of the bag, I dropped a hint that I'd love our honeymoon to be low-key, maybe rent a remote cabin and go unplugged for a week, but Rick's face dropped and then he told me he had booked a different honeymoon as a surprise and that it was non-refundable, but he was sure I'd love it.

A girl only gets one honeymoon, if she's lucky enough to mate for life, and that honeymoon is not a time to give a second chance to a previous experience that she loathed.

Mate for life. Hah. That was never in my vocabulary before. I avoid the urge to look over the sleeping Mason Quinn who thinks that's what we just did.

Opposite to the bridge, past the staircase, there's the opposite side of the top level, another open space with a home office and some gym equipment. I like the design of this top level a lot, though I'd have a master bedroom door if I lived here. Not that I should pay *this* much attention to the kidnapping shapeshifter sex god's lair, but I can't help but be impressed as I try to imagine where the ring landed.

I barely took in the second floor on the way up here, but did note it had more rooms and a loft with a c-shaped sofa. The décor, the windows, the layout – all of it is absolutely beautiful.

Built for entertaining. And for a family. And I'm sort of stumped because the déjà vu feeling floating around in me about this house won't let up.

There's no sign of my ring in this bathroom either. I need out of here before he wakes up and tries to screw me again. I shiver in a very private place.

Mason. *Cue daydream music.*

The bridal march is the music I'm hearing, because he called this our wedding day. Like having sex with me equals getting married. Mating for life. God knows most people don't mate for life. Case in point, my parents. Or more accurately, my traitorous father who thinks he can cheat on Mom, leave her after getting caught red-handed, and then when his assistant (who is only a couple years older than me) ends it – try to come back with a bouquet of roses and a lame promise to do better. As if that's enough!

But really, if sex was something that marked *that* significant of a change in someone's life, the kind of sex Mason had with me would definitely qualify as that. Life-changing. The kind of sex you'd want for your wedding night. God knows I haven't had any life-altering orgasms lately. Or even any mediocre ones (unless you count the ones I give myself).

I certainly didn't ever have sex that made me cry.

I can't analyze all that right now. There's no time. I have *got to* push this stuff out of my mind and focus.

Oh. I spot handles on either side of the bridge that leads to the stairs. Pocket doors. This master bedroom does have privacy as an option if you want or need it.

Okay, that's enough waxing on about Mason's beautiful house being absolutely perfect because why would I care that his bedroom *does* have doors? It's not like I'm going to live here!

I huff at myself, but this makes him stir, so I freeze.

I watch him for a long, frozen moment, thinking that all this is happening because of my aunt messing with Mother Nature via a fortune teller. And that's the only reason I got caught up in it. Basically: voodoo sex magic.

On my way here this morning, I recalled how Auntie Nelle tried to assure me from her deathbed that my life would have magic; she knew it for a fact. Acted like there was a big surprise coming that she was excited about. She promised to watch if she could, just to see it happen but promised she'd close her eyes at the fun parts.

I humored her when she said the universe had something magical in store for all of us Brennan girls. Her letter to Mom said she started the ball rolling when Ivy was a baby, me a toddler – and that she made sure the process was complete when she got her cancer diagnosis. She'd made sure that before she'd leave the world that her girls would be taken care of and that we'd have magic in our lives.

The things she said on her death bed, I hadn't given them much merit; I was so distraught over the notion of losing her that I didn't give much weight to what I thought were her tumor and painkiller-induced ramblings. But when I read that letter Mom handed me last night? Her words on the page took me right back to the days before she died and made me reconsider what I had waved off as delirium.

I haven't even thought about her supernatural stories for a long time. I loved those stories when I was a child. She wasn't always around – often off on an adventure. But whenever she was visiting, she always made sure to do things with me, my sister, and brother individually as well as collectively. I'd get her to recount her supernatural tales often and she told me she could get into a lot of trouble for revealing stuff to me because supernaturals kept things very guarded,. She also said she trusted me with the secrets because one of the Brennan girls would need to know about magic one day. She chose me. And it made me feel important. Especially when she told me my knowledge would help Ivy adjust to the magic in her life when the time was right. I never knew what that meant.

Until now. That 'one day' has arrived.

But evidently, for Ivy first. So that was kind of backwards. Did part of Auntie Nelle's plan backfire or get all mixed up and twisted around? Ivy's a skeptic. How did she react to all this without me having the chance to prep her like our aunt obviously wanted?

My aunt started planting magic beans, she called them, with me, from a young age. In fact, it was an age so young I don't remember a time when I didn't know that she believed there

were witches and fairies, spirits, shapeshifters, and vampires among us. She told me there was so much magic all around but that most people never got to experience it. She said that because their minds were closed, they missed out. She told me to keep my mind and my eyes open and if those and my heart were open too, I could get more magic than I'd ever dreamed. I took my promise seriously – the promise to keep things between us until I knew it was the right time to reveal things to my sister. Auntie Nelle said I'd know when the time was right. That my knowledge could help Ivy know not to be afraid, to know that she can trust her heart, trust that magic isn't wrong.

And that time is now. Or... last week.

She wasn't wrong about this being magical. But that said, everything in me is screaming with the need to get the heck out of here. Getting confirmation this world exists feels dangerous. I can't shake the feeling that I should learn as little as possible about it before I get out of here and my instincts are imploring me to get far, *far* away from this purchased destiny immediately.

I don't have room for magic in my life. And frankly, it scares me. Maybe ten years ago, things would be different, but now? My world of childhood fantasy is colliding with my world of adult responsibility. And I can't compute.

I can't even imagine how Ivy's been feeling.

When Auntie Nelle died, I wasn't engaged. I was single, with a fresh case of heartache. I met him a couple months after she died. And honestly, I was about to end the relationship with Rick when he surprised me with a very public proposal. I wasn't feeling it. Wasn't feeling much at that point due to a whole lot of drama with my parents, not to mention still being in a bit of an emotional rut after my breakup with the guy I was with pre-Rick.

But when Rick proposed after just five months of dating, I told myself it was crazy-romantic and I got caught up with the speech he made, the things he said, the fact that he told me he

loved me when no man had said that before. The way he *seemed* like he really was in love with me.

He slipped that ring on my finger in bed that night, telling me that he'd had the ring made for me, but had forgotten to bring it to the game where he proposed on camera.

The next day, at a brunch with his mother, she sprang it as a suggestion that we get married on his grandparents' anniversary.

Rick was all over that idea. I thought, at first, they meant the following year. They didn't; they meant a few months away.

I tried to laugh that off, saying we needed a year to plan, especially after he said there would need to be close to four hundred guests, but in hindsight he and his mom basically bulldozed me. It felt like something between a high-pressure sales technique and an intervention. They convinced me of how happy it'd make everyone if we got married on that special day. Rick's mom would help. Rick then threw in that he knew a wedding planner. And before I knew it, the date was set, and I was running around planning a huge and lavish wedding like a headless chicken. A headless chicken being directed by two demanding drill sergeants. My future mother-in-law and The Wedding Planner from Hell.

See, Rick's grandfather had died not long before this and was, in fact, responsible for us meeting at the hospital I work at after he had a heart attack, took a shine to me, and set me up with his grandson.

He was such a character that I found myself checking in on him on another floor the day after admitting him and that's when he not only introduced me to Rick, but also finagled a way to set us up to go on a coffee date. I wasn't sure I was ready for things to go anywhere serious as I was still recuperating from heartache, but then I was invited to Mr. Bullock's *coming home* party when he was released from the hospital and was quickly pulled into not only the family fold, also the relationship with Rick.

Fast forward and I've spent the past few months cram-planning the wedding, getting bossed around by Rick's mom and the cunty wedding planner, and to say it's been stressful is an understatement.

Rick insisted cost was no concern – we'd make a profit by the time it was over because his relatives and his mother's business associates would be generous with their wedding envelopes. I still can't help but be uneasy about the amount of wedding debt I've racked up on my credit cards.

Rick also blew sunshine up my butt telling me he had every faith in my abilities to pull the planning off in time for his grandparents' anniversary, a week ahead of his thirtieth birthday. He hired that nightmare wedding planner as if that'd make my life easier. But it hasn't. Sheila has made it worse. Way worse.

I'd have fired her if she weren't a friend of their family. Because she's made it ultra-clear that she hates my guts. I'm not expecting everyone to kiss my ass, but she doesn't even hide that she hates me and it's her job to help me. And it's like Rick's mom thinks that's funny or something. She gets sheer joy out of seeing me hold my tongue and play politics.

I've become stubborn about it, and it's turned into this horrible game of chess. If someone hates me, I kill them with kindness and never show my pain, never let them win. If someone tells me they don't think I can do something, I make sure to do it with stellar results.

Despite that Sheila and I have been like oil and water, I've done my best to rise to the occasion, but frankly between her, Rick, and Rick's mom Carla pushing what they want at me in terms of the venue, the photographer, and getting involved in even the nitty grittiest of details – it's been exasperating and put pressure on our relationship, too.

Ivy called me *Bridezilla* when we fought the other week and once I had a chance to process the argument I couldn't even continue to be mad about it. A light went off, realizing she's right, because I'm already a drama llama as it is, but planning

a glamorous and expensive wedding for four hundred guests in just a few months is really fucking stressful. Adding that to my job working at least fifty hours a week – I had a little meltdown.

I cried for the first time in front of Rick last week, and he acted shocked. He was so shocked that I was remotely stressed and when I detailed the level of stress I'm under with tears in my eyes and told him I didn't think I could pull it off, he convinced me to take a leave of absence from work. If I had more time for planning, I wouldn't feel so overwhelmed.

It was directly after a meal with his mother where she went on and on about the dark circles around my eyes and the fact that I looked like I was retaining water and that I should furthermore cut my sodium intake. This wasn't concern for me as much as it was her bitchy way of remarking I'd gained weight and wasn't getting enough beauty sleep.

His solution of a leave of absence until after the honeymoon would mean more stress – this time financial. He told me he'd cover my share of the bills until after the wedding, but in reality, not having my job as an ER nurse – which is a pretty fucking stressful job – will mean that nearly 16 hours a day, 7 days a week this next almost two weeks will be devoted to the final touches for this wedding. And it's already felt like it has taken over my life. Dealing with seating charts. With bridesmaids who have trouble synching their schedules for things that have to get done. Ivy breaking up with Ben and screwing with the wedding party and leaving me stumped for wedding party gifts because we bought everyone theatre tickets as the *thank you* gift. Not to mention being depressed that my wedding dress had to be let out because I'm stress-eating.

And as large of a wedding party as we've got, I've been the one doing all the work – work my wedding planner has made clear isn't enough. My bridesmaids act all hurt and wounded whenever I get testy about needing them to do something on the very rigid schedule I've had to set up. And it's not like the groom has been much help. He glazes over or mumbles

Sheila's or his mother's names when I complain about anything to do with the process.

Poor me, right? Poor girl getting a lavish wedding and having a big, expensive diamond on her finger. Knowing the scoffing and eyerolls I'd get if I complained, I've just kept the complaints to myself. I'm not the type to typically get caught up in feeling sorry for myself. Or someone who lets others push me around.

But I guess I'm out of sorts especially in the last few weeks. Like... what's the point of this huge dream wedding if I've lost myself in the process, feeling like it's Rick's mother's dream instead of mine? I don't usually let people bulldoze me, but him and his passive-aggressive mom and this wedding planner and the giant, ugly engagement ring and the wedding date synched with the grandparents' anniversary? Not to mention worry about my own mom with all the drama and pain my father has caused in the last six months? I'll be glad when this is in the past. Glad to go back to work. To go back to regular life. I'd rather battle to save lives in the crazy-busy and often chaotic ER than plan another wedding.

We haven't even had sex in close to seven weeks. I've stopped making moves because I'm tired of getting turned down. He says it's because of the stress he's under. He says stress screws with his sex drive. I don't know why he's so stressed either – I'm stressed too, and I find sex to be a pretty good stress reliever.

When I said that to him, we got in a big argument, and I barely spoke to him for a week. He told me there were things way more important than sex. Well, duh. Of course. But if you can't connect with your partner...

Let's say I went from thinking sex would help to thinking I might deny it on the wedding night and leave him frustrated the way he's done to me. Not exactly a great way to start a marriage. I keep telling myself that once the big day is over, things will settle, get better.

And now this monkey wrench – on my hands and knees in the home of a wolf shapeshifter who kidnapped me and gave me the best sex of my life, but he's only into me because of that spell, and while he sleeps the sex off, I'm hunting down the ring and trying to plan my sister's rescue. Her rescue from the same fate – a fate our beloved deceased aunt spent her lottery winnings to purchase for us.

And I realize as I think about this that there are tears falling down my cheeks again. But it's obvious that I was spoon-fed a witch's brew that makes me cheat and cry. And that, coupled with the ball of stress I've been for the past few months, it has to be why I can't stop the waterworks.

Dashing the useless wetness from my face, I softly close the bathroom door so I can use the facilities.

As I do, I become hyper-aware of my poor vagina. It's as if it has been woken up from a long winter's nap and promptly thrown into the ring to go twenty rounds in an MMA fight. A fight it never even trained for. No wonder. I've never been sexed by someone *that* hung. Not to mention the way he did it - there was something magical about that penis. The vibrating. The way it felt like it doubled in size inside me, so unbelievably full – stuffed to the brim. And all the things he did with his mouth, his fingers, even the way he looked at me while he did it. The growling noises. And he bit me. He bit my neck and that was insanely sensual; my neck is one of my favorite places to get affection and *Whatshisface* has been told ten times about that but still doesn't bother to give it much (if any) attention. Though, *fuck* did it hurt for a split second when his teeth broke the skin, but then it felt beyond good.

My fingertips find the spot and my nipples immediately tingle.

Whoa. My neck has always been sensitive, but phew... that's... *wow*.

And that purring thing he did – like a snake charmer having me dance up out of a wicker basket to follow his flute – yeah, his *flute*. Musical and magical.

I realize I'm staring off into space while sitting on the toilet, a goofy smile on my face while I play with the teeth marks. I'm insanely aroused right now.

I shake it off, finish my bathroom business, and haul my panties and jeans up before I move to the sink to wash my hands.

Faced with my reflection, my heart drops and I'm about to give myself a dirty look because my conscience is raw and painful right now, but before I can do that, I catch sight of that mark on my neck. Is that going to scar? My wedding gown has a plunging neckline and I'm wearing my hair up, so *yikes*, that's gonna show. Distinct looking teeth marks.

Fuck.

My heart plays hopscotch in my chest. My wedding pictures, photos I'll look at for the rest of my life – could have prominent love bites on my neck from a man that isn't my husband.

Even if he thinks he's my husband...

A supernatural stranger fucked me raw – doing it bareback and bit me, breaking the skin. *Crazy. Wild. Unfathomable.* But it happened. Because I let it. Voodoo or spells are involved, but still... I should've tried to stop him. I lay there while he undressed me and then actively participated. And got all warm and squishy as he said sweet words to me that sounded better than any wedding vows I can think of.

I can't think about it now. What I *do* need to think about is finding the ring, finding Ivy, and getting us gone. I'll think about all this later – probably excruciatingly.

An evil thought crosses my mind.

I've been thinking of that ring as a weight on my finger, a weight on my shoulders, even. If it's gone, if it's lost forever then that means I don't have to wear it every single day for the rest of my life.

Hm.

I begin to formulate a story in my head. Definitely not the truth.

So, whatsyerface – err,

Let's try that again.

Rick, so, bad news. I was mugged.

No. Bad idea. If I have to report it to the cops for insurance purposes, I'd have to lie, and insurance fraud is a serious thing. Scratch that. I don't look bad in orange, I've got some great orange suede booties in fact, but I'm not down with wearing an orange jumpsuit.

I could blame the cops because they refused, last night, to do anything about the fact she's gone missing again. And anyone who knows me knows I wouldn't just sit back and do nothing.

Hey Rick! Omigod! You're not going to believe this. The cops wouldn't help me find Ivy who got kidnapped, so I ran to rescue her, and I did, long story, but yada yada yada – and my engagement ring was just... gone.

Rick would definitely expect a *yada yada* elaboration.

And subsequent fallout – I'd be expected to update the cops, so they could go after Ivy's abductors, and I'd never be believed. Ivy would have trouble backing me up – she's a shit liar. I can't exactly recount the story of what actually happened.

Oh, Dude... sorry, but while I was off trying to find and rescue my sister, this gorgeous man walked up to me and then uttered my name like it was the most beautiful word in the dictionary before he ravished me in a movie-worthy kiss and stole me, had sex with me, bit my neck, and now we're married in the biblical sense, which the shapeshifter says is as good as the regular legal sense. But don't be mad, it's because of magic my aunt paid for. So, really, it's not my fault. P.S. He threw your ring away while he consummated our mystical marriage.

Yeah... no matter how I tackle it, this will be complicated. Maybe I'll just say I lost it. It was a little loose on my finger to begin with so it's not implausible that I'd lose it.

I'm not someone who lies intentionally, not unless it's absolutely necessary, and mostly I tell everyone else the truth and just lie to myself.

If my lies lead to involving the cops though, it could become a bit of a circus.

But the threat of that – I'm thinking it's something that could actually get Ivy's kidnapper to let her go. And that's pretty much my plan. Get out of here and then call that gas station or Savage Construction again to threaten that I'll tell the cops on them if they don't produce her and let us walk away. And their fear of that might mean I don't actually have to tell the cops anything (thereby risking getting sent to the psychiatric ward).

Ivy and I can then brainstorm; figure out what to tell Rick that might actually be plausible. I don't know – this is all I can think of right now, so it's decided. I'll get out of here now and figure the rest out later.

Though if they call my bluff and I *do* have to call the cops, not only would the cops swarm this area, but the equivalent to the X-Files cast will probably show up too. And possibly the cast of Supernatural.

Dean and Sam. *Mm*. Dean is a little reminiscent of Mason, isn't he? Yeah, kind of.

I drift into another daze remembering those hands on me, his dark eyes looking deep into mine, and when I realize I've been standing too long, I spring into action and dry my hands on a lush sand-colored towel. This guy not only has it going on with the sex god skills, but this crazily familiar house is also an absolute dream with good towels.

Enough thinking about Mason, The Shapeshifter Sex God. He's too good to be true and this is not true – it's voodoo. Time to vamoose.

Yeah, the Supernatural and X-Files guys won't be here, instead there'll be men in white coats coming to take me away (haha, hoho...) God, me and my internal thoughts today!

I slowly, carefully turn the door handle with my right hand, then gingerly open the door and step out, boots in my left hand. Immediately, I slam into a wall of hot, naked muscle.

Mason Quinn is wearing nothing but a sexy glimmer in those eyes.

My eyes rove down the muscled chest in front of me and freeze on the thick, veined, and erect penis. My eyes reverse, traveling back up, up, up, until our eyes meet. He's at least five or maybe even six inches taller than Whatshisface.

"How 'bout a shower, Mrs. Quinn?" He wraps his arms around me and begins backing me up.

Duh, what?

I shake my head. "Uh, Brennan. And no... I'm good. You go ahead."

He smiles.

"Hell yeah, you are. You've got my scent all over you."

My face burns hot.

"Come with me," he says, grabbing my hands and dropping kisses on the left, then the right one as my boots clunk to the floor.

"No. I'm good. Go ahead," I try again, going for nonchalance, but failing. Miserably.

He smirks. "You're about to bolt."

I paint on a frown and play dumb. "Huh?"

"That's not happening," he states with an air of authority, backing me further into the bathroom, kicking the door closed, and reaching for my shoulders.

He pulls my jacket off and tosses it. His fingers move to my chest and he's working the buttons of my blouse down one by

one, like it's a fascinating exercise.

But he doesn't look mad. On the contrary, he's got a smile on his face.

"What do you mean it's not happening?"

"You're my mate. My wife."

I shake my head rapidly. "No. Back up. Listen... that was... that thing we just did was a mistake. I need you to back up and –" I grab his wrists. It doesn't stop him. Another button is undone. And then another. And his eyes move to my chest, the smile fixed in place.

I make a frustrated noise as he informs, "Not a chance. I need more of you. I'm gonna fuck you in the shower so that while the water washes my scent off you I'll be putting it on you again, and then we'll talk. I'm sure you have questions."

"No. Not really," I say, trying to wriggle free, but my belly is dipping, or more like nose-diving. And I can't pay attention to that or else I'm going to have sex again. And while that thought is tempting, I just can't.

He eyes me quizzically. "You don't?"

Another button gets undone and those dark, gorgeous eyes sparkle with amusement.

"Nope, no questions." I try to slap his hand away, but he gets another button undone.

And another.

"Not even one?" He's looking at me like I'm a puzzle. A puzzle he plans to figure out. Right after he fucks me again.

I need to do something. And unfortunately, it looks like I'm gonna have to be a little bit mean.

I reach behind me to the sink and grapple for something to use as a threat. Nothing. A bar of soap?

I stare at it and then my eyes bounce to his face.

His left brow juts up in question.

“Wanna wash me?”

The idea of that puts me into a mini daze.

“I like that idea,” he drawls, “but the minute your scent is off me, we’re gonna have to get it all over me again too. I love how you smell.”

I throw the bar of soap as hard as I can. It sails out through the open bathroom door.

“Go fetch!” I try.

He throws his head back and laughs, hard. “Nice try.” His mouth lands on my neck and he pulls the skin into his mouth while cupping one of my breasts.

Now, just the bottom two buttons of my blouse remain closed, and I somehow shake myself out of a stupor and spring into action, bringing my knee up hard between his legs.

He grunts, doubling over.

“Sorry about that!” I call over my shoulder as I grab my boots and make my way out of the bedroom space, boot it across the walkway-slash-bridge and rush down the stairs.

I’m winded by the time I get down to the main floor, but *Scooby-Doo run* straight for the door, unlock and pull the front door open, and *hallelujah*, there’s my car, parked beside his truck.

Thankfully, it’s unlocked, and I see my fob there in the cupholder, my purse on the floor of the passenger side.

Perfect.

My purse, my keys. My phone will be in my purse and the suitcase I packed for staying with Ivy will be in the trunk. And because I’m Amelia Brennan, that overnight bag has enough clothes for more than a few days. So, once I get her rescued, the two of us can take off and hunker down somewhere for a while without worrying about clean clothes. I drop my boots onto the passenger seat, thinking, *I’m out of here!*

Wrong.

The naked and no-longer-smiling Mason is pulling on my doorhandle before I've gotten a chance to lock it.

Shit, now he's pulling me out of the car.

"Let go of me!"

Fear spikes but it quickly vanishes when he rasps, "Naughty little minx," directly into my ear like he's looking forward to punishing me in a sexy way instead of retaliating for the knee to the nuts.

He carries me back inside.

I grunt and struggle, writhing to get free, warning, "You're gonna make me mad."

"Oh yeah?" he inquires, seeming intrigued, not angry. And he should be furious after what I've just done.

And the fact that he's not angry? This annoys me. I struggle hard, kicking my feet, slapping him and getting more ticked because my slaps are coming out as pathetic girlie slaps on his face and shoulders, and he's completely unaffected.

"Okay, that's enough of this. Let me go! Hey!"

God, he's strong. I can't break free. And now he's taking me upstairs.

"Damn it!" I cry out.

He keeps climbing to the top floor and now I get a better look at the second floor, then on the third floor, the home office and gym. And I crane my neck as I'm looking over his shoulder, seeing what looks like an easel or no, a drafting table. It's also got that fabulous lake view, too. I shake my head at my ridiculous train of thought – like it matters what his home office and gym looks like, what *any* of this looks like.

"Doggo! Yo! Let go of me. I'm telling you right now that if you don't let me-" I don't get to finish that sentence, because I'm dumped onto his bed on my stomach and then he's pinning me, his torso pressed to my back. And then his mouth finds

my neck. He wraps his lips around it and sucks, like he's giving me a hickey.

And ohmigod – I gasp, sensation rolling from my neck straight down to my toes and then right back up to the roof of my mouth, which now tingles.

“That wasn't nice, Amelia,” he rumbles against my neck. “But I can see this might need a slight adjustment period. I'm patient.”

“Are you kidding me?” I snap, “Get off!” I writhe and struggle, but he's too heavy.

“Oh, I plan to,” he drawls. “We'll both be getting off.”

His hand snakes around my hip and the fly of my jeans pops open. *Oh shit.*

His hand slides in and much to my mortification, his fingers slide *straight* in, because I'm *that* wet.

How could I not be? Not only is my neck super-sensitive, but also when he sucked on it I could swear it felt like he was sucking between my legs.

“What are you d-doing?” I demand. “Let go of me! I need to leave.”

“I'm getting us off,” he replies in a gravelly tone, and then he's continuing to work at undressing me. “And you're not going anywhere.”

“My God, are you always this infuriating?” I demand.

He chuckles. “As a matter of fact...”

I start to protest – I do – but then he's making a vibrating, purring sound and before I know it, I guess I'm not protesting, because I'm down to just my bra and panties and his hand is sliding into the back of those panties, then two thick fingers are slipping into me.

My mouth opens as my brain wobbles or something. I stopped struggling as soon as he started making that noise. Again. That

purring noise is evidently the key to the kingdom inside Amelia's panties.

Just as I'm getting into it, he stops. And this jars me back to reality. And back to my anger. I'm being lifted up and carried into the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" I demand to cover up the disappointment that he stopped fingering me while sucking my neck and try to struggle my way out of his grip.

"We're taking a shower and -"

"No. I'm leaving," I snap. "This insanity has to stop right now."

He finishes with, "Then I'm going down on you."

My eyes bulge and I stop fighting.

His mouth splits into a very attractive smile as he sets me down on the vanity between the two raised bronze sinks.

"Maybe you'll go down on me, too."

My eyes drop to his very large, very erect and like his forearms, his well-veined penis.

Mm.

"Stay put." He kisses that sensitive spot on my neck, pulling a shiver from me, pointing at me as he backs away.

I watch him turn the dial on the massive walk-in shower and multiple panoramic showerheads twirl to life.

I *am* kinda sticky and messy from all the... excitement. I guess I could leave after the shower. After the oral sex.

I catch my reflection in the mirror and think... *cheater.*

As the self-loathing slithers through me, he tips my chin up.

"Hey?" His eyes are filled with concern.

"I have to go," I choke out, being serious. Completely serious.

"I really do have to go. I have to find my sister and then I've got to go home and..."

He shakes his head. “Your sister is okay, don’t worry about her. Let’s take a shower, then we’ll get some food and talk.”

“Sorry, but your word alone isn’t enough. And I’m tryin’ to be nice here, because all this isn’t your fault, but really – you have to –”

“Nice? Macing me and kneeing me in the nuts is nice?”

“You’re not leaving me much choice, there, Doggo. You kidnapped me.”

He laughs.

“It’s not actually funny. And I’m really worried about Ivy.”

He sobers. “I’ll see if I can make arrangements for you to speak to her.”

“Then you’ll let me go?” I try.

He cocks his head to one side and cockily says, “Then I’ll talk you into not trying to go. But she’s safe. She’s with her mate, so don’t worry about her.”

This makes me angry. Very. I throw my arms up in frustration.

“I can’t stay for the shower and more cheat-on-my-fiancé sex. I need to get out of here. I need to see for myself that my sister is okay. And now.”

I wrench my way out of his grip.

“Baby, I get the feeling you already know I’m not letting you go. I didn’t kidnap you; I claimed you. But if you don’t already know that, I’m letting you know now. This is it. You’re here. Permanently. With me.”

“No!” I shout, abandoning my task. “This is enough of this. I’ve had temporary insanity. That’s done with. I’ve got to get my brain powered back to *on*, and go pay my penance or something. Outta my way.”

He blocks me.

“I said...” I give him a blazing dirty look, “Out of my way!”

He does not shrivel at my glare, so I shove.

He catches my wrists, transfers them into one hand, and then somehow still hauls me up into his arms, switching my wrists to the other hand before he carries me into the shower.

“Let go of me, Mason! I’m about to get really mad here,” I warn.

“We’re doing this, then we’re talking, and we’ll go from there. Settle down.”

“I will not settle down. Who do you think you are, anyway? This is ridiculous. You people, you... you... shapeshifters think you can just steal people away and make them do sexy things with you and forget their lives? Their responsibilities? I need to go. I have a wedding to finish planning after I rescue my sister, and then, and then...”

Find a way to beg my fiancé to forgive me for this. Or is it better that I don't tell him? But if I don't tell him, will the guilt eat me alive?

“Hey now.” He sets me on my feet in the shower, but immediately pulls me tight against him and makes those chest vibration sounds. My body goes from tight as a drum to almost melting. Like magic or something.

Not *or something*. Magic. 100% magic.

He strokes my hair and continues making that sound. I continue melting, thinking that if you could bottle that sound it'd erase the need for anti-anxiety meds.

Our eyes meet and he speaks again. “How’s this? We’re gonna get clean, I’m gonna fuck you, then feed you, and then we’re gonna talk this out. Okay?”

Emotion tingles in me.

“Yeah?” he checks.

I start to nod but then I snap out of it and shake my head with denial.

He smiles. He finds this amusing. He probably wouldn't find it so amusing if he found out a spell was cast on him. I don't

want to be a total bitch to this guy, but I might not have a choice.

“There’s nothing for you to help me figure out. I need to leave. I’ll figure my own shit out,” I say, though what he’s suggesting sounds way better. And since I technically already cheated on... Rick... Shit. Forgetting his name? Guilt is definitely going to eat me alive.

Mason runs his palm up my back and then his fingers weave into the length of my hair as his mouth gets closer, his eyelids lowering. He’s about to kiss me again. He’s gonna kiss me, shower with me, go down on me, and then feed me.

Since I’ve cheated, really... what’s one more sexual escapade? It’s all on the same day so does it make it worse if it’s more than once?

Of course it does. I’m delusional right now.

What I *should* do is ask the shapeshifter to help me find the engagement ring.

Though... if I don’t find it, I won’t have to wear it anymore. Tempting.

God, I need to get out of here. I’m losing my mind. My common sense. My marbles. My morals. And my bra and panties, because he’s removing them. I’m about to protest, but they’re being tossed out of the shower. He grabs a bath sponge from the shelf on the wall and soaps it up. He begins working it over my back and shoulders.

It’s thick and lathery and what’s that scent? I think it’s him, not the soap. He’s smells potently sexual. That thing my aunt did... looks like I’m gonna need to find out how to undo it. Because I have a feeling this guy is going to be persistent otherwise. Add that to my insanely long to-do list.

He’s crowding me, a look on his gorgeous face while he washes me that feels like reverence – something that’s never been pointed at me. Our eyes meet and that look of tenderness makes my heart race. That expression? The depth of emotion I read on his face? People who have just met don’t have that.

Nobody has ever looked at me like this even after proposing and telling me they love me. Whatshisface never looks at me like this. My ex never looked at me like this, either.

I can't get caught up in the way Mason looks at me. Because it's not real. This is all spells. Voodoo sex magic.

I have to get out of here. Find Ivy. Undo what Auntie Nelle did. Finish getting ready for the wedding. Also explain the missing ring. And decide if I should come clean about what happened here today, what I'm probably about to let happen again. I probably shouldn't fess up. It's not like most people would believe that my deceased aunt was able to pull this off. Or that shapeshifters even exist. Rick doesn't even believe in anything paranormal. He'd just think I'm a slut. A cheating slut who's lost her mind.

My aunt is probably giggling herself silly right now while sitting on a cloud preening her angel wings. She often talked about sexy rogues who would sweep a woman off her feet, read lots of romance novels – always had one or more of those paperbacks with the women being ravished by sexy shirtless men on the cover close by. And that's exactly what's happened to me today. I was ravished by a shirtless (and pantsless) shapeshifter sex god.

This is not my fault. If she thinks this is the kind of thing I want – to be kidnapped and kept in a gorgeous lakeside house of my dreams with a hot guy that can turn into a giant white wolf? One that can erase anxiety with a noise he makes? I give my head a sharp shake. God, when you put it like that?

I need a minute to myself. I need to think. I need a conversation with my sister!

And now, damn it, he's shampooing my hair and *oh...* Oh, wow. A moan escapes my mouth as his strong fingers massage my scalp. I can't let myself think on this because it's part of a fantasy I've had, a fantasy I've had every time I've been in the shower with a guy where I imagine him doing this, but it never happens.

Shower sharing isn't typically all it's cracked up to be. It's cramped and you're often shivering while waiting to get under the water or worrying you're hogging the water and leaving the other person shivering. Except now. Because there are multiple spray nozzles keeping us both wet and warm and a hot guy with his fingers in my hair and lust in his eyes. Showers with the shapeshifter are sensational.

He rinses the shampoo out of my hair while I stare at his chest, emotion burning in my own.

Soapy fingers find their way between my legs.

"Hey!" I push him. "Stop trying to use sex to distract me."

He shakes his head, not budging. "Not what I'm doin', baby. I just want more."

"You can't have more," I say.

His eyes sparkle like he finds this funny.

"My turn now?" he tries, passing me the sponge.

"As if," I grumble, crossing my arms over my breasts, feeling super self-conscious.

"Maybe next time," he quips, then begins to soap himself up. I'm soon mesmerized by watching his soapy hands move over his torso, working up a lather that has me practically drooling. That cut jawline. Beautiful skin. Sexy mouth and bright white smile. Water droplets and bubbles drift down miles of hot, muscled skin, leaving my fingers tingling, wanting to help. Instead, I deny myself. Because if I wash him, if I put my hands on him the way I have the urge to do right now... I might fall under the spell and never, ever leave.

He tips his head back under the water and I wish I could take a picture to preserve this perfection in front of me. That Adam's apple, the solid pecs, the happy trail leading to a thick, beautiful... I shake it off and my eyes move back up to his mouth. *That* mouth.

He wants to put that mouth between my legs again. And the two-second sampler I got tells me that would be interesting.

Whatshisface doesn't do oral. It's been a while since I've had that. Since the first time I had sex with him, in fact. He didn't see it through, got out of the vicinity and used his dick too soon, but little did I know that'd be the first and last time he went downtown. I went on a blowjob strike with him three months ago swearing he'd never get head again until he got over himself and was willing to give it to me, too. He laughed it off. I didn't find it funny.

The idea of Mason's mouth on me? Of mine on him? I work down a swallow with a bit of difficulty, gaze fixed on Mason's soapy hands as he soaps up his cock. His big, beautiful, hard cock. His hands don't stay there long enough for my viewing pleasure. It's about cleanliness, it seems, as his soapy fingers roam the rest of the vicinity and work their way up to his armpits.

I think this might be the best shower in the history of the world. And not just because of the stunning view. My back has had this annoying stiffness all week after lots of time spent hunched over working on forming and filling hundreds of little personalized cardboard boxes with candied almonds. By myself. And curling ribbon for these little scrolls I did with a sappy love poem for the place settings. Not to mention the fact that I sleep beside someone who hogs the bed and steals the pillows. And it feels like it's been even worse than usual the past week or so. I had a better sleep at Mom's last night than I've had in eons, even though I only slept a few hours. A whole bed to myself. No snoring beside me. And I didn't have to wear socks because there was no complaining about my cold feet.

If he keeps snoring I'll be tempted to start sleeping in the guest room. And I know that sounds awful – not even down the aisle yet and already planning on separate rooms, but a girl needs her sleep, especially when she works twelve-hour shifts that require her to be on the ball – on the ball otherwise peoples' lives are at stake!

Mason tips my chin up. "You're a million miles away."

Not a million miles, just a hundred and fifty or so, back at home in my real life.

“This is ridiculous,” I mumble, pushing my way out of the shower. “I need towels.” All I see are the lush hand towels.

He moves out also, and when he does, he squats to open the cupboard doors under the long vanity. I can’t help but check out his absolutely perfect butt. I mean... it is as perfectly shaped as a peach. And it’s right here in front of me.

He turns and unfolds, showing me another perfect and rather erect *thing* as he passes me a towel and then wraps one around his waist. I hold my hand out for another for my hair and he grabs another one, but instead of passing the second towel to me, he moves up to me and begins rubbing the towel over my hair while I wrap the first towel around my body.

After tucking the towel to hold it shut above my breasts, I take the other towel from him and try to take over, but he pulls me close and laughs against the skin behind my ear. And then he trails kisses down my neck to the bitemark, making me shudder and pull away.

Goosebumps are everywhere.

“Stop it. And what did you do to my neck? Will this scar?” I touch the spot, looking into the mirror.

“Absolutely,” he says.

“It better not!” I snap.

“What good is your claiming mark if it fades?”

I slow-blink. “Claiming mark?”

“A statement about our connection. It’s also pretty useful.”

He moves up directly behind me and I catch myself leaning back into him. With nowhere to go, instead of trying to move away, I ask, “How’s that?”

“Now that I’ve mated and marked you, I can track you. I can sense emotions from you, too.”

“Huh?”

“And that mark shows other shifters you’re claimed if they can’t already smell me on you, though they will. Damn fuckin’ right they will,” he says, voice gravelly. “And when you touch it, you’ll know you’re mine. When *I* touch it...” He smiles wide. “Even more pleasure.”

I try to swallow, but I can’t. “Did you say *track* me?”

He rubs his finger along that spot on my neck and I pull back while feeling my nipples pinch and pucker. I can’t help but gasp.

He scoops me up into his arms and carries me back toward his bed. “More talking later; I smell what I want.”

“No. No, Doggo; listen to me,” I try.

He lays me back and then goes for the towel around me, opening it. “Guess what I smell?” His gaze is pointed between my thighs.

God, he’s obsessed with sex.

“Is this what you’re normally like? A sex maniac?”

“Just for you, Amelia. You want me, too,” he answers while he dots kisses along my breasts.

“I do not,” I state.

“The delicious aroma coming off your body says different,” he volleys, “and before me, you haven’t been fucked properly in a long time.”

“I’m engaged,” I advise.

“And he hasn’t laid a hand on you for days or longer. I smelled nobody on you.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“You should get to come daily. And with me, it’ll be at least that often.”

“Who says I don’t?” I snap, though my nipples tingle at those words, at the tone in which he says them.

“The only way you are is if you’re taking yourself there,” he says, eyes sweeping over my face, then traversing straight down to my toes before lazily drifting back up, making my cheeks burn.

His eyes sparkle with amusement as he adds, “Now, *that*... *that’s* something I’ll have to see. You’ll be putting that show on for me. But not right now, because it’ll be a while before I can see myself being able to keep my hands off you.” He smiles. “A long while.”

I roll my eyes. This makes him lean forward looking almost angry. “You should be shown daily how fuckin’ desirable you are, Amelia. Now that you’re mine, you’re gonna get shown multiple times a day and the only way you’ll be giving it to yourself is if I’m watching.”

I try to hide that it’s not easy to work down a swallow at that statement by snapping bitchily, “In my experience, big talk like that is rarely followed through on.”

“Watch ‘n see. I only write cashable checks, woman.”

I scoff. But he keeps going, gesturing to me, and now his tone has sharpened.

“You’re full of life, sensuality, beauty, fire. You were engaged to the wrong man.” Fire lights in his eyes. “Though it’s just as well. I wouldn’t have been happy if I’d brought you home with another man’s scent on what’s mine.”

After I blanch, I somehow manage to speak.

“How dare you!”

What a lame comeback, but I’m just about speechless.

“I dare because you’re mine,” Mason informs. “You still tryin’ to let on you have no questions, baby? Because clearly you’re not entirely clued-in to what’s happening here.”

“Nope. No questions,” I state, trying to go for impassive.

He tilts his head to the side; he’s trying to figure me out.

“Okay, fine, “ I concede. “But you asked for it. Here’s a dose of reality for you, Mason Quinn.”

His eyebrows jut up.

“This is only happening because my aunt paid for it. I never asked for it, neither did my sister. This is all the doing of a hopeless romantic who set the voodoo in motion for her two nieces before she died.”

“Explain,” he demands.

I pull in a deep breath and spill the rest of it. “She paid her fortune teller. I don’t know the details, but she used to go to one regularly. I found out last night after Ivy got kidnapped that my aunt wrote Mom a letter and that spelled this all out. She won the lottery way back when... but spent most of it on *this*.” I twirl my index finger gesturing to the room, the situation. “So, there. That’s what this is. A purchased fake happy ending for us. I found out about the letter after my sister went missing and came to look for her, happening to run into you and here we are. Now, you might as well back off and let me go. Better yet, help me find Ivy so I can then figure out how to undo the magic. I’m not sure how you and your... people got caught up in this but that’s all this is.”

His silence has me searching his face.

He stares at me for a long moment, obviously processing what I’ve just revealed. And I’m almost sad, for some irrational reason. Maybe because now that he knows, I know this is undoubtedly about to end.

“There’s no undoing it. Whatever the reasons, it’s done,” he states.

This makes me flinch in surprise. “Uh... did you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

“You’re sure you heard all I just said? This isn’t fate. This is manipulation. Witchcraft is making you think I’m your happily ever after, that Ivy is the same for Tyson Savage.”

“I heard you, baby.” he states again. “Got good ears. You came through loud and clear.”

I blink a couple times.

He shrugs. “It’s done and despite the shit storm it’s caused, I have no problem with it since it means I have you.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me,” he states.

“I found my happily ever after already,” I advise.

“Bullshit.”

I rear back. *What?* He delivered that word like a slap.

“No, it’s true. I’m saying vows in less than two weeks.”

“You’re already married, Amelia. To me.”

“That’s ridiculous. Not only because I don’t know you, but also because if you think we’re married just because you say so...”

“Because I identified you as my mate, I gave you my mark, and I knotted you.”

“Knotted? Like tying the knot? Because unless I have amnesia, we did no such thing.”

“Exactly like that,” he declares. “Though instead of it being symbolic like in your world, the knot tying happens in this one. The knot formed on me while I was inside you and locked us together so we could mingle our essences while I gave you that claiming mark, took your blood into me and formed a bond that’s unbreakable.”

I shake my head rapidly. “Just because it means that to you doesn’t mean it means a thing to me. Now, my priority is my sister. After I know she’s okay, I’ll figure out how to get this undone. Unless you know how?”

“Don’t worry about your sister. I’m sure she’s fine.”

“I need to know she’s fine because I know it, not just because *you* say it,” I say. “She came home crying. She came over

yesterday looking more devastated than I've ever seen Ivy in my life. She was an absolute wreck. And according to her upstairs neighbor, three men showed up, there was arguing, and then she was gone. I got there and her place was in shambles, looking like there was a struggle. I need to know if my sister is okay. *Need.*"

"Be right back," he says. "Stay put."

I frown.

"Stay put. I'll make a call. Ask about your sister." He leans over and kisses me hard, with tongue, leaving me dizzy as he walks away.

I lie there recovering for a moment or two before he's back, a phone to his ear, a big smile spreading across his face.

Oh... *shit*. He's probably smiling like the cat that's about to get the cream because I'm lying here naked with the towel wide open. I cover up, shooting him a dirty look.

"All right. Thanks, Rye," he talks into his phone, "I'll find out whatever else there is with the witchcraft, but thinkin' she told me everything she knows. Naw, frankly couldn't care less... Yeah, exactly. Worth it and hopefully Tyson'll agree. Okay, bye. Thanks, brother. Me too." He smiles wider and chuckles, then sets his phone down on the bedside table, eyes still on me.

"Your sister is with her mate," he says. "They're working things out after a...uh..." he seems like he weighs his words, then finishes with, "a spat."

A spat?

"Spat? She was crying. Crying! She was a wreck like I'd never seen her. She clearly isn't happy. Something happened, and it's obvious he dragged her off somewhere against her wishes."

"Okay, so spat might not be the right word, but they're working things out. You said three guys came. Well, I was on the phone just now with one of them. Tyson drove to find her

with two council members after she took off and brought her home. He's workin' on... makin' up."

"You know this Tyson guy well?" I ask.

"Not exactly."

I frown. "You don't know him well or you don't know him?"

"It's complicated," he says. "But don't worry about it right now. Need you to walk me through this witchcraft thing. Did you leave anything out?"

I huff and then mutter half under my breath, "Don't worry about it, he says. Of course he says that. Men..."

"Amelia? Talk to me." There's authority in his voice.

I sigh. "I don't know anything about the witchcraft; I already told you what I know."

"Tell me again."

"I know my aunt believed in all things magical and told me crazy stories all my life. Her letter said she didn't have more to leave us for an inheritance because she bought something money usually can't buy. True happiness. She secured magical happy endings for us."

"That it?"

"Basically."

"So you were already aware of my kind. That's why you don't have questions?"

I shake my head. "I mean, it was still a shock seeing you go from person to wolf, but yeah, I came here suspecting something magic-related was at play. I'd heard about shapeshifters from her when I was a kid and ... I haven't thought about Aunt Nelle's stories in years, she sort of stopped talking about them when I hit my teens until her deathbed a year ago, but when I saw it happen, I was..." I get lost in thought, picturing it again.

He waits patiently, eyes on me, so I shake it off and continue.

“Anyway... I don't know much. I had some ideas about what it might be when I came to find my sister, but it still knocked me on my ass to see it. Like... literally.”

“And what is it you know about us?”

“Not much. My mom and aunt grew up near here and my aunt told me the area had lots of magic. Sightings, close encounters she and people she knew experienced. And last night, my mom talked about stuff she heard, some things she saw when she was a teen. We lived in Drowsy Hollow too when we were small, but I've never seen any of it with my own eyes until today.”

“Told you stuff she heard? Like?”

“Reports of people seeing shapeshifters, people who can cast spells, said there are people who don't age. Auntie Nelle thinks they were vampires, but said they can go in the sun and eat garlic. She paid off Mom's house and said that though there wasn't much other money left, it'd be okay, better than okay because she managed to buy what money didn't typically give you. She put money away to pay my brother's student loans for him. She paid to secure me and Ivy a happily ever after filled with beautiful magic and eluded to big and positive changes coming for my mom, too. And it was the anniversary of her death the other Friday and the letter said that's when things would start to happen, so —”

“Friday?” he checks, “Last Friday?”

“The Friday before. Ivy was in this area for a weekend getaway. And things have been screwy since then for Ivy and now obviously... me. Whatever you're thinking is between us, it's just a little hocus pocus making us think there's this insane chemistry. It's not real.”

“It's real,” he immediately states with such surety, such authority that it feels like a gut punch.

I stare for a long moment. He leans forward, about to move in, so I find my voice.

“We’ll just need to get it undone. Do you know a fortune teller or witch doctor, warlock or wizard, or something that could hook us up?”

“Why would I wanna do that?” He puts a knee to the bed and moves toward me.

Uh oh.

“Whoa,” I raise my hand. “Stop right there.”

“Why?” His mouth twitches with amusement as he continues to move closer. Slowly. Like a predator stalking prey.

I’m clutching the towel closed, shrinking backwards against the pillows. “We’re not done talking and if you get any closer, I’m afraid you won’t keep talking.”

“We have a lifetime for talking,” he offers.

“Listen,” I command, lifting my right hand to halt him, but he’s hovering over me. And what a view. With some difficulty, I manage to squeak out, “The sex was nice, Mason, but this thing Auntie Nelle did turned me into a cheater. That’s not who I am.”

His expression drops.

I keep talking. “I can’t let this happen again. It’s bad enough it happened and clearly it wasn’t really in our control because of the spell or whatever, but if I keep letting it go on, I’m culpable. I have an insane to-do list. It’s like... a mile long. I need to pick up my sister, take her home, and if you can’t help, I’ll figure out how to get this undone and then we’ll move on. Just... help me, please? Help me get to Ivy and I’ll take it from here.”

He stares at me for an endless moment.

“I’m serious,” I finally say.

“What’s his number?”

“What’s whose number?”

“The guy you’re breaking up with.”

“What?”

“I’ll call him. Get that off the insane to-do list. Your sister is fine, baby. So, seems to me that if I take *Whatshisface* off your list, all that’s left is me.” He smiles, looking deep into my eyes, making my belly dip.

After I recover, I shake my head. “No. You’re not calling him. I’ll figure out what to tell him about this.”

If anything. I bite my lip. I haven’t a clue how to deal with this with *Whatshisface*.

Rick. I mean Rick! Geez. Why do I keep calling him *Whatshisface* in my head? Because Mason suggested it? Rick has done nothing wrong here; I did the wrong thing. Me.

Eesh. I feel like such a horrible person. It’s the voodoo sex magic – I’d never do this under normal circumstances, no matter how good-looking the guy is. I’m not this superficial. I’m committed to someone, and I take that seriously.

“All right,” he says thoughtfully, “If you feel you have to do this in person, I’ll take you. I’ll take you tomorrow and we’ll pick up your things and bring them back.”

“What? Back?”

“Back here,” he clarifies.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because obviously, you’re moving in.”

I stare in shock. “Did you not hear a thing I just said about this being manufactured from a spell?”

“I heard you.”

“And?” I prompt.

He shrugs. “And I just don’t care.”

I rear back.

He keeps talking, “I designed and built this house for you, Amelia. I just didn’t know that until today. You’re my mate. It’s done. Now it’s time for our magical *happily ever after*.”

Ho-boy. I'm trying my hardest here to let those sweet, sweet words bounce off like I'm Teflon. He keeps going, though, a voice like honey that sticks to everything, making it nearly impossible.

"I drew the plans up and built it. My pack council brothers helped but yeah, I did it thinkin' about the future. Thinkin' about you. Though I didn't know it'd be you. But I did. You know?"

There are goosebumps all over my body, because this is the house I'd build for myself if I had those skills. Except for maybe the scary staircases. "You live here alone?"

"Nobody has lived here but me. I haven't brought any women here, either, not for *that* reason. Anyone I've been with in the past five years since I've lived here – I've gone to their place or used the car, motels, whatever."

Before I can control it, my face sours.

He smiles. "You don't like the idea of me being with other women."

"I didn't say that. I really don't care," I fib. "And I don't need your sexual history so spare me. Though, we did it ungloved so hopefully your history isn't too sordid."

He laughs. "I'm clean. So are you. I know this by the nose." He taps the side of his nose.

I resist the urge to ask questions about that, such as what on earth an STD smells like, but I still scrunch my face up in disgust.

"You do care. Now I know why I never brought anyone here. This is for you. All of it. And all of me."

Ouch.

Fucking ouch.

I stare.

He stares.

It goes on for a long time. Too long. I need to blink. It feels like there's something in my eye. Fuck, I'm gonna lose the staredown.

I close my eyes and sigh, then stammer, "I don't care if – if you're with other women. It's got nothing to... nothin' to do with me. I met you hours ago. And it's not real."

"It's real, baby. And..." He leans in closer, "You fucking know it. Pay attention. You'll feel it like I do."

I shake my head vigorously. "Listen, you're really hot, as I'm sure you already know, and you seem like a lot of fun. The sex was nice, but—"

His eyebrows fly up. "Nice?" He backs off me a little, sits back on his ankles, folds his arms across his chest, and waits.

"You probably know some witches, right? Call one and tell them what I told you. I'll sign something if needed to say we don't care that my aunt gave them all that money. They can just reverse the spell with no worries. If they need me to pay for their reversal services, I'll do that. I'll put it on a credit card and pay it off later. It's my aunt that did this, so that's not your fault. And I'm sorry on her behalf for the inconvenience to you. I'll need you to give me directions for where to pick up my sister, so do that now and – "

"Do people normally do what you say just because you say it?" he asks, humor in his eyes. "That must be it."

My temper flares. I don't appreciate the fact that he's not taking this seriously at all. "Do you know a witch that can help or don't you?"

"I don't know any witches."

"Then, I'll need you to take me to my sister."

"I'll try and make arrangements for you to see her in a couple days."

A couple days? A COUPLE DAYS?

"Buddy... hear me, please." I huff out my exasperation.

He leans forward, grabs the back of my neck, and then his mouth crashes into mine.

It dawns that I'm moaning instead of grunting in protest, so I feebly try to pull back. This doesn't work, so I try pushing him off. That also doesn't work.

"So, the sex was nice? Just nice?" he asks, mouth too close to mine, still firmly gripping the back of my neck.

I blow out a breath so hard my lips vibrate. He still does not budge.

"For me, it was the best fucking coupling I've ever had. Better than I could fathom. Since it was just nice for you... let's see if I can do better this time. How about that?"

This makes my belly dip, but his mouth is on mine as I squeak out a protest. He ignores that. I push as hard as I can and this buys me an inch, maybe.

"No. Stop."

Words. They *do* work.

"Yes," he denies.

"No!" I twist as hard as I can out of his grasp, and he releases me, so I roll off the bed, and while scrambling to get away from him, he snatches the towel I'm wrapped in. I sacrifice modesty for my escape, but he still captures me before I'm even out of the room.

"Damn it!"

I really need to work out more. So much for dropping a dress size, which I was going to do for the wedding, start working out, do some cardio, but I haven't had time with all the wedding planning, plus I, like food. A lot. I'm out of shape. He's going to catch me every single time – unless I find a way to take off when he's not looking. *There's a thought.*

Let him fuck and then feed me, and then sneak off? It looks like he's not about to let me go willingly, so I'm going to have to be crafty about it. That little Jiminy Cricket conscience

voice inside me is whisper-screaming that I don't need to get laid again, that I should do everything I can do to discourage it. I do feel guilty about it – but I'm going to duct tape Jiminy's mouth for now.

If I have to get laid one more time to be able to get out of here, so be it. It's not like I'm going to get sex like *this* again in the regular world.

I'm having trouble with the duct tape here. Guilt slides through me.

"Here's what's gonna happen," he informs, carrying me back to the bed, setting me down, but caging me in as he hovers over me, "I'm gonna fuck you and feed you, and then maybe we'll catch another nap or curl up and talk. Get to know one another. Then it'll be time to fuck you again and hopefully you're more agreeable about us. If not, I'll probably have to fuck you after that, too. Not a hardship. Tomorrow, we'll go pick up your things, you'll dump the guy that thinks you're his, and we'll get you moved in here. How's that?"

"You're delusional," I say, instead of doing what I have the urge to do – remind him about the oral sex he promised me earlier. Because he forgot to mention that.

"I'm not," he denies. "Just the opposite. Nothing has ever made more sense to me. And I get that you're freaked. This is all new. But it's gonna be good, baby. Really fuckin' good."

"How about this? We go find a witch and get her to undo this and then see how we feel. My guess? You'll realize this is all just voodoo sex magic."

Maybe I should get the oral sex *before* we see the witch.

His lips quirk in amusement, but then he sobers. "This is unbreakable Amelia. Not a witch, your ex, you, or your mama can break this. "

Mom! Shit.

"Shit. I need my phone," I blurt.

"Why?"

“Because it’s my phone,” I inform, bitchily.

This guy sure is ornery.

He says nothing, just stares, so I elaborate, “She’s worried. Now me *and* Ivy are both missing, and I need my mom to know at least one of her daughters is breathing.”

“You’re both breathing. I’m telling you to stop worrying about your sister.”

“You telling me to do something doesn’t mean I’m gonna do it,” I advise.

I can just picture Mom pacing the house, staring at her phone, waiting for me and Ivy to call. She’s got to be out of her mind with worry.

“It’s gonna be like that?”

“Huh?”

“I see a lot of spankings in your future if you’re gonna fight me at every turn.” He’s got amusement in his eyes.

“Spankings? Pff.” I roll my eyes. If he were my future, I’d see a lot of orgasms, too. But alas, he’s not my future. Unfortunately.

He goes serious. “You can’t talk to anybody about my nature. You have to guard this with your life. It’s too dangerous otherwise.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning as my mate you’re bound by the same laws I am. You can’t tell a soul about our existence. Your ass is on the line and so is mine.”

“My mother already knows.”

“She’s covered as blood family if she’s trustworthy. But that’s something you’re responsible for. If she puts us in danger, it’d come back on you, meaning also on me. And Tyson and Ivy. We’ll all have to make sure she stays quiet.”

“She *is* trustworthy,” I defend.

And I'm not sure what he means by that. What – if Mom goes to the news, we get punished? Punished how?

I keep talking. “Mom is the one who told me about what was going on here. My aunt wrote *her* the letter. She didn't think much on it when she got it, maybe that Auntie Nelle's tumor was mucking up her logic. But once Ivy went missing and then told her she was near Drowsy Hollow, Mom put that conversation and the letter together and *voilà*. Here we are.”

“Well, she needs to keep it quiet. No one else can know. Even your closest friends.”

I shake my head. “Nobody needs to know about this, not if you let me get to my sister and we both go home. But my mom is a bloodhound, so if you don't let me call her, chances are, she's gonna be on her way here and probably with the police and the press. She will go to any lengths to protect her girls. So... I need to call her. Now would be good.”

Call her and tell her to get to that fortune teller and get this reversed!

He stares, looking serious, looking deep in thought.

“I'm gonna go get my phone from my car,” I say.

“I'll get it,” he states, backs off, then goes through the door beside the bathroom. Confirmed: a walk-in closet. Half empty.

And twice the size of the walk-in closet I currently have to share. And I love clothes, shoes, and accessories. But *Whatshisface* might love them even more. He's got seventeen golf shirts. Five white ones!

Mason comes back out in a pair of snug white sweatpants that sit low on his hips. He doesn't bother putting a shirt on. Or shoes. I find myself salivating as I watch him walk away, as I ogle how his back muscles move as he does, watch how he turns and looks over his shoulder as if sensing my eyes on him.

He winks at me, so of course I immediately tear my eyes away and swallow down the excess saliva pooling in my mouth.

11

Mason

I pass Amelia her handbag. I've also brought in a suitcase and another smaller satchel found in her trunk. I took a peek.

Clothes, shoes, makeup. Looks like she was on her way on a vacation. Maybe leaving that useless guy she was with, which I find interesting.

I dropped those by the front door before zipping downstairs to hide her keys as well as my own, sure my girl is planning to try to take off the minute my back is turned.

She fishes her phone out of her bag and her pretty blue eyes blaze at me. "Privacy?"

I shake my head. "Not yet. Not until we know one another a little better. Make your call. And be good. No funny business. You realize how serious the secrecy level here is, right?"

Those blue eyes narrow and I'm expecting her to argue. Instead, she angrily scrolls her screen.

I'm sensing a lot of tangled up emotions in her. Until I've helped her untangle them, she won't be getting privacy.

She thinks she still belongs to somebody else. She feels guilty for enjoying my body. She feels lust for me, but guilt as well as baggage from her old life are holding her back from letting that lust bloom.

For me? I'm already sliding into it with her. She's beautiful. She's got fire in her veins. I know she's mine without a doubt and I'm happy to figure the rest out as we go. I'm excited for the future ahead of us. Stoked that I've got my mate, that I know in my soul who I'm supposed to live my life with. I know it, my wolf knows it and I'm sure this is what's supposed to be.

She's not there yet. I realize humans wouldn't have the same reaction as us to mating, not knowing what's happening and not having the equivalent pairing in their world. Their marriages are lax in most cultures and no longer considered permanent as ours are.

I know exactly what's happening and I'm thrilled about it. Shifters are taught about mating early on, particularly alphas. She so far just knows she's attracted to me and that she feels guilty about it. Guilt. Worry for her sister. She keeps getting caught up on the witchcraft detail, as if that's the biggest reason to push back.

That says something, too. Witchcraft is most of why she's pushing back, not the useless fiancé. I doubt she knows much else about our nature outside the fact we exist. And she's not asking questions despite limited knowledge, and I think that says something about her state of mind. She's trying to stay aloof.

Plenty of people believe in the supernatural, but very few get confirmation. We prefer it that way. Much safer for us. Humans outnumber us and most react poorly when faced with the truth.

We've brought non-shifters into the pack because they're fated mates or sometimes they become significant others as well as extended family. It gets complicated sometimes. Sometimes we have to wade in, such as if someone threatens to expose us, or if we get a hunch they're the type to try to profit from knowledge about us.

We've had people attempt abductions of their loved one thinking they're saving them from a dangerous situation. Sometimes a human that joins our pack through a relationship must sacrifice their past completely because their loved ones aren't trustworthy, and some relatives have difficulty accepting that. Other times, their families are brought into the fold. We've had to resort to blackmail a time or two to keep people quiet and I've seen couples move overseas, joining other packs or starting one of their own in an effort to distance themselves

from human in-laws. Unfortunately, too, there have been times where the governing supernatural collective has had to resort to extremes to silence someone. Most times, people that manage to spout off about us are simply discredited, though sometimes problems require creative solutions.

I'll have to gauge what things are like with Amelia's family. At least it's not all on me. Tyson and I can share the responsibility of the risk mitigation of in-laws since we're mated to sisters. I think this is a first for our pack: for two council alphas to be mated to human siblings. And I think this might also be the first case of our council alphas mating with non-shifters *period*, other than Greyson's father (though that was his second mating). After I get Amelia settled, I'll request a meeting with Tyson and do what I can do to start to build a relationship since we got off on the wrong foot.

Understatement.

From my brief conversation with Riley today, it sounds like Tyson has his hands full with his mate, who Riley says is devastated. I feel for Tyson after being there in that moment where he hurt her. I can only imagine how difficult it'll be for him to make up for it, particularly given that his mate has no previous knowledge of our ways or the fact that sometimes alphas go into a rut and can't help themselves. I've seen it happen many times. What happened with Tyson, and I was clearly more complex than that, but it was just as primal, and just as out of his control.

Shit happens when alphas get protective, get proprietary. It wasn't the first time our pack has witnessed an alpha rutting a female and I'm sure it won't be the last. But for her, being human particularly, it was obviously traumatic.

All I know thus far is that Ivy took off after what happened at the dance and Tyson, Riley, and Grey brought her home the following evening.

And Ivy being upset when she went back to the city is what brought Amelia here today, so that tells me all this was meant to happen, though I'm sure Ivy wouldn't want to hear it.

And I could call Riley or Cat and ask if they can help arrange to have the sisters talk, but frankly with the drama over there, there's no room right now for more and Amelia's arrival and her connection to me would undoubtedly add more drama to the mix.

Riley told me he'll make sure Tyson knows Amelia is here, make sure he knows I've mated and tells me he's sure once Tyson has a chance to think on it, he'll be open to a conversation with me.

And I haven't had much time to ruminate on it, but now that we know witchcraft is at play, I no longer feel the need to make sense of my behavior last week. The past doesn't matter; the fact that alphas from the same council were mated to sisters with spellcasting involved has got to be the reason for my confusion. I'm a believer in things happening for a reason, but more than that because I don't care how it came about. Witchcraft or otherwise, if what I went through had to happen to get me here, to get me *her*, I can deal.

Now, I'll just need to mend any damage I've caused the pack by working to build bridges with Tyson. And I know that if he's reasonable, I can do it. I feel more like myself. Myself, only better, because I have new purpose.

Amelia.

As far as I'm concerned, I'm getting acquainted with my girl, he's fixing things with his girl, and we'll sort shit out later if he's a reasonable man. I feel like he will be – particularly given the news of my mating his sister-in-law. Arcana Falls isn't that big, plenty of us are related in some way or another, through marriage or through blood, but if he takes his rightful place on our council, we won't only be co-alphas on the same council in the same pack, it'll mean we're also linked through our mates being family. And it sounds like the sisters are close.

Right now what I care most about is spending time with Amelia. Solidifying *our* bond.

Amelia doesn't realize what she's done for me, the clarity I've now got after the worst crisis of my life. It'll take time to help her realize that regardless of a fortune teller, an aunt's wish, her misguided sense of guilt, or an ex-fiancé that's so useless she doesn't even carry a trace of his scent, she's *mine*. All mine. And I'll enjoy every minute it takes to show her. Right now, I'm ecstatically happy and my wolf concurs. I want her all to myself.

"Mom, it's Amie. I'm..." Her eyes bounce to me and then she continues, "...okay. Call me back. Don't worry, I'm all right. But call me back. I'm near Drowsy Hollow and I need to talk to you. Love you. Bye."

Amie. I like that; it suits her.

She stares at her screen, looking pensive as she reads.

And then she taps at it, so I move closer in order to see what she's doing. She backs up against my headboard, trying to tilt the screen away from my view.

I move in even closer, and get speared with a glare.

"Let me see that." I reach for the phone.

She's gorgeous when she glares at me.

"No," she denies, clutching it to her chest.

"Let me see," I repeat, looking directly into her eyes. "What are you tryin' to hide? Do you get how important confidentiality is?"

She flinches at my direct gaze and looks away. "Of course I do. I'm not an idiot and I don't want to be carted off to the asylum." Her face reddens.

"Just lemme see."

"No," she denies, rolling off the other side of the bed, rushing toward the bathroom.

I follow, stepping inside just as she's reaching for her panties, setting the phone face-down on the counter. I snatch it up.

“Hey! When a woman goes into a bathroom and shuts a door, you do not just barge in!” She yanks the black lace up to rest on her hips and then tries to wrestle the phone from me with just one hand because the other hand is being used in an attempt to shield her breasts.

Her beautiful breasts. And immediately, the urge hits to lavish attention on them. I haven’t gotten adequately acquainted with them yet. But first, I drag my eyes away from her luscious body and eyeball the screen, holding the phone up high where she can’t reach it.

All is fine. I’ll be there tomorrow. I already told you I’d get everything done from Ivy’s. You too.

A conversation with Rick.

Rick? The supposed fiancé?

“Excuse me! Give me that!” she tries.

I keep reading. That was her response to his earlier message.

How’s Ivy? Don’t forget lunch with my mother and Sheila tomorrow to finalize the rehearsal dinner details. Lots to do. Hope your sister isn’t stopping you from getting it all done. Love you. Miss you already.

“You too? Is that you saying you love and miss him, too?” I demand, feeling my blood pressure rise.

“Gimme that back, Doggo.”

“Do you?” I know I’m being irrational right now, but I don’t give a shit. The idea of her loving someone has fury rising in me. I’m fucking seething right now.

She snatches the phone from me and slaps it face down on the counter before she puts her bra on.

A growl rumbles up from my gut.

She jerks back, looking alarmed.

“Do you love this guy, Amie?”

Does she love him? Is he going to be a problem? A barrier for our happiness?

She said she was engaged already, this isn't news, but the messages from him make him a reality to me. A reality I hadn't fully considered.

She flinches. "I'm not Amie to you. That's for people that I give that to. I didn't give it to you. I didn't give you permission to look at my phone, either."

I quickly hook into her waistband with my thumbs and jerk the panties down. They hit the floor.

"Hey!"

"You won't be needing those quite yet. Maybe not for a long time." I lift her up, set her on the counter, pull her toward me and free my cock. In one solid thrust, I drive into her.

She drags in breath, eyes widening.

And I'm kinda pissed. I growl at her and she jolts back, fear in her eyes.

I pull her closer, firmly gripping her hips. "You're ending it with him as soon as we finish this," I clip. "I'm taking you there and he'll know it's over. I don't want his name or his words on your phone, I don't want his name on your lips, and there won't be any more *I love yous* from you to him or vice versa."

"Pff. Well, aren't you possessive?"

"Damn right I am."

"It's unattractive," she states.

"Is it? Then why is this pretty pussy so slick?"

She tries to hide her shock. "Biology. Witchcraft. Voodoo or whatever. That's it." She shrugs like it makes no difference.

But her nipples are hard, too. And I know she's filled with lust. Almost as seized by lust as I am. Having insight into her emotions is helpful.

“You want me to stop?” I slam my hips forward, asking a question I already know the answer to. As I pull back, her legs tighten around my waist, preventing me from pulling out.

It makes me want to roar in triumph.

Her phone chimes with a notification.

“Yeah, you definitely should stop,” she says, digging her nails into my back.

“No lies allowed. Your mouth is out of synch with the rest of your body, baby.”

“Shut up.” She grabs my face with both hands and drags my mouth to hers, then she’s sucking on my tongue.

Fuck, she feels incredible. In my arms, around me. I lift her off the vanity and carry her back to my bed, our bodies still joined at the mouth, my cock deep inside her.

As her back touches the mattress, my hand goes between us, giving me access to her clit. I work it for less than a minute before she’s crying out and doing it against my now expanding knot, which starts pulsing.

“Feel that?” I ask, feeling her all around me, feeling so fucking good.

She tenses but doesn’t answer.

“My knot,” I grind out, “is showing you who you belong to, Amie.” My lips touch her collarbone and then I latch around my mark on her neck and suck hard while I unhook her bra and pull it off.

“You’re mine baby, all fucking mine,” I declare.

Fuck, she feels good. Smells good. Tastes amazing. She’s arched, crying out loudly, her body shaking as my essence fills her, as my knot revs up higher, sending sensations rolling through me, making my vision blur briefly as I crest over a peak.

I'm holding her close. She's snuggled into me, head on my chest while I purr for her.

The purring is coming in handy. She melts into me every time. My chest vibrations push the fight, the anxiety, any negativity straight out of her.

I stop to say, "We should head there right now so you can end it. Where did you live?"

Her body stiffens. "Uh...no."

Sass.

"Yes." I slap her bare ass, making her squeak.

"I'm not leaving this place without my sister," she informs, then tacks on under her breath, "and I'm not ending anything."

"Showing me who you are; gonna have to find a way to manage that strong will of yours."

She lifts her cheek from my chest to look up at me.

"Not tame it," I say quickly, "I like it so far, I think. Just gonna have to teach you about compromise." I sift my fingers through her silky hair. I love the feel of it on my skin.

She rolls her eyes. "My whole life these days is about compromise. But I'm always the one doing the compromising and I think I'm just about up to here..." She slices her hand across her forehead, "with it."

"You wanna explain that to me?"

"Not particularly," she says, rolling away from me.

"Where d'you think you're goin'?" I ask.

"I need my phone. Someone texted me when you were... you know."

"While I was fucking my new wife?" I ask. "That's another thing to learn. That you're mine. Just mine."

She shivers and tries to hide it. Did she like that I just said that? I'm feeling like she does.

I follow her into the bathroom and look over her shoulder as she reads the text message.

Sheila Crawford: We should talk about this list you sent the DJ. If you won't reconsider your choice of DJ versus band, you need to at least reconsider some of these song choices.

She puts her phone down, shoulders slumping and then lifts her blouse and holds it close to cover herself as she spins to face me.

She's got fire in her eyes now.

"You said you were gonna feed me. And you promised me something else you never delivered, so I guess you're showing me who you are, too, aren't you?" She squats and lifts her underwear from the bathmat. "And can you go so I can pee, please?"

"What?"

"Never mind." She puffs out her cheeks and then tries to walk away.

I catch her by the shoulders.

"Talk to me. I'll always keep my promises, Amie."

Little lines form over the bridge of her nose and she pouts a little.

Clearly, that text upset her and she's lashing out.

I cup her jaw with a palm, grazing her cheek with my thumb.

"We're gonna have to play catch up, get to know one another rapid pace instead of the way you're used to doing this, but I want you to know here and now that you can be direct with me. Say what's on your mind so we can deal and move forward." I take the underwear from her and toss them as I lean in for a kiss.

She shakes her head. Her phone makes noise. She glances at the screen.

Ivy: Please get ahold of me! 9-1-1! Are you with someone named Mason?

“See? She’s okay,” I say.

She exhales hard with relief and then gathers up the rest of her clothes as she shakily calls her sister on speaker. It immediately goes to voicemail and announces the mailbox is full.

She blows out a long breath and tries the number again while pulling her underwear on.

“What the fuck is going on with her? 9-1-1?” she mutters, more talking to herself than to me.

“See? She knows you’re here,” I offer.

“I need to know she’s okay.” She dials the number again. Voicemail full message again. “Shit,” she mutters. “Where are you, Ivy?”

“I’ll make some calls.” I leave the bathroom and grab my phone.

I’ve got several missed texts. Nothing urgent. I scroll through and see some non-urgent work stuff, one work text about a meeting that I’m not going to be able to procrastinate for long, and a few congratulatory texts from pack members.

I call Bailey Blackwood, Greyson’s sister.

“Mason!” Bailey answers excitedly on the first ring.

“Congratulations!”

“Hey Bailey. Thanks. How are you?”

“Whoa! So much excitement around here lately. Forget me; how are *you*?”

“No surprise, news is traveling,” I say.

“And scents. Some of those are definitely on the move,” she adds.

I chuckle. “No surprise there. And I’m fantastic, thanks.”

“Well, yeah. Second biggest news to happen in a while. I’m surprised to hear from you so soon.”

“Speaking of which, have you talked to Ivy Savage today?” I ask.

The bathroom door opens, and Amelia comes out, rolling her eyes and correcting me, “Brennan. Ivy Brennan.” She clips her bra into place around her waist and covertly works her arms into it without removing her blouse. I find this amusing since I’ve been looking at her naked body for the past few hours and now she’s trying to shield it from me.

“Yep,” Bailey answers. “I was just there, actually.”

“How is she? Amelia’s concerned about her. They haven’t talked.”

“She’s... um...”

I can tell by Bailey’s tone that things are tense over there.

I don’t wait for her to finish. “Amelia is worried because she says her sister was kidnapped and since she can’t reach her, she won’t settle until she knows she’s physically okay. Can you talk to her? Tell her you’ve seen Ivy, she’s uninjured, just with her mate and doing all right?”

“Well, I’m not sure she *is* fine, Mase,” Bailey says.

“Uninjured. Safe. And that Tyson is doing what he needs to do to provide, care for, and protect her?” I push.

Bailey sighs. “Not a good foot to start out on - manipulating your new mate, Mase. Ivy is really feeling betrayed right now, and -”

“Right, here she is,” I resist the urge to grind my molars and pass the phone to Amelia, sure Bailey will find a way to articulate what Amelia needs to hear. It’s not that I want to manipulate Amelia, just put her mind at ease. Even if the Tyson and Ivy situation is tense, it’ll get resolved. Of that, I’m sure.

Amelia backs away.

“Here,” I prompt, extending the phone.

“I don’t know who you’re putting me on a phone with and I’m not about to trust the word of some person I don’t know,” Amelia informs, doing up the button on her jeans, eyes on the phone in my hand with an expression like I’m trying to hand her a flaming bag of shit.

I touch the screen and announce, “Bailey. You’re on speaker.”

“Oh,” Bailey says, sounding uncomfortable. “Okay.”

“Tell her,” I invite.

Crickets.

“Bailey?” I prompt.

“Oh. Uh... hi, Amelia. I like your sister a lot. We’ve become fast friends. I hope you and I will, too.”

Amelia sits on my bed and pulls a sock on. “I stood right here while he not-so-ingeniously coached you to say what he *thinks* I wanna hear.” She clears her throat. “Not trying to be rude or anything, but until I speak to my sister and hear for myself that she’s okay I’m not about to believe a word from you.”

“I *was* just there at Tyson’s cabin, and we talked,” Bailey says. “I promise you that.”

“She’s not injured, no blood, right?” I ask. “She’s in one piece?”

“No,” Bailey says. “Neither of those things. We brought her some coffee and had a chat.”

“Not good enough,” Amelia insists.

“I can totally appreciate and understand that,” Bailey replies. “I don’t have a sister, just a brother, but if I did, I’d feel the same.”

“Thanks a bunch, Bailey,” I mutter.

She snickers. “Sorry, Mase. I get it, though, Amelia. Congrats on finding one another. I’m really happy for you, Mase, and you too Amelia. You’re mated to a good guy. Honest, he’s one

of the best guys I know. And I'm looking forward to getting to know you."

Amelia frowns. Fully dressed, she pulls her boots on.

"Oh," Bailey says, "And, Mase, I have a bit of information you might want that could explain some things from the Strawberry Moon-"

"Call you later. Bye, Bailey," I say and end the call.

"Who is she?" Amelia asks, not making eye contact.

"She's a member of our pack."

"How many people are in your pack?" She toys with the bottom button on her pink blouse.

"With the addition of you and your sister, five hundred and forty-four."

Her eyes widen. "That many shapeshifters? Are they all like you?"

"Like me?"

"Giant wolves."

"We're a pack of wolf shifters; alphas always tend to be the biggest, super-alphas even larger than that. But we have a handful of members that are human or half shifter/half human. Like Bailey. Her mother's human, father a retired council alpha."

"How many shapeshifters are there in total? Outside this pack?"

"Dunno. Far as we can guess, there are wolf shifters throughout the world. We're not all in contact. I'm sure there's a guess but that information isn't something I have at my fingertips. Bailey might have an estimate. She's our resident librarian and historian."

"So... there's a pack leader and you guys all follow him? A wolf shifter like you?" she asks. "Can I talk to *him*?"

“Let’s go get some food. I’m starvin’. Skipped breakfast. I’ll fill you in on how our pack works while I get food for us. You like crepes?”

“Crepes?” She blinks at me like she doesn’t understand.

“Yeah. Crepes. That okay?”

“There’s a creperie around here?”

I explain, “I worked part-time at a creperie while I was in school in Boston. Though Roxy’s bar here in the village has crepes on her menu. I taught her how to make ‘em.”

“Are you for real?” she asks, looking at me like I’ve got three heads.

“Pretty sure.” I shrug. “What is reality anyway?”

She rubs her forehead with her fingertips. “If I ask to speak to your leader, I’m guessing it’s probably a good idea to let me do that.” She crossed her arms. “Maybe it’s even a rule.”

“A rule?”

“Like... what is it... parley?”

Laughter bursts from me, making her eyes narrow.

“This isn’t the Caribbean, and we’re not pirates, Amie. You and me are not opposing forces at war.”

“Not unless you keep pushing me,” she mutters.

“What are you tryin’ to do? Get your mate in trouble?”

Her eyes light with fire. “*Would* you get in trouble for what you’ve done, grabbing me and holding me here against my will? Or are all of you cavemen Neanderthals?”

Right about now I want nothing more than to grab her and show her some primal instincts, but that needs to wait until after we eat. As much as I want to do nothing more than fuck for the foreseeable, the need to provide for her, nurture her – it’s innate.

I lean in to kiss the claiming mark, but she pulls her shoulder up to block access, so my mouth catches her shoulder. I nibble

playfully, which makes her jerk back, giving me access to her slender, beautiful throat.

“Stop it,” she fights me off, face pink but the scent of arousal thick in the air.

“This pack has seven leaders. Lucky for me, I’m one of them. But no... when an alpha claims his mate, he makes the rules.” I run my hand up and down her back. “I need to feed my mate. Let’s talk afterwards.”

Her expression drops. “The rules?”

I smile.

“There’s no hierarchy like on TV? No main leader alpha?” she asks.

“Most packs do have an alpha, majority being betas, and some omegas. Our pack is unique. We’re six, well seven, to be technical. Seven alphas that share responsibility for the pack. It’s a unique one and larger than the average pack. We also have alphas not on the council. And everyone in our pack has a voice so it’s a democracy overall. There’s a birth order hierarchy by age, but to our team, it really doesn’t mean much. All of us share that responsibility.”

“And you’re one of those leaders?”

“So is your sister’s mate.”

She frowns. “You said you don’t know him very well.”

“He’s about to join. It’s... a long story, and tragic, but he was kept from us. He’s about to finally accept his birthright and make us seven instead of six. We hope. The two shifters you met at the four corners are two of the others. Two more were with Tyson when he picked your sister up last night.”

Her eyes bulge. “So, talking to the leader won’t help me because you’re all alpha males who have no problem kidnapping women and walking around naked?”

Smiling, I lean forward and advise, “Nobody gets between an alpha and his mate. Whatever’s up with us is between us.”

She doesn't look impressed by that.

“What kind of help you need from a leader?” I ask.

“I need a conversation with someone who will listen. Who won't keep me naked and under him.”

I straighten. “Nobody will have you naked and under them besides me, Amelia. Nobody. And you can be on top next time if you like. In fact, I like that idea.” I reach for her.

Her hand goes up in an attempt to halt me, lip curling like she finds me disgusting, but her scent, her vitals, they say different.

I add, “And as for the naked stuff... can't exactly run on all fours incognito in clothes, can we? A wolf sporting jeans and cowboy boots? Or a dress?” I flash a smile.

She looks at me like I'm an unknown oddity and I strain to listen to a car pulling in. Scent hits me and I know it's my mother. Terrible timing. I knew news would travel fast after talking to Cicely, but Mom knows better. Dad must be busy, or he'd have stopped her from coming here for at least a couple days. Nobody expects an alpha who just met his mate to accept visitors, even their immediate family.

“Stay here. I'll be right back,” I instruct, pulling my sweatpants up, then going downstairs.

I meet my mother in the driveway. She's got the handle of a large wicker basket in her hand and she's smiling so big it's almost blinding.

“Should've called first,” I greet. “Five or more days from now.”

She's so excited, she looks about to burst. “You mated. I'm so happy, Mason. I'm so happy!” She sets the basket down and wraps her arms around me.

I kiss the top of her blonde head. “Thanks, Mom,” I murmur, feeling a smile tug at my mouth. “I'm happy too. But it's only

been a couple hours.”

“I know, I know.” She pats my arm and bounces excitedly. “It’ll be days before you come up for air. So for that reason, I wanted to drop this off for the new Mrs. Quinn just quick and I have some food in the car. Can you grab it? You’ll need sustenance.” She smiles brightly and wrings her hands. “Carrie says Bailey said the strawberry moon is expected to send mated females into heat as soon as it abates, so... within the next few days most likely. That on top of your honeymoon, I know it’ll be near impossible for you two to stop to cook. Can I meet her? Just quick?”

“Not yet, Mom. She’s not shifter, and-”

“I know; I heard. Heard she’s Ivy Savage’s sister. That’s strange but it’s also a relief because it could explain some things. Are you feeling like yourself again? You look happy. Is your face okay? She sprayed bear spray at you, I heard. Did it get in your eyes?” She reaches for my face.

I back up so she can’t mother me. My mother is amazing, but she still needs reminders from time to time that I’ve been a grown man for a decade and a half. “A hundred percent and I’m fine. Better than fine. But again, it’s only just happened, so _”

“Maybe she’ll go into heat at the end of this moon, and we’ll have a grandbaby! And Bailey found out Amelia is the older sister, so that might explain your confusion. She was saying that it’d make sense since shifter pack order typically aligns with a family’s birth order when there are human-shifter matings in the same family, though the few cases of history she found -”

“Mom, time to go. I need time with Amelia. You should know better than to come over just hours after an alpha mates.”

What she’s saying about birth order is interesting. Mildly. I really couldn’t care less the hows and the whys. The certainty I feel about Amelia is all that matters. All I know right now is my mother needs to go so I can get back to my mate.

“I figured I’d knock instead of ring and if you didn’t answer I’d just let myself in and quietly put the food away.” She shrugs.

“Now, you know better than that, too,” I reprimand.

She grins. “You’re definitely feeling better. I’m so happy, Mase. See, I knew it would all work out.”

My mother taps my cheek, beaming with happiness.

“You did, did you?” I tease, a smirk tugging at my mouth.

She smiles even brighter while shrugging. “Of course I did.”

She’s being facetious. Dad was the one who insisted it would all work out, told us both that, trying to get her to come down from the tizzy she worked herself into all last week, acting like the sky was crumbling. Though I was feeling the same, I didn’t let on I felt that way.

“I’m sure I’ll mend fences with Tyson.”

“Let’s hope that’s not too much work,” Mom muses, looking like she’s worrying about that, still.

“I’ll call you in a couple days and let you know when you can meet Amie.”

She looks at the house expectantly and then her expression changes. Amelia’s coming.

“Time to go,” I add, guiding my mother by her elbow back toward her car.

“Oh, hi,” she calls loudly over her shoulder, waving exuberantly.

Amelia is directly inside the door, waving at my mother.

Mom pulls away from me and opens the front door.

“I’m Skye. And…” She rushes inside and pulls Amelia into her arms. “I’m so glad to meet you!”

Amelia blinks in surprise, but doesn’t pull back. Instead, she pats my mother’s back gently.

“My husband Andrew is at work,” Mom goes on, “but he’ll be thrilled to meet you, as well. We’ll arrange something. A dinner soon.” She squeezes affectionately, then releases my mate repeating, “So *so* happy to meet you! Welcome to the family.”

When I step into the foyer, Amelia’s expression melts from surprise into a snotty look aimed at me. I wink, amused.

“Might as well get the meeting of the mom out of the way,” I quip.

The fire in my mate’s eyes has me realizing I’m about to see my little spitfire throw off some sparks. Before I can do anything to stop it, Amelia’s gaze turns to my mother. “Nice to meet you, too, ma’am. Amelia Brennan. And actually, I could use your help.” Amelia winces for extra effect.

Here we go. I fold my arms over my chest, intrigued.

“What’s wrong?” Mom asks, alarmed.

“He kidnapped me and won’t let me leave. My sister was abducted too, by someone named Tyson. And I have to warn you, my own mom will rain hellfire on this place if we’re not released immediately.”

“Hellfire?” Mom asks, eyes bouncing between me and my mate.

“I’m afraid so,” Amelia replies direly. “I’m sure you don’t want him to go to prison. Or worse, to some experimental lab so they can study him and his kind.” Amelia winces again for dramatic effect.

It works. My mother jolts in surprise, eyes slicing to me, filled with fear.

I grind my molars. This woman of mine is angling for a spanking.

She goes on, “You’d probably prefer he mated with a shapeshifter too, I’m guessing.”

“No,” I say. “You never know until you know. Who your mate’ll be, that is.”

Mom’s eyes ping pong between us with alarm.

“Amelia is a little resistant,” I explain unnecessarily, but it feels necessary that I say this for Amelia’s sake. “It’s only been a few hours since I identified her as mine. She’s told me witchcraft is responsible for me identifying her as mine and I’ve told her it doesn’t matter. It is what it is.”

“Witchcraft?” Mom asks. “You’re a witch? Because I have no problem with that. We’ll take you as you are, Amelia.”

“No,” she shakes her head. “I’m just a regular person. But a fortune teller is responsible for this.”

“You might as well go in,” I say, gesturing deeper into the house and adding, “For a minute.” I want my mother to understand this needs to be a quick visit because I need to be alone with my naughty mate. And soon.

I open my mother’s trunk, grab the large cooler and bring it in, finding them in the kitchen. Amelia is looking at my mother curiously, a hip leaned against the counter, arms folded across her chest.

“So, this is okay with you?” she asks.

“What’s that, sweetie?” Mom asks.

She’s set the basket on the counter. I put the cooler on the floor beside the fridge and then come up behind my woman and exhale intentionally on her claiming mark. She shivers and then tries to shrink away from me. I crowd her so there’s nowhere for her to go.

My mother notices, lips twitching as she fights a grin.

“That he has me here against my will?” Amelia grinds out.

“That he abducted me and tells me that no matter why I’m here, no matter what I’ve got waiting at home for me, he only cares about himself?”

I wrap both arms around her middle and haul her back against my front, planting my lips on my mark on her throat just as my mother responds with a wave of her hand.

“It’s not really like that,” my mother says, “You wouldn’t be the first woman to get unexpectedly swept off her feet by an alpha. One of these days I’ll tell you *my* claiming story.” Her smile gets wider. “You’ll get over the shock and you’ll start to see that you two are a perfect match. And believe me, he cares about you. This fast, yes. He’ll always do what’s best for you. I believe that wholeheartedly. Our Mason is very nurturing. He’ll make a wonderful mate and father.”

Amelia pulls away from me, spinning to glare at me with her eyebrows drawing together. She purses her lips in an expression that I find frankly adorable. She took one look at my mother and assumed Mom was her ticket out of here.

“You’ll get there. This is for you,” Mom says, gesturing to the big wicker basket she brought. “Just my small way of welcoming you. To the Arcana Falls pack and to the Quinn family.”

12

Amelia

Mason releases me, then squats and lifts the lid from the cooler he brought in, revealing stacks of glass food containers. He moves them to the brown and black marble counter in his fabulous kitchen, examining the contents with interest and flashing smiles at his mother more than once as he puts things into his fridge.

She's made some of his favorites, obviously. And his pretty, youthful, smiling mother looks positively delighted about all of this.

Her gaze turns to me, and she gestures toward the big wicker basket again; inviting me to dig into it.

I make no moves toward it, though I'm feeling kind of bad about that. She seems sweet and it's obvious that I'm a bitchy bitch who is angry with her son, so I can't be too nice to her by extension of that.

She explains, "Whenever someone mates, their family – or pack if they've got no relatives – sends food. I started cooking and putting the basket together quickly as soon as I got news. We know you two will be too busy to cook over the next few days." She shrugs.

"Busy?" I ask.

She smiles wider, eyebrows popping up. "*Very* busy." She jabs her elbow lightly at my side like this is a hilariously funny joke. I take a step back and raise my hands.

What the heck? Is this guy's mother seriously telling me she cooked food so we could have uninterrupted sex?

I can't stop myself from glancing into the big basket she brought, seeing assorted treats and pampering items as well as

wine, wineglasses, and candles. It's all very bougie-looking, too.

A card sits on top of the contents with beautiful handwriting scrawled across it that reads,

Amelia,
Welcome home!
With Love,
Your new family members,
Andrew and Skye Quinn
(Mom and Dad)

“The candles and soaps, and skin care products are handmade. By me. My husband made the wine. That's a special mead, a honey wine made for brand new couples. We give one of those to every new couple. Oh! I'll have to send one to your sister. Anyway, he likes to dabble with wine and moonshine. We have a little side hustle that's doing quite well locally. And I'll embroider your initials on the handkerchiefs another day. We'll go get some beauty treatments together and I'll do the embroidery while we get manis and pedis. Give us a chance to get to know one another?”

I can't stop myself from scoffing, while also feeling something in my belly – disappointment? Why, because I can't have this lady as my actual mother-in-law? I'm not sure if that's it, but I already know Skye Quinn is very different from Carla.

Carla would go for pedicures with me, but we wouldn't likely chitchat during it because she'd have her laptop on her lap and /or her phone to her ear. Yeah, Carla would gift me with a basket filled with classy items, but she'd never make something in it herself. She would, however, brag about the cost while dishing out one of her famous backhanded compliments. Like... “I wanted to treat you to a pampering. And yay, you getting to rid yourself of those scales on your heels is a plus, isn't it?” Or, “I bought you these lovely designer lavender cashmere socks, but really, it's for the *both*

of you because Richard says your feet are freezing him out of bed at night. He needs his sleep; he works *so* hard.” A gift for me with a reminder that there’s a complaint from her son. A pampering day for me while making it sound like I’ve got no care for my appearance. Yeah, he’s got an important job making rich people richer and that’s *so much* more important than my job at a hospital taking care of sick and injured people.

I don’t think Carla dislikes me. I think she probably just treats everyone this way. She’s shown herself to be quite narcissistic as time has gone on. It’s gotten more and more apparent to me the closer we’ve gotten to the wedding that she wants everyone else to feel beneath her and lucky to be in her presence.

I adore her husband, Whatshisface’s stepdad. John is a kind, caring, amazing guy who has the patience of a saint. As was Rick’s grampa who died a few months after I met him. His grandmother is sweet as pie. And she’s one of the reasons I agreed to rush the wedding plans, to give her a reason to celebrate her first anniversary without her departed husband. Rick’s sister Gloria is also lovely. And if she lived here instead of in England, I’m sure we’d be besties.

Carla is just a bit much, especially since she’s seeing this wedding as a way to show off to her friends and business associates. The pressure has been steadily mounting, landing squarely on my head.

Skye is attractive, fit, great skin with dark blonde shoulder-length hair. She’s wearing a white denim jacket over a long tan maxi dress with brown suede booties. Her smile looks genuine. But clearly, she’s not going to help me by guiltting her son into giving this up. So I have no choice but to be standoffish.

“Well, I’d better be going,” she says. “It’s not my style to crash your honeymoon.”

“You’ve just shown it is,” Mason mutters, but it’s with humor.

“Besides,” she continues, “Mason’s father and I have plans too.” Her cheeks glow rosy while her eyes widen. “Big plans.” She now jabs her elbow toward her son.

“Information I did *not* need,” Mason grumbles.

“Well, blame it on the moon. And the fact that we’re not dead yet,” she says, smiling wide with a shimmy of her shoulders. “But if it kills us, it’s probably the best way to go.”

Mason throws his head back and laughs. “Can’t argue with that.”

She smiles a beaming smile at me. “Too late for a little brother or sister for him, but that’s okay, right? Maybe there will be the pitter patter of little paws soon enough anyway.”

He laughs harder.

And it feels like my insides twist and shrivel up.

“The end of this moon cycle is expected to send mated females into heat,” she says.

Not only is she not going to help me, not only does she not give a crap that her son has abducted me, but she’s expecting grandchildren.

From me.

“Paws?” I ask, tucking my hair behind my ears while feeling my face go fiery hot.

She waves dismissively. “Figure of speech. Feet that’ll eventually be paws. Maybe. Most shifters don’t experience their first shift until adolescence. Super alphas experience shifts earlier, though. That’s something that often signifies a future council alpha, shifting as a younger child. Mason shifted that first time when he wasn’t even six months old. They all still go through that rough puberty period with the uncontrollable shifting, but when they have a few shifts as infants or kids, that’s a sign. But never mind all that for now... I guess you’ve got to get caught up on how things work. Many half-blood shifters don’t shift, but chances are that your children *will* since he’s a super-alpha. But if they don’t, that’s

not a problem. We'll love them regardless of whether they've got toes or toes *and* toe beans."

"Well, unsuspecting humans giving birth to a litter of puppies would definitely throw them off," I grumble, feeling my insides shrivel a little more.

She laughs. "It sure would. If you have any questions about life here, about being mated to an alpha, don't hesitate to ask. Mason's father's alpha. Not a council super-alpha, but close enough. My Andrew is smart and strong enough, he could've led his own pack. We preferred to stay here where we grew up, though. And it was good that we did since Mase exhibited super-alpha traits from babyhood. We had a strong feeling he'd be a council alpha. And we were right."

"I don't know what most of that means," I say.

"I'm sure you're a little overwhelmed. Any questions, don't hesitate. I'm happy to help you get acclimated."

"Thanks, but I won't be staying."

Her eyes bounce between me and Mason and then she straightens her denim jacket collar before opening her mouth to speak again.

I speak first. "So, I take it by your reaction that you're not bothered by the fact that I'm asking for help here."

"She did help, wildberry," Mason answers. "She dropped food off. And a gift basket for you." He gestures toward the basket.

"Wildberry. That's adorable. Get the rest of that food away, Mase. I'll get out of your hair."

"This is all down to witchcraft, Mrs. Quinn," I say. "And I'm sure that's not what you want for your son. I know it's not what my mom would want for me or for my sister."

"Since we're both Mrs. Quinn, how about you call me Mom? Or Skye if that makes you uncomfortable, though I hope it doesn't." She then adds in a shaky voice, "I've always wanted a daughter."

I put my fingertips to my temples. “I don’t think you’re getting me.”

“Oh, I am, Amelia. There might have been interference by witches. That happens sometimes. They have their reasons.”

“Their ... reasons?” I tilt my head.

“They’re privy to things that keep the balance in nature. Sometimes they have to intervene either for the balance or for other reasons. We don’t worry too much about it.”

“My deceased aunt paid for this,” I say, voice climbing toward falsetto. “This wasn’t done for nature’s purposes. It was done for cold, hard cash. That means your son’s true soulmate is probably out there somewhere getting deprived of all that.” I gesture to Mason who stands by the fridge, his arms crossed over his fabulous, muscular chest as he watches me with interest.

Yeah, all *that*. There’s a lot of it that some poor shapeshifter girl would likely be very disappointed to find out a witch stole from her. God, he looks so good bare-chested in those sweatpants. The way they hang low on his hips. His hipbones are sexier than should be allowed.

“I wouldn’t worry so much about what witches do and don’t do. It’s not for us to be concerned about,” Skye interrupts my Mason-daze, “Long story for some other day, but witches helped form this pack when it first got started. They were once very involved and though that’s not the case any longer, we’ve always respected them.”

“But what if it *is* something to be concerned about? Because what if he’s really supposed to be with someone else? Because I’m supposed to be with someone else.” I press my palm to my chest. “I’m getting married the Saturday after this one.”

She shakes her head. “You’re already married, dear.”

Okay. Now, I’m getting cheesed.

A phone rings from somewhere in the house.

“Right back,” Mason says and then jogs upstairs, leaving me with his mother.

She smiles kindly at me, looking like she’s got empathy. Sort of. But this is going nowhere.

“I get it.” Skye pats my arm. “You’re confused. You’re surprised. But it’s going to be wonderful. You’re the wife of the pack council’s second alpha. That’s an important role.”

I frown.

“And your sister’s lovely. I met her Friday night. It’ll be nice that both of you will be part of our pack. That you don’t have to lose touch.”

I straighten up. “My sister is lovely?”

“Well, of course. She was very sweet to everyone. It’s unfortunate, what happened, but you both look a lot alike. At least we can all move forward now.”

“Pardon?”

“Time to go, Mom.” Mason is back.

“Right.” She loops her handbag over her shoulder.

“Congratulations, again, sweetheart.”

She leans over and kisses his cheek. He hugs her and kisses the top of her head, affection in his gaze. “Thanks, Mom. Appreciate the grub. Say *hey* to Dad.”

“I will. He’ll look forward to meeting you, Amelia. Welcome, again.” She grabs my hand.

I force a smile. “I’d say it’s nice to meet you because you seem like a nice lady, and thanks for the attempted kindness.” I gesture toward the basket. “But based on what’s happening here, I’m afraid to say that things might go legal. The police are very likely on their way already.”

Mason’s mom looks alarmed.

“I’ll walk you out,” Mason says, seeming unaffected.

“You just need some time. And some more of Mason’s charms,” she says softly to me, patting my back as she passes me.

Mason replies while slowly strolling by, “She’ll get plenty of my charms, don’t you worry.”

Blatant innuendo is delivered with that line, so I do my best to scorch him with a dirty look, but he looks unbothered as he carries the empty cooler toward the front door. She looks over her shoulder and waves with trouble in her eyes before stepping outside.

I watch as they talk for a minute by her car. He puts an arm around her, and it looks like he’s trying to comfort her.

A pang of guilt hits me for putting her under stress. But this isn’t okay. None of it.

I try to phone my mom again. The call fails. I try Ivy. That call fails, too. *God*. Frustrating.

I type up a text to Mom.

My phone is glitching. I’m okay but I’m trying to figure this out. Delete this after you read it, but a *guy* has me and he’s swearing we’re married now. Clearly this is what also happened to Ivy. He doesn’t even seem to care that someone was paid. I need you to try to find who was paid so we can get *them* to undo it. Maybe these people will snap out of this once the *thing* is broken. I’ll call as soon as I can.

I hit send and the message seems to go through, so I breathe out relief. But I do it too soon because a red exclamation mark pops up with a *not delivered* error.

He’s back. And he’s got a look in his eyes that has my heart beating in double-time.

“Why are my bags over there?” I pretend not to notice that look in his eyes, and point to the bench by the door before I hit re-try on the message.

Instead of answering me, he's eating up the distance between us with an expression that says... *uh oh*, that look is carnal.

I back away. He quickens his pace and I find myself pinned against the counter. His hands cup my jaw.

"Not nice trying to use my mother as a weapon, there, wildberry."

My heart trips over itself, but I manage to keep my voice steady.

"Not nice to kidnap me and keep me here against my will, there, Shifty. I need to go."

He smiles. But the smile warns of danger.

"Seriously," I snap.

His expression clears. "Let's eat. She brought over some salad, twice baked potatoes, and chicken cutlets. Also a baked manicotti for tomorrow. My ma can cook. You cook?"

"Not even a little," I lie.

"Hm." He doesn't look too disappointed.

"I'm not very domestic at all," I add.

Another lie. I love cleaning. And cooking. And everything domestic.

"That's all right." He shrugs. "We'll pay someone to clean the house. I'll cook."

"You a neat freak?" I ask.

"Not really."

"This place is spotless," I observe.

"Mom cleaned it last week for me. She was here a few days, so she did that while she was here. Why? You a slob?"

"Ah. A mommy's boy," I quip.

His eyes snap to lock with mine and they're sparking with challenge. Am I getting to him?

“You’re funny, baby,” he says.

“Oh yeah?” I ask, “Not tryin’ to be.”

“Yeah, well keep bein’ *that* kind of funny and you might find yourself with a pink ass.”

My jaw drops. “Are you threatening to hit me?”

He leans forward. “Hitting you isn’t the same as spanking your ass.”

“Sounds like the same thing to me,” I fire back, snottily.

“Yeah, well my kinda spanking’s gonna end with you coming on my knot and whimpering my name in that sweet way you’ve got.”

“Pff,” I roll my eyes acting like I’m unaffected, but my nipples and that bitemark on my throat are all tingly. I’ll have to pretend I don’t like that he likes how I say his name.

He shakes his head like he thinks I’m hilarious, then pulls plates out of the cupboard with one hand and forks from a drawer with the other. He takes them around the breakfast bar to his kitchen table, which has an L-shaped bench. He sets the table, then returns to open the big brushed-steel refrigerator and moves a few of the containers around, hunting for something.

“Another broken promise,” I mutter under my breath.

No oral sex. No crepes.

“Hm?” He peers around the fridge door.

I shake my head and point my gaze at the lake, which looks super-peaceful, unlike what’s happening in my stomach right now. My belly is all flippy and fluttery, a series of tiny torpedoes.

My belly goes from fluttery to rumbly. It was a long drive here and all the exertion has left me hungry since I only grabbed a cup of coffee at that diner in Drowsy Hollow.

“What broken promises?”

“Crepes, for one. You, Stranger Danger, are a crepe tease.”

I look over as his face changes. “You like crepes?”

I love crepes. They’re one of my favorite things to eat. Though I rarely get the chance to eat them. I don’t answer.

“We’ll eat the chicken for dinner then,” he says. He puts the containers back in the fridge, walks to a cupboard, squats, and produces a crepe pan and mixing bowl, then reaches into a drawer and pulls out a wooden crepe spreader, whisk, and a long, skinny spatula.

“You were excited about the food your mother brought,” I say softly.

I’m sort of surprised. I pretty much expected him to sluff that off.

He shrugs. “We can eat that stuff later. If crepes’ll make you happy, that’s more important than my stomach. You’re my priority.”

I spin, turning my back to him, staring out at the lake, trying to will my galloping heart to slow down.

Because a) men say you’re a priority and then their actions usually say different and b) I can’t get caught up in this; it’s not real.

It’s not real. But if it was, it might be the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

But it’s not fate. It’s fake.

My palms are suddenly sweaty. And my chest is burning.

I love my Auntie Nelle. I miss her so much it hurts. And this isn’t easy to admit, but I might be kind of angry with her right now for doing this to me.

13

Mason

Emotion rolls off of her when I say she's my priority. It shunts through me, and it feels right to feel this connection. I don't know all that much about deciphering women's feelings; I've never had this sort of insight before, but if I had to name what her earlier emotions felt like, it wasn't hostility about a broken promise, more like longing. And that says a lot to me. And I'm pretty certain it's not saying shit about crepes versus chicken.

But now all that's coming from her is frustration. I think.

She was determined to be disappointed. She has low expectations, clearly. And she's surprised by my flexibility in something as simple as a meal.

I crack a few eggs, watching her stare out the window.

"What other broken promise, Amie?" I ask.

She doesn't answer.

I open the fridge and assess for possible toppings.

"All right then... next question. What kind of crepes?" I try.

"Whatever your specialty is," she answers, not looking at me.

"Sweet or savory?"

She turns toward me, saying, "Yes," with a definitive nod.

I smile. "Any allergies or things you don't like?"

"Allergies: no. As for the other question, that's dependent on whether or not you can actually cook."

"I can cook," I inform.

"We'll see," she mutters, examining her fingernails.

I get to work on a spinach, bacon, tomato, and cheese galette and then mix up some berries and get out some chocolate

syrup and a bottle of whipped cream, grateful for not only the prepared food my mother dropped off today but for the fact, too, that she loaded the fridge and pantry last week because of the steady stream of visitors I had.

While I'm cooking, Amelia slips out onto the deck off the kitchen and my eyes coast over her body as she stares at the lake. It's a little windy and her pretty hair billows in the breeze. She looks troubled and I don't like this. Though, I get it. She thinks she's engaged and that she's been unfaithful. She's protective over her sister. She's surprised by today's events. I want to fix it all for her.

Time. I have to give it time for the sister thing; there's no way in hell I'd show up there right now. I think it'd do more harm than good, and I've done enough of that already. They need time to mend their issues before he sees my face again.

And I'll help my mate end the other thing. As soon as possible with the other thing.

It's not cheating since she was never meant to be his. Especially not with the fact that she's not even carrying his scent. I think meeting me came at the perfect time; she's just not ready to admit it.

Her phone chimes from the table so I peer over at it, seeing a text from her mother.

Mom: Thank God! Are you ok? What's he like? I have no idea who the fortune teller was but I'll go through her boxes in the attic and see if I find anything. I just heard from Ivy. She's okay. She knows who you're with and made it sound like you're ok too. Are you? This whole thing has aged me ten years already! Call me as soon as you can with an update.

I read the message Amelia sent earlier to her mother as well.

Her phone has a half a bar. It drops to no service again.

I look at my own phone. The same. I never have problems with reception here, but it's been in and out all day. Just like I

never had problems with reception near the village and I had issues with my phone the night Tyson claimed Ivy.

Witchcraft.

Fucking with phone signals? Fucking with my truck?

I ponder that notion, moving back to the counter to finish up, then set the food on the table before sliding open the patio door. I slip my arms around her waist, kissing my mark on her. She jolts.

I turn her around so we're facing one another and say, "Food's ready." I step back, tagging her hand.

She eyeballs my body lazily from top to bottom and then back up again. She's looking at me with unbridled lust and it makes me want to say *fuck the food*.

"And you got a text from your mother."

She snaps out of her trance and pulls her hand away.

"Coffee? Orange juice? Or ... what is it you want?" I inject innuendo into the question and blatantly check her out.

Her tits look fucking scrumptious.

"Orange juice is good. Thanks," she mumbles and walks past me, sitting down at the table, snatching up her phone. She straightens up as her eyes travel the screen, then she empties her lungs with relief. "At least she's not stressing as much. Now I feel like I can actually eat knowing she knows I'm not dead in a ditch. And she talked to Ivy. Good."

She makes a call and when I get back to the table with two glasses and the carton of orange juice, I hear her listening to a *mailbox full* announcement. She dramatically pretends to throw the phone before setting it down gingerly and looking to me.

"Either my phone won't work or when it does, the person I'm trying to reach's phone goes right to voicemail. Do me a favor and call Tyson and have him put Ivy on the phone."

“Don’t have his number; he probably doesn’t have a cell,” I say, sitting down across from her.

“Then I’ll give you Ivy’s number. She probably won’t answer not knowing the number, but it’s worth a try.”

“My phone’s on the fritz, too. Dig in.” I gesture to her plate while lifting my fork.

“You called that girl,” she accuses, “And talked to some guy earlier.”

“Yeah, but I’ve tried to use it since.” I slide my phone toward her. “Look.”

She eyes the screen with suspicion.

“Who in the world doesn’t have a cell?” She tries to re-dial Riley on speaker with my phone. The call fails.

“A shifter that lives reclusively and has just shifted back to human form for the first time in more than half a decade.”

She blinks hard. “Huh?”

“Tyson’s been off grid a long time. He only shifted to human form because he smelled your sister.”

“So ... my sister is stuck with some reclusive kidnapper? Your efforts to make me feel better are a big fat fail. And love at first smell? Spare me.”

“You cynical about love?”

“Pff.”

“Strange for someone who’s about to get married, don’t you think? I’d expect someone saying they already found their happily-ever-after would be all about love.”

Her face goes beet red, and I feel emotion flaring in her. I’ve struck a nerve.

“We’ll find a way to connect you with your sister soon, Amie. Meanwhile, eat up. *You’ll need your strength.*”

She looks about to protest, but I jerk my chin toward her plates. Her eyes slide down and then they go round as she

examines the food. She reaches for the plate holding the sweet crepe.

“That’s the sweet one. Not gonna save it for last?”

“Life’s too short for that,” she mumbles and maneuvers the plates around so the sweet plate is beside the savory one.

She daintily saws off a small bite and I watch as she tastes it. She says nothing, but her eyes slowly drift shut before a moan slips from her. And it’s a direct line to my cock.

“Fuck, I want you right now.”

She startles, but says nothing. She takes her time chewing and then swallowing, her eyes rolling a little more; she’s savoring it. And then she dabs her mouth with her napkin, takes a sip of orange juice, dabs again and then tries a bite from the savory one. She moans again. Louder.

I shift in my seat, then find myself gripping the table’s edge, resisting the urge to sweep everything off so I can fuck her on it. But she’s hungry. And so am I. It’s been a few years since I’ve made these. Seems I haven’t lost my touch.

Lust shifts marginally to amusement as Amelia enthusiastically alternates between both plates and studiously avoids my face.

“So, what do you do for work? Do you work?” I ask, halfway through the meal, deciding to follow her lead and alternate between plates. And talk because I want to know more about her and also, if I don’t occupy myself while we eat, she’s going to get fucked on top of this table instead of getting to enjoy the rest of her crepes. She shoots me a dirty look and then takes another bite from the dessert crepe.

“I build things. Sometimes I design them first,” I offer.

She says nothing.

“Homes. Businesses. Some agricultural operations. Recently finished the new racetrack on the other side of The Hollow.”

No response.

“You?”

Still nothing.

“Amie?” I prompt. “Lady of leisure?”

She shoots me a look of annoyance. “Hardly. I’m a nurse.”

For her to be a nurse, she’s got nurturing qualities. And I like that.

“Yeah? You got one of those cute little nurse dresses; one of those black and white hats?”

She shakes her head. “I wear hot pink or purple scrubs and Crocs when I work. Or one of several pairs of Disney-themed scrubs if I’m working in the pediatric ward. The epitome of unsexy.”

“Well, looks like you make up for it when you’re not working,” I say, gesturing to her. “Saw some hot clothes and shoes in your suitcase. What was all that stuff in your trunk for?” I gulp back some juice.

“Maybe I was packed for my honeymoon. Not that you should’ve opened my suitcase and snooped.”

I frown. “Two weeks early? Not likely. No summer clothes in there, either. Where were you going for that honeymoon?”

She says nothing, but her expression sours even further.

I continue. “Or maybe you were planning your getaway.”

“A getaway?”

“Not *a* getaway. Your *runaway bride* getaway. Leaving your useless ex and timing worked in your favor bringing you to your fated mate.”

“Fate. If only,” she mutters, making me perk up. “No, my sister turned up devastated and bandaged. I was planning to go stay with her until her roommate got back from Jamaica. Whatever happened with that Tyson guy, she was a mess. Seeing that when Ivy never gets like that over a guy, I knew she needed me. You know where he lives?”

“We’ll see her in a few days,” I say. “She and Tyson need some time. Like we do. Your mom messaged that she talked to your sister and said she’s okay, so stop worrying.”

Amelia shoots me a look of exasperation and forks up another bite. The last bite of the sweet crepe.

I wait, watching her enjoy the rest of her food and when she finally finishes her last bite from the savory plate, I rise and round the table, then I pluck her up into my arms. She gasps as I carry her toward the stairs.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking you to bed.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Fine, I’ll fuck you here,” I say, turning, and setting her on the breakfast bar, immediately moving between us and grabbing her jaw to bring her mouth to mine.

She tries to pull back, demanding, “Stop that.”

I deny the request, slipping my tongue in for a quick taste before I dot kisses along her jaw, explaining, “I’ve been listening to you moan for the last ten minutes while you took your sweet time eating, and my cock is about to rip through my sweats and find its way home. I need you. Now.”

Her eyes darken with what looks like desire. And I know it *is* desire because I catch my new favorite scent. Amelia’s sweet pussy. She’s wet for me.

I lift her and carry her to the couch, eyes locked. She’s not fighting. Her chest steadily rises and falls. She’s panting. Oh yeah, she wants me.

She rolls her lips and then licks them as I put her on her back on my couch, then reach for her fly. I get the jeans off and haul the crotch of her sodden panties aside before I pull the waistband of my sweatpants down enough to free myself. In one forward hip thrust, I fill her.

Fuck, she feels good. Hot, tight, silky. She clamps around me and this pulls a growl from my chest, which sends her teeth into her bottom lip as her eyes rove my face before they lock with mine.

“You like those crepes?” I ask.

She shrugs. “They were all right.”

“You liked them.”

She rolls her eyes like she finds my delight annoying. “Fishing for compliments is also unattractive.”

“You usually find me attractive? All this?” I use her words of earlier while I roll my hips, gaining the magical effect of pulling a whimper from her.

“All this is just witchcraft, Doggo,” she says a breath after the whimper.

“I don’t care, wildberry.”

“Well, I do.”

“If it’s witchcraft and it’s beyond our ability to resist this chemistry between us, stop feeling bad about it. Let’s just enjoy it.” I caress her face. “Besides, it’s gonna build into something real. Something unbreakable. It’s already happening.”

And emotion comes at me at the same time as it flares in her eyes. Longing. She wants this to be real.

It hits me hard that it already is. The notion of an unbreakable bond feels good. Feels right. I have zero doubts: I’m a hundred percent confident in the reality. I’m hers; she’s mine. I have something that’s all mine. Forever. And it feels fucking incredible.

I grasp her knee and wrap her leg around me while I feel the beauty of her pussy milking my cock.

14

Amelia

Those crepes were gourmet restaurant quality. I could eat them daily for the rest of my days. The rest of my days with this view, in this house, with this man. And his huge, beautiful, magical dick.

Alas, that won't be happening.

While he's fucking me into his couch, while he's driving that beautiful dick into me, so deeply while expertly rubbing my clit, he's staring at me as if there's no place in the world he'd rather be. And this hits me square in the feels. He's giving off energy that shows my pleasure matters. How refreshing.

He's not picturing a celebrity or a porn star or some more exciting fantasy in his head. He's not thinking my hair would be better if it were blonde or that he wishes my stomach were flat and there was no cellulite on my butt. He's looking at me like I'm what he wants. *Me*. Here. Now and forever. Nothing and no one else.

It might sound crazy that I'm getting this from the look on his face, but I am. And it's freaking me out.

So freaked out because I'm torn between soaking it up and bursting into tears because of how amazing it would be if this were my reality. I need to work hard to turn that part of my brain off. The part that wants to believe that magic can somehow be married to reality.

The longer I'm here, the more it's going to hurt to go back to my life. And Ivy might have told Mom she's okay, but is she? That was a 9-1-1 text. Did that get sent before or after she and Mom talked?

"Come back to me," Mason whispers against my lips.

"Hm?"

“You were here with me, in the moment, and now you’re somewhere else. I want you here.”

I swallow down my emotion. A sad, ugly lump of it.

“Baby,” he whispers against my lips, and the way he says that has tingles trilling up my spine. He then slides his mouth to that bitemark he made and pulls the skin there into his hot mouth.

My eyes flutter, vision blurring as I absorb that, then he sucks, pulling hard while he rolls his hips. I jolt as his cock expands and vibrates inside me while his fingers continue to swirl around my clit. He’s still latched onto my neck, and the sounds that Mason Quinn manages to pull from me are somewhere between wounded animal and wanton whore. Wanton whore wins out as my back arcs, all of me detonating into what feels like a zillion shards of rainbow-colored light and broken glass confetti.

God, this voodoo. It’s potent. And at this moment I can actually say that if that were my lottery winnings, I’d say it’s worth however much money it cost me to feel this, even for a minute. He grabs my chin and stares into my eyes.

“It’s real, Amie. It’s very fucking real. You can’t tell me you feel this and have any doubts about it.”

And the look in his eyes? The fierceness? For a second, I almost let myself believe it.

Almost.

I cling to him, nails digging into his back, legs wrapped tight around him, eyes squeezing shut tight, but certain that sparkling rainbows have got to be shooting out of my fingertips and my toes.

“Amelia Quinn,” he whispers, holding my face with both hands, and when I open my eyes, it feels like he’s looking straight into my soul with a magnifying glass.

Oh my God. It’s like I can see the emotion pulsing from him, like it’s climbing inside me...

Mason's head jerks up, his attention moving toward the door. This happens just before the doorbell rings.

He bolts off me, reacting in an almost canine way as he stares at the door then growls.

Doggo. I almost smile.

Quite the sight. His trackpants are down below his hips and he's still hard, his cock glistening with me.

He takes two steps toward the door, but then spins back toward me, pulls his pants up and hauls a soft black and silver blanket off the back of the couch we're on and drapes it over me, then drops a kiss on my lips.

"Right back, baby," he whispers and then he rushes for the door.

And he seems a little angry, though it's entirely directed toward the door.

The front door slams.

I feel the need to get dressed. But ick, these underwear are beyond ready for the laundry with the day I've had so far. I've still got my blouse on, and that doesn't seem so bad, but I need clean undies and jeans. My stuff is by the front door, so I wrap the blanket around my waist like a sarong and peel the undies off before I wander that way, ready to shove them and my jeans into the nylon laundry bag I carry in my suitcase when traveling.

Eek. Mason's spooge is running down my leg. When I get to where my suitcases are by the built-in bench and coat hooks that are utter perfection for a foyer of a home, motion outside catches my eye.

Mason is arguing with a stunning redheaded woman who stands beside a motorcycle parked where Skye's car was parked earlier.

I've got a perfect view of his back, her front, and as if sensing my presence, she looks right at me, props her hands on her slender waist and shoots a glare directly at me while her

nostrils flare. It hits as unconcealed hatred. I rear back at the intensity of it.

Mason looks over his shoulder at me and his expression softens when he sees me. He then points at her, his finger really close to her face, and clips some sort of orders at her, I think.

She twists her neck to the side, pressing her ear against her shoulder and squeezes her eyes shut tight while he continues to jerk his index finger at her, clipping words at her.

His hand drops and her hands defensively lift. She backs up, then spins before climbing onto her motorcycle and starting it up. And as he turns away from her, she shoots me another dirty look before she pulls her helmet onto her head. I watch him stalk toward the door, looking absolutely ticked off. He's holding a wristwatch and a necklace. I drop my eyes to my suitcases and I'm suddenly even more conscious of what's running down my thighs.

As he comes in, I'm still in a squat, being careful to keep the blanket around my lower half as I hunt for the laundry bag.

My heart is pounding hard against my chest wall as the door shuts and locks.

As I stuff my dirty underwear and jeans inside the bag, I hear, "Baby." And the sound of his voice sets off something in me that feels like an alarm.

I steel myself against the strange sensation and look over my shoulder, seeing him set the watch and thick silver chain down on the console table across from where I'm squatted.

It's a man's watch. A man's necklace. She was returning those to him. An ex-girlfriend?

I swallow and it's as if something ugly has slithered down my throat into my gut. My hands are shaking as I rifle through my suitcase.

Maybe she's not any more of an *ex* than Rick is. Maybe she's his current girlfriend and he's just dumped her because he

thinks I'm his fated mate. Maybe that gorgeous redhead with the motorcycle would be his actual soulmate if not for my aunt's meddling.

If so, no wonder she looked at me like *that*. If Mason was mine and some bitch stole him from me, I'd file my nails into points and go for her face with them.

Maybe she heard through the grapevine that her guy just had sex with some girl because he 'smelled' her and thought she was his destiny.

And Rick's face flashes through my mind, the face I imagine he might make finding out that I've spent the whole day getting fucked by another man. My engagement ring that he had made for me lost. Not only lost, but that I'm awful enough to have felt relieved to have it off my finger for the first time in months.

A hollowness spreads through my chest and I burst into tears. And it's audible crying, ugly-crying, nothing lady-like or pretty about it.

He's lifting me. I'm trying to hold my blanket sarong around myself, wanting to communicate that he should put me down, that his blanket is going to be soiled with the cum that's got me all sticky, but the noises I make just come out as crying-blubber, which is impossible to understand.

He moves us back to the couch and arranges me on his lap.

I bring the hankie in my hand to my face to deal with the tears and realize it's not a hankie. It's a pair of clean panties.

Shoot.

He pulls my face into his chest, murmuring, "Wildberry."

"Le-let go," I finally manage.

"I don't wanna let go. Amelia. Not ever, baby."

I make one of those horrible hiccup-sob sounds. Oh God, I'm a walking disaster.

Mason's deep, purring vibration noise moves over, around, and through me. It gets louder and louder and I soon find myself melted. A puddle of Amelia-goo in his lap, my cheek against his chest as I'm absorbing the sensation. The sound. His smell. His warmth.

Amelia's anti-anxiety medication. Organic, holistic, calorie-free.

I bet the beautiful redhead wishes she could be comforted by this sound right now. Did he make this noise for her when she was upset? Did he hold her like this yesterday before he smelled me?

When all this is over, I should get a cat. Okay, so I hardly think a little feline will be able to purr the way he does. And a cat won't be able to hold me, making me feel so... safe. But the sound of a purr once in a while might be nice.

Moments later, I'm still in his arms, snuggled close, and the vibrations stop because he speaks.

"She's nobody," he says, stroking my hair.

"I could not care less," I reply, but even as I say it, I know I don't sound very convincing.

"Serious. I met her not long ago and it was just a quick –"

"Stop."

"...Evening. I left some jewelry behind and..."

I scoff again. "I saw. You don't owe me anything, Mason."

He keeps going, "I didn't know you existed and if I had, it wouldn't have happened. She shouldn't have come here. I wasn't returnin' her calls and she decided to drive down here. She's a shifter so she certainly should've turned her bike around when she caught that scent."

"Scent?" I lift my head off his chest and look at his face. Mistake, because the look of concern and warmth in his expression makes me want to burst into fresh tears.

“The day an alpha mates for the first time, his first knot triggers his claiming scent. That covers the territory he’s in. It’s prevalent for at least a good mile around this place right now. She knows what that scent is and should never have come here.”

I guess that explains the fact that I keep smelling what I can only describe as Christmas morning. And who can resist that smell? Certainly not me, evidently.

“You don’t owe me any explanations, Doggo. You can let go of me now.”

“I feel you, Amie. I feel something’s wrong right now. Talk to me.”

“I don’t need to talk.”

“You’re upset.”

I huff. “Listen, my emotions are just screwy because I cheated on Whatshisface today. But it’s the voodoo sex magic, not my fault. Though tell my emotions that. I’m not someone who cheats. That’s not who I am.”

“Of course not. What we did today wasn’t wrong, baby. It was fate.”

“My mom got cheated on by my dad several months ago and after seeing what that’s done to her, what it’s done to my whole fucking family, there’s no way in the world I’d just do that on purpose. No way.”

“Baby.” He drops a kiss on my forehead.

“I know this isn’t my fault, but that’s not gonna mean a thing to my fiancé when he finds out I slept with someone. And I need to talk to my fucking sister and find out if she’s okay or not.”

“She’s-”

“Fine. Yeah. So you keep telling me,” I snap.

He palms my jaw. “Amie. Everything’s gonna work out. I know it. Trust me.”

God, looking into those dark eyes affects me. Does something to me. They make me want to believe. His fingers sift through my hair and our mouths are suddenly fused together. He's holding me tight.

And then, somehow I've got his jaw in both hands, dropping the panties in my hand and slipping my tongue into his mouth. I'm grinding on his lap while his hands rove up and down my torso.

He lets out a gruff moan and then he's got a handful of my hair, and this has the strangely magical effect of making me grind down harder on him.

His breathing gets heavier, his eyes even more glittery, and I find myself pulling down the waistband of his pants enough to get to his beautiful, big, hard dick. When I get it all the way out, my legs open wider, allowing room to guide him into me. And then I'm driving my hips forward. Rocking, riding him. Fucking him.

What is wrong with me?

I'm fucking him. Me. I instigated it this time.

"We have to stop this," I pant, circling my hips and feeling so fucking good as I look down and see what I'm doing to him.

"We don't."

"No, we do. I'm engaged, Mason. This is horrible of me." Despite my words, my hips don't stop. And I'm so wet, so ridiculously wet, there's that *stirring macaroni* noise again.

He growls and grabs my jaw, locking gazes. "You're mine, wildberry. Mine. Let's go end it with Whatshisface as soon as we come. No more guilt."

I shake my head vigorously and then dash a lock of hair out of my mouth. "Don't be ridiculous."

He grabs my hips and makes me ride him faster. Faster and faster and so, so hard. It feels like he's bruising my hips. And fuck, does it feel good.

His eyes are blazing with anger, possessiveness, determination while he does this to me. My head rolls back while I cry out as he expands inside, and those delicious vibrations rev up.

“How much more of this can I take?”

“You were meant for me. You can take as much as I have to give.”

I didn't realize my question wasn't inner monologue. He quickens his pace, so I bury my face in his throat and cry out, having a huge, brutal orgasm. The second it starts to ebb, I go limp.

He turns me to my back, pulls my legs up so my ankles are behind his ears, and then he's slamming into me over and over, roaring out the sexiest sounds through one, two, three deep and hard strokes. Heat and wet fill me. And then he stays planted and those vibrations rev up as warmth fills me, fills me so much it leaks out of my eyes.

Whoa. Exhausted. Absolutely exhausted.

And my inner thighs are feeling bruised. Bruised and wet.

Evidently, that was exactly as much sex as I could take. I'm at my limit. Finally. He grabs the blanket I'd been using as a sarong and drapes it over us, shifting me onto my side, nestling my back against the back of the couch and wrapping his arms around me, putting his lips to my forehead.

This is the comfiest couch I think I've ever laid on. It's beige, sort of a thick, plush chenille-like fabric, with lots of pillows.

He's warm. Deliciously warm. The sun beats through the window down on us and I feel like a cat basking in a sliver of light. Speaking of cats, he starts purring some more. I yawn. He's holding me close, enveloping me in warmth, making that beautiful sound. My eyes feel so heavy.

15

Mason

I'm stretched out on the couch, facing her, lying on my side while she sleeps, snuggled, melded into my body. She belongs right here. My perfect fit.

Interrupted twice within hours of claiming, alphas and their new mates aren't usually disturbed for days. It's the whole reason the first knot's scent spreads so far and wide. It's likely a throwback to ancient times and no longer has the severity of stepping up knowing they're essentially taking their life in their hands. But still, it's considered rude.

Is this hurting the bonding process? Are these interruptions part of the reason she's so conflicted?

I suspect that more than that, it's how she's been conditioned. Putting herself last. Worrying about everything and everyone else. She's a nurse. The older sister. She's a nurturer.

Leaning back, I smooth her dark, wavy hair away from her face and study her. She looks angelic while she sleeps. Fair skin. Dark hair. Long lashes. Pink lips. I caress her tiny earlobe with two holes in it and then my fingertip skates up to another piercing high up on the ridge of her ear. My fingertips trail back down to the mark on her creamy throat. Her reaction makes my chest fill with emotion; she's burrowing into my chest with a sweet little sigh.

I didn't like that she got upset earlier, but I loved how I was able to comfort her and don't think I'll ever forget how good it felt when she grabbed onto my cock with urgency and shoved it inside herself like she owned it. She does own it. She was claiming it as hers after another woman showed up. And then the way she rode me with that look in her beautiful eyes ... the wild look of sheer possessiveness? She'd deny she was possessive, but that's what it felt like. A woman shows up here

and my Amie's reaction is to slam down onto my cock? Fuck, yeah.

My guess? When she saw Renee, she felt feelings she wasn't able to decode, and her instinct was to claim my cock. And then she promptly passed out, holding me tight.

This feels so fucking right. The way she melds into me and calms with my purrs, with my embrace?

We're not where I want us, but we'll get there once she has a chance to catch up with all that's happening. She's got her human logic filter blocking reality. Even if she says she wasn't a supernatural skeptic, thinking things and getting confirmation are two different things.

It'll all seep through. I can be patient with her. It's still our first day together, and I'll be very unhappy if there are any further interruptions.

I'm still pissed about that Renee situation. She should not have been here. She could've mailed my chain and watch to my pack's general address. Or left it with Cicely at the general store if she felt she needed to do it in person. It crossed my mind the night of the dance that I must've left them in that motel, and I considered them lost.

Every shifter around these parts knows enough about our pack to know there are only shifters in Arcana Falls, thereby meaning our post office is run by a shifter. And furthermore, Renee knows Cicely. Amid flirting the night I met her, we talked about how she knows Cicely and her sister, Candy, how Renee met them at a multi-pack youth meetup camping trip years back and stayed in touch.

She had to have gotten word on how to find me from Cicely or Candy.

The way that bitch behaved in my driveway, the way she sluffed off the known rule she broke by turning up, knowing what her showing up would say about our history – even if it was very brief – it had my hackles up.

I made it crystal clear she was not only out of line, but also that she's not welcome back. And then after the way she looked at my mate? We wouldn't stay in touch, wouldn't be friends, and I won't look back on the memory of her with any fondness.

Knowing what I'm gonna have with Amie, I won't look back on any previous fucking of anybody at all.

Renee first acted innocent, told me she was just getting over a sinus thing and didn't pick up the scent, and then she turned ugly and called me an asshole when I called bullshit after she revealed she could smell that my mate is human and how much of a waste it is for Arcana Falls "royalty" to be mated to a lowly human. That pissed me off in a big way. And then her lame show of submission? Shooting my mate evil eyes when my back was turned? I saw that through the window reflection and if she'd been a man, I'd have beat her to a pulp for looking at my woman that way.

It's almost midnight and Amelia's still sleeping. I stayed on the couch with her against me for a long time, spending time holding her, enjoying how it felt, and giving myself the space and time to really soak in the peace I feel at my new reality.

While I did that, she slept and slept, nuzzled into me, attached like Velcro until nature called and I had to move.

Since then, I've been patiently waiting for her to wake up, because it's obvious my girl is tuckered out.

I'm at the kitchen counter wolfing down some food when Amie shoots from a dead sleep to her feet, disoriented. When her eyes settle on me, she looks relieved. I can feel it and see it.

"It wasn't a dream," I say, flashing a grin, "I'm real."

She swallows hard, tucking her hair behind her ears before she reaches to the floor and picks up the pink underwear she dropped earlier. She avoids eye contact while she shakily pulls them up. My cock twitches as I watch her shimmy up the

shiny pink material, covering up that luscious ass. She's trying to do this quickly and without fanfare, but there's certainly fanfare happening inside my sweats.

As I watch her button up her half-undone blouse, I have one thought. *It's been too many hours since I was inside her.*

She quickly wraps the blanket from my couch around herself again and goes to her suitcases, one of which has some clothes half hanging out from earlier when Renee showed up.

"You want some food?" I call out.

"I'm starved. Thanks," she says softly and slips into the powder room by the front door with a bundle of clothing and a toothbrush and toothpaste in her hand.

"You don't wanna wait to brush your teeth until after you eat?"

She calls out, "No. That nap gave me muck-mouth."

I snicker. That was a nine-hour nap; I'm not sure if she realizes it.

When she comes out, she's wearing black yoga pants and a blue racerback tank top with a loose black mesh hoodie over top. On her feet are black ankle socks and she's put her hair into a knot on the top of her head.

I've got a plate of chicken and potatoes with a side plate of salad on the table for her.

"Glass of wine?" I offer.

"Oh bless you," she says after putting her things into her bag and zipping it up.

"Red or white? I've got both."

"Whatever you've got open."

"Nothing open. Which one should I open?"

"The one in the basket your mom brought," she says almost shyly.

I smile. "The honeymoon mead?"

“Wait... no. Don't open that.”

“Why?”

She shakes her head. “Never mind. I don't... never mind.”

“You think if you open it, you're accepting the gift, the welcome? The mating?”

She glares at me. “Open it. I don't care. I already told you and your mom where I'm at.” She then lifts her phone. “Still no service? What the fuck?” She goes for her handbag on the bench and pulls out a charging cord and block, scanning the kitchen until her gaze settles on the outlet beside my coffee machine. She plugs her phone in.

I pluck the bottle out of the basket on the counter and open it, watching her fish through her handbag.

“Lose something?” I ask.

Her face is pink. She fishes through it some more.

“I hid your keys,” I admit, setting two glasses of wine down.

“You what?”

“The one in the car and the spare in your bag. Hid yours and mine. So don't get any ideas about stealing my new truck.” I lift my glass. “Cheers. To us.”

“You did what?” Her blue eyes widen, and I suspect she's wishing they could shoot lasers at me.

I tilt my head to the side. “Wasn't born yesterday, baby.”

“Meaning?”

I snicker, lifting my brows instead of answering.

My little wildberry has fresh socks on late at night, suggesting she's planning to put shoes on at some stage. Furthermore, she's charging up her phone. She wants it juiced up so she can make a run for it as soon as possible. She's hoping she'll get away from my house and pick up a signal. And she's fishing through her purse looking for keys, agitated about not finding them.

I tap her wine glass with mine. She lifts hers, takes a little sip, and then a big one. “Mm,” she hums after swallowing.

“You think that’s good, wait until you taste my dad’s moonshine. Maybe we’ll get into some of that tomorrow.”

She takes another sip and sings me with a dirty look. “So, it’s official. I’m your captive.”

I smile wide.

“Hiding my keys? This is more than you just stopping me physically from trying to leave by catching me and seducing me to distract me. This is... it’s felonious... unlawful... forceful confinement!”

“If you say so. Eat your dinner. You’ll need to top up on some energy, wildberry. And *not* so you can run away from me.”

“Oh no? Then why?”

“Because I’m ready to fuck you again.”

She stares, trying to look unaffected. And failing at it.

I continue. “And it’s been hours and I’ve got a lot of ways I wanna explore that hot little body of yours tonight.”

She bites her lip and drops her gaze, but not before I see her eye color shift from that bright blue of hers to something luminescent in a darker flame-blue shade.

Interesting.

And then she tries to shake it off.

“Look,” I gesture out the window.

Her eyes move that way. “See the pink hue of the moon?”

“Where?”

I walk to the window; she follows.

“Oh,” she says softly. “I missed the sunset. I bet they’re pretty here.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulder. “The sunsets are one reason why this is where I built this house. You got a thing for

sunsets?”

She goes stiff and her expression changes. She forgot her fight for a moment. Now it's back.

“Fate,” I whisper against the shell of her ear. “Wait till you see it tomorrow. Our sunsets here are like snowflakes. Never the same twice.”

She bites her lip again and her eyes are the windows to her soul. The longing feeling coming at me? I don't just feel it, I see it in the moistness of her eyes.

My girl likes sunsets. She's gonna love it here. This fills me with happiness.

“The pink-hued moon is what my mother was referring to earlier. The cycle of the moon is something we pay attention to, it can have an effect on some of us, particularly alphas. Looks like this tail end of the strawberry moon will be sending all mated females in the pack into heat. And for most men, it'll send us into the rut.”

“The... rut?”

“The need to breed,” I say low. “Or sometimes just the need to dominate. With our cocks.”

She wrinkles her nose like she finds it distasteful but the aroma coming from her contradicts that.

“Gonna be a whole lotta lovin' happenin' around Arcana Falls.”

She pulls away. “What about that food then? I'm fading.”

I gesture to the plate of food. “Salad dressing?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she replies, passing me and opening my fridge to look inside. “Your fridge is ridiculously organized.”

“My mother cleaned last week. Told you.”

“How often does your mother clean your house?” She grabs a bottle of ranch and comes back over to the table.

“Never. Unless there’s a crisis and then she lingers and finds ways to keep busy while sticking close and trying to anticipate my every need.”

“Sounds like my mom. A crisis?”

“It’s over. It’s all good now.” More than good.

She looks like she wants to ask questions but refrains.

It’s too early for us to have *that* conversation. “So, tomorrow we’ll go to your old place and pick up your stuff. End your non-relationship, and go from there.”

I can tell she’s warring with her feelings. Of course she’s going to start on about witchcraft and being engaged again, but I’m intentional in my talking about us this way, like we’ve begun, and that’s what I’m gonna keep doing.

Instead of further debate, she grabs her phone and dials again.

“Shit. It’s ringing. Oh good. Oh shit. Nope. One ring and then Ivy’s voicemail. Fuck sakes.” She tosses the phone, and it skids across the table, falling off the edge, landing on the opposite end of the bench. She lifts her fork and digs into the food.

16

Amelia

Not only can Doggo cook, not only does he have the best napping couch in the history of my life, not only does his mother cook like a Cordon Bleu chef, but this homemade honey wine is delicious, too.

He poured us each a second glass as well and toasted, “To fate,” clinking my glass before I could object.

I didn’t bother responding. I just looked away and sighed, trying my hardest to ignore his gorgeous smile in my periphery.

The fact is: everything about today could’ve come from tearing a page out of my fantasies – if I wrote them down. And if I were imaginative enough to have conjured up the day that today has been.

Cue record scratching and hard braking sounds. Because *no*.

Because I don’t know if my sister is truly fine. Because Mom is worried. Because of the technicality of me having a fiancé. And because it’s all fake. Whoever coined the phrase, *if it’s too good to be true it probably isn’t* – I hate them. Loathe them! It’s because of *them* that I can’t just let go and float through this fantasy.

Here I sit, eating and drinking while the shapeshifter sex god sits across from me with his chin propped up on his palm, his elbow leaned on the table, as he watches me eat. He watches me the way every woman wants to be watched by a gorgeous, muscled, bare-chested man who just served up a plate of great food after the world’s best nap that was necessitated by a day of back-blowing, soul-changing sex. I’ve done nothing but argue, and bitch and complain all day, trying to escape. I was even sort of mean to his sweet-as-pie angelic gift-bearing mom who wants me to call her Mom – who thinks my arrival is a

sign of coming grandbabies. And yet after all this, here he is, looking at me – correction, *gazing* at me like I'm his dream girl.

I bet I could chew with my mouth open, belch loudly, and throw my plate on the floor like a tantruming toddler and he'd still look at me the way he's looking at me right now.

Because, though I'm not his other half, he thinks I am. Because my aunt paid for this ruse. Who would Mason be toward me if this spell wasn't cast on him?

Indifferent, probably.

What the heck am I going to do? He's waiting for me to finish eating so he can have more life-affirming sex with me.

I sigh. All I can think to do is let him. Let him have sex with me, as much sex as he wants tonight, so I can tire him out, then he'll fall asleep giving me the chance to sneak out. Sneak out, look for my sister and rescue her from her kidnapping shapeshifter, get us back to civilization and find the person that can undo the voodoo sex magic spell that makes Mason Quinn think I'm his soulmate. And that makes Tyson Savage think Ivy is his.

And then what? Then marry Whatshisface and face a bland, sexless AstroTurf life with too much noise, not enough nature, no pitter patter of little paws, and absolutely no magic.

How fucking depressing.

One more long, drawn-out session of sex with Mason. Poor me, right?

Might as well make it good – though I already know from today that it will be. Because I need to tire him out. And because after this adventure is over, any future orgasms I have will pale in comparison.

He's smiling at me right now, like he knows I'm thinking about having sex with him. My gaze drops to my plate.

Yup. I'll make it good. Get him good 'n tired. Have the extra memories for the future. Auntie Nelle's parting gift to me, I

suppose. And then off I'll go.

Boo. Sad face. Internal foot stomping.

“All done?” He interrupts my pouting.

“Hm?” I ask.

“You’ve been pushing that last bite around your plate for ten minutes. You look a million miles away.” His voice is laced with concern.

I fork up the final bite of delicious chicken and pop it into my mouth.

He clears everything from in front of me and goes to the sink.

“Refill on your mead?” he asks over his shoulder while washing the dishes.

I shake my head *no*.

Under normal circumstances, I’d have more of this delicious wine, but not tonight – I need to be in possession of my faculties.

That was a nice nap, so I’m pretty awake. Wide awake and determined to get out of here and find my sister. But to do that, I’ll have to try to tire him out without tiring myself out, so more wine is a no-no. I’m not sure how I can even walk after all the sex we had so far today. It must be down to the sorcery.

I plug my phone back in, grab a tea towel, and dry the plate he’s just washed.

He shoots me a sideways curious glance as I dry it and stick it inside the cupboard I saw him pull it from earlier. Nice plate. Thick. Cream in the center, the rim in wedge-shaped blocks of Wedgwood blue, brown, and burgundy.

I grab the other one from the dish drainer in the second sink and tell myself to refrain from internally waxing poetic again about how great Mason’s house is and how even the dishes in

Whatshisface's house have no character. They're colorless.
Like Rick.

Me, Sheila the cunty wedding planner, and my soon-to-be monster-in-law Carla even had to debate about the dish pattern that I chose for the wedding reception. They didn't like the colorful pottery. They tried to talk me into white. I finally went with black, which was probably a sign of the shift in my mood about the whole thing.

I find myself thinking about the latest text from Sheila and how she doesn't like my song choices. It was bad enough she kept pressuring me to hire her friend's band instead of a disc jockey. I like bands, but I wanted a youthful and fun reception and bands, to me, feel like they're typically for an older crowd's party. No matter how great the band is, there's a limit to the variety of music they can typically play. And I chose plenty of music for the older people as well as the younger ones because we've got guests from the toddler age to people in their nineties. It's not like I've got Nine Inch Nails talking about fucking like animals and Cardi B's *WAP* on the list. Though maybe I should make a last-minute list revision and add those songs just because. My wedding, my choice. Ugh. Because frankly, I'm sick and tired of people telling me how my wedding *should* be. Except the groom. He has little to no input unless it's something his mother is trying to get her way on. Then and only then does he have a strong opinion about it. And his opinion always falls with hers, never mine – not once.

I'm pulled out of my daze when Mason abruptly grabs the tea towel out of my hand and tosses it.

"There's still the cutlery to dry," I protest.

"Fuck it," he says.

"Hey!" I squeak out, because he's squatted and now his shoulder is pressing into my stomach.

Oh shit, I'm going up in the air and over his shoulder!

"Doggo, no!"

He moves toward the stairs, despite my high-pitched complaint.

“Thought you weren’t domestic.”

“Hey, stop. Hey! Mason, no!” I plead when he starts climbing the stairs. “I’m gonna barf if you carry me upstairs like this. You want me to barf?”

I slide backwards down his chest and then he’s got one arm under my knees, the other across my back, carrying me the regular way a man carries a woman when he wants to ravish her. My face must be purple. I’m dizzy and panicked, and he’s got an apologetic look on his face.

“Can’t wait another second,” he explains when we get to the second floor.

Instead of carrying me up to the third level, he stops on the second in an open lounging space with a mustard-colored sectional couch with lots of cream throw pillows and a big television on a blue TV stand, three quarters filled with video games and four gaming consoles.

As he puts me on the couch, which is super-soft like the fabric of the one on the main floor, I hear my phone ringing.

Immediately, I jolt and dash down the stairs to the kitchen for it.

I skid on my socks, stopping almost a foot away when I see what’s on the lit-up screen.

Rick calling.

My heart drops. Plummets down to my feet. “Fuck,” I mutter, taking a step back and finding my back flush against Mason.

I’m not reaching to answer it. Just staring at my phone like it’s a big, venomous snake, coiled and ready to strike.

“Want me to get it? Tell him?” Mason asks.

“No,” I say softly.

His hand comes out from beside me and he reaches for it anyway

“No!” I shout and slap his hand, then spin to face him, blazing a dirty look at him.

“No!” I repeat, pointing with accusation like he’s a bad dog or something.

He shakes his head with amusement. “Sooner he’s told, the sooner we can move on with our life together, baby.”

Ow. Pain hits at that statement. I refuse to acknowledge it.

“Do *not* touch it!” I order, pushing him.

He looks amused. I continue to push him backwards, though he’s not really moving at all, it’s just my socked feet slipping on his floors, but I’m not going to let up until the phone stops ringing. So I can stop him from talking to Rick. And so I can then immediately try Ivy again. And then Mom.

“Guess you wanna end it in person,” he shrugs, “I get that.”

Mercifully, the phone stops. Instead of arguing with Mason, I grab it and am immediately dialing my sister.

Call failed.

“Fuck!”

I try texting her.

Me: Hey

It fails.

Double-fuck!

I try Mom. It fails.

“For fuck’s sake.”

I slam it back where it was when it was ringing and then have a thought and try calling Mom on speaker from there in case that’s the magic spot where there’s a signal in this house.

Again, it fails, so I growl in frustration and plug it back in. Still no service, but it’s up to sixty percent charged.

Shit. Shit, shit, fuck.

“It’s got to be your lake. We rented a cottage last summer on a lake and the cell signal was spotty the whole weekend.

Though, not *this* spotty.”

“I don’t usually have problems here. Until today,” he puts in, unhelpfully.

I sigh.

“Where were we?” he whispers directly against *that* spot on my neck.

Goosebumps rise everywhere and my new clean panties are now on their way to being ruined, too. Mason Quinn: shapeshifter sex god, crepe chef, and panty ruiner. Lord have mercy on me – how much longer can I resist this man?

“Wearing your hair up gives me easy access to this little spot, doesn’t it?” His voice is smoky and sexy as he says this.

I grip the counter as I absorb the sensation. He takes the bun of hair into his grip and runs his lips across that spot.

“I need you, wildberry,” Mason says in a gravelly voice. “You wanna go upstairs, or you want me to fuck you right here in this kitchen?”

He puts his tongue to my throat, to *that* spot. That blasted, incredibly sensitive spot.

“Maybe I don’t want you to fuck me at all,” I say. “Maybe you’ve fucked me enough for one day. Enough for one year, in fact.”

“But you do want me to fuck you,” he rasps, “You can’t wait to feel my knot vibrate against your g-spot again. Isn’t that right?”

Fucking Jell-O knees. Again.

“I don’t do dirty talk, Doggo, so if you’re gonna fuck me, just shut up and fuck me.”

“Where? Here?”

“Wherever.”

He laughs. “All right then. My pretty little liar. Both, it is. Prepare to be shown who you belong to.”

Yeah, not only am I full of shit, but he also calls me out on it.

Real talk: dirty-talking is hotter than hot. I dated a guy while I was in nursing school that did it exceptionally well. Since then, I’ve dreamt of having a guy dirty-talk to me again. Blake, my ex, wasn’t a dirty talker. *Whatshisface* Rick isn’t either.

I have a recurring fantasy where it gets taken to another level when the guy makes me tell him what *I* want, exactly what I want in explicit detail, and he keeps me on edge and won’t let me come until I get the words out. It’s hot as fuck.

I asked Rick to talk dirty to me once, when I was drunk, the night we got engaged in fact. He laughed it off. Not only that, he teased me for it the next day, blaming it all on the booze, clueless to the fact that if he’d indulged me it might’ve taken our sex life to new levels that could’ve translated sober, too.

But despite feeling the flutter of temptation at getting something that would truly turn me on, I’m not playing that game here with the shapeshifter. No. This is going to be difficult enough to move on from. No sense making it even harder to deal with the grief of thinking back on how perfect this guy is by indulging in more fantasies.

A voicemail alert pings from the counter, making me go tense.

How is it my phone gets enough signal for *Whatshisface* to call, dies, then gets enough signal to let me know he’s left a voicemail message? Yet when I want to call Mom or Ivy, nothing!

Enough to remind me of what’s waiting for me when I leave here, I guess. There’s magic at work here, for sure, but there’s also these inconvenient little reminders about reality.

“I better listen to that message,” I say.

Not that I even want to, but for some reason, my heart is pounding really fast, and I need a minute.

“All right,” he replies and hikes himself up to sit on the counter behind me.

Holding the phone to my ear, I walk over to the living room window so there’s distance between us.

“Amelia, hey, what’s goin’ on?”

Rick pauses like he’s not talking to my machine and there’s a chance of an answer. He sounds irritated.

“Where the fuck are you?”

Oh. Definitely irritated.

“No one can get ahold of you, so I drove by Ivy’s and the place is dark, your car’s not there, and neither is hers. Guess you two went out. Your mom isn’t answering her phone, so I called your dad too and anyway...”

My dad? Is he whacked or what? He knows I’m not speaking to my father!

“Sheila and my mother both say you’re not answering calls or texts and they need to talk to you about the rehearsal dinner, the seating plan, and somethin’ with the song list. Mother says you’ve got a whack of songs on there that aren’t remotely appropriate. Ivy’s not answering her phone either. Any word on the Ivy and Ben thing? Wanted to know about that, too. Can she keep her head together to be paired up with him or what? We’ve got them sitting together at the rehearsal dinner and the reception and... call me back. Need you to get on this stuff, Amelia. Like... this is why you’re taking that leave of absence, I thought. Hope whatever Ivy’s little drama is, she’s not monopolizing your time. You got a lot to do over this coming week, so don’t be afraid to tell her that if she’s being... you know... too much. Anyway, call me in the morning. I’m headin’ to bed now, so...uh... phone me tomorrow.”

He pauses, then adds, "Love you." And says it in a way that feels wrong. Almost ... forced.

I angrily end the call.

If Ivy is being too much? Where the fuck am I? This is why I'm taking that leave of absence? Calling my father? Talking to Dad after all Dad has put our family through?

I grumble under my breath, "You're the one who's *too fucking much.*"

"Ivy's little drama?"

My eyes dart to Mason.

My face feels hot. I'm angry. Really angry. I feel like I'm about to blow my top.

"Huh?" I ask and then it dawns what Mason has just said.

"You heard all that all the way over there?"

"Got good ears." He shrugs.

I blink hard. And then I blink again, thinking *supernatural level hearing*, obviously. *Duh.*

"What does he think is up with Ivy?" Mason asks. He looks irritated too.

I stare.

He jerks his chin to prompt me to answer.

"Uh... all he knows is she broke up with her boyfriend. And it's caused some wedding party drama because the guy is one of the groomsmen. Anyway, whatever... I don't wanna talk about this with you."

"He sounds like a tool. He always talk to you like that?"

My back goes straight. I frown. He never used to talk to me like that. But the last couple of months... since we got engaged...

"Baby?" Mason's voice pulls me out of my thoughts. "If you need to be there for your sister because of issues with her life that have her upset, why isn't he calling to find out how he can

help with the other stuff? Sounds like he's a passive aggressive shithead. Why isn't he saying that people need answers but because your hands are full, he's happy to give those to them if you tell him how to help? Or tell people they need to either wait or fuck off because you've got other important things on the go?"

My shoulders slump. My throat goes dry. And I just stare at him.

"Inappropriate songs? What does that even mean?" he asks.

I roll my lips, wetting them.

Hopping down from the counter, Mason keeps talking, "Doesn't matter anyway, you're done with him. We'll leave first thing in the morning so you can tell him."

I continue to stare.

Making eye contact, he struts toward me, and it takes everything in my power to hold that gaze without flinching, blinking, or showing any emotion whatsoever.

Because, by a thread...I have to hold onto all my emotions right now.

Because Mason Quinn doesn't know me. He doesn't know my fiancé either. But he's just figured out in the span of a one-minute voicemail what Ivy said to me last week. Rick is a total and complete dick.

And I've been *so* fucking blind. How did I not realize what's been happening to me?

Blind. Blind by obligation based on my promises. Blind by guilt. Blind by the notion that a life with Rick makes sense. Because of the fact that the future he wants is something *I* can actually give him.

But this wedding is supposed to be ours, not anyone else's and why the fuck is it so important what the music choices are, what color the flowers are, whether my bridesmaids wear their hair up or down, or all the other shit that's been the subject of debate for weeks on end? What should matter the most is the

marriage. And that's the thing that I'm most concerned about all of a sudden because when this glamorous wedding is over, and I should not be so beaten down by the planning that I just want it fucking over, what's left? The marriage. The marriage with the guy that's supposed to love me, cherish me, protect me, emotionally support me, and want me to have everything I want in life. Not to mention want me in general.

Is Rick Bullock that guy?

I feel sick.

Because he's not.

He doesn't want me. He certainly doesn't support me emotionally. Why is he even with me?

All I can see now are all the wrong things. All the relenting I've had to do. Not compromise, like Mason said earlier. There's no compromise with my relationship with Rick. There's relenting. Sacrificing. But it's always me.

All the things I've been giving up that I was willing to give up for the right reasons – for him – but he's not been willing to give up a single thing for me. Not one single thing. He's never on my side.

He doesn't look at me the way Mason does. Nobody ever has. And yeah, it's magic, it's witchcraft – so, it's not even real, but damn if it doesn't make me want more than what I have.

I want something real. I want something that's mine. My wedding day. My own anniversary. I already have to share my birthday with my sister who I've always joked was my first birthday present, but truthfully, to have my own anniversary might have been nice. Not to mention, a ring on my finger that I might actually like.

And should I be marrying someone if I'm dreading my honeymoon with them? If he can't even hear me about *that*...

It's strange how I went about life feeling like it was all good, all normal, all just... my thing. A day in the life of Amelia Brennan.

But a day away from it and *poof*... I suddenly see how unfulfilling it all is. How it's just not what I want for myself.

I've been losing myself. Bit by bit. Day by day. And I want myself back. I want color in my life. I want my voice to matter.

This shit sucks. It sucks hard.

But the veil is down, and I see things for what they are.

And I'm suddenly not sad. Not stressed. I'm suddenly really, really angry. And I'm something else, too.

"I'm done," I state.

Mason tilts his head.

Yep. Done.

"I'm done with this shit."

"Good." He straightens up.

"I'm going there now. Right now and I'm telling him we're done." I stomp my foot.

Mason's eyebrows fly up. "I'll take you."

"Yeah?" I feel tears threaten, feeling moved, for some reason, at his support. I beat them back.

"Damn right I will. Let's go."

"Okay. My boots are in my car. Um... sneakers are in my suitcase, though."

"Grab your sneakers. We'll take my truck."

Mason

Some men in my position might think she's using this as a vehicle to try to get me to take her home so she can get away from me. But everything about her right now reads as genuine. This connection I have with her is helpful, like seeing into her head – though I can't quite read her like a book – not yet. Her emotions have been coming at me since we mated, but right now, they're loud. She's upset; she needs support. And she has it.

I've grabbed a clean shirt and pair of jeans from my laundry room downstairs, where I hid her keys along with my keys. Despite feeling her emotions right now and knowing this isn't just a ploy, she's not getting her car keys back. Not yet.

"Where are we headed?" I ask, starting the truck.

She mutters an address, telling me which highway exit to turn off at, then tries dialing on her phone.

"Bullshit," she mutters because the phone isn't working.

Twenty minutes into the drive, she's still trying to make her phone work, but she asks, "Can I try your phone?"

"Forgot it," I answer. "What are we goin' to do? Are we picking up your stuff?"

"I'm just... ending it. I'll figure that stuff out later. This is... it's just bullshit. I'm just... I can't believe I've been so blind."

"What do you mean?"

"Forget it. I don't wanna talk about him. We'll go there, I'm ending it, and then you can take me to my mom's."

"Baby, I'm not dropping you off at your mother's. You're comin' back home with me."

Her gaze swings to me and though she says nothing, she pauses for a moment, then nods. “I’ll end it with him, at least tell my mom I’m okay, and then I’ll come back with you tonight. Tomorrow, you take me to see my sister. And then once I know she’s okay, we’ll go find out how to undo the voodoo so we can get on with our lives.”

I roll my eyes. “Nothing’s gettin’ undone, Amie.”

“I can’t argue with you about this right now, Doggo. I need to go end my engagement and it’s taking all my energy to focus on that. After that, I have to cancel a wedding with hundreds of guests, and... and...”

“One thing at a time. At least that one thing is something I can get behind. But, baby, there’s no point in you trying to sever our connection. I’m telling you right now, it isn’t happening.”

“I can’t think about this right now.”

“Fine, but hear me, all right? You’re mine. I’m yours, and you’ve got me. Okay? I know you’re overwhelmed, but whatever I can do to help, you’ve got me. You only have to ask.”

We’re stopped at lights, about to get on the highway when she pulls the tie out of her hair, and it tumbles around her shoulders.

And I wanna wrap my fingers into those strands and put my mouth on her. So, that’s what I do.

“Amelia. You’ve got me. Okay?” I repeat, leaning over and touching her mouth with mine.

I’ve caught her off guard, so it takes a second for her to react. But when she does, she’s kissing me back. She’s responding like she’s ready to climb onto my lap and take my cock right here. And this doesn’t feel like it’s just a lust reaction; it feels like my words matter to her, too.

A horn blares behind us. The light probably turned green more than a few seconds ago by the way they’re leaning on it.

I lick my lips, savoring the taste of my woman, shooting her a grin, before turning my eyes to the road and hitting the gas. It'll be good when this shit is off her *to-do* list. And not only can she speak to her mother and take that concern off her radar, but it'll also give me the opportunity to assess the woman and make sure we're not gonna have to worry about confidentiality.

Then I'll take my girl home, fuck her to sleep, and tomorrow's a new day. A new day with nothing to worry about but getting to know one another.

We've been on the road just over two and a half hours when I park on a street filled with identical white brick rowhouses.

These places have all got the identical front shrubs and one tree smack dab in the middle of each miniscule lawn. It's assembly-line housing. Undoubtedly overpriced. Ordinary. Little to no craftsmanship. This kind of architecture makes me yawn. And neighbors on top of you? No fucking thank you.

She opens an app on her phone and looks confused as she scrolls.

"What?" she mumbles, tapping a command. A garage door across the street from where we're parked opens. She stares into the empty garage.

The lawn isn't even real. Who the fuck puts fake grass on their tiny lawn?

"Where is he?" she asks, taking her seatbelt off and then adding, "Stay here." She reaches for the door handle.

"No," I reply, taking my own seatbelt off.

She freezes and shoots a warning glare at me. "Stay here, Doggo."

"No," I repeat, leaning toward her. "I'm at your back."

Or her front if he turns out to be the dick I'm expecting him to be based on how his voice message sounded.

“I don’t think he’s even here. His car is gone. Where is he at almost four o’clock in the morning?” She gets out.

I follow her to the house. She uses the app on her phone to unlock the door and disarm the alarm on the place before she heads in, me on her heels. She flicks the light on just inside the entrance.

Everything is white. White furniture, white walls. Mostly white art on the walls.

“Stay here.” She heads for the staircase.

“Nobody’s here,” I tell her. “The guy that was here left at least a couple hours ago.”

“I know by the alarm history, he left at twelve twenty. But how do *you* know?”

“Can tell by the scent trail. Bathed heavily in mouthwash and cologne, by the way.”

She frowns, takes two steps onto the staircase straight ahead and dials a number.

A male voice answers *hey* on the second ring.

“Rick?” She heads up the stairs and I follow. “Where are you?”

Three bedrooms. Doors open. Unoccupied. My lip curls as I glare at the king size bed in the master bedroom. She slept there with him. The room is filled with both their scents. He put his hands on her in there. Not recently, but I still want to rip this guy apart just for having had the opportunity.

“I’m home. Why are you calling so late?” he answers.

“Something up with Ivy? You two scrapping again?”

“You’re not home; Where are you?” She opens a drawer and grabs a stack of clothing from it, then stuffs it into a gym bag.

“I’m almost pulling in, I mean,” I hear the guy answer. “Just a minute.”

“Yeah. Kay.” She hangs up and then looks at me. “Go outside and wait.” She goes to the bathroom and grabs a hair dryer from the counter, then stuffs it into the bag.

“No,” I deny.

“You need to go, Mason!”

“No,” I repeat. “Say whatever you wanna say about who I am and what I’m doin’ here, but I’m going nowhere without you.”

She growls at me. And it’s adorable.

I cross my arms over my chest and lean against the wall.

“Oh fuck. The ring,” Amelia whispers, paling.

“What?” I ask.

“You threw it. Shit.” She covers her mouth for a second, then dashes down the stairs while zipping up the bag, so I follow, slipping past her when we get to the bottom to get between her and that’s when the guy comes in.

Immediately, I’m disgusted at the scent coming off him.

His hair is somewhere between blond and light brown, like me in that sense but fairer, around five foot eight, looks like a gym rat with arms and thighs like tree trunks. The guy has one of those douchebag corporate haircuts and not only is he wearing too much cologne, he’s just shoved at least half a dozen dissolving breath strips into his mouth. More than that scent, he smells like liquor and sex. A lot of the former, plenty of the latter.

When he spots me, he straightens, trying to make himself taller, pushing his chest out.

“Who’s this?” the guy demands.

“He smells like pussy, Amie. And it’s clearly not yours I’m smellin’ on him.”

I feel the air go electric. Amelia gasps. He wobbles, looking at me with shock on his stupid mug.

“Who the fuck’re you?” he slurs, trying to straighten up further.

“And he’s drunk. Drove home drunk? What a fuckin’ meathead,” I mutter. There’s no way this conversation with him is going to go well.

“I had only three beers o’er six hours,” he slurs, “an only drove six blocks. Who is this fuckin’ guy, Melia?”

“You’ve drank a helluva lot more than that,” I volley.

“Again, who the fuck are you?” He takes a step toward me, and I know he doesn’t like that he has to look up at me. He puffs himself up even more and when I don’t back down, don’t back off, he turns his ire to my woman.

“Amelia? Explain this to me. What is this?”

She dashes her hair out of her eyes and then her eyes bounce between us.

“You *are* drunk,” she says, “You’re... completely trashed.”

He shakes his head. “Am not.”

“You drove home drunk,” she accuses.

“Why the hell you believin’ this guy?” Spittle gathers in the corner of his mouth. “And who is he? Why is he in my house?”

“Get this over with, Amie. This conversation isn’t gonna be productive,” I mutter.

She shoots me a dirty look, then turns her eyes to him. “I came here to tell you the wedding is off,” she says softly.

She’s staring at him with what looks to me like the eyes of someone who is realizing they don’t know the person they’re staring at as well as they thought they did.

He laughs, like it’s a big joke, and then he stops laughing and rears back and his mouth drops open. “Say what?”

“You drove home drunk! I can’t believe you. You know how I feel about that. How I see the effects of that on a regular basis

at work. How Blake lost his parents when he was a teenager to a drunk driver, and-

“Not drunk, Amelia! I’m fine! Who is this guy? This isn’t Blake, is it?”

She shakes her head. “Of course not. I can’t believe you. We were over when I got your voicemail but now... I don’t even feel bad about it.”

“No. That’s not... hey... where’s your ring?” He moves toward her, reaching for her left hand.

I get between them. “Back up,” I demand, my voice going guttural.

He does not touch her. No fucking way.

“Get outta my way, asshole.” He tries to push me aside. He doesn’t even move me an inch.

“Mason,” Amelia says with panic in her voice just as my palm comes up and knocks him in the center of the chest.

He stumbles backward, though catches himself before he falls. That was the one and only warning he gets. I used next to zero force. It won’t be the same if he comes at my woman aggressively a second time.

“Do not get between me and my fiancée,” the guy shouts, going red-faced.

“I’m no longer your fiancée,” she says. “I’ll come back to get the rest of my stuff later.”

“Amelia, wait!” He raises his hands in surrender. “I’m not drunk. I’m fine. And I didn’t fuck anybody, despite what he says. Who the fuck is this guy with these ridic... Amelia, come on!”

“Goodbye,” she spits.

“Don’t,” he whispers, looking wounded.

“I’ll call you later and make arrangements to get my things.”

“Amelia!” he calls out. “Talktomeee. Let’s talk about thissss.”

She loops the strap of the bag over her shoulder and storms past me, past him, and out the door.

He tries following her. I block the door.

“Outta my way, fucker. Meliaaaa!”

“Do not follow her. She said goodbye.”

He glares at me. “You wanna tell me who you are?”

“He gave me a ride,” Amelia calls back. “Don’t worry about him, Rick. We’re over because of *you*.”

“Stay here or I’m the guy you’re gonna have a problem with,” I add.

“Psh,” he scoffs, then tries to push past me, grabbing my jacket roughly, “You got any clue what I can bench? You don’t wanna mess with me.”

I clock him in the mouth with just enough force that he feels it. He loses his balance and falls.

“Believe me, I do wanna mess with you. This is your one warning to stay here or you’re gonna give me ample reason,” I warn.

He scrambles to his feet but with Scooby Doo legs, immediately falls back down. He gets up again and barrels toward me, upper body at a near forty-five-degree angle. Guy is smashed drunk.

I step to the side as he falls to his knees. He grunts, face going red.

“Do yourself a favor and stay down, man.”

“You’re dead,” he shouts, pointing at me. “You fucking her?”

“How long have you been fuckin’ someone behind her back?” I fire back.

My horn blares. I look over my shoulder. It’s Amelia, in the truck, animatedly throwing her arms up in the air.

This is going to draw attention. Honking at four in the morning on this high-density street.

“Mind your own fuckin’ business,” he says. “That’s my future out there. And I need to talk to her. Are you from the hospital? One of those doctors always checkin’ out her ass?”

“Stay down, asshole. Don’t make me tell you again,” I say, then stride past him.

Crossing the street, I feel his eyes on me, so I look over my shoulder. He’s in the doorway.

I get in beside Amelia who is putting her seatbelt on, tears in her eyes.

“You okay, baby?” I ask.

“No,” she whispers, chin trembling, and this makes me want to go back and pound him to a pulp.

I feel my blood pressure rising. I grip the steering wheel and inhale deep. The air around here fuckin’ stinks. You couldn’t pay me to live on a street like this.

“Mason, please. Please get me out of here. Please?” Her soft, quivering voice just about undoes me.

I peel out so I can take my girl home.

She doesn’t want to talk. Every time my mouth is about to open, she senses it and either throws up a hand or says, “Don’t.”

After the third try, I ignore her *don’t*.

“Just got one thing to say right now, so let me say it. He was fucking around with someone tonight, Amie. I smelled pussy and cum on him. His cum.”

“Stop.”

“Don’t feel guilty. You don’t have to feel bad about us. You never had to feel bad because we were meant to meet when and how we did. My suspicion... a guy like that? Posturing macho asshole? This isn’t the first time. Thinks he has to get

endless amounts of tail to prove he's a man. That shit only proves he's a -"

"Please stop. Pleasepleaseplease." She cradles her face in her hands and bows forward.

I stop, mid-rant, take a breath, and then say, "Okay, babe. We'll plan to get your things later."

She says nothing.

"Want me to stop at your mother's?"

She shakes her head and lifts her phone from her pocket. I glance over and see she's typing out a text.

"Amie?"

She's still texting.

"I'm about to get on the highway and head home, baby, unless you give me your mother's address."

"It's okay. We can go home."

She keeps tapping away on the screen, likely oblivious to the fact she just called my place *home*.

But the bottom line is that it is her home. And she's mine.

Amelia

My eyes bolt open. For a second I'm not sure where I am, but then it crashes down and snaps into place piece by piece.

Mason. Ivy. Witchcraft. Wolf. Shapeshifter. The ring ping.
Rick. *Done.*

I'm in Mason's bed. In Mason's embrace. I'm the little spoon with my back plastered to his torso, and his beautifully corded forearm draped over my hip.

The sun streams through the windows in here and his warm breath keeps sweeping across the back of my head evenly. He's sound asleep; it feels like a warm summer breeze.

The last thing I remember was thinking that the road was getting blurry as I stared at the windshield noting the sun was peeking over the horizon. I was feeling several emotions, but one of them was relief that I was starting a new day as a single woman. That's the last thing I recall; obviously, knowing to my core that the Rick chapter of my life was closing. I fell asleep and as that's the last thing I remember, it's obvious that I miraculously slept through him bringing me inside his house, up all those stairs, and putting me in his bed, before wrapping himself around me. I'm a light sleeper so that's pretty unlike me. There again... sorcery.

I'm still dressed, though he took my shoes and socks off. And he's warm. Super warm. The soles of my feet are on his shins and for a change, my feet aren't like ice cubes.

I texted my mother on the way here, telling her I was fine, that the wedding was off, and that I had plans to rescue Ivy today, though I figured Ivy might not be happy I did figure she was most likely alive and well, or well enough. I texted Mom it was a long story and I'd fill her in ASAP, and not to worry if she couldn't reach me because I'm staying somewhere for the

night that has shitty cell service, but I'll call her tomorrow as soon as I can get back into civilization where there is a signal.

The text actually got through and she responded with a wow face emoji and asked if I needed anything. I told her to go back to sleep and not worry, that I'd handle things and get Ivy and the three of us would sit down and figure out what was next. I also told her to keep looking for clues about Aunt Nelle's fortune teller.

My phone rang endlessly for the first hour on the road, actually. I ignored repeated calls from Rick and then a text came through.

Rick: Amelia, call me back. Or Texas me. Please. I don't know what went wrong tonight don't know who the guy was I need to talk to you're. I love you. love much. Please call me. Or come home as soon as possible and we talk.

That text would've said *drunk* if I hadn't seen with my own eyes that he was drunk.

I turned my phone off instead of responding.

I care more about the drunken driving than I do about the cheating. I don't know the deal with the cheating, but I also don't really care. Obviously Mason knows what he smelled and even if I didn't believe him, the fact that Rick was out in the middle of the night for no good reason would've spoken volumes. But driving drunk? Not only did my ex, Blake, lose his parents to a drunk driver, giving me a front row seat to the carnage left of his life afterwards, but the fact that I work in a hospital means I regularly see the fallout of peoples' stupidity, one of the common ones being because they get behind the wheel drunk or stoned. And he knows how I feel about it. I don't care if it's six feet, six blocks, or whatever. You don't get behind the wheel when you're impaired. And Rick was smashed drunk. He has ride share apps on his phone. If it was six blocks away, why didn't he just walk? Why the hell was he driving? Was it because he saw I was home and got there as fast as possible for damage control because he was fucking

somebody? Who lives six blocks away? No bars would've been open at that hour.

Sheila Crawford? The cunty wedding planner lives a few blocks away.

I shake it off. I can't think about that.

As for Mason talking about how Rick smelled like sex? I don't know if it was a one-off or if he's been having an ongoing affair or affairs, but I can't exactly be a hypocrite, can I? I spent the whole day yesterday having sex.

I do know we're done. And I knew it before I set eyes on him last night. Setting eyes on him, though, there was definite guilt written all over his face. His drunk, reckless, selfish face.

He hasn't laid a hand on me in a month and a half, shows no interest in doing so, and that's a big sign I was ignoring. I'm not saying I'm irresistible, I could definitely stand to drop a dress size and I can get bitchy sometimes which might not be doing me any favors, but if you're about to marry me and you're already uninterested in having sex with me, what does that say about our future love life? About our future *period*?

Why is he having sex with other people when I was right there, wanting it, willing? I can't believe that I'm gone two nights and that's when cheating starts. I'm not that gullible. It's just that he had extra opportunity to be blatant about it.

And all he cares about is this *fucking* wedding and how everything has to be perfect. And perfect equals his mother's standards. Not mine.

The church they wanted, not the one my parents got married in that, before Mom and Dad split up, I'd thought of as where I'd eventually get married. Not a honeymoon I'd even enjoy. His mom got pushy about the menu, the dish pattern, ridiculed me for my desired wedding cake, tore down my suggestions for flowers. She even tried to talk Sally into getting hair extensions for the wedding pictures, like Sal doesn't look absolutely beautiful just the way she is. And I'd felt like my voice got smaller and smaller over the past few months while I

was manipulated about what Grammy Bullock would love and so on, so I told myself the wedding reception wasn't nearly as important as the marriage itself. And then the marriage started to look like it'd be less than what I wanted and now I realize... far less than what I deserve. Did I ignore that nagging voice because I didn't want it to be true?

I barely factor, other than being the wedding gopher and the one to listen to him drone on about what a Master of the Universe he is at work, at the gym, in his financial life, and so on.

I can't even remember the last kiss I got from him that was more than a quick peck.

Yeah, I've been snippy with him for the past few weeks, but he's been a pain in my ass and I'm under all that pressure because of his family.

But still... I'm shaken. I'm shaken up. My life has been turned upside down in twenty-four hours. And there's all this supernatural stuff happening.

I need, right now, to do one thing and one thing only. Find Ivy and take her to Mom's. Baby steps. Once I do that, I can focus on the rest. Canceling the wedding stuff while finding a way to deal with the witchcraft stuff, which... I can barely fathom how I'll deal with, but we'll start by combing through Aunt Nelle's old things to look for clues as to who might be able to undo this.

Mason Quinn is a good guy. A nice guy. And he doesn't deserve to feel sad that he can't have me. He deserves to be freed from this spell that has him thinking we're fated to be together, so he can go out and find the girl who belongs in this beautiful house, who will get to wake up to the view of this lake and see all the many snowflake sunsets with the view of Mason Quinn every day. Because that girl isn't me. Unfortunately.

I need to get out of his embrace. Because it's making me wish for things that aren't mine to have.

I don't know what's next for me. I do know I'd better get down to executing my plan right now before he wakes up. Because it's time to take control over the mess that's my life.

19

Mason

I wake in an empty bed – she’s gone.

My little minx.

I burst from bed and follow my nose. She’s roamed the house, all of it, probably looking for keys so she could drive off.

I open the front door and see my truck and her car. She didn’t find the keys, so she’s on foot. She hasn’t gotten far, hasn’t been gone long. It’s early, only ten o’clock and we got back just a few hours ago, so I’m knackered, but she got that long nap in yesterday and slept most of the way home.

My nose leads me to her bags, stashed behind a tree beside the garage. Since she couldn’t find her keys and didn’t want to have to come back inside to get her things, she figured she’d put them somewhere within easy reach.

Her scent trail goes from the suitcase and gym bag up to the top of the driveway and then left, which won’t take her back toward the four corners of Arcana Falls. Instead, the road runs about two miles to a dead end. Beyond that, there’s dense forest that goes on for miles. Forest that the whole pack uses for our runs.

As soon as my feet hit the road, I shift to wolf.

And at the dead end, I see her. Liquid lust shunts through my veins when I spot her in her pink jacket, jeans, and sneakers. Her dark hair is pulled into a high ponytail, and she smells like berries. And me.

She’s heading back toward our house, and she looks flushed and flustered. She realized she chose the wrong direction, saw the dead end, so now she’s either doubling back intending to go past the house, or I’d wager heading back to my house to look for her keys again.

She sees me. And she startles, eyes widening.

And the fear scent emanating from her, it becomes primal for me, striking that liquid lust like a match.

She spins the other way and takes off down the ditch toward nothing but forest that'll eventually take her to the shoreline of Chariot Lake.

Running from your mate, Amelia Quinn? That won't do.

I sprint after her and when I get to the top of the hill, I skid to a stop. Instead of overtaking her immediately, I decide to watch... see what she does.

She's going sideways down the muddy embankment, taking little steps, trying to prevent herself from taking a tumble. She's breathless and unsteady on her feet. I can hear her heart racing from here. She glances back at me and huffs, then tries to hurry, but slips, grabs a tree branch to slow herself and then grunts as she slides some more until she gets to the bottom, stumbling, righting herself and then she turns to look over her shoulder and trips, falling onto her back, which makes me sprint.

She's hurt. Vulnerable. Mine.

I pounce, landing on top of her without any of my body hitting her. Instead, I cage her in with my front paws on either side of her face.

She screams right in my face, a scream so loud and shrill, my fur blows back.

I squeeze my eyes shut tight until it stops.

When the screaming finally stops, she breathes, "Oh my God, no!"

My eyes open. She's staring at me in horror.

She broke the skin on her palm with the tree branch. I sniff her palm and then lick the blood away. This makes her shriek in fear.

I sniff her throat and then I slowly lick her face from jaw to temple.

“Wh-what the fuckity fuck? Mason?” she asks, cautiously.

I put my nose to her claiming mark before I shift back to man. I then watch her eyes transform from afraid to angry.

“It *is* you,” she snaps.

Now I put some of my weight on her. Weight that’s a hundred or so pounds lighter than my wolf form. I lick her throat. “Of course it’s me. You thought it was another wolf following you? You didn’t recognize me? Not many pure white giant wolves walking around.”

“And how would I know that?” she hisses.

Her face is red.

“I guess you wouldn’t,” I say. “My wolf’s coloring happens to be uncommon.”

“Well, good for him,” she snaps.

I smile. “Not to mention, you carry my scent. Another wolf coming near you with anything but the intention of helping a lost little lady getting back to her mate would have a death wish.”

She says nothing.

I growl, reacting to my manufactured hypothetical situation, imagining any wolf getting near her with carnal intentions, feeling my teeth flex as if I’m ready to shift. I beat it back. This reaction must be coming from the fact that it’s been too long since I fucked her. Time to rectify that.

Her eyes are wide, but interestingly, her panties are also now drenched.

“But next time, look into my eyes.” I caress the apple of her cheek with my thumb, finding that touching her soothes me. “You’ll know it’s me.”

“What if it isn’t?”

“Then it’s a direct challenge. Probably not a great idea to look a wolf in the eyes if he’s not your mate.”

Her pretty eyes narrow. “How does that make any sense?”

I shrug. “Guess it’s better you don’t go wandering out in wolf territory alone then, huh?”

“You’re infuriating.” She grinds her molars.

“Am I?”

Her expression softens as she looks away from me and I can tell I’m not infuriating at all. Not that she’ll admit it.

“Out for a morning stroll?” I ask, twirling a wavy lock in her ponytail around my index finger.

“Can you get off me, please?”

“No. Don’t think so.” I pluck a twig from her hair and toss it, then roll my hips against her. “What are you doing out here, baby?”

She tries to shove my chest, so I pin her wrists over her head and nibble on her neck. Not on her claiming mark, just above it. “Your hand okay?”

“It’s fine. Just a scratch. Trying to find my sister. You said she wasn’t far, so I figured I’d try to find her. Off me, Mason.”

“So you snuck out on me while I was asleep, planning to stay gone?” I grind my erection against her. “Saw your bags outside, wildberry.”

She doesn’t really want me off her. She wants me to fuck her. I can feel it. I can smell it.

She doesn’t answer. Her heart rate is picking up though. And her cheeks are flushed.

“Why did you go without me?” I ask, continuing to tickle her throat with my tongue, teasing near the claiming mark. “I know where Tyson lives and it’s too far on foot, unless you can run like the wind like I can.”

The scent of her arousal hangs heavily in the air and it's making my mouth water. I flick my tongue over her claiming mark and the arousal scent intensifies.

Is my Amelia about to go into heat? There's a nuance to her arousal aroma that's new. Not surprising with the current moon phase.

"Running is definitely not one of my specialties. Can you please get off of me?"

"Naw, not until we get a few things straight." And not until I've had a fix of my delicious little mate.

"Such as?"

"Such as you not leaving without talking to me, leaving a note or a text, something..." I grind against her and caress the side of her breast. She's wearing a tight white shirt with pink glitter on it under her pink jacket.

"You're ridiculous."

"And serious. We need some mutual courtesy. I leave, I'll let you know where I'm going, when I'll be back. You do the same. Put me in your phone and I'll put you in mine."

"Listen here... this is pointless. I'm finding Ivy today, whether you like it or not, and then I'm going with her to figure out this witchcraft bullshit so I can move on with my life."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, I'll go move in with Mom or Ivy. Get my shit from Whatshisface's and let you know when it's all over with so you know you can move on, too." She shrugs.

"I'm perfectly happy with you here. Under me. I'll be even happier in a second."

Her eyes search my face. "What's happening in a second?"

"This." I snap the button of her jeans open and the zipper slides down as I slip my hand inside. When I hit that sweet,

wet center of her with the pad of my middle finger, it easily slides inside.

“You snuck out this morning. Don’t do that again.” My finger goes deeper.

“And if I do?” She pants, opening her legs a little bit.

“If you do, I might have to punish you,” I threaten, giving her a dark look while adding another finger.

“W-what does that mean?” Her eyes darken with need and her legs part a little further, making me smile.

“Don’t test me unless you wanna find out,” I warn, touching my lips to hers while pumping my fingers in and out. There’s not a lot of room with these jeans of hers. They need to come off.

“Are you serious right now?” she asks.

“Why’d you sneak out, Amie?”

She heaves out a sigh, grips my wrist and tries to pull my hand out of her underwear. I don’t budge. Instead, I press my finger against her g-spot.

This gets me a gorgeous reaction. Amelia blows out a breath and moistens her lips, “Because...” she grips my wrist, “I figured you’d try to stop me from leaving. You’re not giving me straight answers about my sister and that’s pissing me off. There’s something not being said.”

Observant.

“Your sister is getting acquainted with her new mate. I’ve told you this. They had a fight and they’re working it out. Your mother herself said last night that Ivy’s fine, she talked to her. I’m planning to spend today doing the same ... getting acquainted with my new mate. If it makes you feel better, I’ll make some calls, see where things are at. Okay?”

She glares at me. “I’m ready to call the cops on you. That’s where *I’m* at. Enough keeping me from my sister. Either you take me there right now or I call the police. How’s that?”

I rear back. She looks serious.

“Amie...”

“I need to find my fucking sister. Okay? I mean it! And this sorcery is fucking with my head, my logic.” She taps her head. “I should’ve left last night to do my shit, not let you drive me, practically thanking you for taking me to break it off with Whatshisface when in reality my keys are hidden somewhere by you. I n-need to think straight and that’s not easy with you and your...” She gestures to me like the rest of the sentence isn’t needed. She is definitely angry.

“I’ll see what I can find out. You don’t waltz in on an alpha with his new mate. It’s just not done.”

“I don’t care about the rules here. And even if that’s true, your mom came over yesterday, didn’t she? Not to mention that redhead bombshell. Take me there. Now. I’ll knock on the door and see for myself.”

“Fine,” I say. “But in future, no sneaking away from me.”

She huffs.

“I mean *that*, wildberry. I wanna give you a punishment fuck right here on the forest floor,” I say. “And if it wasn’t so cool and damp out here, I would.”

She rolls her eyes, but she also clenches her inner walls around my fingers.

She wants to get fucked here and now. She’ll never admit it. It’s a good thing I can tell she wants it.

I pull my hand out of her jeans, then turn so it’s my back that’s on the ground and she’s on top of me.

“Though maybe you want that, so it won’t be such a punishment.”

“Shut up.”

“Fine. I’ll fuck you. But I’ll be the one to lay in the dirt.”

“Such a gentleman. *Not*. I don’t want that,” she lies. “I want you to take me to see my sister. Now.”

Yeah, she wants what she’s saying she wants, but she also wants what I want. I can see it and I can absolutely smell it.

“First, I fuck you.”

She doesn’t answer, but I can tell by her scent, her eyes, the tightness clamping around me that she’s in agreement.

“I want these clothes off you. Help me,” I order, nuzzling her throat with my nose and letting out a purr.

She bites her lip, her eyes flaring with heat.

I pull her shoes off, then her jeans down, the underwear coming with them, and she helps without argument.

I’m already nude because I went to bed nude, then shifted after leaving the house to hunt down my sneaky little mate and I’m glad that it means I get to fuck her all the sooner.

“You better keep your word,” she warns, breathlessly.

“I’ll take you there after I fuck you. Get on my cock. Now.”

She climbs on.

“And Amie...” I add.

Our eyes meet.

“If you sneak off and make me hunt you again, I’ll enjoy hunting you. A lot.”

“What does that mean?”

I slip my hand under her t-shirt and cup her breast. “It means, if you wanna play rough, I’ll play rough. If you want it gentle...” I rub her nipple, “I can do that too. I like to play. I love to hunt. If you run, you’re doing it knowing you’ll be hunted.”

She gasps.

I bite her earlobe, then say, “You run, I’ll chase. I’ll chase, then catch you.” My hand leaves her shirt and lands on her

hip. I grip it tight.

Her eyes light with a combination of anger and arousal. I think she's only trying to show anger though.

“Meaning?”

I take my cock into my fist and rub the tip slowly over her clit before I line up. “Meaning your mate is a predator. I’ll do whatever I need to do to protect and provide for you, but I’ll also happily treat you as prey if it gets you off.”

“You’re disgusting. Let go of me.”

“I wanna fuck you. And you want me, too.”

“No.”

“Yes,” I lick her throat again at her claiming mark. “I’ll fuck you, then we’ll drive to Tyson Savage’s.”

“Mason,” she tries to sound annoyed, but her arousal betrays her.

“Amie.” I pull her tighter onto my lap as I drive inside her, and she cries out immediately, full of me.

I jackknife up, grab her ponytail, and bring our lips together.

“Gimme that beautiful fucking mouth.”

She obeys, lips parting, eyes a luminescent blue flame color. She’s on fire with desire.

Is she part Fae? This isn’t the first time I’ve seen her eye color flicker like that. Though right now it’s definitely more noticeable.

Her eyes drift closed.

“Yeah, baby. I’ll find you, fuck you, then bring you home where you belong,” I say.

She tightens around me, showing how much my words turn her on.

“You’re mine,” I say.

She tightens again, face burrowing into my neck. She licks my collarbone, then nips at my throat. Fuck, yeah. She wants to put a claim mark on me too.

“And I’m gonna fuck this sweet, tight pussy every day for the rest of my life.”

Tightening again. And my earlobe is between her teeth.

Yeah. She loves dirty talk; she was absolutely bullshitting me before.

“This cock, my knot, every ounce of strength I have in my body? All yours.”

She swallows hard, holding onto me, fingernails digging into my back as I bounce her, holding her hips.

“Fuck you feel so right. I’m so fucking happy you’re mine.”

My right hand goes between us so I can rub her clit.

She wraps her arms and legs tighter around me and rides me. Rides my cock, rides the feeling of my fingers against her clit with her eyes closed, her back arched, and when my knot emerges and starts pulsing, she cries out. She cries my name so loud, birds in the trees over us fly off all at once in a frantic flock.

“Yeah, baby. My. Fucking. Wife. My life. You feel so fucking good.” I growl as my climax hits and I spill inside her, burying my face into her throat, sinking my teeth into the mark I’ve already made as her pussy contracts around me over and over and *fucking over. Heaven.*

Regardless of the words she says to me, her eyes, her scent, her body’s reactions tell me the truth. Those are what I’ll be paying attention to as I work to gain her trust, until her words are no longer the lies she tells to protect herself.

We’re holding one another tight, and I’ve moved a few feet back so I can rest my back against a tree. She’s still on my lap, straddling me with my cock still inside her, my fist full of her soft hair. “That was fast. But it was just an appetizer,” I say, touching her skin with my lips.

Something wet hits my shoulder. She sniffles.

I use her ponytail to gently pull her face back so I can see it.

She tries to hide in my throat.

“Amie?”

“Don’t,” she whispers.

“Why are you crying?”

“Fuck off.”

I swallow. She hurts. She’s in pain. Deep emotional pain.

“What is it, baby?” I ask, lips touching her head.

She shakes her head and continues hiding from me with her face buried in my throat. I wrap her up tighter in my arms.

“Talk to me.”

She shakes her head but burrows deeper into me. Me holding her comforts her, I feel it.

“It’s my job as your mate to hold you when you need it, to fix things when you cry. So that’s what I’m gonna do.”

“Then take me to see my sister like you promised.” She sniffles again.

“Okay, wildberry,” I whisper, kissing her again. “But you can talk to me.”

“No. I can’t.”

I swallow and wait.

She’s pulling herself together emotionally. She was emotionally moved by our fucking. By my words? I guess both.

Yeah, Amelia Quinn. I’ve got my eye on you. I’m gonna fix whatever is broken in you, too.

“Up we go,” I stand, lifting her by her hips and setting her on her feet, then I squat and help her into her panties. She holds my shoulder while she lets me do that. I pull her jeans on her

too and then rise, fasten them, and kiss her on the mouth – a mouth that’s currently being chewed while she’s watching me dress her bottom half. I then put her shoes on her feet, dust the dirt off my legs and my backside.

“Too bad you can’t magick your way into clothing after you shift,” she remarks as we climb the hill back toward the road.

“Why?” I tag her hand and help her the rest of the way up. I don’t let go of her hand when we get to the road, and she doesn’t try to pull it out of my grip.

“Then you don’t have to walk around naked after you turn back into a guy.”

“I don’t care about my nudity.” I lift her hand and kiss it while we walk.

“Alrighty.”

“Good thing I’m mated to a human, though. Wouldn’t be happy if you had to walk around nude after shifting.”

She smiles, but tries to hide it by chewing her lip. A moment later, she asks, “What does shifting feel like?”

I ponder this.

“Does it feel strange?” she asks. “Do you have human thoughts when you’re a dog?”

“Wolf. Not dog.”

“Wolf. Dog. Same difference.” She shrugs.

I snicker. “Not the same.”

“Whatever,” she smirks. She’s trying to push my buttons with the dog comment. “What does it feel like?”

“So you *do* have questions.” She’s full of questions today despite yesterday’s act that she was uninterested in all things shifter.

She shrugs.

“It’s what I am,” I tell her. “I don’t know what it feels like. It’s always been like this.”

“Oh.”

“When I’m wolf, I’m wolf. When I’m man, I’m man. Do I have *man* thoughts as wolf? Yes. Do I have wolf thoughts as man? Also yes. This is just... me.”

“Ohh-kay. Thanks for clearin’ that up.”

“In most packs, alphas are the rarity. In ours, super-alphas are the rarest, only seven born each generation. And we’re more in tune with our animal sides than most shifters. Heightened senses. Strengths,” I explain.

She says nothing and we walk for a moment in companionable silence. I can’t imagine living in that concrete jungle with the fake grass and other homes so close that you can smell and hear everything happening inside everyone’s walls. It would drive me half-mad.

Amelia’s stomach growls.

“Breakfast before we go,” I say.

“No. I want to just go. Right after I change my pants and underwear. You’ve left me a little... soggy.”

“I need food, wildberry. I woke and immediately came to you. And you need food, too. Your belly is askin’ for it.”

“Grab something to go then. Eat it on the way.”

“We’ll go home, and I’ll get dressed, eat first.”

“I thought you didn’t care about being naked.”

“I don’t, really, but it’s practical. I keep extra clothes in my truck, but I have to grab the keys anyway. And I need food.”

“Yeah. Keys. From your hiding spot.”

“Exactly.” I bop her nose.

She purses her lips with annoyance.

“I’ll stop hiding keys when I’m no longer worried about my mate taking off.”

“Whatever.”

20

Amelia

Mason looks edible in his faded jeans and his sky-blue button-down shirt that's rolled halfway between his forearms and his elbows. His dirty-blond hair is a little messy with sexy bedhead and he's in need of a shave. And that stubble looks incredible on him.

Whatshisface never sports stubble. He shaves every single morning. I once hinted that stubble turns me on, and he laughed it off promptly before shaving. The guy never took a hint. Even a blatant one.

My phone is still working and has been on mute because he's called me about forty-seven times since last night. I've left my mailbox full so he can't leave more messages, but I keep looking at the screen in case Mom or Ivy call or send a text. I tried calling both of them before Mason turned up in the woods. Ivy's phone actually rings until it goes to voicemail each time, so cell service is working again, though she's not picking up.

It feels like something is wrong. Like... fundamentally wrong and I don't know if I'm just extra-amped because of the past forty-eight hours or not, but I know I won't be able to shake this feeling until I'm able to get ahold of her.

After getting back to Mason's, I was carried directly up to the top floor bathroom. I tried to argue, but he just took me there without answering me. And then when I refused to get in the shower, he sat me on the vanity, and I watched him shower.

He then got dressed and I changed my soiled bottoms before following him down to the kitchen where he proceeded to scarf down random food from the fridge, feeding me pieces of cheese, deli turkey, and bites of fruit.

I tried to reject food and got bitchy about him not being fast enough and that made him slow down. And that pissed me off. So I got bitchier. And then he took even more time and decided we weren't leaving until I ate whatever magical amount of food he deemed enough.

He then fished through the fridge and pulled out an apple pie that his mom brought yesterday and fed me pieces of it with his fingers, coaxing me like I'm a toddler. "Three more bites and we'll go see your sister," he offered.

I rolled my eyes, ate some, then some more. After the third bite, I bit his fingertip.

He leaned in, eyes glittering with mischief. "You like biting games?"

"Don't piss me off, Doggo," I warned, then yanked a three-quarters-eaten banana from his hand, stuffed it into my mouth and then talked around a mouth full of banana, "Time to go."

He flashed me a grin and kissed my neck before he disappeared down the stairs.

I tried to ignore the neck shivers as I chewed what was in my mouth and by the time I swallowed, he came back up from the basement with sparkle in his dark eyes that felt like playful mocking. I stuck my tongue out at him. There may still have been banana on it and like I suspected he wouldn't, he didn't seem to care.

I saw that downstairs area when I wandered the house while he was still asleep this morning and was as impressed with it as I am with the rest of the place. Much of it is a giant man cave with a great room that has two focal points. One: a pool table and the other: a semi-circular bar with a big television mounted behind it. But it's well-decorated, lots of color, and like the rest of the place with all the windows, is drenched with light.

That level opens up via patio doors to a dream yard with a small in-ground pool, barbeque, and patio area, plus a firepot surrounded by wooden chairs. Beyond that... shoreline with a

long dock that has two boats. One is on the ground attached to a boat trailer. And there's one of those contraptions that holds a big one, a mini yacht, up in the air. It's early spring so I guess he hasn't put it on the water yet. And despite the pool, the lake looks swimmable with a sandy beach sprawling in both directions.

As much as I didn't want to go on a two-week cruise on the ocean, I really wouldn't mind a ride on that mini yacht on this lake.

And clearly, my keys are down there somewhere too, but he's not giving them up. Annoyingly.

Right now, what I'm most worried about is priority one – Ivy. Talking to her. Brainstorming on getting this thing Aunt Nelle did undone. And of course making sure she's okay. Ivy didn't tell me what was going on when she showed up on the weekend; she was probably protecting me what with the fact that this stuff is a big secret that she could get in trouble for revealing. But now that I know, now that it's *our* secret instead of just hers, she can talk to me and together, we'll find a way to move forward.

We pull up to a small, neglected-looking cabin with a detached garage set back. This place isn't *at all* charming. If this is where Ivy's been with her shapeshifter, I sure got lucky.

"This is his place?" I ask, eyeballing my sister's car.

"Yeah," Mason says, putting his truck in *park*. "Pretty sure they're gone."

"We haven't even knocked yet."

"I can tell." He taps the side of his nose.

"How convenient," I mutter, opening the door while pulling off my seatbelt, then striding toward the door, calling over my shoulder, "Excuse me while I check for myself."

"You're wasting your time," he calls out. "They're not here."

I knock on the front door of the cabin.

“Amelia,” he calls.

“Is this even the right place?” I ask and then accuse, “Or is this a game? They’re somewhere else and my sister’s car here is a prop to throw me off?”

This place looks like a hunting and fishing camp. Reminds me a little of a place Dad used to go to with my brother most summers. I only went once because it was definitely roughing it. Me, Mom, and Ivy found girlie stuff to do when they did their rough boy weekends.

I feel him at my back as I try to peer in through the window.

“A little insulted you think I’m tryin’ to deceive you here, wildberry.”

“How would I know if you’re not?” I snap.

He grabs my hand and tugs. “This is the place. They’re just not here. Let’s go home. I’ll find out when we can-”

“No!” I pull away. “I’ll wait.”

“This is pointless. Let’s go.”

I glare at him.

He stares, unaffected.

And it’s ticking me off.

I pull my phone from my pocket. “That’s it. I’m tired of the game-playing. I’m calling the fucking cops. This is my sister we’re talking about and if you can’t produce her, then she’s missing and possibly hurt or in danger, and…” I slide my finger over my screen to make a call. “I’m not playing your games.” I touch nine, then one, and then Mason snatches my phone from my hand.

“Hey!” I protest, reaching for it.

He pockets it and pulls me toward the truck.

“Give me my phone, Doggo,” I grind out.

His shoulder goes into my belly and I'm up over it again.

"You know... you're really starting to piss me off," I growl.

"Settle down."

"Put me down Mason! Put me down and gimme my goddamn phone!"

"You're bein' reckless."

He deposits me into the seat of his truck and slams the door. I glare at him while he comes around and gets inside.

"We'll figure it out," he says, reaching across to pull my seatbelt on, then starting the truck up.

I fold my arms over my chest and grind my teeth. I am spitting mad. I don't have a good feeling about this. Something's not right with my sister.

It's evening. And I'm pissed. I'm pissed off and I'm not hiding it. But part of why that is, beyond not getting to see my sister, is the difficulty I'm having with giving Mason the cold shoulder.

Despite his offers of food, of drinks, I'm sitting on the couch where I've sat for hours, looking out the window. And his absolute sex appeal has not escaped me. On the contrary, it's as if he's taunting me with it. The way he moves. The sound of his voice. His scent – his motherfucking scent – ack. It's a potent aphrodisiac all on its own and I've been having difficulty with self-control. Which pisses me off because I'm angry and horny and that's a really strange combination. All I should be worried about right now is Ivy. The witchcraft is clearly at work here making me even notice his sex appeal. Stupidly infuriating.

He hasn't laid a finger on me since we got back, and that's been annoying, too. I'm sure he's being extra sexy so that I'll make a move. Miraculously, I've stood my ground, but not without suffering.

I watched the sun set over the lake earlier with awe. And tried to hide how amazing it was. Shades of blood orange, yellow, and lilac reflected off the water and though I got goosebumps, I didn't utter a word. And though I didn't utter a word, I felt his eyes on me, felt him watching me watching the sky.

Today has felt excruciatingly cruel.

Even though the sex in the woods this morning was tied for first place for the hottest sex I've ever had in my life (tied with the first time with Mason), I want more. I just want him to initiate it. So that I don't have to admit how horny I am.

I probably don't need to get laid for a very long time. In fact, the kind of sex I've been having compared to the sex I'd had in the past, I could die happy right now in the sexual fulfillment department.

He's been talking on the phone or texting but hasn't given me updates or explanations. And he also hasn't given me my phone back. And it's making me angrier. It's obvious he's been having cryptic conversations, which tells me that there's definitely something *off* here.

As I stare out at the darkening sky, I catch motion from my periphery.

He's walking toward me with a gleam in his eyes, making me clench my thighs, hoping he's about to initiate something, though I'm doing my best to act nonchalant.

His phone rings when he's about five feet away.

He pulls it from his pocket and answers.

"Hey?"

His eyes go concerned as he listens to the phone and I straighten up, wishing I had the supersonic hearing he does.

"Okay. Right. On our way." He thrusts his hand through his hair and pockets his phone while turning his gaze toward me. "Your sister is at the clinic," he says. "She's sick and since you're a nurse..."

“What?” The blood drains from my face and plummets to my feet.

“She’s with Cat, the pack’s healer. She hasn’t been able to get the fever down and we should go there.”

“Oh my God.” I shoot to my feet.

“It’s not far.”

Oh God, Ivy. What happened now?

And how long has Mason known about this? He didn’t even seem surprised when he announced, “on our way”. That phone call seemed just a little too quick for him to have gotten all the information he just relayed to me.

We move past a reception desk and empty waiting area into an exam room. There’s my sister, on a hospital bed. The huge, long-haired guy beside her looks me over and tilts his head curiously, dark brows furrowing. A dark-haired woman with a stethoscope around her neck stands beside him.

What the fuck has happened? My little sister is someone I’ve always felt protective over. Right now, I’m feeling more than protective. I’m incensed. Not only did she get bit by a snake last week, not only did she come home distraught like I’ve never seen and trying to hide injuries from me, but then she went missing after me finding out three men took her from her house and here she is in a hospital bed. And I’m angry with Mason right now, too, because he’s kept me from her and now look at her!

I storm over to the giant, muscled, dark-haired man who I immediately know is the source of her problems.

“What’s wrong with her? What the fuck did you do?” I demand, and before I can stop myself, I slap his face.

Maybe not my best idea, but I sort of just saw red.

He barely flinches with the force of my slap, of which I used lots, but looks dismayed at my reaction. Immediately, Mason

is pulling me back by my waist, whispering some sort of placation into my ear.

I struggle in his grip, so, so angry. Angry that Ivy's hurt. Angry that this guy thinks it's his job to hold me because he thinks it'll help. Angry that I'm only finding out about this now despite that it's obvious Mason has known far longer than me that something is wrong with Ivy.

Not only do I blame this Tyson guy for my sister getting bitten by a venomous snake, but everything else, too. I don't even know yet what he's done to her, but she keeps getting hurt!

I'm so furious I could spit. And so upset I could cry. Sensing this I guess, Mason starts to do that vibrating low purr he does, and I can't help but sink into his frame.

He kisses the bite mark on my neck and as my body reacts, he turns me and buries my face into his throat, holding my head.

And damn it, damn damn damn it, it feels like it helps.

"Is Ivy okay?" Mason asks.

The lady with Tyson answers.

"Her fever is finally coming down a little. We're hopeful. If it spikes again, we'll have to evac her to St. Jude. Amelia?"

I twist to meet her gaze.

"I'm Catrina Savage. Can I ask you some questions about Ivy's medical history?"

I pull out of Mason's hold and move to my sister's bed again, dropping a kiss on Ivy's forehead. *Shit*: she's really burning up.

"Her face is so pale. She's so hot. What is it? I'm a nurse, so talk to me."

I assess the set-up. This is clearly a doctor's office, but I'd feel a whole lot better if Ivy were in a hospital. I lift an infrared thermometer and take her temperature. *Shit*. A hundred and two point six. And it's already come down a little?

“It came on suddenly,” Catrina says. “She’s weak, high fever, and vomiting, unable to keep even water down. I’m rotating ibuprofen and acetaminophen to try to tackle the fever. Tell me about any allergies, major illnesses. She was here when she got bit by a snake and said there was nothing, but are you aware of anything she might have forgotten to mention? Any allergic reactions, anything like that?”

“No, nothing I can think of. I’ll call my mother and ask her. Do you have a phone I can use? Somebody took mine.” I glare at Mason.

“Man, I gotta say,” Mason moves to Tyson and shakes his hand. “I don’t blame you. I woulda done the same. I know that now. I’d have done the exact same.”

I don’t know what that’s about, but right now my concern is solely focused on my sister.

Mason’s voice drops and Tyson says something while they shake hands, but I tune them out as I phone my mother.

I’m pacing, hand on my neck when it dawns that I’m waking up those crazy sensations on my neck, so I pull my hand away and catch his gaze. He’s giving me a cocky smile. I poke my tongue out at him before I turn the other way.

It’s been a couple hours and though she hasn’t yet roused, her temperature is down. She keeps getting chills, so I’m not satisfied and have made it clear I want her at a hospital.

Tyson is on the bed with her, trying to ward off her chills, apparently raising his body temperature for her. That’s a convenient skill to have and he doesn’t look too comfortable, but despite his distress over my sister, that doesn’t mean I’m not shooting him the evil eye every time I get a chance. His mother is being kind, seems competent, but nothing about this situation sits right with me.

Mason is staying close. He’s brought me water, offered to send someone for food, which I declined. And to make things

worse, he's refused all five times I've asked to give me my damn phone.

"Who do you think you are, keeping my phone from me?" I demanded earlier.

"I'm your husband," he responded, deadpan and filled with cockiness.

And did it *ever* piss me off.

"Pff. Even if you were, which you're not, do you think that makes it okay to keep my phone from me? Is this the 1950s and some strange time warp where not only do men rule, but where a woman's consent means nothing?"

"You threatening to call the police and expose me and my pack is good enough reason for me to keep the phone out of reach. But as your man..." His voice dropped and his expression went even more serious, "It's also my job to keep you from things that are bad for you. Like being forced to see that the loser you were engaged to is probably still calling repeatedly. I'm *this* close to blocking him on your phone."

"Do not touch my phone settings!"

He raised his eyebrow at me and for some reason it made my heart skip a beat.

"You wanna talk to him?" he asked.

And his tone felt a little dangerous.

"He will be deleted, blocked, and forgotten once I get my stuff back," I informed. "Not because you want that, because *I* do."

"Then why do you need your phone?"

"Because it's my phone. Go pack it up and bring it to me."

"Not goin' anywhere right now."

"Grr." I went back to ignoring him after that. Or trying to.

It's got to be somewhere near morning when Mom rushes in with two giant hotties behind her. I know their names are Riley

and Lincoln because I heard Mason on the phone with them, asking them to wait for her at the gas station and to bring her here.

One looks like a cleaned-up version of Tyson, super-hot and muscled, tall, but with short hair. Maybe they're brothers. The other is the definition of a lumber-snack. Bearded. Bulging muscles. Flannel shirt, jeans, and construction boots. And really warm eyes. I'm pissed, but even I can appreciate male beauty. Is it a rule that all supernatural people are hot or something? Because I haven't seen one single person here so far that's unattractive or even just average.

"Mom!" I rise from the couch in the waiting room where I'm sitting beside Mason.

We hug and then I gesture toward where Ivy still sleeps.

"What's happening?" Mom asks, approaching my sister.

"I'm trying to raise her body temperature. She's got severe chills," Tyson answers.

His mom then speaks up. "I'm Catrina Savage, this is Tyson. Ivy's temperature is back to normal, but her fever medication will wear off soon so that'll be telling."

"I'm Kathleen Brennan. What can I do?" Mom asks.

"All we can do is wait."

"Shouldn't we get her to a hospital?" Mom checks.

"If her fever spikes within the next bit, yes. If not, we keep watching closely. Her temperature has been normal for two hours."

A phone rings.

Catrina excuses herself, leaving the room with the phone to her ear.

"I think we should get her to a hospital right now," I announce, again.

"Let's give it a bit and see," Mom suggests.

“Even though her temperature is down, we don’t know why it spiked. We don’t know why this is happening. We need a hospital, you people!” I’m getting loud. Maybe partly because I want Mom to take my cue that there’s good reason for animosity here.

“Ames. Ames?” Ivy croaks out, snuggling into Tyson.

“Ivy, oh God.” Relief sweeps through me. “Hi Ivy. How do you feel?” I move closer.

“You’re being dramatic,” Ivy accuses as her eyes flutter open. She shivers some more.

“Hi,” she then says, but it’s not directed at me. She’s looking at Tyson who she’s lying on top of.

“Hi,” he greets with relief in his deep voice and it’s like it’s just the two of them, like nobody else is even here. “Are you feeling okay?” he asks.

She snuggles in, teeth chattering. I grind my teeth at seeing her looking so frail.

“Amelia, are you here or am I hallucinating?” she asks.

The way she’s snuggled into him, she doesn’t seem angry with him. And this confounds me.

“I’m here. Mom’s here, too.”

“Mom?” Ivy calls out.

“I’m here, baby girl.” Mom leans over and kisses Ivy’s cheek.

“Amie, did... did... you get claimed by a werewolf too?” Ivy asks.

And the way she asks, it’s like it’s neither the strangest thing in the world nor even a problem. Like she’s asking me what I had for lunch.

“Looks like it,” I mutter.

“Has he done that knot thing?” Ivy asks. “Did he make a neck clit on you?” She then giggles.

My face flames. I close my eyes, so I don't have to look at anyone. *God, Ivy.*

"She's delirious," Mom mutters. "Ivy?"

Ivy eyes me questioningly.

"Yeah, Ives, he did," I admit, making sure I do not make eye contact with the 'werewolf' that did that to me.

"A neck clit?" Mom asks, eyes wide, mouth dropping open.

Ivy giggles, nuzzling into Tyson.

Oh yeah, she's totally delirious. Or totally drunk on the hot shifter that has her. My eyes roll.

The look of shock mixed with intrigue on Mom's face is so comical; I can't help but smirk. But I wipe it off quickly.

Tyson chuckles, snuggling my sister closer and also tossing me a grin.

And I've got to admit, I warm up to him just a little seeing them snuggle together. The way they look into one another's eyes. He looks like a giant lovesick puppy dog. My sister deserves to have that.

My thoughts then stray to the fact that this isn't real for my sister, either. Just like with me. We're both here with these 'neck clits' and these supernatural hotties not because they really want us, but because our aunt messed with nature instead of leaving these guys to find other shapeshifters to mate with.

Looking at how Ivy and this guy gaze at one another though, I'm wishing right now that it was real for her sake.

My eyes hit Mason's and I have to turn away because sadness washes through me.

"Ivy, are you still taking that birth control pill every day?" Catrina asks. "It just dawned on me while I was on the phone with the doctor in Scotland."

"Yeah," Ivy replies groggily.

Tyson's mother looks at me with relief. "And we have our culprit. I think." She looks back to Ivy. "When did you last take it?"

"What's this?" Tyson asks.

"Ivy?" Catrina prompts.

"When I wake up every morning. What time is it?"

"It's almost seven in the morning. We'll see what happens over the next few hours. Let's take your temperature."

"Still up a little," she says, eyeing the machine after the beep, "but definitely better. How are your chills, Ivy?"

"I'm still c-cold."

"Let's let Ivy rest for a bit, everyone. I think it's safe to be optimistic here that we've found the culprit. We'll wait a few hours. Once she's about thirty-six hours from her last pill, I'll do more bloodwork and send the results to my contact. Her hormone levels are totally out of whack here. You should all get some rest."

I try to protest but Mom says she wants some sleep and makes me roll my eyes when she adds, "I feel like Ivy's in great hands."

"Mom?" I'm shocked at how nonchalant my mother seems. Not to knock Catrina Savage, but still...

"Aunt Nelle went to a lot of trouble to put all this together, apparently, and something tells me it's all gonna be okay," Mom whispers.

I frown.

"I have a guest room. Come on up and you can get some rest," Tyson's mom tells my mom. "Amelia?"

"Yeah, I'll go lay down with Mom," I agree quickly. I need space from Mason. I need time alone with Mom. To talk some sense into her about all this for starters.

"Crash on your couch, Cat?" Mason asks.

She replies, “Absolutely, honey.”

“Nice to meet you, Tyson,” Mom says, “And you, Mason.”
She then leans over and kisses Ivy, exchanging some whispers,
and then Mom kisses my forehead and gives me her signature
reassuring look.

“Mason, can you show them upstairs? I’ll be right there,” Cat
says.

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Mason

I walked Amelia and her mother upstairs and introduced them to Cat's half-awake partner Stan who offered to make coffee and cook breakfast. He directed the girls to the guest room when they declined.

While Amelia was in the bathroom, her mother asked me about myself. My little minx burst out and dragged her mother to that guest room before I could get more than a couple sentences out, shutting the door while I was mid-sentence, shooting me yet another dirty look. Stan chuckled as he passed me bedding for the couch, slapping my back good-naturedly.

As I'm getting ready to crash, I hear Riley's and Lincoln's voices down in the stairwell, so I jog downstairs and meet them outside.

"Congrats, brother," Linc throws his tree trunk arms around me and lifts me a couple inches off the ground. "So fuckin' pleased for ya."

Riley has a grin for me, too. "She's beautiful, man. Full of piss 'n vinegar, too, from what I hear. She'll certainly make life interesting."

"She sure will," I say, a smile plastered across my face.

"Guess we'll all drop like flies now," Linc adds, slapping my back. "Better get the rest of the wild out now before it happens."

Riley's energy changes and Linc and I feel it.

"Fuck. Sorry, man, I didn't think," Lincoln mutters.

In typical Riley fashion, he reassures Linc. "I'm good man." He taps Linc's hand with affection. "I'm happy for Mase. Happy for Ty. I'll be happy for every one of you when you

find it. Don't you shitheads try to hide your happiness from me, you hear?"

"I hear," Linc says gruffly, lifting his palms up.

"Can't wait to see you shackled up, too, Linc. Serious," Rye adds.

"I know," Lincoln replies, but he's gone somber.

"Good you 'n Ty can be in the same room, Mase. Today's a good day," Riley adds.

"Yeah." I blow out a breath. One less worry for me.

"Ivy's gonna be fine. Mase here is paired up, and Mase and Ty didn't rip one another's throats apart. How did that go? When you got here?" Riley asks. "No issues?"

I lean against the building, suddenly feeling bone-tired. "He's all about his mate. As he should be. He was stressed about her, didn't give a shit about anything else. He was cool with me, though. Completely."

"I'm sure it helped knowing you've got your woman now," Linc puts in.

"I'm sure it did. Sure helped me," I say. "I feel completely myself again."

"Now we can put our pack together. Now we'll be whole," Lincoln says with light in his eyes.

"Definitely," Riley agrees.

But both Linc and I can feel that there's a piece of Riley Savage missing. A big one.

And I've always had empathy for it. Been worried about Rye for a long time. But now, after finding my own mate, I appreciate it on a deeper level. Deeper than Lincoln can appreciate, I'm sure. Because I have what all alphas want. I have it, it's mine, and after having it for just a little more than a day I already know I'd do everything in my power to protect it.

And looking at one of my closest friends, someone who is a brother to me and who has always been here for me, I wish I could fix this for him. Help him heal. Bring her back. Pay a witch like my mate's aunt did to fix this so he can fall for someone else and forget what he lost. Something.

"Amelia wants it undone," I tell them, watching their expressions drop. "She's talkin' about finding the witch that her aunt paid to set this in motion so it can be undone."

"Shit," Linc mutters. "Time?"

"Yeah," I mutter. "It's early yet. And honestly, I've been chewing on it and feel like I need to know if it's on the up 'n up. So I'll know if it's an option." And make sure it's an option she never has the ability to exercise.

Riley speaks. "I've already been thinkin' on this since Ivy told us about the witchcraft. Ty said Cornelius used to go to a fortune teller in The Hollow." Riley leans against the wall beside me. "So, I looked and though it's now a drycleaner, it's managed by a property management company owned by someone with the last name Young. The Young Coven aren't local, the last surviving local Young witch died not long ago, lived quiet just the other side of Drowsy Hollow."

"Lyrica Young," Linc says. "Had occasion to meet her a few times for tracking gigs before we took over the council."

"Yeah?" Riley inquires. "Interesting. A friend of mine in The Hollow tells me her relatives have been around at least a couple times in the last couple months and though we all know they had to wade in on shit to do with that murder spree last year, Grey's father got ahold of me this morning and two of those coven members are gonna meet me after hours at the drycleaners tomorrow based on the request he put in after the dance. We'll find out what we can about this spell. Figured you'd wanna come, Mase. Though I know with the fresh mating you might wanna give it a miss, so I already have Greyson coming with me. You wanna join us Linc?"

“I’ll definitely come,” I say. “This whole thing was called because of what happened with me last week. I want the answers straight from the horse’s mouth.”

“Can’t,” Linc shakes his head. “Got an out-of-town tracking gig. I’ll be leaving from here, but let me know if you need anything. I should be back tomorrow morning, maybe even tonight if the gig’s easy and sounds like it will be.”

“So you’re in?” Riley turns to me.

“I’m in. But I don’t want it undone if it’s unsanctioned. I’m sure Tyson doesn’t either,” I say.

“Of course not,” Riley says. “And witches aren’t likely to undo something they did. But we’ll get some answers. Make sure nothing else is going on we might need to know about. And make sure that if your woman or Ty’s gets the chance, they don’t get anywhere on their quest.”

“Good point. By the way, I think Amelia and Ivy have Fae blood somewhere in their lineage,” I say. “You guys notice their eyes? Ivy’s especially.”

“Fae? Could also be vamp,” Riley puts in.

“Doubt it,” Linc says. “Their scent? More likely it’s fairy than bloodsucker. Though probably not for generations. We’d all smell it immediately if not.”

Lincoln has the strongest nose of anyone I know. I trust his instinct.

“I’ll have to figure out what to do with Amelia while I’m gone. Maybe I’ll have my parents come over. No way can she be left alone yet.”

“Why’s that?” Lincoln asks.

“She’ll try to leave. Call the cops. Do something reckless. Burn my house down.” I shrug.

“Sounds like she’s safest in your bed with you inside her,” Linc offers.

I smile wide. “Damn straight.”

Riley laughs.

“You want some cuffs?” Linc offers.

I laugh. “I might take you up on that.”

He grins. “Say the word. I’ve got plenty of implements I can lend to help the cause.”

“Too much information. But thanks all the same. Though, unfortunately, since I’m exhausted and since she’s right now choosing to sleep with her mother, I’m gonna go crash on the couch upstairs for a few hours.”

Riley and Linc both laugh.

“Playin’ hard to get,” Linc says. “That can be fun.”

I wiggle my brows. “It is.”

“You’ll fix ‘er up,” Riley assures, giving my back a slap.

“I sure will,” I vow.

Amelia

I'm beside my mom, staring at the ceiling, and I'm deep in thought about all this. All this... *craziness*.

It's beyond crazy that we're even here, sleeping in the apartment of strangers. Normally, I'd find this all to be dangerous. I know I'm not in danger. Not physically, anyhow. My heart, however...

The curtains are drawn, but morning light seeps through anyways and despite how tired I am, I'm having trouble quieting my brain.

My sister is downstairs with her shapeshifter. And she's repeatedly been in peril with him. That makes me angry. Not only did she get bit by a snake, not only did she have a severe allergic reaction to her birth control pill because of his world that she got thrust into, but also... she clearly tried to leave and got brought back and if that hadn't happened, maybe this dangerous fever wouldn't have happened.

What else lies ahead for us? Is there going to be an easy way to get out of this?

And why am I the only one out of the Brennan women seeing sense right now? The way Ivy gave him googly eyes and snuggles was concerning.

A little while ago, Mom and I had a short conversation when we got behind closed doors that shows me Mom doesn't care a lick that witchcraft is a factor here.

"He's cute, Amie. Really cute. They both are," she said.

"Both?"

"Your guy and Ivy's guy."

“Cute? Those men are not cute.” I dropped my voice an octave. “Sex on a stick with a side order of orgasms, maybe, but cute?”

Mom’s eyes lit up as she reached for me. “Where’s your neck clit? Let me see it.”

“Don’t touch it. Ew!” I shrank away.

She laughed with glee, getting in my space so she could get a look.

I pointed to my neck. “Do not touch it. Just look. Bite marks.”

She reached anyway.

“No touchy touchy!” I exclaimed.

Mom laughed harder. “A biter, huh? Yummy. So, does it really feel like a... love button?”

“You did *not* just say love button.”

“Fine. Clit. Does it feel like a cl-”

“Ew! Do not keep saying clit to me, Mom. I don’t know what’s worse.”

She laughed harder.

I was half-giggling while I loudly shushed her. “Mason has crazy-strong hearing. It just looks like he bit me, which he did. Animal that he is...”

I could swear her eyes dilated at that point. And I was thinking, yuck – my mom likes sexy biting. Info I did not need.

Mom, Ivy, and I have always talked openly about sex. But that didn’t mean I wanted to discuss this with her. Or gain any insight into her kinks. And it’s always been my go-to to act grossed out when we do veer into sexual territory.

“Do you think there’s a shifter wolf somewhere here for me?”

My eyes darted to hers.

She went on, “I wonder what Nellie-Belly did for me and my love life. Her letter said something was coming for me, too.”

“God, who knows?”

“I can’t wait.” Her eyes got all dreamy.

I gave Mom a poignant stare. If she were in my and Ivy’s shoes right now, she’d be all over this adventure like a dirty shirt.

“I’m moving here,” Mom then announced. “I’m gonna sell the house, rent something nearby for a bit and bank the money and invest some. Your... Rick was trying to get me to invest with him. I’m glad I held off now that you two are broken up. Wouldn’t want any unnecessary connections. Oh, and if you need help, you just say so.”

“Help with what?”

“Money.”

I’m really not all that okay financially. And I’ve paid half the bills at Rick’s since I moved in with him and it was cheaper to live on my own. His overhead is crazy-high. And he talked me into my car loan. I love my car, but I was perfectly happy with my last one, which was payment-free because I’d had it for eight years. But Rick kept saying it was a shit box, and that I deserved better. I think he just preferred that nobody saw his fiancé driving something that wasn’t new.

I’ve put a lot of stuff on my credit card for this wedding. Wedding favors. The flowers. The disc jockey. My dress I bought with savings, and it was crazy-expensive. Some of the other deposits went on my credit card, too. Rick put the money down on the venue and the catering, though. And that’d be the biggest expense, but it still has been a stretch for me to pull all this off.

And now? I guess I’ll move in with Ivy or Mom to save money for a bit and I’ll take overtime at work, I’ll get my debts paid off. I guess I’ll need to pull my investments with Rick from the sale of my condo.

“I could see Rick trying to make you pay the nonrefundable deposits since you called off the wedding,” Mom said, “And I’m more than happy to cover those as my non-wedding wedding gift to you.”

“Non-wedding?”

“Well, non-wedding to Rick and wedding to Mason. Will you be having a wedding? And Mason’s last name? I know Tyson’s is Savage.”

“Quinn. But Mom, I’m not-”

“Amelia Quinn. I like it.”

Ignoring my protests. Yup. A sign of things to come? Mason was already ignoring my protests. Mom, too?

“And how did Rick take it? How did you end it?”

“That’s really sweet Mom. Um... the wedding money offer. But the thing with Rick... it’s a long story. I’m totally pooped, so can we talk about all that later? Later, when we start figuring out how to undo-”

“You’ll give him back the ring, right? That ring really wasn’t you; you know? I didn’t want to say it, but it wasn’t your style.” Her voice dropped. “Neither was Rick.”

She was right about Rick not being my style. I rubbed my thumb across my ring finger and flexed it, noting how much lighter my hand felt.

“Mason threw it across the room at his place and I can’t find it.”

“He threw it?”

“Yep. He was having sex with me despite that I told him I was engaged.”

Her eyes bulged and she looked alarm.

“Holy crap, Amie. Are you... did he... um...”

I shook my head, knowing what she must be thinking.

“It took two to tango and I was definitely tangoing, Mom – though I did try to verbally protest, but I was also being...” I shook it off.

A wanton whore? A slut? Just mesmerized by magic?

“Seduced by a gorgeous man?” she tried.

“You know what Auntie Nelle did,” I went on, “I keep saying I don’t think I had a choice. Mason neither. But I’m still feeling guilty about it.”

“Of course you are. You’re a good person, Amie. You’re loyal even when someone isn’t necessarily deserving.”

“Anyway... I told him I was engaged, and he pulled it off my finger and tossed it saying, ‘not anymore you’re not’ and I was distracted by... what he was doing to me. I’ll look again when I go back there. Mason’s house is huge, and I have no idea where it landed, but it’s there somewhere.”

Mom watched my explanation with her eyes bulging.

“I want to tell you to start at the beginning and tell me everything that happened from the minute you got here, but...” She covered her mouth and tried to stifle a yawn. “I haven’t slept much the past two nights. I’m beginning to fade.”

“I’ll tell you later. I don’t even wanna see how excited you get about the pulsing knot.”

“The what what?”

I said nothing until she whole-named me.

“Amelia Penelope Brennan, if you don’t spill –”

“Never mind for now, Mom. I really don’t have the energy.”

She harrumphed.

“Not surprised. Sounds like you’ve been getting up to all sorts of energy-expending... endeavors since you got here.”

“If you only knew.”

“I wanna know! I’m all ears. And quivering thighs.”

“Gird your loins. We’ll talk more about it later.”

“Just tell me that part. Come on... You can’t open that can and not spill the beans.”

I leaned in close.

“It grew while it was... you know... in me.”

“His... penis?”

“Yup. The knot thing Ivy mentioned. And it started doing this pulsating thing. Like a vibrator but with the dial turned up to like... six hundred.”

Mom’s eyes bulged.

“I want my own wolf shifter,” she stated.

I rolled my eyes.

“I’m deadly serious,” she declared.

“Let’s go to sleep,” I then said, not wanting her to start firing more questions at me.

“Fine. But guess what I’ll be dreaming of? Neck clits and pulsating... dickie birds.”

Her body shook with laughter.

“Eesh. Do not tell me you’re about to have sex dreams when you’re sleeping right here beside me.”

Dickie bird? Bleck. That’s what my little brother called his... thing... And my reaction to that nickname would make Mom use it as a weapon to get me laughing. We would giggle every time he said it, Ivy and me. And I know that’s why she said it then, wanting to inject some levity.

It’s been a half hour since we stopped talking, since we got under the covers, but obviously we’ve both been lying here thinking. I can sense her thought-bubble overhead, next to mine.

“I think Ivy’s gonna be fine,” she breaks the silence.

“Hope so,” I whisper.

Physically and emotionally. Because I don’t know the extent of what my sister has been through, but I do know it was deep heartache I saw in her eyes the other day.

Mom caresses my cheek and then kisses my forehead.

“I think you both are.”

“I just wanna sleep and then once we know Ivy’s all right, get to the bottom of this fortune teller shit and get this spell reversed.”

“But this could be the best thing that happens to you. This could be the beginning of your happily-ever-after, my baby girl. You don’t throw a winning lottery ticket in the trash...”

I say nothing to that. I just snuggle into my mom. But my chin wobbles.

She whispers, “I can’t wait to get my happy ending, sweetie. I know I shouldn’t need a man to be happy, but damn it, I want one. I want a good one who won’t let me down.”

“Nothing wrong with wanting that, Mom. You deserve to have what you want,” I say.

And she really does. It’s awful what my father, her husband did to her after twenty-seven years of marriage and three children.

Dad was a good dad when we were kids, I have great memories from my early childhood. But when my brother hit his teens, it was like Dad just checked out of the marriage. As if because his kids didn’t need him as much anymore, he didn’t need his wife. And that’s really shitty – my parents should’ve had time to focus on one another after all the self-sacrifices until the time came when they had grandbabies to spoil. But Dad decided to spoil himself instead by having an affair, leaving Mom when she finds out the truth, then trying to worm his way back home after his girlfriend dumps him.

And a kid knows when they’re the least favorite. Dad was over-the-moon when he had a son. And he always treats Ivy

like a princess. But me? He's never hidden the fact that I'm a pain in his ass. I'm proud of her for sticking to her guns. Very proud.

But right now, I'm staring off into space, feeling sad. Because I can't accept all this as my own happy ending if it's fake. I love my mom, I respect her, but I watched her heart get stomped on after she put everything she had into her marriage. That won't happen to me. And this whole fake thing might have a time limit. What happens if the magic wears off and these shifters realize they're with the wrong women?

The idea of my sister being heartbroken strikes deep pain in me. I can't let myself get caught up in this.

I've always wanted something real. Deep. Three-dimensional. Unfailingly loyal. And I don't think I've ever had anything like that.

I was resolved with Rick that what we had was pragmatic. It was logical. Practical. Especially after everything that went wrong with Blake. After everything that happened with Mom and Dad. I wanted to protect myself from that kind of heartache and it felt like things with Rick made sense.

And now... now I want so much more than that. And wanting it feels dangerous.

I wake up to tingling. Very pleasant tingling. It starts on my arm and slowly moves up to my throat. To Mason's claiming mark.

I open my eyes, getting a lungful of Mason. His scent is everywhere. In my lungs. In my head. He's left a trail of heat and zinging nerve endings. And I've gone from sound asleep to awake and horny.

And there's tingling between my legs as a byproduct of the fact that he's kissed his way up my arm to that magical spot.

To my dismay, he lifts his head from my throat and looks into my eyes. And it's unnerving, that dark, endless stare.

“Good morning,” he rasps.

I slowly blink away the sleepiness while stretching.

He eyeballs my chest as I arch my back slightly, then his hand cups my left breast and he whispers against my lips, “Don’t like waking up without feeling you. I’m already addicted.”

I blink some more and try to ignore the burning sensation in my chest at those husky, sweet words.

He touches my lips with his and his thumb strokes my nipple before he backs up a few inches.

“Sorry to wake you up. Only got a couple hours myself, but got shit to do today.” He backs off completely.

“Where’s my mom?” I ask, sitting up and swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

“Havin’ coffee with Cat and Stan.”

I wipe my eyes with my index knuckles. “Ivy?”

“She’s good. Sleeping but good, apparently. Stats were all normal last check.”

Why is his voice so sweet? It’s deep, smoky. And it’s as if it has been injected with care. He cares he had to wake me up. He’s showing concern for my sister, too. He’s making me all melty. But I need to ignore that. He’s in the doghouse with me right now and I can’t let his sweetness make me forget it.

“You go ahead and do what you have to do. I’ll stay here. Wait for Ivy to wake up. Talk to Mom. And-”

“Nuh uh. Time to go. Get your shoes on.”

I take in the now-serious look on his face. “Um... what?”

“Not leaving without you and I’ve gotta go, so I need you to get ready, baby.” He leans forward and kisses me, as if it’ll do what – lessen the sting of him laying down the law?

My hand comes up and lands on his chest. Using it to halt him, I hiss, “Do not kiss me right after you get all bossy on me and

expect that a little kiss will erase that. Especially not after that bullshit you pulled yesterday.”

“How about a big kiss?” he tries.

No sweetness remains. Now he’s got a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

I wave dismissively. “Not amused, Doggo. You go. I’m fine here.”

“What shit do you think I pulled yesterday?”

“Not telling me about what was going on with my sister until you decided it was time to come here. You knew something was up with her for at least a while before you let me in on it. I don’t appreciate that. You’re in the doghouse big time with me, Doggo.”

“Well, baby, here’s how it is...” he says, and lunges, pinning my back to the bed, my arms over my head. He leans in close as I gasp in surprise. “I’m not fine with you here where you can slip away outta town on me. And as much fun as it is to chase you down, I don’t have time to do that today.”

“Doggo-”

“No, Amie. I’m taking you home. I have my folks comin’ to sit with you while I take care of some shit and -”

I blanch. “Sit with me?”

He flexes his jaw.

“You mean like... babysit me?” My eyebrows fly up.

He shrugs. “I guess you could put it that way.”

“A babysitter? Seriously?”

“Yeah. Someone to sit with my baby.” He caresses my face, sweetness back.

Nope. I’m shoring up my immunity to it. “Get off me.”

“If I thought you’d stay there and not run off again, I wouldn’t have to have someone sit with you.”

I'm silent. He's right, but also, how dare he? He's treating me like I'm his property.

"We're not there yet. Clearly. Your non-answer says it all," he mutters.

"Get the fuck off me," I snap, not even caring that I do so loudly.

He backs off, thrusting his hand through his hair. "C'mon Amelia. Can you cooperate with me on this please? Fight with me tomorrow if you have to. I don't have time for it right now."

"I'm not going anywhere until I—"

"I need you to move your sweet ass now, or I'll move it for you," he clips.

He's losing patience with me. Well, good.

"How about you bite my sweet ass?" I snap.

His eyes light with fire and before I know what's happening, I'm flipped to my belly and my yoga pants are whipped down. He sinks his teeth into my right butt cheek.

"Ow!" That's gonna leave a mark.

Before I can protest further, I'm airborne, over his shoulder. He's yanking up my waistband to cover up my smarting behind as he squats to grab my sneakers and my bag from the floor. And then we're on the move.

"Put me down!" I demand.

"Amelia'll call you later. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Brennan," I hear him say.

"Hey!" I shout from over his shoulder.

Mom laughs. "Call you later."

Laughs?

"Mason!" I shout. "Put me down."

"Later," I hear a female voice, presumably Catrina Savage.

“I swear to God, if you don’t put me down right now, I will scream my fucking head off!”

“Wait until we get outside then. Your sister’s still sleeping.”

“Wait. Mom? Mom, stop him!”

“See you soon, honey. I’ll call you.”

“What?” I call out. I can’t believe she’s not doing something.

He’s climbing down the stairs with me, and I feel myself go a little woozy, so I squeal in fear and hang on tight to his shirt, squeezing my eyes shut tight.

The next thing I know, I’m being put into Mason’s truck, my bag and shoes being chucked into the back seat.

“You know... I’m getting just a little sick and tired of being dumped into this truck,” I snap, feeling like all the blood in my body has rushed to my head. I’m angry. Really angry. When he gets inside, he hits the button, and his truck starts up.

“You’re being an asshole!” I announce, shooting him an angry glare.

He flexes his jaw.

Oh. No smirks? No smartass comebacks? Guess he’s grumpy today. Maybe the shine on the new penny is wearing off. Not a surprise. That’s how it goes, doesn’t it? They want you. They want to impress you, make you think they’re sweet as pie and that they wouldn’t even look at you the wrong way. Not ever. And then they show their true, selfish colors, don’t they? Only took two days, too.

Whatever.

“Seatbelt, Amie.”

I buckle the belt as he pulls out and cross my arms tight over my chest again.

“I’m sorry, baby, but I’m exhausted. Slept six or seven hours across three days. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you what was up immediately yesterday, but I was assessin’ the situation and as

soon as it seemed serious, I did tell you and I got you here. As for today, I have shit to do today and then tomorrow... tomorrow we're stayin' in bed all fuckin' day. All I'm gonna do is sleep, and between sleeping, get better acquainted with every inch of your body."

He grabs my thigh and squeezes it. It feels like my heart is being squeezed, too.

Because a day in bed with Mason on a quest of discovery sounds like perfection.

But then I shove that thought away. Or try. I want to shove it with all my might, like it's something ugly that has to be thrown down the stairs. It's like I'm at the top of a long, steep staircase, but I can't stand by to watch it tumble and fall apart, so I look out the window and chew the inside of my cheek instead.

Having someone apologize the minute after they hurt your feelings is weird.

But my feelings shouldn't be getting hurt. I need to be practical here. I have stuff to do, too and need to decide how to go about doing it.

I need to talk to Ivy.

I need to find that ring, though, so I guess I'll do that while I'm being babysat.

I need to get to Mom's and go through Auntie Nelle's stuff.

I should probably also call my job and get put back on the schedule early, since I have a bunch of stuff to pay off. Not to mention get the ball rolling on canceling the wedding. If I get ahold of my phone, I can go onto the wedding website where we have all our details and send out a mass announcement from there. Three quarters of the people coming are on that mailing list.

How dare he think his things to do are more important than my things to do. A babysitter? Ridiculous.

"Mad at me?" he asks.

“Very observant, aren’t you?”

“Well, your ears are practically smokin’. Plus I’m sensing emotions in you. But yeah, I’m observant. I’m tired, so I’m moody. Clearly you are, too.”

“I’m always moody,” I retort. “If this bond with us were real, that’d be your life sentence.”

He doesn’t seem shaken by that. He keeps talking. “I’ve got shit to do and I can’t trust you’ll stay and wait for me. I’m lookin’ forward to the time when I can trust you, and I know we’ll get there.”

I scoff.

“But wildberry, I know we’re not there yet. So I’ve got company for you. People I care about, so be nice to ‘em okay? You and me are mated for life so these people are gonna be your people for life, too. Remember that before you mouth off or hurt their feelings.”

“Your parents?”

“Yeah. Mom might bring some of the girls from the pack. I suggested that so you can make some friends.”

“I have friends at home. I’m all set in the friend department, fuck you very much.”

He sighs. He does look exhausted. I look away, feeling guilty.

“What things do you have to do?” I ask.

“Your friend circle has to change, baby. We’ll talk about that later. Life can’t be like it was. I’m sorry about that, but we’ll figure it all out. One thing at a time.”

“Once again, you’re wasting your breath. God, you’re stubborn.”

“Same can be said about you.”

“Yeah, well I’m not the one with my head in the clouds,” I say.

He’s silent for a minute.

“What things do you have to do?” I repeat.

“I’ve gotta meet with a customer to go over some changes to blueprints on their place, then I’m meeting with Grey and Rye and we’re seein’ some witches.”

That comment makes my gaze swing to him.

“If magic was a factor in Tyson and Ivy and all that, then me and you? We should know,” Mason says.

I nod. Because yes. Even though I already know. Because that’s the only reasonable explanation. Though it’s not exactly reasonable – it’s magic.

“Mostly because we need to know if it was sanctioned. Not done out of turn.”

“Meaning?”

“Witches have rules. Like we do. If they didn’t follow them, someone’s gonna be in trouble.”

“And we need to find out what it’ll take to undo it,” I say.

“They won’t undo it if the rules were followed.”

I frown.

“Not for any price. They’re not allowed. If they go against that, they’ll be in trouble. Witches that break the rules can have their powers taken. Or worse. They don’t like that, so they rarely break the rules.”

“Oh?”

“And I’m not happy about this because though we need to know what’s going on, I don’t like the idea that this might’ve been done without rules being followed because in a case like that, it might be able to be undone.”

My throat goes dry.

“And I don’t want it undone,” he says, angrily, hands tightening on the steering wheel.

I bite the inside of my cheek and try to ignore how that feels. Because despite that he’s saying it, I’m sure he’d rather be with whoever he was intended to be with.

“You haven’t got much to say,” he observes.

“I’ve got lots to say, actually.”

“Yeah?”

I say nothing.

“Amie?”

“First, I need to pee. You pulled me from a dead sleep. My bladder is about to explode. And second, I’m pissed at you because I wanted to see and speak to Ivy since I’ve been trying to speak to her for the past two days, but you made sure I couldn’t do that, didn’t you?”

“I told you; got shit to do.”

“Plus you clearly didn’t tell me what was up with her the minute you knew and you’re damned lucky she looks like she’s going to recover because if it was more serious and you’d kept that from me, it would be unforgiveable. Unforgiveable, do you understand me?”

“I get you. I apologize.”

“Also, you dragged me off before I could have more than a quick conversation with my mother and, I don’t know, maybe have a cup of coffee and get a chance to thank Catrina for her hospitality as well as helping my sister, but like a caveman, you dragged me out of there.”

His face breaks into a very nice smile. “I’ll have you home in five. You can go to the bathroom, shower, change, and I’ll make you some coffee and tell my mother to call Cat and give you the phone so you can say thank you as well as get an update about your sister.”

“How magnanimous of you.”

“When I get back, we’ll have a nice dinner.” He grabs my hand and kisses my knuckle. “Then we’ll spend at least twelve hours in bed, maybe twenty-four, allowing three or four for fucking and the rest for sleeping, before I feed you again and fuck you some more. How’s that?”

I roll my eyes.

“You’re not on that same pill, are you?” he asks.

I stiffen.

“The birth control pill? Because after what just happened with your sister...”

“I’m not.”

He breathes out relief. “Good.”

And I say nothing. I say nothing, but inside I shrivel up a little.

Because I don’t need the birth control pill.

I can’t have children.

I can’t have children and Rick didn’t want them, which was one of the reasons I thought he and I would work. And it’s the reason Blake, my longest serious relationship, dumped me. Looks like Mason is just another man in the line of men I’ve been with that wanted what I couldn’t give them.

We pull into Mason’s driveway and despite the sinking, sad feeling I get whenever I think about the fact that my reproductive system is useless to me yet still gives me ridiculously awful periods every month as if to remind me, I remember my luggage and crane my neck to scan the area beside his garage.

“I brought them inside already,” he says. “When you were napping.”

I say nothing.

“Coffee, shower time for two, then breakfast. By then, my folks should be here.” He looks at his phone. “Oh. Mom texted. Bailey and Cicely are coming by too so you can meet Bailey. You met Cicely the other day at the general store.”

“You mean the woman that watched you kidnap me?”

He smiles, turning the truck off.

“Yeah, I’m real anxious to be friendly with her,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“She also watched you use bear mace on me and didn’t step in to help either. Pack members don’t step into scuffles with alphas and their mates unless asked to.”

“Whatever.”

Two steps inside the door, and I’m suddenly pushed up against the wall. Mason’s palms cup my jaw as he moves in for a kiss.

And my first thought, as he steals my breath, is that I haven’t brushed my teeth. He doesn’t seem to care. He’s devouring me like I’m the best thing he’s ever tasted.

“No sleeping without me,” he speaks directly against my mouth, tickling my lips in the best way, “If you pick sleeping beside anyone but me ever again, even your mother, I’m gonna have somethin’ to say about it.”

“You’re crazy,” I whisper. “This has to stop. Go, see the witches, find out what’s what and do that before you spend another second thinking we’re gonna be anything.”

“Amie, damn it, this is *it* for me. And for you. I feel it in every cell of my body.”

I blow out a stuttered breath and find myself unable to tear my gaze from his. “It’s the voodoo.”

“This is real and I fuckin’ know it.” His eyes are so fierce, pain twinges in my gut.

“I need to brush my teeth. And get coffee. And take a shower, and...”

“We’ll take a shower together while the coffee brews. You go up. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“I’d like to take a shower alone. And I’d like my phone.”

“You’re funny, baby. Go.” He swats my behind and gestures for me to go ahead of him. “Your luggage is in the closet. Day after tomorrow, we’ll go back and get your stuff. You’ll need to quit your job, I suppose, but-”

“My job? Whoa back!”

“If you have to give notice, we’ll stay in a hotel. I’ll work from there. Or you quit and-”

“You’re crazy if you think you can just meet me and make me do what you want me to do. Quit my job? Move my stuff here? The phone please...” I hold my hand out.

“Crazy? Yeah. About you.” He slaps my palm and then lifts his own palm high like he wants a high five. I stare blankly.

“Let’s work on one thing at a time. Get through today and then make a plan for the rest of it. Okay?”

“This isn’t-”

“Go ahead. I’ll start coffee. You like it weak, strong, what?”

“Strong enough to wake the dead. I’m not quitting my job. I’m not getting rid of my friends. And you need to stop laying down these rules for me like you’re my husband and it’s the dark ages. Because I don’t have a husband. And I just ended things with a guy that was revealing he was gonna be a rotten husband and in doing so have decided if I ever *do* get married, which right now – that’s debatable, the guy will be perfect. I’ll settle for nothing less.”

He smiles a dangerous smile. “You’re already married.”

“I’m not.”

“Well, I am. To you.”

“Then it’s time to find out about getting a supernatural divorce. They exist in your world?”

“They do, but they only happen in very rare circumstances and when they do, the couple typically suffers.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you might go on with your life since you’re a non-shifter, but I’ll be left fucked up.”

“Fucked up?”

“Irreparably. In my world, alphas mate for life. If that bond is broken, the alpha is left broken too. He can get somewhat better over time if she dies and he finds happiness again, but if she’s alive? If he doesn’t find someone else? He’ll be fundamentally unhappy. Anyway, I don’t want this severed. Even if the witches broke the rules. So, if they have, don’t ask to get it undone. Because Amie, I’ll fight you on it and it won’t fucking happen.”

“You want me tied to you even if I’m not supposed to be?”

“I knotted you. I gave you my mark. You’re mine. I want to know the truth about the spell and if it wasn’t sanctioned, I’ll be going before a supernaturals council to formally request it be left as is.”

I frown. “So, you don’t want it undone because you’ll suffer. Whether it’s real or not, you’ll suffer. So you’d rather not suffer even if it means I do. Got it. Typical male.”

“You’re not gonna suffer, baby. I’m gonna be the best mate there is. I’m gonna do my fuckin’ best to be as close as possible to the perfection you refuse to settle for less than.”

I stare, arms folded over my chest, saying nothing, and doing my best to blank my mind because the look in his eyes is like he’s reading my mind again and I don’t want him in my head. I don’t even wanna be in my head right now because those things he just vowed? *Gah*. I can’t let it penetrate.

He pulls a can of coffee out of his cupboard, angrily slams it down before he turns the tap on and angrily washes the coffee pot while flexing his jaw.

He’s pissy. Good. I’m pissy, too. Too bad pissy is hot on him.

“If I was gonna marry someone, maybe I’d marry a guy who’d at least for a minute *consider* leaving his life for me instead of expecting me to just walk away from it all,” I fire at him, then woodenly walk up the stairs to his room so I can shower. I slam his bathroom door for good measure.

And then I lean against it.

I feel numb. And sad.

The door opens and I nearly fall, but he catches me and spins me to face him.

He moves us backward, eyes intensely on me as he pins me against the wall, caging me in with arms on either side of my face. He gets so close I can count his eyelashes. And I can plainly see how tired he is, too. I stare up at him, not even trying to hide my pain for a change.

His voice comes out hoarse. "I don't want it undone because of what I feel when I'm with you. Because of how I feel inside you. Because of how I know how good it's gonna be as time goes on and I fall deeply in love with everything about you."

I shake my head. I do that without words because I can't find any.

"If you stop fighting me for five minutes, Amie, maybe you'll feel something too. Something besides fear."

Fear?

"Fear," he repeats plainly, looking at me like he can see everything inside me.

Well... that's ... unnerving. And annoying. And... scary.

"I look in your eyes and see my future. What do you see in mine, baby?"

I look away.

He sighs.

"When you're ready to look, I'm guessin' you'll see exactly what you want."

I huff.

"You don't have to fight it, Amelia. I'm not goin' anywhere. I'm yours."

He tips my chin to make me look at him.

"Fighting isn't gonna make me give up," he goes on, "and full transparency: it's kinda fun. Because I know you don't mean it

when you try to fight me off. And no, I won't lose interest when the chase is over either."

Fucking mind reader.

He herds me to just outside the shower and keeps hold of my hand while he turns the dial. Steam fills the room. The scent from his body, the heat from his gaze, and now the fiery touch as he leans in and begins to undress me, there's a fireball glowing and growing in my chest.

"Kick off your shoes," he whispers.

Is he going to get sexy-bossy and talk dirty again? Like yesterday morning? Because that was ...

"Now, baby." His voice has gone rougher, making my belly swoop.

I kick my shoes off.

Heat sparks between my legs when he reaches for my waistband and divests me of my pants and undies. My eyes are glued to his muscular shoulders. I'm fascinated with watching them bulge as he continues removing my clothes. I'm used to muscles on guys, but something about Mason's makes my mouth water. He doesn't look like he swallowed a bunch of lead balloons like Whatshisface.

When I'm naked, Mason lifts me by my hips. My legs wind around his lower back as I grab his shoulders. I'm suddenly aware of the fact that I've chewed the inside of my cheek almost raw.

His gaze is fiery, on me, and I note as he flexes his jaw muscles that it's sexily stubbled. Before I can calculate the move, I reach out and my palm glides straight up his jaw until my fingers weave into his soft hair. His eyes are molten black lava as he tilts his head to kiss the inside of my wrist while reaching under me to guide his cock through the wetness that's all me, not remotely due to the water raining down on us. When my spine touches warm tiles, he begins to sink inside, slowly, intentionally. Deliciously.

As I draw in oxygen, his lips touch mine and immediately, his tongue dips in.

As I exhale, I also melt. And close my eyes. Which is a relief because I was so tempted to look as deep as I could into those dark pools. To see what he wants to show me.

He pulls his hips back and then slams forward.

“You’re mine,” Mason tells me. “And very soon, Amelia, you’re gonna admit it to me. And to yourself.”

The fullness increases just as he says that and that’s when the torturously delicious vibrations start. And it’s hitting hard and fast – an orgasm that makes me feel like my vagina is sparking the way metal does as it’s dragged across asphalt. I whimper. Loud.

“Fuck, you smell delicious,” he says, nosing my throat as I continue crying out.

I’m circling my hips, whining aloud, sounding almost like it hurts. But it doesn’t. This is the opposite of pain.

He grabs my hair into a fist and tugs, so my throat is more exposed while his mouth closes over his teeth marks.

I plead, “Mason...”

What am I pleading for?

“Yeah, ride that, baby. You’re choking my cock and I love it. I fucking love it.”

I love it too. God, I’m gonna miss this.

As this thought occurs to me, I dig my nails into his skin, whimpering both in pleasure and sadness. As I do, his head jerks back and he shakes his head.

“You’re not goin’ anywhere. Neither am I. You’re mine, woman, and I’m gonna make you realize that this is where you’re meant to be. This house, my pack, all of it is meant for you. That’s why you’re here. That’s why I’m not giving up and goin’ to that concrete jungle with you. I’m giving this *to* you.”

I wish. I wish it was mine for the taking, but since I'm single and since I've been clear about what this is and what this isn't, I decide not to feel guilty about enjoying his body.

He gives me a dark expression like he seeing right inside my head, so I bury my face in his throat as the pulsing revs up. He begins purring.

I hang on tight, reveling in the way his muscles bunch up, the way his hips keep flexing as he spills into me. And then his lips collide with mine again and he groans out, "Amelia Quinn. That's who you are now. My woman. My mate. My everything."

I burst into tears.

"Stop that," I plead.

He turns and sits down on the bench with me still wrapped around him, with his cock still inside me, and he brushes the hair from my face and searches my eyes. I can't tear my gaze away. I just stare, bawling.

Why am I so fucking emotional? What the fuck?

"It's the hormones. You're bonding with me, you're gearing up to go into heat, and you're going through an emotional shift as you start to see that this makes sense. *We* make sense."

I frown.

"It's a process. Some adapt quickly. Some need more time. You have all the time you need. I'm here."

"Let me go," I whisper.

"Never," he vows.

But he releases his hold on me, so I climb off his lap shakily, still coming back to earth from that orgasm. I feel him leaking down my thighs as I soap up and rinse off. He stays seated on the bench watching for a minute, then he grabs the shower gel, squirts some on his palm, rubs both palms together, then uses the lather on my hips, up and down my legs, up to my breasts.

I twist to give him my back, but it doesn't deter him, and those soapy, strong hands work their way up and down my backside, up my spine, tickling me under my arms. I move away to reach for the shampoo.

After my hair is rinsed, I turn to see him scrubbing himself.

“Smells stronger than it did yesterday.”

My eyes dart to his face but I don't ask any questions.

“The scent of you gearing up to go into heat.”

I swallow and ignore him as I squeeze the water out of my hair and shakily reach for the door. He halts me by hooking an arm around my waist, then takes the length of my hair and tosses it over one shoulder while he kisses the other.

“Best thing I've ever smelled. Wish I had nothing to do today besides fuck you.”

Me, too, Doggo.

“I need coffee.” I sidestep him and get out of the shower.

Mason

I find her inside the walk-in closet, dressed in jeans and an off-the-shoulder black sweater, rifling through her suitcase, frustration etched into her features. I drop my towel, and reach for a hanger holding a pair of jeans.

Though she's pretending she's not watching me get dressed, her increasing-in-speed heartrate gives her away. So does the scent of arousal. It's been coming from her on a near constant basis today.

After I pull a flannel shirt on and reach into the drawer for a pair of socks, she mutters, "You didn't put underwear on."

"Nope."

"Are you allergic to them?" she asks.

"I have a couple pairs," I reply. "But rarely wear 'em. Not real conducive to shifting. What are you hunting for?"

"None of your business."

"You're my business, Amelia. What are you looking for?" I squat, putting us closer to eye-level.

"I was just putting my stuff away," she says defensively, her eyes darting everywhere but to my face.

"Lots of room on your side of the closet." I gesture to the empty half of the closet.

"As if. I've also been looking around the perimeter of this closet for the engagement ring. It's the only place I didn't check up here the other day. In case it rolled under the door."

"Ah."

"Have you seen it?"

"No."

“It’s very expensive. You threw it when you...”

She pauses.

“Mated you,” I finish, helpfully.

Her face pinkens. “And I need to return it to him.”

“It’ll get found. Don’t fret.”

She sighs while closing up her suitcase. She then takes the big hair dryer from the other bag with a makeup case with her to my bathroom.

“How do you take your coffee?” I call out.

“Just a bit of skim milk usually. Today? Two creams, two sugars.”

“I’ll bring it up.”

She shoots me a dirty look before closing the bathroom door.

I walk over to the patio doors and my eyes drop to the door tracks where I see that diamond ring embedded in the track between the two sliding doors. I should get her a diamond ring. And a wedding band. I’d wear one too, if she got me one.

I’m about to squat to pick it up when multiple scents hit my nose at the same time as I hear four car doors closing in near unison.

I turn and head down the stairs to answer the door and I’m back a couple minutes later with a coffee for her.

Stepping into the bathroom, I find her folded over, blow drying her hair from underneath.

After setting the coffee mug on the counter, I grab her by the hips, grinding my cock against her sweet ass. She squeaks in surprise but continues with her hair, pretending to ignore me. She’s breathing faster. Her heart pumps harder. And she’s wet. Too bad I need to leave. Too bad there are people downstairs.

Amelia

When I come out of the bathroom, voices fill Mason's place. Female ones, happy ones. I've taken my time getting ready, sipping coffee, putting makeup on. I'm glad I thought to grab my hair dryer when I went to dump Whatshisface. When I thought I was going to Ivy's I didn't bother packing it because she has the same one as me. I also grabbed most of what was in my workout clothes drawer to tide me over a bit longer. I own a ridiculous amount of yoga clothes for someone who doesn't know a sun salutation from a downward dog.

And though I was tempted to just stay in the bathroom all day, I reminded myself that I'm no coward. And I've decided that it also might be easier to escape my babysitters than it has been to escape my captor. I'll play that by ear once I assess the people that are here and take a guess on how today might go.

As I get to the top of the stairs, I steel myself, straighten my back, and make the descent. But my nerves fray more and more as each step takes me closer to the bottom. I'm not usually nervous about meeting people. Where are these butterflies coming from?

When I pass the second level and am walking down the last flight of stairs, telling myself not to look down between the open steps otherwise risk vertigo and a very dramatic tumbling entrance, I make eye contact with a man. An around or slightly over fifty-hottie standing at the bottom of the stairs with a coffee mug in hand, looking relaxed, casual.

Oh. Mason's dad? Definitely.

He's a turning-silver-fox DILF. Mason's mom is pretty, sweet, with a great sense of style, and his father is fit as fuck. One look at Mason and it's no surprise he comes from good genes.

The man's eyes hit my face first, not my boobs – which says something good – and immediately remind me of Mason's mischief-expression, though Mason's dad's eyes are blue. He gives me a wide, eye-touching smile that looks a hundred percent genuine. The laugh lines around his eyes are sexy. Mason moves to his side and smiles at me, too. More laugh lines, though not as deep on Mason's face. They're both in a similar uniform of jeans and flannel shirts, though Mason's shirt is black with grey stripes and his father's is cream with blue checks. Mason's dad is in work boots and Mason is wearing a pair of sneakers. If Mason ages half as well as his father, his true soulmate is going to be a lucky woman.

At that thought, my chest hollows out, so instead of soaking in that unpleasantness yet again, I turn my attention toward the other sets of eyes that are on me. The three women in the kitchen.

Mason's mom, Skye, is dressed in dark jeans with a cool tooled brown leather belt and a frilly ivory blouse, then there's the beauty that watched me mace Mason at the gas station. She's got a ponytail and a casual denim jumpsuit on, looking like the poster girl for healthy outdoor living with her glossy dark hair, great skin, and crystal blue eyes. The other girl looks to be early twenties, and she's petite, dressed in jeans and a brown turtleneck, Uggs on her feet. She's got long caramel hair, no makeup on her flawless face, big light brown eyes behind eyeglasses. Freckles. The gas station girl smiles wide, giving me a wave. The other girl looks over with open curiosity and a timid smile.

“Amelia!” Skye exclaims, coming over with her arms open. “How are you? That's Andrew, Mason's father.”

She hugs me quickly, and I just stand still. I'm then scooped up and engulfed by Andrew in a hug that lifts me off the floor. “Well hello there, little lady. Welcome to the nuthouse. Also known as the family, our pack, our village. How are you?”

He sets me on my feet and looks me in the eyes.

“Uh, um... Hi Mr. Quinn.”

He laughs good-naturedly. “Andy. Andrew. Or Daddy. She’s a looker, Mase.”

“She sure is, “ Mason says, “Though she won’t be fuckin’ callin’ you Daddy.”

The room breaks out in laughter, including Andrew who looks pleased with himself.

Red creeps down my face and neck. I have a brain, I’m not shy, but you wouldn’t know either of these things by my reaction so far.

Skye tugs my hand, pulling me to the breakfast bar where the two other women hop down from the stools. “Don’t mind my man. He’s a flirt, but he’s harmless.”

“Harmless to every female other than you, my love,” Andrew says and holy cow that’s swoony. He smiles wide at her.

She chuckles. “Lucky me. Cicely and Bailey, meet our Amelia.”

My chest flares at not only her description, but also the warmth in her voice as she declares me theirs.

“We meet again,” Cicely greets, smirking.

I don’t get a chance to reply before the one called Bailey pipes up.

“You look so much like Ivy. Or I guess she looks like you since you’re the older sister. It’s great to meet you. We talked on the phone.”

“Oh, hey,” I say, feeling like I’m under a microscope. “And yes, older by a year to the day.”

Skye points to her cooler on the counter. “I brought snacks. And beverages. Girl-time this afternoon!”

“Beverages?” Mason asks, voice laced with suspicion. “What sorts of beverages?”

“The fun kind,” Skye replies, wiggling her brows. “Now, shoo. You have stuff to do and it’s *girl* time.”

Mason rolls his eyes as he moves over and hooks an arm around my waist, pulling me tight to his body and making my heart play hopscotch.

“Be back as soon as I can be,” he says, looking into my eyes. “Enjoy your *girl talk*. Be careful with that moonshine and be good.” He drops a kiss on my lips and I’m about to pull back when one of his hands catches my jaw so he can deepen it.

Before I can do anything else, he’s moving away. I’m swaying for a second before I grab the counter to steady myself.

“I’m gonna go putter on the boat some,” Andrew says. “Nice to meet you, Amelia. Welcome. I’m sincere about that, darlin’.”

“Um...” I manage, but that’s all I manage.

Andrew gently squeezes my shoulder as he passes me before he drops a kiss on his wife’s throat (making it hard to swallow because I know exactly where he kissed her. That raspberry colored set of teeth marks), pulling what looks like a happy shiver from her before he follows Mason out the door.

Married as long or longer than Mason’s been alive and still like that? That’s a dream and a half.

I find myself trying to get a look at Bailey’s and Cicely’s throats. I don’t see those marks on Cicely and Bailey’s turtleneck is in the way.

“Punch!” Skye exclaims, pulling me from my daze.

I see her lifting a big, empty covered pitcher from the cooler.

“So early?” Bailey asks. “It’s just after noon.”

“It’s five o’clock some place or another.” She removes the lid and pours a container of crushed orange ice into it. And then a covered glass container of fruit chunks is dumped in.

“I haven’t even had breakfast,” I say.

“Is my son not taking care of you?” she demands, looking perturbed. “That’s not like him. I also put more food in. Moved that manicotti bake to your freezer so it won’t spoil. I

hit the supermarket in Drowsy Hollow today. Got some great steaks on sale, too.”

“Oh,” I wave nonchalantly, “It’s just that I was up all night at that clinic and only slept a little while upstairs from it and then he had to do some stuff, so…” I trail off, realizing I need to stop talking, because I sound like I’m defending my kidnapper.

“There’s fruit in there. And orange juice,” Cicely says as Skye dumps more liquid into the jug. “Your moonshine punch can probably qualify as breakfast, huh, Skye?”

“To pirates, maybe,” Bailey puts in. “We have lots of snacks though. We’ll hook you up.”

And I can’t stop the laughter from bubbling up when Skye enthusiastically dumps an entire large brown jug-style bottle of amber liquid with a pink skull and crossbones label on it into the orange concoction.

She stirs the fruit-filled booze pitcher with a wooden spoon before popping the lid on. She then rolls her sleeves, washes her hands, and hauls more containers and Ziploc bags from her cooler, stacking everything on the counter. Bailey washes her hands and lends a hand arranging things on a large cutting board she’s pulled from one of Mason’s cupboards. Cheese, fruit, meat, crackers.

“I’ll pour some beverages,” Cicely says. “Where does Mase keep the glasses?”

Skye points to show her and then looks to me. I’m standing like a deer caught in the headlights when she asks, “How’s Ivy doing?”

I hesitate, then softly say, “Better, I think. But he whisked us out of there before I could talk to her.” I don’t bother to hide how I feel about that.

Skye gives me a look of sympathy. “Alphas.”

“She’s doing well,” Bailey informs. “Really well. I talked to Cat a little while ago. They just left, headed home.”

I was prepared to go for a fake nap while my ‘babysitters’ were here, so I don’t have to be sociable. And then maybe taking the opportunity to find a way to sneak off before Mason got back.

But I’m hungry. And I’m curious about that punch with all the fruit floating in it. And despite being upset that these people know what’s going on with my sister when I don’t, I decide to sit down at the counter and see where the conversation takes us. If nothing else, it’ll be a time killer while I wait for the right opportunity to skedaddle.

I see movement in the backyard, so I crane my neck to get a better look. Mason’s father is lowering the big boat down from the hoist it’s on. He has a big toolbox beside him. The perimeter of trees surrounding the lake have more buds today. Things are looking just a little less sparse. Spring is springing. And I’m suddenly itchy to catch a whiff of the air.

“Mind if I open a window?” I ask Skye.

“This is your house. Open your windows. Break ‘em if you wanna.”

I laugh but then sober. “This isn’t my house.”

She pats my arm. “It is, lovey. Mase built it for you. Here.” She passes me a drink. “Bailey, can you open that patio door and then we’ll have a toast?”

Bailey opens the door, leaving the screen across before the three women move in and surround me as I lift the glass toward my mouth.

It’s definitely cool out there, but it smells like spring. And the smell is actually wonderful.

“Welcome, again,” Skye says, “to our pack and to my family, Amelia. We look forward to getting to know you.”

I pause. I’m not ready to drink to that. But no one is ready for me to drink yet because then Cicely pipes up.

“I’ve been lookin’ forward to having a drink with you since I saw you spray Mase’s face. Hope we’ll be friends. I liked you

the minute you got all up in my grill demanding answers about your sister. You've got moxie, babe."

"Yeah. Thanks for your help," I mutter. "Not."

She scoffs. "Rules 'n all."

I roll my eyes.

"Lots of things to learn about shifter pack life," Bailey says.

"If you need information, don't hesitate to talk to me.

Consider me your local shifter life wiki. Cheers to you."

"Bailopedia," Cicely says.

"Drink up," Skye bumps her shoulder against mine.

"Wait." I request. "How about we instead drink to this lovely spread here. Skye, you seem to do it up right with the booze and the food."

"Dig in," Skye invites.

"I'm not drinking to a welcome or to me and your son.

Because I'm not staying."

"Yes, you are." Cicely waves her hand. "You can't deny the claim of an alpha wolf shifter, no matter who you are. But one of our council extreme-alfas? Ha. Nice try. You need schooling, sister. Drink up and we'll fill you in. We might need all this hooch to get this resistant chickie up to speed on her new reality."

"This is witchcraft. And I'm not down with that. I'm gonna find out how to undo this spell so we can all get on with our lives. I don't need any information from you guys. Unless you can enlighten me about the witchcraft stuff?"

Nobody says anything, so I continue.

"And, well... feel free to skip the shifter 101 human acclimation or whatever you're thinking you're gonna do here."

"All get on with our lives? Who all?" Skye asks.

“Me, Ivy, Tyson, Mason. You and your husband, Mrs. Quinn. And whoever else’s life has been affected by the meddling my Auntie Nelle got up to. She meant well; I know she did – but she was wrong to do this. There might be two shifter women here currently getting cheated out of their own super extreme alphas or whatever you call them.”

“Drink up. We won’t hold you to staying based on drinking to a toast,” Cicely says.

I put the drink to my lips and take a sip.

Yum. Boozy punch. And the booze is smooth. And the ice tastes fruity. Way better than ice watering down a drink. I might wanna be Skye Quinn when I grow up. Day drinking on a Thursday? On just a couple hours of sleep? A pirate’s life indeed.

“This is delicious, Mrs. Quinn.”

“I told you, we’re both Mrs. Quinn now. Call me Mom.”

“No offence, but I can’t do that. I already have a mom.”

“Skye then. For now. Forever if you prefer, I won’t be pushy. But if Mom starts to feel natural, or Grammy when that time comes... I’m okay with that.”

I swallow down a big sip of the punch.

“My offer to share information stands,” says Bailey while she reaches for the green grapes on the charcuterie board.

I lift a cracker and the knife so I can attack the sunflower seed coated cheese ball.

“He should be with whoever he was destined to be with before my aunt spent her fortune getting me and Ivy shapeshifters.”

“It may have been written in the stars that it turn out this way, though, Amelia,” Bailey says. “These things work mysteriously at times.”

“Mason said he’s going to see the witches today to see if they broke any rules,” I tell them. “You guys seem like nice people. But I don’t want a lesson on how to be an alpha wolf’s little

lady. I don't want to be a bitch and be rude to you: I'm sorry if I was standoffish the other day, Skye. But, I've had a really trying few days and I just want to get my head together and figure out how to move forward."

Skye climbs up onto the stool beside me.

"Let us help," Cicely invites, sitting on the bar stool on the other side of me and reaching for an apple slice. She dips it in a caramel spread in the corner of the board.

"Ooh, I need some of that," I say after another sip of my punch, "This is all great, Skye."

Skye smiles. "Enjoy. Eat up. Drink up. Let's just have a girls' day. No pressure."

"Sounds good to me," I breathe, popping the apple slice into my mouth.

"If you don't wanna talk, don't worry about it. But if you do want to talk out your issues with us..." Cicely says, "do it. Right now, we're not your Arcana Falls welcome wagon. We're new girlfriends, kickin' back, having some beverages and snacks on a lovely sunshiney but brisk afternoon. Mind if I throw the fireplace on?"

"We can close the door, I just wanted to smell the spring. My place at home doesn't have grass and I miss the early spring smell."

Nope: Rick's place isn't my place anymore. I'm officially homeless. *Wonderful.*

I wish I'd rented out my condo instead of selling it and putting the money into investments. I hope they're nothing that's locked in because otherwise it'll be a while before I can afford to put a down payment on anything what with my stupid new car payment and all the wedding debt.

"We'll leave the door open *and* throw on the gas fireplace," Cicely suggests, moving to the fireplace. "Mase makes big bucks. He can afford the heat bill."

I snap out of my sudden money woes. I can move in with Mom for a while. I'll sign on for extra overtime. I don't have to fret about money right this minute. I have options. Choices. As soon as all this stuff I'm currently dealing with is over, it'll be okay. Somehow. I sure *could* use some girl talk. But these three aren't likely to be impartial.

"I'll be your mother-in-law starting tomorrow. And I'll take my mother-in-law hat off whenever you need me to. Go ahead. Shoot."

I sigh. She seems to have the same mind-reading powers her son has. They all wait expectantly.

"Well..."

Each of them waits. I moisten my lips, then take a sip of my drink before speaking, "I've been dealing with a pending monster-in-law for months now. I could use a day without one."

"I won't be a monster-in-law!" she exclaims. "You'll see. I'll be like a big sister who you can have fun with, get drunk with, go to your problems with, and bonus: one who offers free babysitting when the time comes." She takes a big sip of her drink.

Ugh.

"You're still acting like Mase's mom," Bailey points out.

"Oops. Sorry." She takes another mouthful of her drink. "This will help."

And I almost laugh.

"Talk to us," Bailey invites. "You don't know us, but I promise, you can talk to us."

"Well... where to start?" I sip my drink. "I was supposed to get married in less than two weeks and in the blink of an eye, that's over. Not only that, but I was also already dealing with a motherlode of stress. My parents splitting up, Dad acting like an a-hole. Being overworked."

“What do you do?” Cicely asks.

“I’m a nurse. Most of my shifts are in a hospital emergency room. Sometimes I work in the peds ward.”

“High-pressure,” Cicely says.

“Yeah. Twelve-hour shifts and run off my feet while planning a ridiculous huge wedding that I was turning into a gopher for and having almost no input into. Monster-in-law and nightmare drill-sergeant wedding planner. Fighting with my sister because I was just up to my eyeballs with stress and expecting her to understand that. Hating on my father. And realizing and yet ignoring that I was about to marry a man who had no sex drive and very little interest in anything but himself.”

“Oh honey,” Skye says.

I take a big breath and feel some tension leave my shoulders at the genuine, concerned looks on all three faces.

“I’m starting to think I was looking to get married like it’d make my life better. But it wouldn’t have. It wasn’t the answer to my sadness. It definitely wasn’t going to make me feel better about what my dad did to my mother. About losing my aunt to cancer. About the things I couldn’t have that I wanted.”

“Normal to look for happiness where you can get it when things are shit,” Cicely says.

“Yeah. I guess. His grampa set us up after being in my care at the hospital and I was just humoring it at the beginning but then his grampa died, and I was suddenly the girlfriend instead of the girl he was casually dating. Up there with the family at the casket and just pulled into their inner circle. And then he drops this proposal on me at a baseball game on the big screen and I was drunk, and happy my team was winning, and he proposed, telling me for the first time that he loved me, and I just... I agreed.”

“Caught in a whirlwind,” Bailey offers.

“Yeah. So, fast forward a couple months to me losing my mind trying to plan this wedding for four hundred guests while working fifty-hour weeks, and then my sister vanishes after we have an argument because I’m so stressed about the wedding planning and then find out she’s been bit by a venomous snake!” I exclaim, then take another gulp of my moonshine punch.

“Oh, that’s right,” Skye says, patting my arm. “I heard about that. Linc tracked down the rattler. Luckily Cat’s clinic had some antivenom. That could’ve been catastrophic.” Skye pours herself a second glass of punch and topping Cicely up before eyeballing my and Bailey’s drinking glasses. “Catch up, lovies.”

I take a big sip, but I’ve still got half left. Bailey looks on in horror. “I can’t guzzle this. If I do, you guys will have to peel me off the floor.”

“Guzzle away,” Cicely invites. “Andy is driving.”

“No need to worry about over-imbibing though; if you get drunk you can run it off,” Bailey says to Cicely and Skye, “We can’t.”

“Run it off?” I ask.

“Drunken she-wolves. It’s kinda funny at first when stagger and shift, but they’ll sober up fast.”

I frown.

“A shift or two with a run helps with drunkenness,” she explains.

“Ah. You’re all shapeshifters then,” I say. “Except you?”

“Wolf shifters,” Bailey corrects. “Shapeshifters can shift into many forms. Wolf shifters just switch between people and wolves. Those two are full shifter. I’m half. Mom is human, Dad’s a shifter. But I don’t shift. I’m stuck in this awkward body a hundred percent of the time.”

“Bailey has shifter senses, though. One of the best noses around,” Skye says.

“And one of the best brains,” Cicely tacks on.

Bailey rolls her eyes.

I look her over. “You don’t seem awkward.”

“Believe me, I am. I trip over my own feet constantly.”

“Me too,” I say. “I’m the most unathletic person I know. Doesn’t help when you’re trying to run away from a fit shapeshifter sex god, either.”

Skye chokes on her moonshine punch.

“Sorry!” I exclaim. “Ugh. I guess I really did forget you were his mom for a second. See? You have persuasive powers.”

“Why you runnin’ sister? That man is one of the hottest men in the pack,” Cicely says.

“Every man in the council is hot,” Bailey adds. “Maybe she runs so he’ll chase her. That’s what I’d probably do.”

I guzzle back another sip of my drink. “He’s intense. It’s instinctual to run from that, I guess.”

“Well, it’s instinctual for him to chase, so... sounds like you two will be having all sorts of fun acting on your instincts,” Bailey says.

“Are either of you married?” I ask, dunking a baby carrot into some dip before I take a bite.

“Nope,” they both say in unison.

“I used to hook up with Linc sometimes,” Cicely says. “But I started catching feelings, so I pulled back. He’s a council alpha, too.”

“Linc?” I ask. “Is that the lumber-snack guy or the one that looks like a Tyson-doppelganger before the doppelganger went wild?”

She smiles. “Yeah. Linc’s the snack and a half.”

“Mm hm,” Bailey agrees, sipping her drink. “Riley is Ty’s cousin.”

“You don’t do feelings?” I ask Cicely.

“I don’t do feelings with alphas,” Cicely corrects. “Or I try not to. But sometimes a girl gets convinced.” She smiles a Cheshire cat smile.

Bailey giggles.

Cicely goes on, “And not just because I’m an alpha female. Mostly because though they’re lots of fun – if you catch my drift, and I’m sure you must, given you’ve been with Mase a few days – any unmated alpha in our pack obviously hasn’t identified me as their mate, so I let myself play until the last year when I hit the big *two-nine*. I decided I wanted to grow up and only invest in a guy who might be long-term.”

“If he’s alpha and he hasn’t identified her as a mate, he probably won’t. Unless he’s a council alpha,” Bailey explains. “Since... they’re all queued up now.”

Skye tops my now three quarters empty glass up.

“And Linc could, once it’s his turn,” Skye says.

“I’m not holding my breath,” Cicely advises nonchalantly.

“This is really good,” I announce after a gulp.

“Thanks. And I know,” Skye agrees with a big smile. She does it good-naturedly though. There’s nothing remotely pompous about her. I really like Mason’s mom.

Bailey pushes her glasses up onto her nose and pipes up, “Council alphas mate in birth order. Don’t know why but that’s how it’s always worked, ever since our pack was formed with the help of the local coven several generations ago. This council, things have gone a bit differently. The eldest was Tyson and he was kidnapped as a baby, so nobody knew what happened with him. Mase is second, but for some reason Riley identified his mate first, even though he’s third in the birth order but Riley’s role acted a lot like the first alpha of our pack.”

“Kidnapped as a baby? Brutal. By who?” I like Cat Savage. It must’ve been horrific to lose her child.

“Yep. Long, long story. Crazy uncle. But anyway, Tyson mated Ivy and that meant Mason was next. Enter you. Now, Riley being third is an anomaly but like I said, he didn’t fully complete his mating. He only spotted her and I think he marked her, but didn’t knot her. Right? Or did he lose her before either happened?”

“I don’t think he marked her either,” Cicely says. “Don’t the markings happen during the knotting?”

“Oh. I’m not sure,” Bailey says.

“Not for me,” Skye says. “I was marked first. Carrie said she didn’t get the mark until their second time. Then again, Graydon had been mated before, to Greyson’s mom, and he was surprised he could knot with Carrie, which happened during their second coupling.”

“That’s my dad,” Bailey advises. “Graydon Blackwood. My brother’s Greyson. Dad was in the last council before they retired. Grey is in this one.”

“You?” I hear Skye ask as I put my mouth to the rim of my glass. My eyes slide her way and I find her looking at me.

I choke on my drink at the innocent way she asks the very personal question. About her son.

“Um, while. It was during, uh...”

“We get it,” Cicely replies, saving me from continuing down that path.

I shoot her a look of gratitude.

“It’s not always the same,” Skye observes.

“So...” Bailey continues, “We don’t know how the Riley factor will affect things. Anyway... now that the eldest two have mated, we believe that opens things up for the rest of the council alphas. They’re all joking they’re about to drop like dominoes now, considering the fact Tyson and Mase mated just over a week apart. My brother Grey is born after Riley, then there’s the others. Jason, Lincoln, and Joel. And the birth order thing might be why things went sideways last week.”

“What do you mean sideways?” I ask.

Skye’s phone rings. “One sec, girls. That’s Mason.”

The room goes quiet as she talks to him. There are just a few sentences spoken, but it’s obvious that he’s asking about me and probably reiterating she needs to watch me like a hawk, so I don’t run off.

She wraps the call up quickly. “Where were we?”

“Jase,” Cicely scoffs. “As if he’d ever settle down. He’s a wild one.”

“So’s Linc,” Bailey huffs almost indignantly. “And so was Mase, so…” Bailey’s gaze shoots to me. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

I shrug. “I don’t care. Like I said, I’m not here for a long time. But today, *a good time*.” I raise my glass and touch Cicely’s. Bailey comes closer so she can touch her glass to mine. Skye moves in, too.

“I’ll drink to almost anything, but you *will* be here for a long time,” Skye says.

“Don’t stress her out,” Bailey says, seeming upset.

“She’s touchy because she’s carried a torch for Jase since she was little,” Cicely says.

“Shut up!” Bailey shouts, popping the p. “You telling me you wouldn’t be thrilled if Linc looked into your eyes one of those nights you two were doing the no pants dance and suddenly declared you were his one and only?”

Cicely huffs. “Then marked and knotted me? I’d have been over the moon. And that’s why I’ve turned my attention away. Because what if he doesn’t? I don’t want to be his fuckbuddy with me catching feelings and every time we fuck I’m waiting and hoping for the knot. Suddenly, he’ll pull away and tell me we’re done because he’s found his one. And if we’re in the same pack I’ve got to watch that for the rest of my sorry days? I don’t need to set myself up for that kind of heartache. Either I’ll find myself on the radar of an alpha in another pack who

wants me, or I'll get myself a decent beta, which is a bonus because they can still be hot and muscled like our alphas if you're lucky enough and yet they aren't cavemen."

Skye puts her hand on Cicely's shoulder. "My granddaddy was a cinnamon roll beta. He was sweet, but even Grandmama said that in the bedroom, you want a caveman if you can get one."

"Yeah, but I don't want to fall for a caveman if he doesn't want to savagely drag me by my hair back to his cave for *more* than just one hot night. Conundrums of a she-wolf," Cicely says, looking to me.

"So, only alphas mate for life? And do that knot and bite thing?"

"Betas can mate for life too. Same as omegas. It all depends on the couple. Shifters in general have really low divorce rates. But it's different with an alpha. Pretty much unbreakable. The divorce rate with alphas is less than a fraction of a percent."

A fraction of a percent isn't zero percent.

"But you *can* get a divorce from an alpha," I say.

"The alpha has to request it. It's pretty archaic," Bailey mutters. "But thankfully it exists, or I wouldn't be here."

"Wait. Only the alpha? Not the woman?"

"Fact," Cicely says, sipping her drink.

"You're joking," I hiss aggressively. "A woman can't ask for a divorce? That's outrageous!"

"Different packs have their own rules about mate rejections. In our pack, she can bring it to the council if she really wants one. And there will be a hearing. It hasn't ever happened, but it's in the books," says Bailey. "And alphas very rarely ask for a severing."

"Rarely?"

"Only in very rare circumstances, due to a total rejection. Either their mate is barren, or she's done something

completely unforgiveable. But even if he's angry enough to ask for one, it'll be a hard road from there. He'll feel like something's missing. Some alphas in other packs have gone crazy. Suicidal. Even if they were sure they hated their mate."

My eyes bulge. "Infertility can mean she's rejected?"

"It doesn't always work out that way," Skye puts in. "Some alphas will take on a concubine of sorts and keep their mate."

My jaw drops.

"Or," Skye continues, "in the case of my parents, I was adopted. My adoptive father was alpha, and he didn't reject my mother or take on a mistress to ensure he carried on his family name. She had to have a total hysterectomy a few weeks after they mated in order to save her life. They adopted me and a couple years later, they adopted again so I wouldn't grow up alone. My birth mother killed herself after I was born because her mate had been killed."

"Oh my God, Skye. I'm so sorry," I say.

"Don't be. I was adopted by a wonderful family. And they adopted my sisters, too. Twins. We traveled together to pick them up from Malaysia."

"They're shifters, too?" I ask.

"There are shifter packs all over the world," Bailey answers.

This all surprises me. Adoption agencies for wolf shifters?

I don't let my heart go where it's trying to go. Especially not with talk of mistresses. I stuff another caramel-drenched apple wedge into my mouth and then wash it down with more moonshine punch.

Three Hours Later

I'm drunk. And these girls are great. Absolutely fucking awesome. I love them!

I wish Mason's mother could be my mother-in-law. She's the most chill mother-in-law I could imagine. And she makes amazing moonshine punch. It sure does give you a punch, too. It goes down like fruit juice with a kick and then punches you in the brain because suddenly you can't stop laughing and you wanna dance. Skye makes great snacks. And she's so fucking nice!

I just announced that I wanna dance. So now Skye is staggering down to the shoreline to ask her hot husband to drive us to Roxy's bar so we can dance. It apparently has a great juke box and an awesome dance floor. And chili fries!

The sky is changing colors, too, and Mason was right - it's a different sunset than the last one I saw. Today, the sky is fuchsia and gray. And gorgeous.

"I want to take a picture of this sunset," I say, leaning over the balcony and strangely not even spooked by the height for a change.

Skye and Andrew are necking. Like teenagers. I smile at first, then feel a little sad thinking about my folks. For a split second, I want my mom to have her happy ending as soon as possible. But the potential ramifications? What if there's a shifter somewhere here for her? She'd lap that up based on what she said this morning. And Ivy seems to be all into her shifter, too. At least I think she is based on the way she and Tyson were all cuddled up on that gurney.

"The sky is definitely pretty," Bailey agrees from beside me. She's drunk, too. Though she's only had three drinks. Then again, that punch packs a lot of *punch*.

Cicely seems to be holding her liquor better than the rest of us. She's fun too, though. Just not nearly as wobbly as me, Skye, and Bailey.

The past few hours have been mostly fun girl talk, they stopped with the heavy conversations after Skye's adoption story. I've heard some funny stories about some of the pack members. It didn't feel too gossipy, more like giving me a

primer on who's who. Not that I'll likely remember any of this tomorrow. Or even be here long enough for it to matter.

Boo.

I like it here.

I like these girls. I like Mason's mom. And Mason's house.

And... Mason.

"I can't take a picture though, because Doggo took my phone," I complain.

"Doggo," Bailey barks out a laugh. Then she sobers, "And I know; he forbade us to let you use our phones before you came downstairs."

"He did?"

"Yu-huh." She nods and takes another sip of her drink. Some of it dribbles down her chin. She laughs and tries to scoop it back into her mouth with her fingers.

"I'm outraged! He's such a... A..."

"An alpha?"

"Pff. Yeah."

She giggles. "I'll take a picture for you." She pulls her phone from her back pocket and points it at the horizon. "I'll get your number and send it to you so that you've got it when you get your phone back."

"I'm gonna miss fucking him," I state. "God, his penis. It's the kind of penis that poets write sonnets about. You know?"

Cicely laughs from the patio chair behind us.

"Nope. I actually don't know," Bailey says.

"Why?" I ask. "Religious reasons?"

"No no... I just..."

"She's carrying a torch for Jase," Cicely says.

Bailey glares over her shoulder at Cicely but doesn't say anything.

"Nothing wrong with saving yourself, Bail," Cicely adds.

And Bailey says nothing.

So I speak instead. "I wasn't gonna say it in front of his mom, you know, but I am gonna miss him."

"You already said that," Cicely says.

"Oh." I laugh.

They both laugh, too.

"He's an animal in bed. Well... duh. I guess they all are around here, aren't they?"

The girls both laugh.

"Duh," I repeat. I'm definitely drunk. "Well, at least I'll have something juicy for my memoirs. I mean... I guess I can't write memoirs though, can I? Because all this is super-secret."

"Super-duper secret," Bailey agrees.

"You're not gonna have to miss fucking him, Amelia. He's not letting you go," Cicely says.

"I'm gonna get this magic undone. I have to."

"Why?" Cicely asks. "What's back in your old life that you're so anxious to get back to? The guy you mentioned who doesn't even want sex? The job that was stressful? Your sister is here. Your mom is moving here, too."

That feels like a glass of cold water thrown in my face.

Nothing much is waiting for me back home. My job. Some friends.

"I like my job."

Bailey pipes up. "Our pack has grown. It's really too much for Cat to handle all by herself. I was already talking to her and she said she'd love to hire you. Her niece Leona is studying to become a healer, too, but she's just started studying. And there

are a whole lot of pack members at childrearing age, plus once all our council alphas pair off and start breeding like bunnies the pack will need even more medical attention, so her practice is probably about to explode, especially with how this moon phase is winding down. I predict at least two dozen new babies nine months from now.”

“Not that you need a job,” Cicely puts in. “Mase makes good money. He’s got a one year waiting list for his design services.”

“Girls!” I hear and we all look toward the shoreline.

Skye is giving us a big smile with double thumbs-up.

“Dancing!” Bailey exclaims.

“And chili fries!” I add, glad for the segue to something far less heavy.

We watch Skye head toward us while downing the rest of the drink in her hand.

“Road trip!” Bailey announces. “Let’s boogie oogie oogie until we just can’t woogie anymore.”

I laugh. “And maybe do some karaoke?”

“No. Roxy used to have a karaoke machine, but it got broken during a wrestling match.”

“A wrestling match?” I ask.

“Things can get rowdy at Roxy’s,” Cicely informs before downing the rest of her drink. “After the karaoke machine got broken, they started moving things outside in the nicer weather. Nice weather and alphas all liquored up – things can get rowdy.”

“I bet that’s fun to watch.” I wiggle my brows.

“Oh yeah,” Cicely drawls, finishing her drink.

I down the rest of my drink and then follow them inside, nabbing my purse on the way out. Skye uses the keypad on the

front door to lock up and we pile into an amused Andrew's SUV.

Mason

After a too-long meeting with a customer where I fail at hiding how distracted I am, I catch up with Riley and Greyson in Drowsy Hollow.

I'm anxious to get back home. To get back to Amie. I'm missing her; I don't like not being with her. I guess it's alpha separation anxiety kicking in and I've heard about it but would never expect it from myself. It's clearly too soon after our mating for me to be off doing shit without her. Newly mated couples usually spend a week or longer alone – together, fucking, bonding, more fucking. But too much shit is happening to afford me the opportunity to do that, including taking on a big client that's not a shifter therefore being unable to come up with a viable excuse for canceling this appointment.

I'm ready for and equally dreading this meeting with the witches. I don't have a good feeling about it. Is that because I'm worried these matches were made against the rules? If that's the case, I've got a fight ahead of me because I'm not giving her up, not for anything.

The guys are having coffee together in a corner booth in the diner. When I sit, the waitress immediately comes over with a cup in one hand, a coffee pot in another.

“Boys,” I greet and give her unspoken coffee offer a nod.

The way the guys look at me, I know they're happy for me. It feels good.

“How are you, man?” Grey asks.

“I'm good. Great, actually, with one exception.” I turn my gaze to the waitress. “Thank you.”

“Menus?” she asks, face pink.

This happens often when we're around human women, especially when there are two or more of us together. Alpha shifters are blessed with the kinds of looks human women like. They often get flustered and shy. Or they try to flirt. This one is the former. Which is preferable to me suddenly. And that's new. I've never disliked being flirted with before.

"Naw; just coffee for me, thanks," I say.

"I'm good," Riley puts in.

"Just a warm-up for me, pretty lady," Grey says, giving her a wide smile.

She blushes.

"Anybody want pie?" she tries, "We've got absolutely fa-fabulous pie..."

"Bet your pie is delicious, blossom, but we're good," Grey tells her.

The red of her cheeks deepens. And Grey's eyes sparkle with mischief.

Greyson isn't tired of flirting, clearly. But in the not-too-distant future, he will be. And I'm looking forward to being a spectator instead of the specimen under the microscope.

The waitress shakily fills his cup and then hurries back to the counter like her long hair is about to catch on fire.

"What's the exception?" Riley asks once she's out of earshot.

"I just wanna know this wasn't unsanctioned."

He sobers.

"Amelia keeps goin' on about getting things undone. I won't have that. In fact, I'm wishin' Graydon hadn't called the meeting at all. Because if we don't know if it's sanctioned we won't know if it's possible to get it undone."

Riley grabs my shoulder and squeezes.

"And if it wasn't and the Young coven decides they'll undo it, am I gonna have to take my woman and run? Am I gonna have

to fight with witches over keepin' Amelia? I'm already fighting with Amelia over it and I'm not jokin' when I say I won't go down on this matter. It isn't fucking happening."

Grey winces and gives me a warning look. I'm getting too riled up.

"And..." I lower my voice. "Not sure running would even do anything because it's obvious things can be set in motion without the people involved being there for it. So what does that mean? That emotions could be ripped away from me without my say-so? Fuck." I lean back and empty my lungs slowly.

"We'll get to the bottom of this," Grey promises.

"I already know I got played with the night Tyson claimed his woman and I am not down with having my shit fucked with again."

"I feel for ya, brother," Riley says, "So, we'll go and find out what's what and go from there. We don't commit to anything. We find out what the deal is. And then if it isn't the news you wanted... we call a meeting with you and Ty. Since this affects him as much as it affects you."

"Except his woman isn't gonna be asking for it to be undone," Greyson says.

"They're good?" I ask.

They looked like they were happy at the clinic, but I'm asking anyway.

"They're moving into the Savage house as we speak," Riley answers.

"Good news," I reply.

I'm glad things are working out for them. I'm glad Tyson is back after a lifetime of being kept from his pack, his family. This says good things for the future for all of us. All seven of us. As it should be.

But feeling uneasy about this witchcraft factor, the sooner I know what the deal is with this spell the better. I'll either feel relief in the knowledge I don't have to fight to keep someone from trying to rip my mate away from me or I'll know I need to get ready to protect what's mine.

The idea of someone making any moves to take her from me? It won't fucking happen; I won't let it.

I look at my wrist. Twenty minutes till our meeting.

"They know why we're coming?" I ask, drumming my fingers on the table with impatience.

Grey speaks up. "Dad was the coven connection last council, but he was vague when I asked questions. So, I had Bailey dig in to find out the coven hierarchy for the region. My dad says they've been told they needed to pull logs for Lyrica Young, who was the last remaining local Young coven member until she died. Told the woman to look for things pertaining to Nelle Jenkins, Kathleen Jenkins-Brennan, Ivy and Amelia Brennan all related to the Arcana Falls pack. Hoping the answers are there, and we'll have an answer before we leave the place." He sips his coffee.

I sip from my cup while Grey rips open sugar packets and dumps them in.

"And if this was legit and all's good, you ready, Grey?" Riley asks. "You're next."

"Always ready for anything," he says and smiles wide.

"Linc's plannin' on sowing the rest of his oats while he can. He and Jase are headin' to Roxy's tonight for a prowl."

"Oh yeah? Guess he finished his gig early," I say, "Though it's pointless. They have no idea that once they find her, they won't even give a shit about anything they had before."

Grey's eyebrows jut up. "Good to know. You're obviously not mourning your bachelor days."

I shake my head. "I was in bed with a redhead who was a ten. Ten and a half even. Waking up with her wasn't good. In fact,

I found her suddenly repulsive even though I'd just fucked her repeatedly for hours.”

“When was this? The night you came home and got lost?”

“Yep. Same night Tyson claimed his woman.”

Three people move into the booth behind us, so I drop my voice to barely above a whisper.

“Being with Amelia? A thousand times better than sex with anyone before her. But the night with the redhead? That’s the night I knew something was off. The night the witches fucked with me.” Urgency hits me. “Let’s go now and get to the bottom of this shit.” I don’t want anyone fucking with me like that again.

Riley glances at his phone and nods.

I pull my wallet out. “Got this.” I drop a twenty and rise, taking another sip from my cup.

“Hey, babe. Can you pass me a to-go cup and a lid?” Greyson calls over to the waitress at the counter who is overfilling saltshakers while staring at our booth. She looks down at the mess she’s made and straightens. “Sure. Uh. Sure.” She hurries over.

As we head outside, Grey puts the to-go cup to his mouth with a smirk on his face.

“She was cute. Haven’t seen her there before. Smelled nobody on her. My take: not only single, maybe even a virgin. ”

“You lookin’ to pop one more cherry before you’re mated?” Riley asks. “Let her keep it for her future husband. Don’t be a fuckin’ dawg.”

Grey shrugs. “One more? Maybe two, three. We’ll see.”

Grey is a good guy. This behavior today reminds me more of Jason. Not that Jase isn’t a good guy, though he’s arguably the biggest player in our council. That, along with the strawberry moon – is this sending mated alphas into the rut and making unmated ones antsy, especially with the notion of a pending

mating? Linc and Jase talking about sowing oats as if that's not something they're already doing. Grey actin' like this?

"Where's Joel today?"

"He's researching for a case," Riley answers. "Might be sending Linc to Anchorage to meet with a pack outside the city. They want help on a case, and they generally don't deal with outside packs. Must be desperate if they're seeking help."

"What kind of case?" Grey asks.

"Fill you in later. Here we are."

"He's not itching to get laid like the other boys?" I ask, jokingly.

"Joel's jokin' he's happy to sit back and watch the rest of you fuckers fall first."

I laugh again.

At least some things are status quo. Joel hasn't ever been much for prowling for women. Not that he'd have any problems if that's what he wanted. He's frequently the object of desire for our local teenaged girls in particular since he looks like he belongs in a boy band.

He had a serious girlfriend for a couple years, but they had an ugly split on her twentieth birthday during a bush party where friends of her older brother from another pack showed. One of them an alpha, ten years older than her, identified her as his. Whisked her away right under Joel's nose. It was ugly. Bloody. Took several of us to stop him from fighting to the death to keep her.

I haven't seen him with anybody since then and some would say what happened to him is almost as bad as what happened to Rye. Though the promise of his own fated mate still looms for Joel at least. That girl was someone he loved, but she wasn't meant for him.

We make our way into the drycleaners where an attractive blonde sits behind the counter, eyes on us and I immediately know – she knows who we are.

She rises. “Flip the sign, will you?” She looks over her shoulder. “You can leave early, Patrice.”

A teen girl comes into view and removes a smock before grabbing a puffer vest and a backpack and then slipping out, eyeballing the three of us with wide eyes as she goes.

Riley is the last one inside, so he holds the door for her. After shutting it, he flips the sign, twists the lock, and then he flinches. Something strange is coming at me from him. Something wired, bordering on dangerous.

My eyes swing toward Grey who is looking at him as well.

Riley’s brows knit together as his face drains of color. He stares at the woman behind the counter.

“Rye?” Grey calls with concern.

Riley’s eyes track the perimeter of the space while muscles on his face twitch before his eyes come back to the blonde, then his nostrils flare.

She stares back with a look that has me on edge. Whatever he’s feeling right now that’s causing this reaction, she seems unsurprised about it.

“Hey?” I say as they stare one another down. I then watch Riley’s pupils blow, turning his eyes from green to coal black.

“What. The. Fuck?” he snarls in a guttural tone.

Both Grey and I have gone wired.

I’m pulling scents in, as well as sights; examining the space, trying to determine what’s setting him off. But nothing sticks out to me. Not a thing.

She flips the countertop over to grant us access.

“You know who I am, don’t you?” Riley demands.

“You’re Riley. You had a meeting with my sister, Jess. You get me instead.”

The three of us remain statue-still.

“What’s goin’ on, brother?” Greyson asks.

Riley's dark eyes scan the place and I note his body is trembling. That's not fear, that's fury. A low rumble rolls through the space, coming from Rye's gut.

"I'm Dani. Come through." The blonde gestures to the open side of the split counter.

Nobody moves a muscle.

"Rye?" Grey reaches for Riley's shoulder. Riley's gaze snaps to Grey and the look in his eyes makes Grey stop inches away.

I speak up. "Do we leave? Or-"

"We're goin' through," he clips, mouth contorting into a snarl, eyes still coal black as he stalks behind the blonde, who isn't looking remotely concerned or even surprised at Riley's demeanor.

"What the fuck?" I cuss under my breath.

"I suspect we're about to find out," Grey mutters as we follow Riley back through the atypical dry-cleaning space, past racks of clothes covered in paper, until we're moving through a back-office space where an old desk with an ancient computer sits in front of a bookshelf that's pulled out from the wall just enough to get behind it. She rounds it and we follow, going through a half-opened doorway that's framed with a multicolored beaded curtain. The wooden beads rattle as Dani Young goes through, then Riley follows. I head in behind Riley, Grey behind me.

A white-haired woman, likely in her upper seventies sits in the corner, knitting from her rocking chair.

"That's my Aunt Mimi," Dani says. "Jess had to cut out early for something happening nearby, but I can help you."

Mimi's piercing near-silver gaze lifts from her knitting and lands first on Greyson. Her brows lift in question and then she stares at Dani.

Grey rears back and I immediately know why. Her eyes are nearly the same shade as Grey's. Grey's eyes are dark grey, but

they change to that piercing silver when he's wolf. She turns her gaze to Rye.

"He's going to be a problem," Mimi says of Riley before her eyes flit to me, sharpening. "And maybe him, too."

"Not you, though," she says to Grey. "You've got your head on straight."

"Do I know you?" Grey asks.

"Not technically. But you should. Though, that's a conversation for another time."

"I've got this, Auntie," Dani declares.

"Just to say, wolves," Mimi goes on, "if any attempt at harm comes at either of us, I've got enough power in my pinky finger alone to obliterate all three of you." She wiggles that finger and then resumes her knitting.

"We're not here to start trouble today," Greyson says, "We're here for information."

"Information disclosure that could lead to trouble," Mimi mutters as she hauls the yarn off her lap before shifting her weight to get more comfortable, wincing as if she's got an ache.

My eyes bounce around the irregularly shaped space we're in. I can spot bad angles from a mile off, and what's going on in this room is enough to give me a headache. Low ceiling, seven angled walls with none of them leveled. The space is windowless, and it'd be impossible to miss the white painted pentagram that dominates the black epoxy-coated floor. The two longest walls are lined with shelving, one of them: books; the other, dust-coated jars and vials. Another six-foot section of wall is painted with chalkboard paint and covered in chalked symbols. Some of them I don't recognize, others are common. Triangles. Circles. Some with angled lines through them. Outlines of eyeballs. An infinity symbol. Slightly less than an eighth of a moon. Ying yang symbol. And one wall is the backdrop for a massive wooden tree sculpture with

branches that twist off in multiple directions, the branches decorated with ornaments.

There's a couch and a couple chairs as well as floor cushions that look like they came straight out of Haight / Ashbury in the Woodstock era. Another battered, old desk just like the one in the office we just walked through is against the wall beside Mimi's rocking chair. On top sits an old, off-white rotary phone and a stack of weathered leather books. Despite the abundance of seating options, all but Mimi remain standing.

And Riley's aggression must be close to bubbling over, though I don't know why. He stands in front of me, hostility rolling off his body as he takes in the space, fists clenched.

"You're here because?" Dani inquires, though I would bet money she already knows.

Riley is still assessing the place, so I fill in the blank.

"Because two recent matings by Arcana Falls pack council alphas may have been interfered with by your coven. One of those happens to be my own mating. Are you familiar with the uniqueness of our pack?"

"We are. Our ancestors helped form your pack."

Riley prowls the perimeter of the space, looking like he's about to come out of his skin. He's looking like he's tracking, all but putting his nose to the floor, but coming up with something that won't add up.

His eyes flash with irritation, prompting me to jerk my chin in question. His response is a shake of his head, which is looking about ready to implode.

"Rye?" Grey tries. "Do we need to go? Reschedule?"

"Abso-fuckinglutely not," he snarls. "You know why I'm reactin' this way, don't you?" He's aiming that question at the two witches.

"We'll get to him," Dani Young says calmly. "Let's deal with you." She looks at me.

"Don't you?" he repeats in a dangerous tone.

“One moment, please,” she says and then her eyes move to me, and I notice her aunt is looking at her niece with a shrewd expression.

I hesitate, waiting for Riley. He jerks his chin up at me.

“I just mated,” I say. “And another pack member -”

“Sisters,” she says.

“Yes. You know what’s been happening then?”

“What do you want to know?”

My eyes dart to Riley again. He’s growling, low.

“Brother? What do you need?” Grey tries.

“We’ll get to him in a minute,” Dani interrupts. “He can talk about why he’s ... upset.”

“Upset?” Riley clips. “Upset?” he repeats. “Where. Is. She?”

“Danica?” Mimi inquires. “What’s going on? Is this who I think it is?”

“Who?” I ask. “Who are you asking for, Rye?”

“Rikki,” he snaps, eyes still on the witch.

“Rikki?” Greyson asks.

“Rikki,” Riley repeats. “Or is her name actually Jess?”

Dani sighs.

Mimi pushes the wool square on her needles down and then drops the knitting on the desk.

“Rye what?” Mimi asks, getting to her feet.

“Auntie, leave it,” Dani tries.

The woman shoots her a glare and repeats, “Rye what? What is your surname?”

“Riley Savage,” Grey replies.

The older woman lifts the top book from the stack of leather books and then opens the second book. “Come here, child,” she says, and her niece moves over.

“Help me find it.”

They both flip through the books and after a moment of flipping, Mimi’s eyebrows jut up and she shoots another glare at her niece, who looks agitated. Dani folds her arms across her chest.

“Riley Savage of Arcana Falls, seventh generation council alpha, third in birth order?”

“Yes,” Greyson says when Riley says nothing, still glaring at Dani.

“First, I smelled that you’re blood to her. Sister? Aunt?” Riley jerks his chin to Mimi.

“Yes,” Dani says without inflection. “I’m her sister. This is our great aunt.”

“And who’s Jess?”

“Another sister.”

“And I’ve never scented any of her relatives before now, not since ...” He pauses and fills his lungs before continuing, voice trembling with emotion, “Since she disappeared. And then stepping in here, first, I smell her relatives, then I smell *her*.”

Silence hangs heavy in the air.

“How the fuck can that be?” Riley demands, his voice dangerous.

“What do you smell, young man?” Mimi demands.

“I smell *her*,” he grits out. “My...” he lets that hang.

Mate. His mate.

He’s angrier than I’ve ever seen. There’s never been a time when I didn’t know Riley Savage and I have never seen him more angry, more dangerous, closer to coming unglued. Grey and I exchange glances.

None of us have seen her or even knew her name. We felt extreme agony from him before he disappeared for almost six

months, sending a message to the post office that he needed time away and would be back soon. When he came back, it was in time for us to take the reins from the previous council of alphas. Riley flatly told us he met his fated mate and lost her that same day. He never told us her name or anything else about her or about that day, swore he didn't want to speak of it.

But we've all known it's haunted him since then. He threw himself into the council. He threw himself into serving his pack. We all gave him whatever leadership roles he wanted because it seemed to be what he needed. But all along, we've known he hasn't been whole since then.

What the fuck is going on here? I'm angry on his behalf. What sorts of games is this coven playing?

Fucking with my head? Fucking Riley over? What the fuck?

The old witch opens another large leather book and flips through the pages. She then notches her left brow and levels the young witch with a look.

"Riley Savage. Yes, of course. Your parents are Atticus and Lucy Reilly-Savage, correct?"

"Correct."

"You have siblings. Brody and Trina."

"Yeah," he clips.

"You're of the belief that your fated mate was Rikki, but you lost her. Was that before or after you mated her?"

"Why are you asking me that?" he demands.

"It's important," Mimi states. "Can you tell me the answer?"

He shakes his head. "Why don't you ask her, since she's obviously not dead since I can fuckin' smell her?"

"You should have told me," she hisses to Dani.

"I wasn't entirely sure he'd pick up her scent," the young witch defends. "She showered for our meeting and then

masked it before she left with Jessica. I wondered, but I didn't know for sure so there was no point bringing it up."

"Not enough. And we should've masked. Don't play with me, child. You know better. Did your sister know he was coming today?"

"What the fuck!" Riley stalks over to the woman and stares down at the book.

"No. But it's time this was over anyway," Dani says with a shrug.

"Girl..." Mimi admonishes like she's exasperated.

"You know it, Auntie. The seven years are nearly up anyhow. She needs to move forward. Finally..." She lets that hang.

"The fuck does this say?" Riley demands, looking over Mimi's shoulder at the ledger.

"Your name is here in the ledger. And her transgressions are listed."

"What does it say?"

"That's not for you to know."

"Sorry I hijacked your meeting, Mase," Riley says, still black eyes hitting mine. "Your issues are urgent. But I need to fuckin' know why the girl I identified as mine, why the girl I knew I wanted to spend my life beside and inside, the one who I would love until I turned to dust..." His nostrils flare and he inhales deep, "Why... I can smell the girl I watched disappear into the river almost seven fucking years ago never to resurface ... in this place. And why my name is in a fuckin' witch's book." His gaze swings back to the blonde witch.

And not a word is uttered. I don't think anyone even breathes.

Mimi closes the book, walks back to the rocking chair, and lifts her knitting up. Then she continues with the clicking of the needles.

"We can't help you with those answers," Dani says.

“She’s a witch, then,” Riley states.

“We can only reveal what we must about the other situation. His situation.” Dani gestures to me.

Riley’s chest puffs up as he hauls in a big breath and it feels like when he does, he sucks every ounce of oxygen out of the room.

“Where the fuck is she then? So I can *take it up* with her,” he roars.

She shakes her head. “We can’t help you with that.”

“You can’t help me with that?” he volleys, then he steps toward her, hostility oozing from his pores.

She doesn’t move. The old lady sets her knitting down and straightens up.

“Rye,” I warn.

Ignoring my warning, he takes another step and reaches like he’s about to grab her throat. The old lady’s hand flies up and though she doesn’t touch him, Riley flies back, hitting a black curtain on the same wall the door is on, falling into a shower stall.

“Do not...” the young witch warns calmly, “attempt to accost me again. I understand you’re emotional, but this is between you and my sister.”

Riley rips the curtain from the rod and tosses it, then whips his shirt off, kicks his shoes off as he reaches for his fly and he shifts, his large brown wolf lunging for the girl with his teeth bared.

Fuck!

He’s fast, but Mimi is faster. This time her hand flies up and just inches away from the blonde witch, Riley’s wolf freezes, mid-air, frozen in animation for two beats before he flies backwards, hitting the wall beside the shower stall.

“Secure that wolf or not only will we refuse to discuss anything with any of you,” Mimi hisses, “he’ll also be

toothless, both as wolf and as man.”

“We do not need to piss off a couple of witches, brother,” I warn Riley, who is on the floor in wolf form, eyes wide.

Riley growls, baring teeth at her.

“No,” Dani agrees, smoothing her hand over her hair, looking rattled for the first time today, “You do *not*.”

Riley shifts to man again and promptly picks up the battered old desk and heaves it at the wall of bottles and jars. Shelves fall, bottles crash to the floor, glass shards explode throughout the area.

“Where is she!” he roars.

Pungent aromas immediately fill the space and Grey and I exchange alarmed looks. What the fuck is in those bottles and will the puddles of liquid blending together amid the broken glass on the floor make this place blow up?

I don’t know much about witches firsthand, but by reputation and the vibe coming from the older one, I know this is a dangerous situation.

“You’ve got three seconds to tell me what the fuck is going on here or I go find her.”

“That’s what you’ll have to do. What you’re feeling, your anger? That’s not something me or Aunt Mimi can weigh in on. You need to talk to Erica.”

“Erica?” Grey asks.

Dani grinds her teeth. “Erica. Rikki was a nickname.”

Riley licks his teeth without opening his mouth. His eyes are still coal black and he’s getting angrier by the minute.

Mimi gestures to me. “Do you want to discuss your situation? I have to warn that if he lays a finger on anything else in here in anger, you’ll have to book something more formal with us in front of the supernatural collective, because we won’t entertain any of you here again. And please dress yourself, Wolf.”

“Riley?” Grey calls.

Riley pulls on his boxers and jeans, then carries the rest of his clothes and shoes toward the exit.

“Where are you goin’?” I call out.

“I *need* to track her. Even though her scent doesn’t lead out of this room, I have to try.”

He slips through the beaded curtain.

“Grey?” I urge.

Dani pipes up immediately, “He won’t find her trail. She masked her scent before leaving.”

“So, she did something to make him think she’s his, then faked her death?” Grey demands.

Nobody says anything.

“Thank her for us. Thank her for fuckin’ up a good man who did not fucking deserve it,” Grey mutters as he exits.

I cross my arms over my chest and stare at the witches.

Dani speaks up. “You want to know if my great aunt, Mimi’s sister Lyrica cast the spell on you and your pack mate? She died, but we have her ledgers and brought forth ledgers for the rest of the group in as well. Our coven didn’t have to do much. When Ms. Jenkins came here, most of what she asked for was already part of fate’s plan.”

I frown.

“Just like people ask us to do the impossible, people also come to us to plead for things that are already inevitable. Sometimes we step in to help the inevitable along.”

“She didn’t pay a large sum of money for this?” I ask.

“Oh, she did. A very large sum. But it’s among the reasons why she won the money in the first place.”

“Explain.”

“She won the money for a number of reasons, but partly so that it could lead her where it led. Just like Aunt Lyrica cast a spell she was always intended to cast.”

“I don’t get it,” I grind out.

“You don’t *need* to get it,” Mimi interjects. “It’s how things were intended. Lyrica needed the money for something important, Ms. Jenkins received money in order to provide it. It was disclosed that we would endeavor to help further the timeline along so that things would happen sooner than later. They came to an agreement and Lyrica honored our end.”

Dani speaks up. “You’re not unhappy about the outcome, are you?”

“No. But my mate doesn’t believe in it.”

“Well, looks like it’s your job to convince her then,” Dani states.

I stare.

She stares back.

A long moment passes, and I finally look away, blowing out a breath. *Okay then.*

“We need you to go,” Dani announces, gesturing toward the beaded curtain.

“So you can warn your sister, you mean?” I ask.

“We don’t live here. We have a long drive home.”

“Did Riley incorrectly identify your sister as his mate?”

“I suppose it looks that way,” Dani replies.

“Because your sister cast a spell?”

“So it appears.”

I stare. She’s being awfully fucking vague.

“I can’t discuss this with you,” she states.

I raise my hands, frustrated.

Mimi speaks, “I knew why you were coming today, Mason Quinn. My great-niece did not disclose that Riley Savage was coming, too. I believed this meeting to be with Graydon, which was why I chose to come. My attendance was unexpected.” She shoots a glare at her niece and it’s obvious deception is at play not only with these witches, but also between them.

I wait for her to elaborate.

Dani says nothing.

“I also happen to know Erica has been called to answer for her interventions, and punishments were doled out.”

“Well, Riley has been suffering for six, nearly seven years. Suffering like you couldn’t possibly fathom. Why’d she do this? And did you-”

“We can’t reveal more than you need to know,” Mimi responds and starts packing her knitting into a tote bag.

“She faked her death?”

They say nothing.

“I need to go check on Riley; I’ll be back.”

“We need to leave,” Dani says. “In other words, if you have questions, ask them now. About *your* situation.”

I’m pissed. Not only are these witches fucking around with people I care about, they fucked with me, too, and they don’t have the decency to wait a few minutes so I can make sure Riley is all right. My lip curls as I stare at Dani.

She’s made of ice. Doesn’t flinch.

Finally, I scoff before saying, “Might have questions about the way it came about. About the time I lost. About the fact that interference by you guys might have led to Ivy Savage getting hurt in a way that might sting for a long fuckin’ time, that... left me fubar’d for a week and put our pack’s bond in jeopardy, had me thinking I was losing myself, but you’re

stating you don't have the time, so I guess it's pointless of me to bring all this up."

"Penelope Jenkins came here asking for help," Mimi states. "Help with the love lives of her sister and her two nieces. My cousin Lyrica took payment. The only extra help that was intervened with was what was necessary and that mostly affects Kathleen Brennan finding out the truth about her husband. That marriage was interfered with but only to bring truths to light and open the door for Kathleen to find happiness. Not outside of what was allowed. As for the chain of events leading to where you, your pack mate, and your fated respective mates... that was already in motion, and the team only interfered where necessary in order to facilitate things that were meant to happen while minimizing complications because of the old birth order guidelines."

"Why?" I ask. "And respective? What about that?"

"What indeed," Mimi replies cryptically.

"What about the birth order rules? Our pack librarian says logically Tyson should've mated Amelia." Just saying it sickens me. Bile bubbles at the back of my throat. "And what if Amelia and Ivy have questions? Or Tyson? I guess I'll have *them* call you since it involves them?"

"Tyson Savage won't have questions. He knows this is how it was meant to be. As do you," Mimi replies.

Dani speaks up. "If you weren't suited to her and he wasn't suited to the younger sister, it would not have happened the way it did."

"You're saying that superseded birth order rules?" I ask. "Did you have to get involved to make it happen that way? Did you keep me in limbo so Tyson could claim Ivy? Would I have done it otherwise?"

Dani stares into my eyes. "Is the knowledge that it's all working out the way it's supposed to with all four of you mean it's worth the price you've paid?"

"Yes," I answer without hesitation.

“Then stay the course, Mason Quinn. Be the person you are. The alpha. The man. That’s who your mate needs and who she was meant to have.”

I stare.

Grey steps in again.

Mimi speaks now. “When our coven helped your pack form, guidelines were put in place that made sense at that time. Guidelines, not laws. And even laws can become archaic, therefore needing to be altered to suit the current time and circumstances. Birth order confusion might be explained by the fact that nature saw that the birth order between you and Tyson and the two sisters didn’t align. Maybe one wasn’t suited to the logical one. Maybe there are other reasons for the pairing that are yet to be revealed. And sometimes spells have flaws and things go awry and require us to help with the untangling. Sometimes magic attempts to work against nature. Or spells are perfect, and nature simply intervenes for what’s best.”

“Which of those things happened when I lost time? When I thought I was going mad? Do you people have any idea how fucked up that was? Was trapping me in limbo and making me think I was losin’ my fuckin’ mind your version of untangling a mess?”

“Do you prefer the younger sister?” Dani asks.

“Absolutely not,” I reply.

Dani shrugs. “Then accept it for what it is. Instead of getting caught up in what you’ve been taught, trust your instincts. You have those instincts for a reason.”

“Not so easy to discount everything we’ve been taught.”

“Do humans also not have to discount everything they’ve been taught when they’re blessed with the knowledge of the supernatural things they’ve previously been told aren’t real?”

I sigh.

Mimi walks over and her hand lands on my forearm. A frisson of unease slides through my blood. “Things can get warped,” she says, “distorted, requiring our assistance to do the untangling. Maybe you were simply more suited to Amelia. Maybe the untangling left you confused temporarily. Do you have clarity now?”

“Mase,” Grey interrupts, “I think we need to get him outta here before things are revealed that require extreme damage control.”

Fuck.

“Right. We’ll be going. Dani. Miss Mimi.”

Mimi nods and lifts her knitting bag.

“If my mate, her sister, their mother, or anyone else approaches your coven and tries to get you to undo this –”

“Won’t happen,” Mimi states and gives Dani a look I don’t know how to decipher.

“We can trust that? With what your sister did?” I ask.

“Because if you dare...”

“Do not threaten me, wolf.” Mimi leans forward and her eyes blaze with fire.

I stare, unflinching.

“Mase,” Grey warns then turns to them, “We’ll reach out if we need more information. Thank you for the information and your time.”

“We’ve shared as much as we can share,” Mimi states. “But there will need to be a conversation between my coven and your council after the seventh of you mates.”

“Why?” I ask.

“The next generation of council alphas after yours may need a new roadmap. You and I need a conversation, too, at some stage, Greyson Blackwood.”

“About?” Grey asks.

“Best we discuss when the time is right,” Mimi replies, “I’ll seek you out after you’ve mated. Or you might seek me out. We’ll see how it all transpires.”

Grey gives her an assessing look, but doesn’t reply.

“What’s your number?” I ask. “I’d like to have it.”

Dani hands me a business card.

Danica Young. Enchanting Enterprises, Marblehead, MA

There’s an email address and a website in addition to the phone number.

“Thank you. Sorry about the mess,” Grey gestures to the debris. “I can send some pack members later to clean up,” he offers.

“We don’t allow more individuals in here than necessary, but thank you.” Mimi gestures to the beaded curtain.

I turn to go through that curtain. As I pass through it, the hairs on the back of my neck rise and everything inside me demands I resist the urge to look back over my shoulder at them. This room’s vibe is disturbing. Maybe it’s the mixture of spilled potions. Maybe Riley’s rage is still hanging in the atmosphere. It’s only upon leaving it, that I fully feel it. And I want to wash it off.

Grey jogs over to Riley, who is punching the shit out of the side of his truck. Spectators on the street look on with unconcealed concern, some of them muttering to one another.

This town has had its share of drama and then some, especially last Halloween, after the serial killer went on a killing spree right here on the main drag. Talk still hasn’t died down from it. They won’t take too well to seeing a man unhinged right here where all that happened. And the last thing we need is Riley losing it altogether and shifting to wolf form in public.

“Let’s get outta here before the cops come.”

Riley looks up at me. His eyes are filled with pain.

“I smelled her, Mase.”

“I know, brother. And I’m sorry you’re dealin’ with this. I can’t even imagine how emotional this is, but...”

“I fuckin’ smelled her, Mase,” he repeats, this time, his voice filled with the same agony as his eyes. He drops to his knees on the pavement and rakes his fingers through his hair. “In there. And now her scent is just... gone. Just like that day. That fuckin’ *fuckin’* day when she went under in the river and never came back up.”

He stares into space ahead of him and I know by his expression that Riley Savage isn’t *here* with us. He’s living in that moment almost seven years ago when he watched the woman he believed was his mate disappear into the river, losing sight of her, losing her scent for what he believed was the last time.

Fuck. What a shock it must’ve been to take in that scent.

“Let’s get somewhere quiet and talk this out. Figure-” Grey starts.

“I swam. I swam and swam until my lungs nearly gave out.”

“Brother, I’m sorry,” I say.

“Let’s go. I’ll drive your truck,” Grey offers.

“And then I slept and searched the shores for her, to see if she washed up.”

Grey and I exchange glances as a scent hits me. It must hit him too by his expression. It’s the river. It’s a female scent. It’s a potent combination that I’ll never, *fuckin’ ever* forget now that it’s hit me along with Riley’s sorrow. If I smell Erica Young, I’ll know it.

“C’mon man.” Grey reaches for Riley’s hand.

Riley rises without taking it. “Gotta... I can’t. Got her in my lungs but the trail is fuckin’ dead. Only exists inside that room.

I need to find her.” He gets into his truck, slams the door, and peels out without looking back at us.

“Fuck,” Greyson snaps. “You smell that?”

“Yeah,” I breathe. “Where’s he goin’?”

My phone rings. Caller ID says *Danica Young*.

“Blonde witch calling. I’m gonna take it,” I say.

“I’ll try Rye,” Grey says.

Grey is phoning Riley while I hit the button to put the call on speaker as we get into my truck.

“Dani,” I greet.

“Nobody in my coven will do anything to change the way you and your mate feel about one another,” she assures.

I can’t help but empty my lungs with relief. “I fuckin’ hope you’re telling the truth. What about other covens? If Amelia should happen to find another witch-”

“It doesn’t work that way. Not under normal circumstances. It would take a lot of effort and dark magic to work in a territory that’s not yours and ... never mind. Just don’t worry about it. Do what you need to do to build your relationship. Put in the work. This is destiny. Trust it.”

“About Riley and your sister. And Greyson...”

“Got to go.”

“How’d you get this number? Riley give it to you?”

“We have everyone’s numbers. Sorry, but I need to go.”

She ends the call.

Fuck.

Yeah, I don’t doubt she has all our ‘numbers’. Something tells me that despite that we’ve never dealt with the Young Coven, they’re more than up in our business.

I'm speeding out of Drowsy Hollow, following my nose toward Riley, who thankfully appears to be heading home.

"You felt like you knew that witch?" I ask Grey.

"Mimi Young looked familiar. See the eyes?"

"Yeah. Looks-wise, that woman could be your grandmother."

He shrugs and I know he's thinking the same thing. "Dad told me my birth mother was part witch once, when he'd had too much to drink. Guessin' now I'm related to the Young coven."

"You think?" I never knew this.

He looks at me. "He wouldn't talk to me about it. Look ravaged about it when I asked, so I never brought it back up."

"Did he know you were coming today? With Riley?"

Grey shakes his head.

"You okay, brother?" I ask.

"C'mon, man," he shoots me a knowing gaze. "You've seen shit from me that's different from the rest of us. Always wondered why I've got that power of persuasion thing. The things Dad said that one night stuck with me but never brought it up to anyone. But yeah, those women in there? I felt something when I was in there."

"Be nice to learn how to hone some of those skills."

He shrugs. "Guess they'll talk to me when the time is right. Whatever the fuck that means."

And what this probably also means is that Greyson Blackwood is related to the woman that fucked Riley Savage over.

Grey and I are pulling up in front of the Savage house. After Riley took off, we followed him to his place and found him in the Savage Construction office, on the phone. He was talking to a private eye we've worked with a couple times who is an unofficial pack member. The guy prefers to live alone most of the time, but occasionally comes to pack functions when he's

feeling on edge. Shifters belong in packs, most of us. There are lone wolves out there, but most of them aren't happy with their lone wolf status. Jared spends time with us when he gets those urges but inevitably goes back to living alone after each quick fix of pack life he gets.

Atticus Savage was walking into Rye's when we left – we briefed him quickly about what'd happened with his son, glad we weren't leaving him alone in that state. We'll be talking to the rest of the council tonight.

We're starting with finding out whether or not we're a council of six alphas or seven. The fact that Tyson is here at his parents' house is a good sign. Whether he'll be open to working with me as a co-alpha, becoming part of our team – it's what I'm about to find out.

“You sure you're okay here? I can do this alone,” Grey offers, “Let you know what he says.”

“No, man. Thanks. Ready or not, it's the moment of truth.” And it is. Yes, he was approachable at the clinic, but we haven't shared more than a few sentences and I tried to keep a respectable distance. Maybe not respectable enough in Tyson's eyes, though the best I could do in mine because I gave him and his mate as much space as I could while still being close enough to Amelia to show her I was there for her.

“I can do the talking if you want,” Greyson offers.

“We'll play it by ear,” I say, then knock.

Immediately, the door flies open, and I'm faced with an amped-up Tyson Savage.

He steps back, gesturing for us to enter.

“What happened?” he demands.

He feels it, too. No doubt, Joel, Jase, and Linc are also feeling it. Though maybe not Jase and Linc so much if they're partying tonight as booze dulls our connection to one another. Many lone wolves who have abandoned or been shunned by

their packs wind up alcoholics because of the constant flow of liquor it takes to dull their need for their pack.

Grey speaks first. "They found the records. Sure enough, Nelle Jenkins paid a bucket load of money to have her two nieces matched up with two alphas from our council."

Tyson looks at me. I pick up on his emotions and am certain he picks up on mine. We have the link. The link between co-alfas. It's a necessity to be able to work together the way our pack does.

"And?" he asks.

Grey answers a combination of what he heard and what I filled him in on from when he was outside with Riley, telling him how we think things went screwy because of the birth order, how Ivy was more suited to him and Amelia, to me.

After Grey's quick explanation, Tyson lifts his shoulders with a shrug. "I'm good. You good, Mason?"

"More than good," I say, "That's not the problem."

"What *is* the problem?" Tyson asks.

"The coven," I tell him. "And Riley. Riley caught scent there. Scent that drove him nuts. He went mental. Worse than I went when your woman's scent hit the village."

"What? Why?"

We tell him what happened. And then Grey tells him,

"Riley's gonna need us. All of us."

Before we've left Savage House, it's decided that Tyson will meet us at dawn for our usual run and a talk.

Greyson says he'll call Joel and the others tonight before getting some sleep and then he'll try to connect with Riley and offer to shadow and support him as well as keep in contact with us while on the road with him. So much for my plans to

spend the day inside my mate tomorrow convincing her that what we have is real.

Almost to Grey's place, my phone rings and it's my father. There's a lot of background noise.

"What's goin' on there?"

"We're all over at Roxy's." He sounds amused. "Was waiting for you to call and check in so I could tell you."

"My hands have been full," I say, and my blood pressure is rising. I told my father to keep a close eye on her, said she might try to sneak off, told him and my mother to watch carefully and for Mom to holler for him if she vanishes. My father has exceptional tracking skills and he's lightning fast.

"What? All of you? Amelia's at Roxy's?"

"She is. The girls are shit-faced. They're having a great time. Amie is beating the pants off Jase at darts. About to take a hundred bucks off him and says she'll use it to buy drinks for the girls. Gotta say, your girl fits right in, son."

Well, fuck me.

"I'll be there in five to pick her up."

"See you soon."

"I'll drop you off," I say to Grey as I turn the corner, "Then I'm headin' to Roxy's. Mom, Dad, Bailey, Cicely, are all there with my mate."

"I heard," Grey says with a smile. "After the day we just had? I could use a drink. And some entertainment. We'll talk to Jase and then I'll find my own way home."

Snickering, I make a U-turn to take us to Roxy's.

Mason

Roxy's bar is the only food and drink joint in our little village, and while it's far from a fine dining establishment, the food is decent, the vibe is relaxed, and most of all it's exclusive to our pack and visiting shifters so everyone can let their guard down.

Roxy's uncle, Cade, is one of our non-council alphas. He helps her with the place and watches the door for outsiders.

When I cross the threshold, his eyes hit me as he's wiping down an unoccupied table. He smiles wide.

"Congrats, Mase." He strides over to slap my back and then greets Grey with a fist bump. The place is buzzing with a nearly full-house, music and laughter and despite that there are a fair number of bodies in the place, immediately my nose and my eyes find my mate.

And plenty of other eyes are on her, too. I'm wondering if part of the reason why Roxy's is so busy tonight is because word's gotten around that Amelia is here. Folks would be curious.

She's smiling wide, standing in front of the dartboard. She playfully punches Jase's arm, and he throws his head back and laughs uproariously. She's gloating over her win against him. My immediate reaction to this is a pang of ugliness.

Her smile is aimed at him. Her laughter is in the air, and she doesn't know I'm here. Jase is obviously drunk. So is Linc, who stands to the side with a goofy grin, also aimed at my mate.

Mine.

Jason Creed would never lay a finger on what's mine, but that doesn't change the jealousy rising in me. While she's laughing and joking with him, my father is in the vicinity, sitting at the

bar, eyes on her and a smile on his face. I know he's already clocked me, but when Dad looks my way, he jerks his chin up in greeting, and I know he reads me. His facial expression changes to one I know, one that tells me things are all right. Of course they are; Dad has had his eyes on Amelia in my absence and this is my pack, my people. But still... that my woman is giving positive attention to anyone but me stings.

This is why we need time. Quiet, private, uninterrupted time to bond with one another. So that I can then let her bond with the rest of her new pack without feeling like this – like they're taking something of mine.

My mother sits with Bailey at a table near the darts area and Cicely is talking to Roxy who stands in front of the bar, one hand on her waist, the other hand holding an empty tray. Roxy's eyes are on me. I catch the sadness in them briefly before she paints on a smile and looks back to Cicely.

Roxy was my first. I was hers. I was fourteen and she was sixteen. It was a sweltering hot summer night by the shoreline near the falls that started with skinny dipping and ended with losing our virginity. She's carried a torch for me since then, though I didn't realize how hot it burned until three years ago when we spent a no-strings night together after my thirtieth birthday party and she drunkenly revealed how she'd been waiting for me. Hoping. Based on my actions with her that night, she expected me to knot and mark her. She thought it was our mating night and when it didn't happen, she couldn't hide the disappointment.

Roxanne is well-loved in the pack. She surely knows she has to hold her shit together to avoid problems here tonight. I don't know the feelings she's got from firsthand experience, never having felt anything deeper than fondness for a woman until now. But I'm sure it can't be easy on those carrying a torch for someone who won't ever be theirs. I'm not totally insensitive to this, but that's not my concern right now. Amelia is.

Roxy's eyes touch me again and I shoot her a smile, but it probably comes across as tight; I can't help it.

Jase's eyes are on me, and he smiles big, then his smile slips. Whether I'm giving off possessive energy or he's suddenly picking up on the disconnect right now with Riley, I don't know. I only know as I move across the room, erasing the space between my mate and me that I want to take her home, bury myself in her, and sleep for eighteen hours holding tight to her while I do. But I can't sleep eighteen hours, because she'd undoubtedly try to leave.

It's been a *fucking* day. I'm overtired, I'm concerned about Riley, so much so that I haven't had a chance to absorb the fact that I get to tell Amelia there was no mistake, no unsanctioned spells over us. She's mine. I'm hers. As it was intended.

At that thought, I take her in again and feel the tension in my neck and shoulders ebb a little.

Amelia's eyes zero in on me and lust immediately flares in them. She smells incredible and as soon as she sets those blue eyes on me, she gives off an aroma of arousal. I immediately want to take her out of here and bury myself in her so my cock can be coated in that scent. Every alpha in this joint can also smell it. Yes, they'll know it's for me, but I want nobody to even catch a whiff of what's mine.

"Hi!" she exclaims excitedly and throws her arms around me, "You're here!"

She jumps up a little and I help her attach herself to me by hiking her up. Her legs immediately wind around my waist.

She's shitfaced.

And beautiful.

"Hey there, shapeshifter sex god!" She caresses my face. "I won money. And took a shapeshifter's dignity. Do you want me to kick *your* ass at darts now? Jason tells me you think you're hot shit at darts, but I think *I could wipe the floor with you.*" She scrubs her nails along my jawline. "Stubble is so sexy. If only it were five o'clock all the time. Hey everybody!"

Many eyes turn her way.

“Babysitters are off duty; the shapeshifter sex god is back.”

Laughter fills the place.

She continues running her nails across my jawline.

“It’s not five o’clock, wildberry. It’s after nine.”

“Well, a nine o’clock shadow is even better than a five.”

I cup her ass and suckle my mark on her throat briefly. And the tension in my body all but disappears.

“Mason.” Her voice has gone husky.

There goes the rest of that tension. Fuck, that feels good. Stress leaving me as soon as she says my name like that. And I’m gonna get to have this for the rest of my life. I want her alone. Now.

“We need a celebratory drink. Roxy!” Jase calls out.

“Celebrating what?” Amelia asks.

Fucking Jase.

“You kicking my ass in darts, for one,” Jase says sheepishly.

“Put me down, Doggo. I have to go to the loo. And then yes, Jason, buy me a drink. Buy Mason one, too. A double!”

I set her down while I kiss her before I watch her sashay happily to the ladies’ room.

“Doggo,” Jase quips.

My drunk mate is sexy. And agreeable. And fuck, that ass is gorgeous. And mine.

“You cool, brother?” Jase asks, putting his beer to his lips.

“You’re here to sow your wild oats, why are you hanging out with *my* woman?” I ask.

Jase bristles.

Roxy is handing Grey a beer, then greeting me with, “Congrats, Mason.” She says it softly, not making eye contact.

“Thanks, Rox,” I reply, accepting the drink.

“Roxanne,” Grey greets.

“I kinda wanted to hate her when she walked in,” she adds.

“But she’s great. She’s already fittin’ right in.” Her eyes dart to meet mine just quick before she hurries away.

Jase pipes up. “And I’m just about ready to sow someone.” He wrings his hands together, eyes sweeping the space. “It’s just a matter of who the lucky lady’ll be.”

“As long as you keep your eyes off my little sister, jackass.”

Grey puts in as we all see a drunk-looking Bailey staring at Jase with longing from the corner.

Jase rolls his eyes. “I wouldn’t do that to you brother. Feels like she’s my little sister, too. Only way it’d happen is if she’s The One. Guess we’ll find out who it is soon enough, though.” Jase gulps back more of his drink and gets a sour expression.

“Looks like you’re dreading it,” Grey states.

“My parents fight like you wouldn’t believe. And then they’re at it like fuckin’ farm animals. Grates on me.” He shudders.

“Seein’ other couples over the years all over one another while acting all jealous and shit. You, even, Mase. You looked at me like you wanted to rip my nuts off for talking to your woman. I don’t like that shit. And it ain’t gonna be me.”

Greyson pipes up. “Bet you twenty bucks, Quinn, that before long we’ll be laughing because of that saying... *famous last words*.”

“You first at least,” Jase mutters.

I sip my beer, swallow, then shake my head in the negative.

“Not a losin’ man, brother.” I look back to Jase. “So I’ll pass on that wager, but you’ll see, Creed. Lookin’ forward to watching, too.”

Jase rolls his eyes. “What’s goin’ on? Vibes comin’ off you two comin’ in were more than about Mase’s woman. You were both amped as fuck.”

“It’s about Rye. I’ll get Linc over here, so we don’t have to tell it twice tonight,” I say, looking across the room toward Linc, who’s chatting up a female half-shifter pack member, Audrey, over by the pool table.

Amelia is coming my way. And her eyes are on me. Glassy, but igniting with arousal.

“Actually,” I pivot, “Would you fill ‘em both in instead, Grey? I need to get Amelia home.” *To bed.*

“The way she’s lookin’ at you, bro, I don’t blame you a bit,” Grey mumbles, good-naturedly.

“I’d say I need a few days with no interruptions, but interrupt if you need to. And I’ll meet you guys at the four corners at dawn for a run and a talk anyway. Ty’s coming,” I say for Jase’s benefit. “I’m there anyway I can be for Rye. Can you call Joel, Grey?”

“Of course.”

As Grey shakes my hand and slaps my back with affection, the door opens and pack member Sean struts in with two boxes of cigars and a mile-wide grin, announcing, “It’s a boy!”

Cheers break out through the place, including from Amelia.

“And you’re here?” Roxy calls out from behind the bar. “Why are you here?”

“It’s been six hours. They’re sleepin’ and her sisters and our moms are over. I just wanted a bevvie.”

Roxy rolls her eyes. “I’d give you shit, but it’s wolves like you that keep me in sexy boots and overpriced coffees.”

“Bevvies for everyone, on me!” Sean loudly announces and another round of agreeable reactions fill the air. My mother hurries over and throws her arms around Sean to hug him.

“Your mom is the bee’s knees, by the way,” Amelia informs, smiling in my mother’s direction.

“Yeah?” I slip my arm around her waist and hook a foot around a leg of her chair so I can shift her closer to me. I drop

a kiss on her lips.

“Good babysitter choice, Doggo. And I really like your pops, too. He’s a silver fox. Or... silver wolf. I told him a lil’ while ago he was a silver fox and he corrected me. Foxes would love to be referred to as wolves but the vice versa is apparently untrue.” She wraps her lips around her straw and takes a big sip.

“What ‘cha drinkin’?” I ask, taking a whiff. “Tequila?”

“It’s a Tequila sunrise. Not nearly as good as Skye’s moonshine punch. But Roxy over there makes a fine drink.”

“That she does,” I agree.

“The moonshine is probably to blame for the shenanigans tonight,” my father puts in, sitting down at the table with us. “Staying for another drink, Mase?”

Not a shock. That moonshine has a reputation around these parts. Especially when mixed with fruit juice. Every new batch made, my mother shares it like it’s nectar of the gods and the pack’s women drink it like it’s about to go out of style. When she shares it, there’s always fun amongst the pack’s women, and that translates to fun for their mates, too.

“Actually, was gonna head out. How’d you all end up here anyway?”

“Your mother and the girls wanted to dance.” Dad shrugs.

“My idea!” Amelia snaps up that credit like she did a good thing today and is ready for her medal.

“And did they?” I ask, “Dance?”

“Oh yeah,” Dad nods. “Been at it all evening.”

Amelia pops up to standing and breaks out into a tap dance that ends with a pointing gesture directed at my dad who smiles wide.

“He teased earlier about us all having no rhythm and said we should take lessons.” She rolls her eyes. “Reverse psychology? Nice try. I then demonstrated some jazz, tap-”

“And ballerina stuff,” Dad adds.

Amelia nods. “Went to dance constantly for years. Hated nearly every minute of it but I’ll never forget those steps. Madame Chapette would skin me alive if I did. Ivy stuck it out until she was an adult? Me? The minute I got my first training bra I was out of there.” She jerks her thumb to the side for emphasis.

Sean approaches, the proffered cigars held out as he drops a book of matches on the table.

“Congrats, man.” I slap his back while taking a cigar and slipping it into my shirt pocket for later.

“Thanks. Nine pounds. We’re calling him Arsen.”

“Awesome, man.”

Roxy brings over a tray with a bottle of whisky and a couple stacks of shot glasses. As soon as she sets the tray down, Sean starts pouring.

I see a flash of light and there’s my mate, lighting a cigar. I watch as she hollows her cheeks to do it and my jeans are suddenly tight in the crotch.

Multiple sets of eyes in the vicinity light up as my mate blows out a plume of smoke. “I’m Amelia. Amie,” she says, extending her free hand toward Sean.

“I know,” Sean says with a smile, squeezing her hand.

“How?”

“You smell like this guy,” Sean replies, gesturing to me.

Amie laughs it off. “Congratulations there, dude. First baby?”

Sean smiles big. “Thank you. I’m Sean.” He lets go to pass her the first poured shot. “Third baby.”

“You guys done then?” she asks.

“Done?”

“Done having kids.”

He laughs. “No. Why?”

“That’s a houseful of kids,” she says.

He shrugs. “We’ll be done when we’re done.”

She laughs and touches her shot glass to his. They both toss their drinks back at the same time.

Guess we’re not heading home quite yet.

“You owe us,” Cicely says to me a few minutes later, sitting in Amelia’s empty chair beside me.

The chair is empty because my woman is again dancing and she’s doing it with my mother (who already drunkenly told me that she loves her new daughter). Amie pointed at her. “It’s not tomorrow yet! Tonight you’re not the monster-in-law, you’re the bestie.”

My mother apologized to Amie and then they hugged and laughed.

Mom, Amelia, and Bailey are dancing to that *Shoop* song Roxy puts on whenever this joint has more than a few girls as it never fails to get them all up dancing. Except Cicely. Cicely doesn’t generally get up to dance with the women.

Yeah, these women are all sloshed. Amelia’s dancing drunkenly, laughing and singing the lyrics, looking lost in her own world and perfectly at home in mine. She and my mother start bumping hips and I can’t help but laugh.

“Owe you for what?” I inquire belatedly, tearing my attention away from the dance floor.

“Babysitting,” she replies with a smile.

“What’s the price?” I ask instead of pointing out she tagged along, and it was my mother and father that were tasked with watching my baby today, not Cicely and Bailey.

“You let us take her out again soon. She’s a hoot.”

I smile.

“You look at her like you wanna lock her up in your bedroom and never let her out again.”

I snicker.

“Congrats again, Mase,” she says. “She’s great.”

“Thanks, Sis.”

“But...” she starts, and her expression goes grave.

I straighten and wait for her to finish.

She squeezes my forearm.

“You’ve got a lot and I mean a lotta work to do. That girl hurts. She puts on a brave face but it’s gonna take work to get her to believe.” She drops her chin and looks straight into my eyes with a knowing look. Cicely has always been intuitive.

She then squeezes my arm affectionately again and moves aside.

I feel heat on the back of my neck, so I turn to the side and see Amelia’s eyes on me. They’re laser-sharp and it takes a second to realize that there’s possessiveness coming from her. I like it, too.

I smile at her and she seems to shake it off before winking in reply, then twirling. After the twirl, she exaggeratedly bumps hips with the nearest female body, which happens to be Bailey’s. Bailey stumbles and nearly falls. Amelia catches her and several girls on the dancefloor break out into fits of giggles as Bailey’s cheeks go red with embarrassment and she covers her face with her hands.

I catch sight of Grey, Linc, and Jase over at a table in the corner and my expression drops. I can tell that Grey’s news about Riley sobered them up a little. I’m about to head that way when the back doors of the joint are thrown wide. Cade waves everyone out. He’s been working on a bonfire.

Whenever Roxy’s gets nearly full and they think people are about to get rowdy, they open things up to the back patio. It’s not unwise. All this testosterone in closed quarters, it never

takes long before roughhousing starts, putting the furniture and other people in harms' way.

Another group files into the place and I recognize some of them as Sean's relatives by sight and know by scent that they are all related. Some are local, some not, so must've traveled in with news of the birth. Roxy brings over another bottle of whisky and more shot glasses. And I suspect Cade saw them pull up or heard they were on their way and decided to open up the back doors.

Not only does Sean get lots of handshakes and backslaps with words of congrats; but I do, too. And it feels good, considering how I'm guessing the pack felt about me after the last large gathering I was at. Wondering if I was losing it. Wondering if they should cast me out.

My eyes find Amelia and she's back at my mother's table, sipping her drink and talking to Bailey, joking that she meant it when she told her she was clumsier than Bailey.

"She's either someone who can hold her liquor real well," Dad says low into my ear, "Or you're gonna be holding her hair back later. She's been drinkin' the shine, tequila, now whisky? Sherry was in when they first got here and opened a bottle of champagne, too. Your woman had two glasses."

"Sherry gone?"

"She disappeared a while ago after a tiff with Bailey. Not sure what that was about."

Sherry, Jase's sister, is a hellion. Alpha female who loves attention. A bit of a bitch, frankly. The majority of the females in our pack are hoping an alpha from another pack will claim her and take her away.

I catch Bailey eyeballing the guys in the corner. She likes to know what's going on, has strong instincts for picking up on drama that's happening under the radar. She's also generally looking in the direction of the council whenever we're together because of her crush on Jase.

She looks about to head over there when Amelia grabs her hand and says something into her ear. Bailey shakes her head rapidly.

I strain to listen but there's too much commotion between the music and all the people.

I move closer to them. "Time to head home, wildberry," I say.

"Oh? Bummer," Bailey pouts. "Things are moving outside, though."

Bailey knows I like to hang out on the patio, often joining in on the wrestling matches.

"Not tonight," I say.

"Ah," Bailey replies knowingly. "Alone time. Between the moon and the honeymoon, I'm surprised you even went out today."

"Don't remind me," I mutter.

"Do it," Amelia encourages her and then hugs her before turning to look at me.

And she's got a heated expression. What's this? My mate isn't about to argue with me for a change?

No. She's ready to go home with me. I'd wager she's been anxious to see me all night. And it feels really fucking good.

"What sort of shit are you tryin' to get Bailey to stir?" I ask.

"Mind your business," Amelia advises good-naturedly, smile laced with mischief.

It takes a few minutes to get outside, what with Mom and Amelia taking extra-long to say goodbye, Amelia looking almost emotional about it when Mom says she'll see her in a couple days.

And I can only surmise that Amelia thinks she'll be gone by then and is feeling melancholy about it. It's more than obvious to me that my mate has conflicting emotions about our pairing. And it's my job to tilt the scale in the right direction.

Amelia hugs my father goodbye near the fire pit and then has another quick word with Bailey before waving to Cicely as I grab her hand trying to steer her toward the half-open gate that leads to the parking lot.

Things are getting louder both inside and out on the patio. Outside, a wrestling match is getting going between Linc and Gus, Sean's alpha brother – a guy that we're all tight with.

The women move away to give them room to brawl. Nobody wins against Lincoln at wrestling, the guy and his wolf are both built like tanks, but it never fails – liquor and an abundance of testosterone in close contact and things devolve into shifters lined up trying to take Lincoln's crown. It often starts as them in human form and transitions to wolves wrestling when whoever is refereeing blows a whistle.

Lincoln never loses; never tires.

As I have this thought, Amelia gasps. Linc and Gus are both wolves now. That didn't take long. And nobody blew a whistle.

"I still can't believe my eyes when I see that," she says, in awe.

Cade rushes over, whistle in hand.

"You'll get used to it," I say.

She smiles but then her smile drops. She doesn't think she'll have that opportunity.

I hear a grunt as Gus returns to male form and then he lets out a groan. Linc shifts to man, tackling him. Amelia laughs.

"Naked men rolling around together is kinda hot. Oh wait... he's bleeding!" She points.

Blood gushes from Gus's face, near his eye.

"Fuck!" I hear shouted.

Sean's nephew is pissed off and taking a swing at Linc. Not real smart. The kid is barely old enough to drink and obviously overflowing with his own testosterone, not to mention

protective instincts for his blood family. He's not from around here otherwise he would know better.

Sean cuts in, backing the kid away from Linc, who eyeballs the kid like he's an annoying mosquito.

"Let's get home," I say, steering Amelia toward my truck, but she pulls from me.

"His head needs looking at." Amelia moves to toward the fire pit where Gus stands, looking unsteady on his feet, blood pouring down his face.

"Baby!" I grab her and scoop her up in the air by hooking an arm around her waist.

"He might need sutures," she argues, struggling to get out of my grasp. "Mason! Put me down!"

I set her on her feet. "This isn't necessary, wildberry."

Cade, Sean, and Greyson have closed in, and the kid seems to be settling down.

"You got a first aid kit, Roxy?" Amelia calls out.

"This place? You'd better believe it. But don't worry about him, a shift or two and it'll be good." She waves.

"Come on, let's get a look," she says to Gus, who is squatting to grab his clothes from the ground.

"At what?"

"Cover up so I can have a look at your head."

"Why?"

"Your head is bleeding," Amelia says, talking to him but looking the other way. "And I'm a nurse, I'd like to help, but that might be easier to do if I can't see your junk."

"One sec, little lady," he holds a hand out, putting space between them, and then he shifts.

"Still bleeding," she says, looking at his wolf with astonishment, but backing up until her body hits mine. I wrap my arms around her, and she melts into me.

Gus's wolf is large and menacing-looking, this not being helped with all that blood on his face. "That's probably a deep cut," Amelia says again. "It'll definitely need sutures."

The blood is really pouring from his face.

He shifts in quick succession multiple times and then back as man, he wobbles. He looks exhausted. He stumbles toward the bar and Amelia follows, so I'm right behind her.

"I'm all right. I'm-" Gus stops at a mirror near the restrooms. "Oh fuck, that *is* a lotta blood." Much like a cartoon character, Gus promptly hits the deck, passing out.

Me and Sean help him up onto a chair and as he comes to, Amelia has already dug into Roxy's first aid bag. While she applies pressure to the wound, asking him questions, talking to him in a calm and comforting voice, she seems mostly sober. Sober enough to slip into nurse mode, I suppose. And I like this. I like seeing that my mate is nurturing and handles herself well in a crisis despite indulging all day long.

"Why didn't he heal? The gash wasn't that bad," Linc asks. "What he cut it on?"

"You two went tumbling into that pile of firewood," Bailey puts in.

"Fuck, bro, I'm sorry," Linc calls out.

"It's okay, Linc. I'm good," Gus says, waving it off.

"Head wounds bleed like a mother," Amelia mutters while lifting the towel she's using as she assesses the wound. "And alcohol thins the blood, so..."

"Shifting should've helped," Linc says.

"Don't worry about it, Linc. You played fair," the still-pale Gus waves it off, "I'm just not good with seein' blood."

We all already know this about Gus. Only alpha I know who, when we were teenagers, would hunt game, take it down, then get queasy because he saw blood.

“Is the clinic accessible right now?” Amelia asks. “We could do with a sterile environment for me to stitch him up.”

“I could do with a drink,” he says.

“No booze,” Amelia denies. “Someone get him some water, please.”

“Got it,” Roxy calls out.

“Water?” Gus mutters.

“No pouting. Right now, you’re the patient and the nurse is the boss.”

“She’s bossy. I like her,” Gus says to me.

I snicker.

“I’ll phone Cat,” Bailey has her phone in hand.

Amelia

“Time to go. Now,” Mason says.

“But...”

“Now,” he repeats, or more like... growls. He looks aggravated.

“Uh, excuse me, Doggo –” I start to protest but my next thought is cut off at the knees when he scoops me up over his shoulder and is on the move out of the place.

And this is not good because my stomach bottoms out as the ground gets closer to my face and I’m thinking I might vomit straight down his back.

It’s after one in the morning and he’s taking me out of the medical clinic, toward his truck. I didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye to everyone. A half dozen people followed us to the clinic where Cat stitched up Gus.

I was willing to do it, and felt perfectly capable but as I’d been drinking, I deferred to her and watched her do it. She did compliment the work I’d done on the wound so far, though. I don’t know what sort of medical training she has versus myself; Gus probably won’t have much of a scar when she’s done. She did a good job.

They kept mulling over (and with concern) the fact that shifting didn’t take his wounds away. A pretty useful skill to have. And it explains why Mason transformed multiple times after I bear-sprayed his face.

But now I’m annoyed because my captor is depositing me into the seat of his truck. And this makes me not even want to put out for him tonight.

In fact, I'm thinking I should deny him entirely on principle. But the problem is that I've been thinking about having sex with him nearly all day. I've been fixated on the idea of it for hours. And what if tonight is our last night together and I turn him down?

"Buddy, I don't know why you think you can just scoop me up and haul me around and all, but now I feel puky. So if I barf in your truck, it's your fault," I say, pointing at him.

He pulls my seatbelt over me and clicks it locked. "You need to puke, tell me and I'll pull over. This is a new truck. Don't want it puked in."

"Just for your attitude, I'm probably gonna puke in it." I stick my tongue out.

He pauses mid-putting his own seatbelt on to level me with a dark look that frankly has my underwear getting slippery and making me forget the urge to hurl.

"Revenge barfing in a guy's new truck? That's cold."

I stick my tongue out again.

"Tell me if you need to pull over to puke but I'm hoping that's not gonna happen because all I want is to get you home, peel those clothes off you, fuck you, and then fall asleep holding you. So can you try not to puke? For me?"

"Well, all right," I relent. "Since you asked so nicely."

He starts the ignition and smiles wide at me, like he finds me adorable.

He's the adorable one. And sexy. And I think I *will* put out tonight.

Adoration. Yeah. I could adore Mason Quinn with little to no effort if I let myself.

"I had fun today," I announce.

"Yeah? That's good. I'll try to not let it wound me that you had fun when I wasn't there."

“Yeah, well, things started off with me really annoyed with you, but... I ... I needed that. I can't remember the last time I had an afternoon with a couple nice girls, great food and drinks, and a bunch of dancing. With no pressure to plan a wedding or anything. It was like medicine.”

“Glad to hear it, baby.”

“And chili fries! I've been avoiding chili fries and delicious foods like that as much as possible what with the desire to get into my wedding gown, which was a little snug at my last fitting despite that it'd been let out, but today as soon as someone talked about Roxy's chili fries I had this amazing eureka.”

He says nothing, so I repeat myself. A little louder. “I had an amazing eureka!”

“Oh yeah? What was your eureka, Amie?”

“I don't have to worry about dress fittings or what size I'll be or anything like that because I'm not getting married to Whatshisface.” I feel myself beaming with happiness. “I don't have to deal with hundreds of people, that *Sheila* person who is a total unty-cay itch-bay. Instead, I can eat dollops of sour cream on top of my chili fries because I don't give an uck-fay!”

“Unty itch what?”

“Cunty. Bitch. Pig-Latin,” I say. “Me and Ivy talked Pig Latin a lot when we were kids. Auntie Nelle taught us. And that Carla? She was going to be my mother-in-law, cross that out...” I draw an x in the air with my index finger, “My former monster-in-law to-be. I don't have to deal with those itchy-bay eople-pay anymore. More Pig Latin if you didn't understand that. And that's...” I spread my arms and throw my head back, “ah-mazing. I just have to get on top of finishing up the cancelations and then... *all done.*” I swipe one palm across the other. “I will be *so* glad when that's done. I'll need my phone back in the morning so I can get on top of doing that. Okay, Doggo?”

He stares at the road and says nothing.

“Are you gonna give me my phone back any time soon?”

He lifts one shoulder.

“Don’t make me get ad-may at you,” I warn. “that’s mad if you don’t understand Pig Latin. Right now I’m feeling rather amorous and if you get me ad-may at you, I might not put out tonight.”

He chuckles. We’re already pulling down his driveway.

“Wouldn’t want that,” he muses. “Though baby, seeing you dance tonight and watching you with the pack, gotta say I might agree to just about anything to get you to put out.”

I laugh. “Charming, aren’t you?”

He smiles and turns the truck off. “Never had to be, but I guess I’ll earn-lay.”

“I find that hard to believe...” I say. And then I bark out a laugh because he said *learn* in Pig Latin.

By the time I get my seatbelt off and get my bag off the floor of the truck, he’s opening the door for me.

As soon as the chilly night air hits me, I’m suddenly sleepy.

“I didn’t puke,” I inform.

“Good news.” He lifts me up.

“I can walk.”

“I know you can.” He shuts the door and carries me bride-style to the front door.

“But it’s kinda nice to be carried when it’s without being upside down over your shoulder,” I tell him, looping my arms around his neck and smiling wide.

His eyes sparkle with amusement and look as beautiful as the glittery-with-stars night sky. “I’ll try to remember your preference for bein’ carried.”

“I’m gonna miss this,” I say, instead of saying, *I’m going to miss you*, like I’m thinking. Because I will. As bossy as he can be, as much as he’s pissed me off a few times with carrying me places, taking my phone, and leaving me with babysitters, he truly seems like he’s just doing everything he can do to convince me how right we are for one another.

If only that were true.

“Miss what?” he asks, opening the front door.

“Never mind.”

“You’re not gonna miss nothin’ here, Amie. Everything you want from me, you’ll have from me if it’s in my power to give it. For as long as I live, which I’m hoping will be a long, long fucking time.”

He locks the door.

“Shit, you guys wrecked the joint,” he says while I’m still absorbing strange emotions from his statement.

I look around. Yeah, we left a bit of a mess of his kitchen. We just ran off to go to the bar without putting anything away. It’s far from trashed in here, just looks like we had a little party.

“My ma never leaves anything a shambles. You girls got her truly shitfaced today.”

“It ain’t that bad. And uh... correction. Your mommy got *us* shitfaced. She brought the booze, mixed it, and did most of the pouring, Mason Quinn. Don’t kid yourself. That momma is one badass mamma-jamma just like your daddy is a silver wolf. Those two are smokin’ together, too.”

Mason rolls his eyes, but it looks like fake aggravation on his gorgeous face.

“Not surprised two beautiful people like that made someone as drop-dead gorgeous as you.”

His eyebrows fly up in surprise. “Thanks, baby. That’s a nice thing to say.”

And then he's moving us toward the fridge, grabbing two bottles of water and carrying me up the stairs.

I tell myself not to look down, but then something settles over me... I know he's not going to drop me. He's got me and would just *not* let that happen. It feels strange to know that about someone. Comforting. I'm able to somehow let go of my fear and just enjoy the ride straight up to his bed.

When he puts me down on that soft, comfy, perfect bed, he sets the bottles of water on the nightstand and is quickly unbuttoning and then throwing his flannel shirt off while kicking off his shoes.

His eyes are on my face the whole time he does it and there's something infinitely sexy about that.

I bite my lip as he goes for his belt while toeing off his socks.

Once he drops his jeans, his big, hard dick bobbing up and making my thighs clench in anticipation, he starts working my boots and socks off.

"Lay back, baby," he whispers, going for my fly.

I do what he says as he slowly peels my jeans down, eyes still on my face while he does. Goosebumps rise on my flesh and my panties go damper thinking about what's to come.

I make a decision.

I'm gonna surrender. Just for tonight. Just for tonight, he's mine. I'll let myself believe that he's supposed to be and therefore *will* be for the rest of my days – the man who looks at me like this. Mine. The man who touches me like this. Nobody else's. Like he can't get enough of me. Like he could stare at me for days and never stop appreciating me as a person, as a woman, as a sexual being. My man, a man who wouldn't fuck someone else because all he wants is to fuck me. Make sure I smell like him so everyone knows he fucks me constantly because he can't get enough of me. This is the man that wants to have a life with me. Watch sunsets with me. Cook crepes for me. Make babies with me.

My heart hurts that I can't have that. Any of that.

Because it's not mine, not meant to be mine.

But maybe it's okay if for tonight, I pretend that it is.

Whether it's the booze that's letting me live in this fantasy land or it's the notion that this, like all other good things in my life, are destined to come to an end and will likely end soon, I decide to pretend as much as I can.

I will myself to open up like a flower blooming and give him everything tonight. All of me. Physically, emotionally.

He's pulling my sweater over my head now and tossing it, then his mouth moves toward mine and looking into those dark, beautiful eyes of his it feels real. All of it. I take his jaw into both hands and I'm the one that starts the kiss. I taste him gently at first, and then my fingers glide across that sexy stubbled jaw into his hair and I smile against his lips because I know if I asked him to always wear stubble for me, he would. If I asked him to take me somewhere specific for our honeymoon – to not take me to a place I hate, he'd listen. If I told him to stay away from my asshole father, he'd listen. If I told him I needed his help because I was overwhelmed, he'd probably do it all, relieve me of all my duties to let me have the time I need to focus on what I need to.

I deepen the kiss. He's letting me guide this and I think he's enjoying it. I feel my bra get unclasped and then it's gone and he's hovering over me while I've got both hands in his hair, my legs widening. He quickly snatches my panties at the hips on both sides and hauls them down as his mouth then moves away from me. I'm about to protest but before I get a word out, he's sucking on my neck, then moving down and feasting on my boobs before moving his mouth lower, lower, and lower still... lips touching all the way down until his mouth is between my legs.

My back arches as he sucks deep on the perfect spot.

"It's about time," I whisper.

"Hm?" He looks up.

“You promised me this the day we met and never delivered,” I inform.

His fingers grip me tighter, and he lifts his head. “I’ll have to make that up to you. Daily.”

“Don’t write checks you don’t want me cashing.”

“Wildberry, I invite you to climb on my face at least once a day. Whenever you want my mouth on you, you can have it. In fact...” He then sucks on my clit. Hard. “Don’t you dare stop me because I want to taste you every day for the rest of our lives.”

I cry out at the intensity of what that hot mouth does while absorbing the sensation of his warm, strong hands, which glide up both hips, whispering across my stomach and my ribs until they’re massaging both breasts. He continues to feast between my thighs; I feel his stubble on my inner thighs, his strong hands touching me, the heat from his body, and fire from his gaze.

He’s staring at my face while he eats me out and this is insanely hot. He likes what he’s doing. He’s not just doing it out of obligation.

He moves slightly and I can see he’s now got his cock in his fist. Seeing that, coupled with feeling what I’m feeling – sensation bolts through me, making me come, hard. Super-hard. It’s a body-shuddering experience with animalistic sounds escaping my mouth. I come so hard, my toes cramp while I grip his hair too hard.

As I’m coming back down to Earth, he flips me to my stomach and I know he’s about to crawl up my body and slam inside me, so I roll, quickly and catch a look of surprise on his face.

My body is like freshly squished Jell-O, but I manage to tug his hand and guide him to his back.

I press my lips to rock-hard abs, practically salivating at the idea of being able to return the favor he just gave.

As soon as my lips wrap around his thick crown, the sound that comes from him makes my body erupt with sensation. Connection. Bliss.

“No knotting in my mouth or I might choke to death,” I warn.

He chuckles. “Can’t knot in your mouth, wildberry. Doesn’t work that way.”

“Okay then,” I say with a smile and then I twirl my tongue around the tip of him several times, squeezing up and down his length before taking him as deep as I can.

The humor on his face vanishes. Intensity is back as he watches. He watches with rapt attention, looking at me like I’m the hottest thing he’s ever laid eyes on.

“Fuck, Amelia. Fuck, yeah.” His fingers glide through my hair and he hangs on gently. “That’s amazing, baby,”

My gag reflex tries to ruin things, but his words and his body language give me the strength to keep going, to soak in the praise and do my best to make it the best head he’s ever received. I want him to remember this long after this is over; maybe he won’t forget me entirely later on when he finds his real soulmate.

I scratch that thought and remind myself that I’m the soulmate.

Me. I’m his, he’s mine, even if it’s just for tonight and *fuck*... the sounds he’s making and the way his body is responding to what I’m doing, I feel like I could come again if just a slight breeze hits me between the legs.

I continue working him with my lips, my tongue, my fingers, and then I run my middle finger straight down his sac, down the line and just as my finger is about to breach his butt, I’m being flipped to my back, my arms pinned over my head and he’s slamming that hard, hot, wet cock inside my pussy.

Yes. This.

This. Is. Sensational.

His eyes hit mine for a moment before his lips come closer and touch mine again. He releases my wrists. I wrap my arms around him and dig my nails into his back as he swivels his hips, then starts to vibrate.

“Nothin’ in my ass, wildberry,” he warns.

I giggle. But then, vibrations rev up inside me as he expands, still gyrating his hips, and I swear it feels like there are fireworks going off between our bodies.

He’s never done this to anyone but me. I’m the only one who has had this sensation from Mason Quinn. My man. My wolf shifter. *Mine*.

I cry out into his mouth, feeling his hand slide up my body until it rests cupping my jaw. He’s pinning me in place so he can stare into my eyes as I come undone yet again. He watches intently and for once I don’t feel self-conscious. I feel uninhibited. I feel ... free.

The orgasm continues to rip through me with vibrations that I swear knock my soul loose, freeing it from the chokehold it has been living in for months.

“Mason,” I whimper.

“Yeah, Amelia. Feel that. Feel me. Feel it, wildberry. Fuck, you’re mine. I’m so fucking glad you’re mine, baby. Nobody is ever gonna take you from me. Not ever.”

He then roars animalistically as he releases, and the hot cum that’s filling me, that’s leaking out of me, feels incredible. It feels like I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be. There’s no place I’d rather be in at this very moment. I feel like I’m exactly where I should be.

My eyes drift shut and a tear trickles down my cheek and drips off my jaw. I blow out a long breath. My heart is beating so fucking fast.

Mason moves away from me and then he’s wiping between my thighs with something, a towel I think. He’s cleaning up the mess and I’m drifting. I hear him crack open a bottle of

water and guzzle what sounds like most of it down before cold lips touch my cheekbone and then my mouth.

“Sweet dreams, beautiful, perfect wife. Pretty sure that though I’ve never felt this before so have no frame of reference...”

I open my eyes as he verbally goes for the throat. “I’m falling in love with you. And Amie, I am so fucking happy about it.”

“Me, too,” I whisper sleepily, holding my hand out until I feel his lips touch my fingertips. I rake my nails across his face gently. “Don’t shave tomorrow, okay?”

He chuckles. “Okay, baby. Hope you’re this agreeable when you’re sober in the morning.”

“Naw. I just let myself have this tonight.”

“Hm?” His lips touch the inside of my wrist.

“I let myself have it for just tonight.” I mutter and then feel my hand drift to the sheets as my eyes get impossibly heavy.

I slip down a long yellow slide like one of the ones at the water park, though I’m not in my bathing suit. I’m in my wedding dress. I know I’ve slipped straight into a dream. I know it’s a dream because I’m somewhere else and Auntie Nelle is there. She’s sitting on a cloud hovering over a weeping willow tree with wispy blue angel wings and a big smile on her face.

“Freefall, beautiful girl,” she says, “He’ll catch you.”

The slide I’m sitting on disappears and I fall. I fall toward pink clouds, and I know they won’t stop me from plummeting, but I’m not afraid of what’s beyond them.

Mason

“I let myself have it for just tonight.” She mumbles sleepily.

“Have what, baby?” I ask, brushing hair away from her forehead with my fingertips.

“The thing I want,” she mutters, breath evening out, lashes resting on her cheeks.

“What do you want?”

“Weeee!” She smiles. “That’s fun.”

What’s she talking about? “What’s fun?”

She doesn’t answer. She’s sinking into slumber.

“Amie?” I whisper. “What are you letting yourself have tonight?”

“You,” she says softly, then turns away and promptly snores into the pillow.

Emotion bubbles up in me and I wrap myself around her back and hold on, feel her warm, soft body mold itself to my frame. I take in her delicious scent that’s right now laced with sex, with my scent, as it should be. And despite how fucking exhausted I am, I lay for a while just soaking in the feeling of her in my bed, in my arms, my beautiful, frustrating, complicated mate.

Never knew how good this would feel. Not a fucking clue.

A smile pulls at my lips as I think about her earlier, having fun at Roxy’s. Being friendly with Sean. Smoking a fuckin’ stogie. Joking around, ribbing my council co-alfas and showing she’s compatible with the pack. Nearly knocking Bailey down with her crazy, uninhibited, sexy dancing, then laughing in hysterics with Bailey in a sweet, sisterly way, before trying to

conspire with her about something that made Bailey blush – likely something to do with her crush on Jase.

Pulling herself together to help Gus with his head wound. Talking medical stuff over with Cat in a way that showed respect despite how angry she was the other day about her sister. Hugging my parents goodbye tonight. Lighting up both Dad's and my mother's faces, showing she's going to be a perfect addition to the family. To the pack. To my life.

I'm drifting toward sleep, my body more relaxed than it has been in weeks, but then I hear the echo of Cicely's warning from tonight about Amelia. My woman is smart, beautiful, feisty. But she's also insecure, unsure, and has what feels akin to self-loathing. She's terrified of what we have. And I know it's not gonna be simple. I'm sure the resistant Amelia will be back in the sober, probably hungover morning light, but I'm absolutely *all in* to put in whatever work it takes to make her believe that not only does she have me, not only is it meant to be that way, but that she deserves to have the happy ending she's doubtful she'll get. And I'm grateful she showed me tonight a bit of who I'll get when I succeed at making her believe.

She didn't even ask about the meeting with the witches. Tonight, she was living in the moment, enjoying the *now*. Tomorrow, I've got to meet with the guys at dawn, which is only half a night's sleep away, which is par for the course for me this past few weeks, but with any luck I'll be back in bed beside her before she wakes, and then I can lose myself in her again and then get some more sleep.

“Just... quickly pull it back,” Tyson says. “Slow... let it halfway out, do it slow, then just before it's out, yank it back fast. Next time, you could let it finish coming, but slow. Practice slowing it down each time you shift and you'll gain more control over it.”

Linc misses and becomes wolf and barks loudly out of frustration before throwing himself onto his belly on the ground.

“You’ll get it, Lincoln,” Tyson assures.

Joel takes a shot and manages it for a count of about three before he finishes the shift. Jase already held it for a count of two before sliding to wolf. So far, Greyson holds it the longest and manages to pull back to man instead of landing on wolf, which is the best of us so far. I’ve given up trying after three attempts. I’m so fucking tired, it has to be why I can’t manage this.

Grey does it again, successfully, and this time for a longer count.

“Good work, Greyson,” Tyson slaps his back when he’s back to man form.

“I’ll try again next time. I’m too fucking tired today,” I say, leaned against the cave wall.

“Why so tired?” Jase asks with humor in his voice.

Tyson cracks a smile.

We’re in the cave behind Arcana Falls. All but Riley. I’m looking forward to the seven of us going for a run together for the first time. It’s probably not happening any time soon.

Grey talked to Rye and described him as furious, as determined, but as having his shit marginally more together today than it was yesterday, which is something at least.

The six of us met at the four corners this morning. I got there second; Tyson was waiting. Having a couple minutes alone was probably a good way to start things off.

“Hey,” he greeted my wolf in man form. I’d run there after shifting, leaving Amelia in my bed, soft, warm, and snoring like a little lawnmower.

I shifted to man and extended my hand. “Good morning.”

He took my hand and we exchanged more than the handshake. There were currents of familiarity, of the pack bond, and of a mutual understanding.

“We’re good, Mason,” Tyson said.

“Thanks for that reassurance. I appreciate it. I can’t tell you how fucked it felt.” I slapped his back affectionately as he let my hand go.

“Fucked?” he asked, showing he was open to hear my side.

“I didn’t know myself. I wasn’t one with myself or my wolf, and there was this other dark shadow, this confusion. But the minute I laid eyes on Amie, I knew. I knew without a shred of doubt she was mine. And that’s what brought me back to myself.”

“The witchcraft,” he said.

“Had to be. The birth order confusion? Dunno if that’s what it was, but the witches say everything is as it should be now, so, I’m just glad I’m myself again. And that how I behaved didn’t...prevent you and me from ever being in the same space together. I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad you’re home. Honest.”

“I get it,” he said. “The night I caught Ivy’s scent, the moon wasn’t right, the sky, I knew there was sorcery. But it seems that things are happening the way they’re supposed to. Just not the easiest road for any of us. Me, you, or Riley.”

“Exactly. Hope it all ends well for Rye, too. How are you and your mate doing after... everything?”

He blew out a long breath. “I won’t say it was easy. I thought I lost her. I thought I lost everything just as I was getting a chance to have all I’d wanted.” He swallowed hard and sat back on the large rock under the willow tree. “It’s good now. I feel lucky. I’ve never felt lucky before.”

His gaze turned to the right, and I caught the scent as he got recognition on his face. Linc and Jase were close, coming our way.

I found it interesting he seemed to catch it a second before I did.

“Jason and Lincoln,” Tyson said.

I nodded. “Hopefully things go easier for them.”

“How’s Amelia? Still fighting?” he asked.

“Tooth and nail,” I breathed, “Except last night. She got drunk and let her guard down.”

He smiled.

I smiled, too.

“Good night, then?”

“Yeah,” I said with a grin.

“So alcohol isn’t *all* bad,” he mused looking thoughtful. “I smelled it on you when we first met and that didn’t help matters. Cornelius drank a lot of the same stuff you were drinking that night.”

“Ah,” I said. “Tryin’ to shut out the pack, the needs.”

“Mm,” he muttered, a frown forming. “Maybe today will be better for you and Amelia.”

“I was feeling nothing but stress for Rye when I left your place, but yeah, getting a chance to think on what the witches said and then spending time with her last night... she was entertaining. She keeps asking for Ivy, wants to talk to her, and I suspect that’ll be one of the first things out of her mouth this morning when I get back to her.”

He tilted his head in thought. “My mate could set her straight, maybe give her some peace of mind. I can’t say my Ivy’s completely recovered from what happened, but she seems better than she was.”

“Well, Amie could try to convince Ivy to take on this witchcraft thing and get it reversed. Revive Ivy’s anger at you. My mate doesn’t know what happened between you two at the dance yet.”

His mouth went tight.

I continued, “Whatever she knows about you and your mate isn’t much. Though, the witch I talked to told me they wouldn’t help the girls if they did try to finagle a severing, though I’m not sure how much I trust a witch’s word given what Rye is going through right now.”

“Mm.” Tyson looked thoughtful.

“I think I need a couple days alone with her. Time to strengthen our bond. Time to convince her it’s real and worth it,” I added. “We’ve had constant interruptions. She ended things with the boyfriend, but hasn’t talked to him since and after talking last night about having all the pressure off her for an evening, how I’ve seen her get emotional at the toll the wedding planning was taking on her, I think I’d like to stay in a bubble with her and keep all the pressure off her for a bit longer. Take time to build our bond.”

“I understand that thinking. I’d be tempted to do the same. And I think at least a few more days alone for Ivy and me would be good. It’s been... a lot.”

Jase and Linc were with us then and obviously heard what we were talking about, shifting to male form with Jase immediately offering advice.

“Sisters getting together can feed one another’s anger and insecurity. I say you both take some time before you let the girls get their heads together,” Jase offered.

“He has three sisters, he undoubtedly has firsthand knowledge of sisterly bonds,” Linc explained to Tyson.

“You have sisters?” Tyson asked.

“Brothers,” Linc replied.

“You?” Tyson asked me.

“No siblings by blood. But I have all of you.”

Tyson stared a moment, something emotional flickering in his gaze.

Grey then joined us on foot as man and dropped his clothes by the tree near Tyson's feet, piping up, "I think Jase is right. Both of you build your bonds with your women before you let them get together. Ivy could make Amelia clam up by telling her what she's been through. Amelia sounds like she has a temper and I'm guessing she could bring a resurgence in Ivy's anger and embarrassment."

"I can only imagine," I said, considering that Amelia getting news of what went down during the Strawberry Moon dance is inevitable, but strengthening our bond and letting Tyson and Ivy strengthen theirs first? Not a bad idea.

"My mate wasn't angry; she was hurt," Tyson said, sadness in his expression. "I'd prefer her angry with me than me causing her pain."

"Humans don't understand shifter culture," Linc put in.

"Neither do I," Tyson said. "But I want to learn it."

"We'll help," I offered. "Wherever you need."

Tyson shot me a grateful expression. "Take time to bond with your mate. I'll do the same. Let me know when you're ready and we can talk about a plan for them to meet. Come to the house for a meal, maybe. My Ivy is a good cook."

"Though... keeping the sisters apart," Greyson said, "They might not take lightly to any deception or ploy to keep them apart. But a couple days is not a bad idea. Tyson and Ivy have healing to do. Mason and Amelia haven't gotten hardly any time at all to bond since they mated."

"What about this?" Tyson proposed. "Ivy and I talked about having a wedding party – so she can have her traditions. Maybe we will plan that and have everyone come together then. Gives everybody a chance to bond and then gives both girls a positive event together. I know Ivy won't be in a rush to see the whole pack after being embarrassed about me doing what I did, but having it be for a happy occasion with her mother and sister there might help."

"That could be good," I said.

Joel joined us then as Tyson and I agreed on quick phone calls if the girls insist until that time. Tyson would talk to Ivy about a wedding plan, and we'd go from there.

The six of us then talked more about our concern over Riley. We hoped that over the next few weeks everything would resolve itself. That he'd catch up with her and find resolution so he'd be able to move on. Find the true love of his life. The happiness he's been missing for years because of that witch.

And then we shifted and went for a run through the bush and wound up at Arcana Falls where, at my request, Tyson showed us how he half-shifts.

And that's where we are now, wrapping up and getting ready to swim back and head our separate ways for today.

It was good spending that time together. It's good knowing Tyson and I are good. Knowing the pack has seven council alphas and that the six of us are all here to help Riley, however it goes.

I get home shortly after seven and am relieved to find my mate still sleeping in my bed. I crumple the note I left on the bedside table and toss it in the bathroom waste basket before I shower quickly to wash the river water and sweat from myself before I slip my arms around her and pull her close, drifting to sleep almost immediately having that warmth, that scent filling me. I pass out with the hope I'll get a few hours before she wakes and that if she does wake before I do, she doesn't try to slip away again.

Amelia

I wake up with the sun shining on my face and warmth wrapped around me. I wake up doing something I don't usually do – I wake up smiling. But then the strange smile wobbles and my happy bubble pops as my head is assaulted with memories of last night.

And instantly I want to burst into tears.

Because last night was beautiful. The level of connection I felt with Mason was something I've never fathomed as possible. The moments of eye contact. The touches. The feeling of safety.

I was drunk. Drunk on moonshine punch and drunk on Mason Quinn. I was also intoxicated by the whole vibe around here. A close-knit community where everyone knows everyone's name. Where people showed up to the bar specifically to welcome me to the village with open arms and offers to buy me drinks. Yep - several people told me they were just part of the pack who heard through the grapevine that I was there and wanted to pop in and welcome me. It felt great even as I resisted the urge to set them straight about me not truly being the newest Arcana Falls pack member. Because it felt good to be welcomed, to be treated like a new member of their family.

Family. That's what the place felt like. A family where the birth of a new baby meant buying drinks and handing out cigars to celebrate. Where parties involve a group of big, beautiful men showing off their masculinity wrestling by firelight, laughing and drinking with their women and family members cheering them on. Though someone got hurt, there wasn't animosity. Other than one drunk teenager who got set straight in a caring and affectionate way, there was the opposite; everyone trying to help.

This is a place where people come together when someone gets hurt. Where they come together to welcome, to celebrate. I wonder if Auntie Nelle knew she was buying us not just a love match but also a wonderful community. The way she chased down information like a paranormal truth hunter, I'd bet money that she knew exactly what this community would be like.

Why can't I let go of the shit stopping me from sopping this up? Why? Logic, that's why. Self-preservation, too. Reality, which is probably moments away from coming crashing down like ants and a thunderstorm ruining a picnic. Sourness rises in me as I carefully slip out of Mason's embrace, doing so while telling myself to avoid looking at his sleeping form. But I can't help myself and take a quick peek before I rush into the bathroom.

Damn. I didn't need to look at him sleeping, naked, all that delicious skin on display, his hair falling over his forehead begging to be fingertip-brushed away. That handsome, stubbled face that makes me want to lean in and touch my lips to his, wake him up so he can fuck me. Make breakfast for me. Fuck me again.

I'm *such* a horndog for this guy. I'll blame it on the witchcraft and the moon thing they keep talking about. People at the bar were talking about the fact that the moon phase should be sending couples into dual heat any day now, but already Mason can't get enough. And the same goes for me.

Looks like I've somehow escaped a hangover despite not only drinking a lot but mixing booze types too, which usually results in not only upchucking before the night is over but also a hangover. I count my blessings as I use the bathroom. I take a quick shower, then stealthily slip into his closet to grab a change of clothes from my bag.

As I'm getting dressed, I have a lightbulb moment. This might be the best chance I have to find my phone, my keys, and go. He came up with his own keys from the basement the other day, so I suspect my keys and phone are also down there.

Narrowing things down to the bottom floor is a lot better than the last time I looked, having four different levels to check.

Yes, I feel like I need to go. See Ivy. Talk to her. And then get back to Mom's, hopefully *with* Ivy, so I can begin the process of canceling my wedding and getting my life together. I've still got a few weeks off work, the time left before the wedding and then the following two weeks for the honeymoon.

I can't justify having much time without an income, especially not considering the state of my credit card debt and my sad bank account. I still wish I hadn't let him talk me into buying that car.

I figure I'll keep the next week off to get my life sorted and maybe see if I can sell off the wedding stuff I bought so I'm not out completely. I'll call the hospital and get them to put me back on the schedule early, if possible. If they can't, they can put me on call if they have traumas or people call in sick.

I tiptoe downstairs with my stuff, setting it by the door before heading to the basement, which doesn't prove any easier to comb through than the last time I was down here. It's vast. There's a lot of places to stash things.

What a great place for a party. I stop myself from lamenting on the notion of entertaining in this house, this basement, that backyard with the pool, the fire pit, the boats, the lake...

But eureka!

I get to his laundry room where there's a stack of folded clothing on top of the dryer. He went down here the other day and came up with keys wearing a fresh shirt with his keys in his hand, so is the laundry room his stash room?

I open the cabinet above the washer and find laundry detergent and other cleaning supplies neatly lined up. But there's a gap in the middle big enough for a hand to fit in. Upon fitting mine in, there's a jingle sound. Bingo. Keys. My keys. And hallelujah, my phone. Mason's keys and his phone, too. Sneaky Doggo must have tucked his back in here last night after I passed out.

Adrenaline rushes through my system as I realize I didn't even ask Mason about his meeting with the witches last night. I did overhear snippets of a conversation between Bailey and her brother last night when the guys got to the bar and Bailey asked, "How did it go at the dry cleaners?" I didn't hear her brother's response, but his face went very serious.

Earlier that day, Mason's mother mentioned them being in Drowsy Hollow for their meeting, so I can only surmise that Drowsy Hollow's dry cleaners is where the witches are based out of.

My face goes hot as I decide that's my second stop. My first stop is going to be looking for the house where my sister is. I know it's somewhere near Roxy's Bar. I heard a conversation last night between Roxy and Mason's father and Roxy mentioned Tyson and Ivy were staying at Cat's former home in the village. I asked Bailey about it, and she said that the pack all thought it was a good sign that he and Ivy were moving to the Savage house in the village. I asked questions about Tyson's absence from their pack, and she told me it was a long story and too much to get into in a crazy-loud bar. But I got the feeling there was more to it so asked flat-out if Mason had told her to keep me in the dark when he directed them not to let me use their phones. Bailey's face went bright red at that.

I'm going to stop into the general store and ask Cicely where it is.

My half-baked plan is better than nothing, so off I go.

I know Mason wants me here, wants to make all the rules, but Mason is not the boss of me, and he needs to understand that.

I power my phone on and see a plethora of missed calls and text notifications. Ugh. *Rick. Carla. Cuntly Sheila. Bridesmaids.*

Nothing from Mom or Ivy so I stuff my phone into my pocket and head out.

30

Mason

The sound of a car starting jolts me awake.

I'm alone in my bed and my instincts have me sprinting from the bed as wolf in order to get to the door faster.

My nose touches the window flanking the door in time to see Amelia's car pulling out of the driveway. I run downstairs and shift back to man, throwing clothes on as I fetch my truck key and phone from their hiding place, counting myself lucky she didn't take them with her.

As I'm pulling out onto the road, I'm calling Lincoln on speaker. He answers on the first ring.

“Sup Mase?”

“Amie took off. She's in her car. Just left my house; are you where you can block the road?”

“On it.”

“Quick. She'll be almost there by now. I'm on my way.”

“I'm at Roxy's. Don't sweat it.”

She'll have to drive through the village to get to the main road to head anywhere and I knew Linc would likely still be at Roxy's, so he was my best bet. He's also got the strongest nose and can help me track her down if she miraculously gets past the village before he stops her. We can track our mates within reasonable distances but since she's on wheels instead of her feet I don't know how it'd go.

I pull up to the four corners of the village and my heart settles when I see Linc was successful. She got past Roxy's but not past the four corners a block away where the gas station and town hall are.

Amelia's car sits in the middle of the intersection. There are two wolves and Gus in front of her car.

Lincoln and Lorenzo are in wolf form. Gus is in human form, a bandage over his eye from the night before and I suspect that's why he didn't shift, protecting his stitches.

I'm not surprised to see our retired second-born council alpha here. Despite being retired, he's always looking to help out. Though he usually does lunch in Drowsy Hollow at the diner and dinner at Roxy's, so I'm surprised he's here.

I put my truck in park beside Amie, who's sitting in her car with her forehead pressed against the steering wheel. She's white-knuckled and I feel her frustration at the wolf roadblock ahead of her.

I get out and pull on the handle to the driver's side and it snaps with denial. Locked.

I wait.

She knows I'm standing here but she hasn't moved. I see her chest rising and falling with deep breaths and I can feel increasing frustration coming at me through our connection.

"Amie?" I rap on the window with a knuckle. "C'mon baby, open up."

I watch her hands tighten on the steering wheel before she heaves out an exasperated sigh.

Instead of opening up, and without looking at me, she shifts the car into reverse and turns it around, heading back toward Chariot Lake.

"We'll wait in case she's about to try to deke you out," Linc offers.

"Good plan. I'll text when you're cool to stand down."

Lorenzo gives me a thumbs up. "Congrats, Mason. Have fun."

I flash him a grin as I get back into my truck.

I pull up behind her. No more than two inches between our vehicles so she can't get out again without me moving out of her way.

I get out and stop by her window. My beautiful mate looks furious. She sits there with her arms folded across her chest and a tight scowl on her face. Because she won't look at me through the driver's window, I lean over the hood to get directly in front of her face. And the anger blazing at me through the windshield from those blue eyes? She's really pissed. And her eyes are nearly luminescent with her anger. Darker. Almost glowing.

"C'mon inside. I'll make breakfast."

She flips me the middle finger, eyes continuing to shoot dark blue fire my way.

She then picks up her phone from the passenger seat and turns it on before making a call.

"Yo, baby. Be smart," I warn.

I wait patiently, straining to listen and hear her sister's voicemail greeting before she puts the phone down and again her forehead rests against the steering wheel.

"We'll make plans for you to see your sister. Soon," I offer.

"How soon?" she demands through clenched teeth.

"As soon as Tyson and I work it out."

"Anything longer than *right now* is too long."

"Why? So you can get in her ear to try to convince her it's time for you two to try to finagle a way out of your marriages? Because that's not okay, baby."

"What did the witches say?" she demands.

"Come in the house and I'll tell you."

She shoots me another dirty look.

I smile. "You're beautiful when you're angry."

Her eyes roll and she dials on her phone again. Ivy's voicemail. And then she ends the call and stuffs her keys and phone into her bag, puts her bag over herself cross body, and then she comes out of the car, stomps past me, and goes inside.

I reach into the back seat and pull out her luggage, spotting a large pink travel mug on the floor back there. I snicker at the words on it.

Nurses. We can't fix stupid, but at least we can sedate it

I nab that to bring it inside, too.

"I'm not staying," she says, spinning to face me as I drop the bags on the bottom step going upstairs.

"Oh yeah you are," I volley.

"What happened with the witches yesterday?"

"Sit down, I'll make some coffee." I take her mug to the sink and start washing it.

She glares at me, looking ready to argue, but then her eyes hit the coffee machine and I read the need in her for her obvious addiction to caffeine.

She's curled up on the couch, cross-legged with eyes aimed at the lake when I bring the steaming mugs over, one of them: her travel mug. After setting them down, I stretch out on the couch, pulling her backwards onto me, bracketing her legs with mine. Of course she's stiff, emanating anger.

"Why do you keep running? Do you really want away from me this much?"

I feel her flinch. I know that what Amelia is running from, truly, is her feelings. And I'm pretty sure what I'm feeling from her right now is a shot of guilt.

"You're not being very sweet to me, are you? And I'm tryin' to be all sorts of sweet to you, wildberry..."

She scoffs. “Oh, it’s sweet to keep me here against my will? To chase me when I try to go? Hide my phone and keys, hire babysitters and have your friends block me from leaving? That’s sweet, is it? You’re not the boss of me, you’re not in charge of me and even if this thing with us were real, your alpha ways would not be acceptable to me.”

I kiss her cheekbone and wrap my arms tighter around her. “I want to give you everything, Amie. But I know why you’re tryin’ to run, and it goes against my instinct to allow it.”

“It goes against your instinct to let me see my fucking sister too, evidently. To have my phone. To have any control over my life?”

I sigh.

“This is not fucking okay and if you think that trapping me here is the key to making me give in, you’re in for a rude awakening. I left this morning to go see my sister and I did it because you have no right to keep me here.”

“I have every right, baby, but we’ll get to that in a second. About your sister... I had a conversation with Ty yesterday. He needs time with her. I need time with you. You two, definitely you, don’t need to get together and make a ploy to-”

“A ploy to undo this witchcraft against us? To give you free will over who you get to be with?”

I blink in surprise as she leans out of my embrace to fetch her mug, open the lid, blow on it, and then she takes a sip. She pulls the lid off before setting it back down.

I pull her back against my front again, kissing her temple.

She empties her lungs of breath, and we say nothing for a moment.

“I don’t feel like my free will has been stripped. I want this.”

“You think you want this. That’s the whole point though, isn’t it? To make you think you want this.”

I shake my head. “I kept your keys because you keep tryin’ to leave. I kept the phone because you threatened to call the cops. Stop making me worry about what you’ll do, and I’ll stop preventing you from doing what you want to do.”

“So are you gonna tell me what happened yesterday, then?” she clips.

I blow out a long breath before replying, “Yesterday was a shit show for Riley and the news wasn’t good for him, but the news for us and for Tyson and your sister was good.”

She jolts tight and says nothing.

“You’re where you’re supposed to be, Mrs. Quinn. So is Mrs. Savage. Tyson and I *do* have free will here, baby. Riley’s got issues with a missing fake mate instead of a dead legit one, but me and Tyson both have what we’re supposed to have.”

She begins shaking her head. She does it for too long before finally spitting, “Bullshit.” She then pulls away and gets to her feet, eyes blazing at me again.

“It’s not bullshit.”

“Bullshit!” she repeats, voice full of venom. “That’s not remotely believable when you consider my aunt handed over a fortune to the witches and made this happen.”

“The witches told me your aunt went to their relative who is now deceased, but did that because that was fated. Their grimoires all check out.”

“That doesn’t make a lick of sense.”

“They say your aunt probably won that fortune in order to do it. That fortune was meant to go to the witch for some needed purpose.”

She shakes her head again and stomps to the window, giving me her back.

And now I’m getting a little pissed. “You’re so determined that this isn’t real. Why not give it a chance? See how it feels to you if you let me in just a fucking little bit.”

“No.”

She’s so fucking stubborn.

“No? Why? Because you’re afraid of being wrong? Afraid of being happy? Tell me you weren’t happy last night when you let yourself have it for one night?”

She scowls. I rise, turn her and pull her close. She freezes and purses her lips in an adorable way. I kiss her mouth softly.

“Amie, baby...”

“No!” she denies. “Stop trying to use affection to get under my skin.”

“Nope,” I deny. “I’ll use whatever I have in my arsenal to get in there.”

“I want to talk to these witches.”

“They’ve gone. They live out of town.”

A scoff. “How convenient.”

“I’m serious. I have no reason to lie to you about anything. I have every right to keep you here. As your mate, it’s my job to do what I need to do to keep you safe, keep you as mine. That’s what I’m doing and what I’ll keep doing,” I promise.

“Then let’s go wherever they are. I want to hear it from the horse’s mouth,” she says, completely disregarding everything I just said to her.

“You don’t believe me, but I have no reason to lie. You’re mine whether you believe it or not,” I try again.

“I hardly know you to know if I should believe you or not. How do I know you’re not either lying to me or that part of this spell makes you believe all this ridiculous shit?”

“All what ridiculous shit? Alphas identify their soulmate. That’s how it’s always been. They get the urge to mark that one and only female with a bite during mating. They can only knot their fated mate. All that happened. Yeah, witches say there was interference, but this coven swears it’s all above

board. What's ridiculous? That we're meant for one another? That we'll get to spend the rest of our lives together making one another happy, having a family, being there for one another? That's ridiculous?"

"Completely!"

"Why is that completely ridiculous? Because there's something about me, my life, my pack that you don't want for your life?"

She frowns.

"Or," I continue, "Is it because you don't believe you deserve happiness?"

Her jaw muscles bulge.

"Is it that you're afraid to believe it in case it gets ripped from you? And you don't want to get hurt?"

Her expression now falls, and this'd tell me everything I'd need to know if I didn't already know it.

"Amie." I pull her tighter to me, tucking her head under my chin. "Give this a chance. You're no longer engaged, you clearly don't give a fuck about that guy and told me yourself last night how relieved you were that the wedding is off, before you told me yourself you were letting yourself have what you want for one night and-"

She twists to claps a hand over my mouth and her entire being exudes warning.

I swallow down the rest of what I was going to say, but keep pinning her with my gaze. She knows what she did last night, she remembers every second of it, and wants me to pretend it didn't happen? No fucking way.

I growl.

And she flinches. She can dish out the dirty looks, but she can't take them.

I back off and pace the room. "No. I'm saying what I need to say. You don't want me to call you out on your bullshit, do

you? Well too fucking bad, baby, because I will. Every goddamn time. That's something you get to look forward to, too. A mate who will work his ass off to not only make you happy but make sure you realize you deserve to be happy, even if you're trying to deny it for some bizarre reason."

"You are so fucking full of yourself, aren't you?" she accuses. "You think you're my dream man, ready to rescue me from myself? Well fuck you, Mason. Fuck you and your huge ego. I don't give a shit if my aunt paid, if the witches tell you this is fate, or what you feel, I need to be in charge of my life." She thumps her chest with her fist. "Me! I should get to choose what *and who* I want. I've had a big awakening as part of this whole weird shit storm and that's the fact that I have had this new habit for the past nine months of letting other people trample my wants and I'm done. I'm fucking done." She slashes her hand across her throat. "I don't want this. I don't want you. Now, move your truck out of my way."

"You're stubborn, aren't you, woman?"

She stomps to the staircase, grabs her bags, and storms outside.

I follow. My phone is ringing from my truck.

She's opening her car door; tossing her things into the backseat. I scoop her up into my arms and push the door shut with my foot. She pounds on my chest, infuriated and then screams in my face, "Put me down. I'm not joking!"

"No," I deny. I reach into my truck and grab my phone and answer. "Sorry Linc. I'm good. Got her."

"You fucking asshole! Let me down!" she screams.

"Cool," he replies, "Sounds like you've got it under control." He's laughing when I end the call.

"I've got something that'll adjust that attitude of yours, baby," I tell her.

Her body locks tight.

"You need to keep that knot away from me," she states.

“Naw,” I tell her. “Don’t think I will. I think it’s just the thing you need.”

Now she’s really losing her shit, trying to struggle out of my arms, tears streaming down her face.

I begin to purr for her. Almost immediately, the fire in her goes out and she goes slack in my arms. Why didn’t I think of this five minutes ago?

I carry her back to the couch, pull her tight to me and purr louder, from deeper inside my body. She’s sobbing now; sobbing but burrowing into me.

I bury my nose in her hair, caress her claiming mark and keep on purring until I feel every ounce of tension leave her.

She’s practically liquid when I lean back to look her in the eyes. Her eyes are a deeper blue, a brighter blue than I’ve seen so far. I have no idea what it means, but suspect her emotions are closely tied to this phenomenon. Wolf shifters eyes can glow when we’re enraged. With me, my anger manifests with blood vessels in my eyes popping, making my eyes look like they’re bleeding. Vampires and fae both get fiery-eyed when they’re feeling extreme emotion. She looks sad. She feels sad.

“I can see I’ve got a fight ahead of me with this, Amelia,” I say, and it comes out gruff. “But something to know about me; I won’t give up.”

With tears in her eyes, her chin wobbles.

“You don’t play fair,” she whimpers.

“I’ll play whatever way I need to play to make you believe.”

“You’re crazy,” she accuses.

I shake my head. “You’re mine. I’m yours. Stop trying to leave me. I’ll chase you down until I find you every single time. I’ll keep working my ass off to show you that this is not only real and meant to be, but also that it’s gonna be very fucking worth it.”

“Batshit crazy,” she adds.

“Crazy about you,” I correct and kiss her nose.

“Have you gotten your rabies shot? Because you’ve really gone mad.”

“Mad about you.”

“Why? Because I’m so awesome? Pff.” She dashes tears off her face.

“More self-deprecation? You’re telling me a lot right now.”

She says nothing so I continue.

“I have no idea why, other than that you’re meant for me. Everything about you is meant for me. And every bit of it feels right. Everything about me is meant for you. That’s how this works. Nobody smells better than you, nobody tastes better than you, and I’ll never *fucking* ever want to sample anybody to test that theory. It won’t happen. Here’s what *is* gonna happen: I’m going to give you everything you want and need. Someday you’ll do the same for me. Until then, I work at this to convince you it’s real, right, and that nobody is ever gonna take it from us. And while I do that, we’ll get to know one another and I’m guessin’ we’ll learn all sorts of reasons why this relationship makes sense. But even if it still doesn’t seem like it does, it will. Because there’s no bond like a bond between an alpha and his mate.”

She lets out a gust of breath, eyes wide, heart racing.

“You get me?” I try.

“I want to see Ivy. That’s what I need right now.”

“I’ll give you what you need as long as it’s good for you. Ty and I don’t think that’d be good for either of you right now.”

Amie’s eyes widen with renewed rage. She singles me with a scowl.

“Compromise. Phone her. You can talk on the phone. But I’m right here while you do, and I’ll end the call if I think it’s unproductive.”

“I called and she didn’t answer,” she spits. “He’s probably got her phone like you’ve tried to keep mine from me.”

“You’re a good little hunter, though, aren’t you? Or do you have a shifter’s nose?” I bop her nose with my finger.

She growls at me. “You’re just a lousy hider.”

“I’ll try harder next time.”

Amelia looks away sourly.

I lift my phone and text Bailey.

**Is there still a house line number for Savage House?
Or does Ty have a cell yet?**

Amelia lifts her coffee and curls into a ball, staring out the window and blowing out a long breath. Her knees are jiggling rapidly. She needs to work off this energy. I’ll help with that after she settles down. If she doesn’t settle down, I’ll still help her with that.

Bailey dings me a moment later with a phone number for the house. There’s still a land line there and she says she was just talking to Ivy on it a few minutes earlier. She also says she heard Ivy got wind Amelia took off and is worried about her, so someone calling Ivy would be a good idea.

I call the number.

“Talk,” Tyson answers.

“Ty? Hey, man. It’s Mase. Can the girls talk?”

“Yes. She took off again? I take it you have her.”

“I do.”

“Good. I’ll get my Ivy. Wait.”

“Talk to your sister, baby.” I pass Amie my phone. “She heard you took off and is worried about you.”

Amelia

“Hello?” I say into the phone. I’m curled into myself, my feet planted on the couch cushion. Mason wraps his arm around me. I shrug him off. Or try. He doesn’t budge.

“My Ivy’s coming,” Tyson informs.

His Ivy? I roll my eyes. These shifters.

I hear giggling and then Ivy answers breathlessly, “Hey. Are you okay? I heard you took off. Are you all right?”

“You heard I took off and yet you’re giggling when you answer the phone?”

“Ty said you were safe. That Mason caught you already. Are you okay?” she asks.

“We need to talk. About all of this. About what we’re gonna do about this shit.”

“Are you okay?” she repeats, slower.

“Duh. Obviously not!”

“What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? You just told me you heard he *caught* me when I took off and you’re asking what’s wrong? He won’t let me leave, Ives!”

“Because you’re his one and only. He wants you. He loves you.”

I blink hard. Am I really talking to my sister here?

“Are you high?” I ask.

“Nnooooo. Should I be?”

I give my head a shake. “You *are* high. On wolf shifter dick.”

She giggles.

I bonk my forehead on my knee repeatedly while I swallow down my pain, my feelings of dismissal here.

“I’m happy, Ames,” she says in a dreamy voice. “So happy. I know we haven’t had a chance to talk properly, but this is *it*. The stuff they write the sappy love songs about. My happily ever after. And I’m so relieved, because you get to be part of it, being Mason’s happily ever after. Sometimes when these things happen, people don’t get to stay in contact with their family, but we’ll be able to!”

I hard-blink. “As if either of us would be okay with that.”

She holds the phone.

And anger flares. Because this reaction has me thinking Ivy would pick Tyson if she had to choose between him and her family.

“This is witchcraft,” I hiss. “And it’s bullshit that you would consider picking him over the rest of us.”

“But I don’t have to. Because you’re mated with Mason.”

“Against my will!”

“Did Mason take you against your will?” she asks softly. “Was it... ough-ray? The first laiming-cay?”

She’s asking if my first claiming was rough. She’s obviously asking in front of Tyson.

I hear masculine mumbling. It sounds like she has her hand over the phone.

I swallow hard. “No. That wasn’t ... no, not like that, but everything I’ve been enlightened about and all that’s happened since then hasn’t exactly been okay.”

“It will be, though. I was thrown too by all the intensity and everything that happened. It hasn’t been easy for Ty and me but we’re figuring it out. And I’m so happy you’re here, Ames. So happy.”

Mason’s eyes are on me as she talks to me. I look away from him.

Emotion is trying to claw its way up my throat and I hate this. I feel so weak right now. I also feel like I'm the only one around here with any common sense.

"This isn't okay. Any of it. Especially not us being kept apart."

"Kept apart?"

"He won't let me see you. He took my phone, my keys. He's blocked me in his driveway. He's chased me down repeatedly when I've tried to leave..."

"Does he punish you with sex, too?"

"What?" I gasp.

"Um... Tyson is very... intense."

"He punishes you with sex? What the fuck, Ivy? You're okay with this?"

I glare at Mason with a *don't you dare* expression. But he already threatened that the other day in the woods, didn't he?

His gaze darkens and his eyes work over me.

"Um..." Ivy say shakily, "it's kind of like a honeymoon period as Bailey explained it. He wants to be alone with you. He wants you two to have time to bond, probably. Bailey says all alphas are really protective and very clingy when they're first mated. I'm only a little bit ahead of you on this journey so I'm no expert or anything, but I'm telling you, if you let yourself think about the pluses instead of the things that seem strange... I know the supernatural angle is hard to get a grasp on, but Amelia... give it a chance."

But I should have a much better grasp on this because I'm already more aware of the supernatural angle than she is. Yet I don't.

Conflict and pain thrum inside me. I try to fight the tears back, but I think I'm about to fail.

"I'm gonna marry him," she says.

"What?"

“Isn’t that strange? You were getting married instead of me and now we’re both already married in shifter eyes. But Tyson and I are talking about doing it people-style, too. Soon. So... you can be *my* maid of honor!”

I hard-blink.

“What’s happening with Rick?” she asks casually.

Ugh.

“Amelia?”

“Yeah, I’m here. I ended it. Long story, but... back up for a sec, Ivy... how can you be jumping this fast? Have you lost your mind?”

“Maybe. But I love him. I love him, Amie, and despite that things haven’t been perfect...I can’t imagine my life without him.”

“Haven’t been perfect? I’ll say. You haven’t even filled me in, but I already know things haven’t been perfect. Snake bites and dangerous fevers and getting kidnapped and dragged back here after you left. And here you are talking about getting married just a few days after all that?”

“I think you’re gonna have to get there on your own,” Ivy says. “I’m only days ahead of you and believe me, I was skeptical at first too. I also made a run for it, more than once. But Amie, if you open your heart and let yourself take a really close look at it all, I think you’ll see. This is amazing. We’re so lucky to have this.”

I growl in frustration. “Who are you and what have you done with my sister?”

“I’m right here. I’m here and I’m happy, too. Happier than I have ever been. Mom is moving here, too. We can have this and have her and it looks like her happy ending is coming, too, according to Aunt Nelle’s letter.”

“What about our baby brother?” I demand. “If he doesn’t have a she-shifter soulmate we have to cut him out of our lives?”

“Leo is gonna be in school the next three and a half years away from us. We’ve got time to figure it all out. And you know him. He’s chill. He’ll be approved to be let in on all the secrets.”

I’m ticked. Absolutely ticked. And it’s going to manifest itself with more tears if I can’t stop it.

“You deserve so much happiness, Amelia,” she whispers, her voice laced with emotion. “Please give things a chance. It’s the best feeling in the world to know you’re with your soulmate. I want that for you, sis.”

The dam breaks and I burst into tears.

Mason takes the phone from me and pulls me into his chest.

“I am, Ivy,” Mason says softly into the phone. And then he says goodbye and puts the phone down, wrapping his other arm around me.

I don’t speak, I just let him hold me, the purring soaking into me and making my body relax while also causing my throat and chest to feel clogged with emotion.

Mason

“What do you want for breakfast? Crepes again?”

She shakes her head, still snuggled into my chest.

Lies. She wants crepes.

“What then?”

“Nothing,” she rasps out.

Her stomach rumbles, contradicting her.

“You can try to lie with your mouth, but your stomach tells the truth.”

“Hmpf.”

She pulls away, keeping her eyes aimed away from me, sips her coffee and stares out the window.

“Eggs?”

She rises, takes her mug, refills it, adding cream and sugar and then she opens the patio door off the kitchen to go out onto the deck without replying.

I lift my phone and send a text to Riley.

**Checking in. I’m here, whatever you need brother.
Check in when you can. Offload onto us if you need
things covered for work or the pack. We’re all here for
you.**

I survey what’s in my fridge and see my mother added more food to it yesterday, including more fruits and vegetables, deli meat, and several brown paper butcher shop packages. She also put more food in the freezer. I see a package marked 2 x NY strips, so decide on steak and eggs while putting the other meat packages into the freezer.

While I'm doing that, my text alert goes off.

Riley: Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. I'll stay in touch. Enjoy time with your woman. What's the story there? Thumbs up on what Dani told you about your situation or thumbs down?

What I saw yesterday, what I can imagine he must be feeling, I'm sure he's not okay. I also know based on what I went through the week before Amie got here, he's not gonna want to be coddled. I know I didn't want that.

We'll be here when he needs us, however he needs us. And in true Riley fashion, he's worried about his pack despite what he's going through.

Me: Thumbs up. All's above board. Now just to convince my woman of that.

Riley: Glad to hear. Talk soon.

Amelia

I don't know yet what I'll do next, since my sister is brainwashed and Mason is ridiculously stubborn, but I know one thing – this is a great thinking spot.

The lake, the crispness of the air, the sounds and scents of nature – I've been missing this tranquility in my life. I'm on a patio chair on a deck off the kitchen and thinking I should go up to the top level where I can have the same view but with the lounge where I can put my feet up, too.

So many thinking spots. Perfect for sunset-watching. This house, this spot? Perfection.

As I have this thought, my phone pings with a text message from my mom.

It's official. House is listed and I'm picking up my keys today for the apartment above the dry cleaners in Drowsy Hollow. I'm going to move a few things over tonight and I might even sleep there. And I could have a new job too. They say they might hire me. Been a long time since I used my seamstress skills.

Well, that was fast. How interesting that of all the places she's chosen to move to, she chooses the apartment above the spot I suspect Mason was at yesterday, getting news about the sorcery involved in our lives. I reply.

Me: Strange question but important and confidential - Who did you talk to about the apartment?

Mom: Did most of it by phone with her. Jessica Young. Didn't even make me sign a lease. Told her I might buy something local later on. Why?

Me: We'll talk about it later. xxoo

Mom: You doing okay?

Me: Not! But I guess. Not sure if he's going to take my phone again. I tried to leave this morning and he brought me back again. Grr.

Mom: He's smitten.

Me: I need to get my life in order.

Mom: I'll call you in a few hours? Happy to help you do that, too. Hang in there. Ivy's fine. Don't worry about her btw. She's happy and is planning a wedding! We'll have a Brennan girl wedding soon after all! Love ya!

Me: So I heard. Love you too.

I'm deleting the message string (all messages will be deleted until I'm not in danger of having my phone confiscated) when the patio door opens.

Mason comes out carrying a tray that's holding two steaming cups of coffee, salt and pepper, and some bottles of sauces. He sets the tray down on the table. As the cutlery glints, catching the sun, I catch a whiff of delicious aromas from inside the house. He goes back inside, then returns with two plates. He uses his foot to push the patio door closed and then flashes a smile as he sets the plates down.

“Hungry?”

I sigh.

Sometimes, I wish I were the sort of girl who could go on a hunger strike when angry, but I'm not that girl.

I like food. I especially like food when I feel stressed as it releases the happy chemicals in my brain when I don't feel happy and gives me a little hit of joy. Until the next day when I can't button my jeans.

The plates have steaks, fried tomato wedges, scrambled eggs with cheese on them, and he's split an orange in quarter wedges and divided it between the plates.

“Dig in,” he invites and begins to cut into his own steak. Instead of him eating what he’s cut off, he holds his fork out to offer me the first bite.

My eyes narrow while I simultaneously salivate. His smile sparkles with something illicit, so I huff as I tip my nose up at him before daintily biting the meat off the fork.

He watches intently for a moment, and then when I reach for my own knife and fork, he saws into his steak again.

The man can cook a steak, too. Of course he can. It melts in my mouth like butter. Whatshisface turns it into shoe leather on the rare occasion he tries to grill. It’s like Mason was designed explicitly to be good at everything Rick Bullock is bad at.

It’s not exactly like I can sit and continue to think about my problem with my problem sitting here beside me, looking all sexy, can I?

So I take a breather from letting my wheels churn my problems into butter and eat every bite on my plate.

I do this while I stare at the lake and despite everything bubbling around and around in my head, the peacefulness out here is a soothing balm.

I feel like a lazy sow when I sit and watch him clear the table and take all the dishes inside. Instead of going in to help him like my instincts tell me to do, I continue to drink my coffee. My phone, which I’ve carefully guarded under my thigh lest Mason try to take it from me again, pings, so I lift it.

A wedding group chat ping from Sally, a good friend and one of my bridesmaids, asking me if I want her to come over early and help with any last-minute planning, asking what food to bring for our sleepover and telling me she got an unexpected Saturday off and that I should put her to work. I realize I don’t even know what day it is. My life has been *that* out of whack.

I haven't been reading any messages that have come in. There are texts and voicemails from Rick, Carla, from Cuntly Sheila, and several messages from people in the bridal party.

I scroll over to the calendar app. *Friday*. A week and one day until I'd be getting married. My eyes close as I sigh.

Tomorrow night, I'm supposed to be having all my bridesmaids over for a sleepover, our at-home bachelorette party and a chance to get some last-minute stuff done.

I quickly tap out a reply in the group chat.

Sorry, I'm not up to speed on the messages in here. I've been off the grid a few days. No time to talk but the wedding is off. Rick and I are finished. I'm reeling right now so I can't get into it. I need some me-time. I'll get back to everyone as soon as I have my head together. Suffice it to say tomorrow's slumber party is also off. I'll be going dark for a few days. Love you guys.

Almost immediately, several of them are typing, including Gloria, Rick's sister. I forgot she was in the group chat.

Yikes.

I exit out of that chat and tap out a text to Ivy separately.

Your phone is prob about to blow up with questions about my canceling the wedding, FYI. Might want to shut your phone off. I'm turning mine off for now. If you need me, I guess have your captor contact my captor.

Yeah, a dig at her guy. I can't help myself.

After I hit *send*, I watch, and once it appears to be delivered, I open my wedding planning app and send a broadcast to anyone who has opted to receive updates through it that the wedding is canceled.

I'm sorry to inform you but the wedding has been canceled and will not be rescheduled. Please accept my

apologies for any inconvenience to your schedule.
Regards, Amelia Brennan.

After I send it, I immediately turn my phone off, so I don't have to read messages or get incoming calls asking what happened.

A few minutes later, sitting alone with nothing but peace surrounding me, I realize a knot of tension has loosened and left my body. I feel lighter.

I'm one step closer to moving forward. But toward what, though?

After a while, I find myself shivering with the chill in the air, so I begrudgingly go inside. The dishes are washed, drying in the dishrack, and the main floor is empty, but his truck is still behind my car. I wander to the couch, find the remote and turn the television on. I've spent the past several days basically cut off from the world.

After thirty minutes of catching up on the news, I firmly press the *off* button; being cut off from the craziness wasn't so bad.

Footsteps approach and I'm unprepared for what hits me.

Mason comes down the stairs, a pair of black trackpants all he's wearing, lots of stubble on display, and judging by the towel draped around his neck and the slight sheen to his skin, he's been working out up there. And I missed the show.

And there's an aroma in the air... something potent and mouth-watering.

His eyes scan me as he walks by and then he's in front of the fridge, back muscles rippling as he opens the door and peers inside.

I chomp down on my knuckle as I watch him pull out a water bottle, uncap it, and drink three quarters of it down. As he gulps it, his sexy throat bobbing, my own throat goes dry.

His body is magnificent. A perfect amount of body hair. Lower back dimples. He's got a silver chain around his neck and a watch around his wrist; I'm pretty sure it's the one that came from that redhead the other day. I feel a flutter of extreme unpleasantness at imagining his hands on another woman.

He looks over his shoulder at me, eyes trailing me from head to toe and then back up again.

I push that awful image away and swallow down that ugly jealousy I've got no right to feel.

He puts his drink down on the counter, still watching me.

Without thinking it through, I moisten my lips with my tongue, and it must signal something to him because now he's got this look on his face, a kind of... purpose in his eyes.

"What?" I whisper.

He's moving in my direction.

And the look intensifies.

Uh oh. He's coming over to fuck me. I know he is by that look in his eyes. "Stop," I command.

"No. Fuck that," he replies. "It's the middle of the afternoon."

"And?"

"And I haven't even fucked you yet today."

Something in me snaps and I'm bolting past him, heading for the door.

Like a dummy. Because of course he's going to chase me.

I look over my shoulder and see he's smiling wide, looking supremely pleased that I'm running.

He changes directions and is in front of me. Just before we collide, I pivot and run the opposite way, which means I'll either have to run upstairs or downstairs.

It's down the stairs I go. As fast as I can.

He's laughing behind me as he follows.

Like this is a game.

Is it?

Of course he's gonna catch me. The biggest problem with this? Mason loves chasing me when I run.

And my biggest problem? The thrill I get, knowing what will happen when this predator catches me. I might be running on purpose. At every opportunity. But what if the thrill dies and he stops chasing?

I push that unpleasant thought away and look over my shoulder. Before I can stop myself, I crack a smile. His eyes light up, seeing it.

I bolt through the big party room on the bottom level to the back patio doors and find them unlocked. I slide the door wide and run toward the lake.

Not twenty feet from the house, I'm up in the air, caught in the Mason snare. He lifts me effortlessly into his arms and fluidly changes direction, marching back toward the house.

"Got 'cha."

"Put me down!" I grind out, thrashing in his grip.

My heart is pumping hard, my body feels like I'm running a temperature, and the glittery look in his dark eyes has me feeling something... something... I feel alive.

"No way," he denies, tightening his grip on me. "Never. I caught you, baby. You're mine forever."

His eyes flare with something... something irresistibly hot.

Oh fuck. That's it – something snaps inside me – self-control? Restraint? Whatever snapped, it's gone. My hands are suddenly on his prickly jaw and my mouth attaches to his. He shoves the door open and then we're tumbling onto something soft. A couch.

I immediately throw my hoodie over my head and off while he whips his trackpants down, lust in his eyes.

34

Mason

“Your face is prickly,” she says softly before her lips touch mine.

“You asked me not to shave. You want me to?”

“Please don’t,” she whispers, kissing me again.

My face splits into a wide smile. “You want me to grow a beard for you?”

“No. Just... stubble. I have a thing for the five o’clock shadow.”

“Or the nine o’clock one?” I tease.

She wrinkles her nose. “I won’t be here long enough for you to grow a beard anyway.”

“Yeah you will,” I correct.

And I see something in her eyes, something new. I feel it rippling from her, buzzing from her. Possibility?

“I’ll keep stubble for you whenever you want. You want to give me permission to shave? I’ll wait for it.”

Her teeth skim her bottom lip slowly, a glow flaring in her indigo eyes.

“You like that idea,” I say.

“Maybe.”

“My mate’s an alpha female. And I like it. There are some things I’m gonna control and some things you can take the lead on. We’ll work that out.”

She reaches for my cock and squeezes while I lick the seam of her mouth until she parts those lips enough for my tongue to

dip inside. It meets hers and they dance together so I grind my pelvis into her hand. She squeezes again.

“I need inside you, wildberry. Now.”

“Have at it, Doggo,” she replies in a husky voice that makes the hairs prickle at the back of my neck. I’m dying to hear her call out my name in that same tone. “Now,” she adds.

“Now? Not later?” I tease.

Her eyes flare with lust. And then they go quizzical.

“Why do you call me that?” she asks.

“You taste like berries. I see something wild in those eyes sometimes. Something you hold back most of the time. Maybe I’m tryin’ to call it out. Looks like I just did.”

She bites her lip.

I lean in, but my ears and nose are assaulted at once. Faint noise. A car. Scent. What scent is that beyond the car scent? I straighten and inhale deep. And when I do, I want to roar out in rage.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

Fuck. Not him. How?

“What’s wrong, Mason?” she repeats, panicked.

“Stay here,” I command, leaving her on the couch, rushing up the stairs and to the door, ripping it wide, finding myself face-to-face with Amelia’s ex.

His eyes narrow as he looks me over. “I need to speak to my fiancée,” he states.

My lip curls with disgust. This weasel reeks of entitlement. And sex. He fucked whoever he fucked the other night again, just a few hours ago. And despite that he’s somebody I’d like to crush for the fact he’s touched and hurt my mate, I also know instinctively that even under other circumstances I’d feel the same. There’s something about this fucker that I just immediately dislike.

“Not your fiancée anymore and I do not fuckin’ think so,” I say, staring down my nose at this little puke.

“Are you tryin’ to say she’s not here? Because that’s her car.” He gestures. “And phone location services have her here. So, produce her. I’m not leaving until I talk to her.”

And now she’s coming up behind me. My mate needs a spanking for constantly disregarding my instructions.

“What are you doing here?” she demands.

“Honey. Thank God. I’ve been worried sick,” he calls out, trying to peer around me to see her. I move slightly to block his view.

“What are you doing here?” she demands again. “How are you even here?”

I make no move, just stare him down.

“I got desperate after not hearing from you,” he says, “so I tracked your phone.” His eyes intermittently bounce between me and my woman. I want his eyes off her.

“Grr, fuck,” she mutters.

“We need to talk, Amelia,” he states.

“I don’t wanna talk to you. I’ll come get my stuff in a couple days. You shouldn’t have come.”

“I can’t even see her. Move, will ya?” he clips.

I bare my teeth and say nothing.

“Go home, Rick,” she says, “I’ll call you when I’m ready to come get my things.”

“The wedding is in eight days, Amelia. A week from now is our rehearsal and rehearsal dinner. We need to talk this out. What happened the other night... I wanna explain. I... I didn’t screw around.”

“Lie,” I spit.

He glares at me. “Where do you get off? I don’t know you, man. And you, Amelia, accusing me of fucking around and yet

you're at some guy's house? Who is this guy?"

"None of your business," she states. "And I didn't accuse you. He did."

He huffs and gets a determined look on his face. "This guy knows nothing; he sure as hell doesn't know me. We can work this out, Amelia. We have a good thing, you and me. You owe it to me to at least talk to me."

"She owes you nothing. You got more from her than you deserved, and you'll get no more of it. Get the fuck off my property."

"Amelia... we have stuff to talk about," Rick pushes.

"Mase," Amelia says softly.

And I flinch. This is the first time she's called me that.

I look over my shoulder and see her eyes are soft and on me. Me, not him.

She swallows and then her gaze bounces to him and then back to me.

"Okay, baby," I say and drop one arm so she can step ahead of me.

And as she moves, my eyes land on the joker in front of me. Ugly energy rolls off the red-faced fake-tanned asshole with his puffed out-chest. And it takes control to stop myself from knocking his veneers out.

For how he mistreated her. For how he makes her feel. For the fact that he's touched her at all. Touched *my* woman.

A growl rolls up from my gut before I can stop it. And I see a flash of surprise combined with fear in his expression. He must see the near feral look in my eyes because he flinches and then his eyes turn to my mate who has stepped off the porch and is now leaned against the hood of her car, arms folded across her chest, eyes on me with an unreadable expression.

She turns to him. She's in a tank top and jeans, barefoot. Make-up free. Nails painted the color of candy apples. Smelling like me. She's beautiful. And she's all mine.

She smells like me, not him. She wears my mark, not his. I remind myself that he doesn't matter. This guy will soon be a distant memory. He's not a threat, not remotely. She doesn't love him, didn't even carry his scent when she got here and now finds the idea of being with him unfathomable. She knows he's not the man for her. She might not yet be admitting that I am that man, but she will.

"You wanna give us some privacy?" the asshole has the nerve to ask.

"I don't," I fire back.

Amelia's eyes are on me. "It's okay," she says softly and then looks to him.

My lip curls. "I'll be on the other side of this door and if I hear anything I don't like, I'll —"

"Fuck off, buddy," the guy beaks off with an annoyed expression on his idiot face.

If he puffed his chest out any more than he's doing right now, his spine might snap.

I lean forward and growl again.

"Mason." She sounds panicked. My eyes dart to her face. Fear? She's pale.

I tell her, "He will not fuck with you, baby. Won't happen."

"Can you go inside for me, Mase? Please? It's okay," she whispers, hoarsely, "I've got this."

Before I step back inside and close the door, I move to her and press my lips to her forehead. I hear her gulp down a swallow and then turn to go back inside, shutting the door, not even giving him a glance. I make no further moves. I can see everything through the stained-glass windows that flank the door and I'll hear every word that's said.

“Who is that guy, Amelia? Tell me you haven’t moved on,” he demands. “Not already.”

“It’s none of your business,” she spits back, “not anymore.”

“But I love you,” he states plainly.

And as much as I don’t know this guy, I know that those words don’t sound remotely sincere. He says it like saying it will get him what he wants.

“I know things have been stressful with the planning of the wedding,” he goes on, “but we’re almost there, almost through it. And full disclosure here, I did drive the other night when I’d had a few but I only had a few and was only at Sheila’s, just a couple streets over and I ran over to talk to her about some wedding stuff since you weren’t returning her messages and it was the backstreets and just a few blocks. Not a car on the road, honey. I’m not proud of it, but I’ll never do it again. Ever.”

“You’re blaming me for your drunk driving because I didn’t return Sheila’s call? Are you for real?”

“I didn’t mean it like *that*. I saw you were home, so I wanted to get to you fast.”

“No. You never do mean it like *that*, do you? Not when you’re called out on it at least. Right? God, you must really think I’m stupid.”

“Amelia.”

“You fucked the wedding planner? No wonder she hates me. She wants you for herself.”

“It’s not... no. She’s married.”

Liar. It’s written all over him. I smell the lie as plain as I smell the nervous sweat he’s exuding.

He stammers, “I’d never do that, especially not after all you just went through with your folks.”

She shakes her head. “Yeah, it makes total sense that you were there until four in the morning on a weeknight while I wasn’t

home.”

“We’re old friends, that’s all.”

“It doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t. There’s so much wrong with our relationship, Rick. It’s not what I want. And you didn’t even want me, so...”

“I did! I do. We’ll fix it. We’ll go to couples’ counseling. We’ll...”

“Too late.”

“I didn’t fuck around!”

“It doesn’t matter, Rick. And I did, so...”

“Because you thought I did?”

She sighs but doesn’t answer.

“Because if you did this, left me for this guy because you felt neglected, pressured from the wedding and thought I cheated ... I ... I think we can work on it. I think we can fix it. We’ve both made mistakes, obviously, but we’ll go to counseling. We’ll get past this.”

“It doesn’t matter why; what matters is that it’s too late. I’ve done a lot of soul-searching and we’re not right for one another.”

“What do you mean? We want the same things; you’ve said it yourself.”

“I don’t think we do. I don’t care about the huge wedding, it sounded great in theory but nothing about it is my choice. It’s all what your mother wants. And it’s like I haven’t even had a voice the past few months with anyone and I’m tired of not being seen, not being heard. You never stand up for me.”

“You’re strong. That’s one of the things I love about you. Since when do you need me to fight your battles, Amelia?”

“No, I don’t need anyone to fight my battles, but having my back might be nice at least. I can’t *not* be seen, Rick. That’s not who I am, I’m not okay with being treated like I’m

invisible and don't even know how I let things get as far as I did when everything inside me was screaming the whole time about it all being wrong. I'm not myself when I'm with you. I've become this other person and I'm not a huge fan of her."

"I'll try. I'll try to-"

"It's over."

"Don't do this to us!" he pleads. "Not right before the biggest day of my life."

He moves in and as I catch sight of him putting his arms around her. I practically fly out the door and haul him off her and throw him.

The shithead lands on my lawn on his ass.

"You do not *fucking* touch her," I snarl. "Not ever."

My chest rises and falls rapidly, and I remind myself to keep my shit together. It's not easy.

"Leave," I grind out.

"I'm tryin' to talk to my-"

"Leave!" I order.

"Fuck, man, what the fuck? I could level you." Though his words are threatening, his tone isn't. The guy is afraid of me. He should be.

"Are you hurt?" Amelia asks him. "Mason!" she snaps, shooting me a look of shock. And then Amelia's eyes go wider.

"Mase.. your eye!"

"It's okay," I say, hauling oxygen into my lungs to calm my shit down, then I turn to the loser. "Go."

"Come with me, babe," Rick says. "Come on. Let's go talk away from this neanderthal." He gets to his feet unsteadily. "I don't care that you slept with him. I know things have been stressed lately, but we can get past this. That didn't mean anything. What we have means everything."

My eyes hit Amie's and she looks panicked.

"You're not taking her anywhere," I snap.

"Shouldn't she be the one to decide that?" He tries and shoots her a look, a look that's an attempt at manipulation, like I'm in the wrong here.

"The biggest day of your life? What about my life, Rick?" she asks.

He sighs. "Amel-"

"Go." She points to his car. "I'll get my stuff out of your way as soon as I can. I'll cancel everything that I arranged, you do the same on your side, and we'll go from there."

"We've spent a lot of money on this wedding. Money we won't get back if the wedding doesn't happen. A lot of effort. My mother's office storage room is filled with gifts we've already gotten. We have almost four hundred people coming, and, Amelia, my grandmother and the anniversary..."

"Low blow. Weaponizing your grandma. Not wanting to upset her isn't reason enough to marry you. We're all wrong. It's over."

He stares at her with shock. And I can hear the guy's heart racing.

"Amelia. Please."

"I'll make arrangements to pick up my clothes and things."

"No. Come with me so we can go talk," he pleads.

"Go, before I make you go," I warn.

"That's it? All this time, all that planning, all the money, down the toilet?" His face is redder again.

"All the money? Who cares about money if it's a mistake to get married?" she cries out.

He grinds his teeth and then his expression changes. "You already took off your ring?"

She blanches.

“It’s inside,” I answer. “You want it? Amie, come inside. I’ll give it to him.”

“I don’t want it,” the guy says, “I had it made for you. I want you to have it on your finger. I want you to be my wife. I want you to think about this before you throw away what we have.”

“She’s already mine.”

He spins to face me, face red. “Stay the fuck out of my relationship, buddy,” he spits. “Fucking my fiancé does not make her yours.”

I take a step forward. “She’s mine. A hundred percent mine. Permanently.”

He steps back with panic, probably because of the energy coming from me, maybe the look on my face, the blood trickling down one cheek, I don’t know, but I advance, aggressively, so he backs up some more and then the idiot trips over the edge of the stone flowerbed edging and falls to the grass.

“This isn’t over,” he warns me while scrambling to his feet.

“It’s definitely over, Rick. Go home. Mason c’mon.” The door slams. Amelia has gone inside.

“It *is* over,” I tell him, standing over him, looking down my nose. “She’s mine now. And she won’t ever be yours again. Now *you* fuck off.”

“You’re not fucking my life up. That girl *is* marrying me.”

“You fucked your life up, nobody else,” I fire back, “Now, step off.”

I turn, go back into my house and close and lock the door. Then I find my phone and message the council group chat.

Code yellow!

I then send another message to explain.

**Amelia’s ex came to my house. He’s leaving now.
Make sure he’s not poking around the village. White**

Mercedes.

I take a picture of his car and forward it.

Linc or Joel, can you run these plates?

Instinct tells me this fucker might be a problem.

I look out and see his car gone.

My mate has gone upstairs.

My phone sounds off.

Linc: On it. Do we need to set up some border patrols for the time being?

Me: Don't know if that's necessary, but we should stay at code yellow until further notice.

Grey: I'll get Bailey to activate the phone tree.

Everyone will get notified of the code yellow, and this will happen within a half hour or less. Those whose homes are in the more visible areas of the village get notified first. The yellow status means we've had an outsider here and might have outsider eyes prying for the foreseeable. This means extra vigilance and caution in public. No shifting without extra care to ensure no outsider eyes are on us and extra-careful conversations in public as well.

Joel will activate the cameras at the four corners and set them to 24/7 surveillance. We'll rotate watching to see if anyone else comes or goes.

We wouldn't stop a car from driving in, and chances are that Amelia's ex won't have any reason to poke around, but we're always vigilant when an outsider has a beef with someone in the pack. Our village roads are carefully laid out with dead ends and only one route in or out means very few outsiders come in, and when they do it doesn't take long for them to realize they're in the wrong place.

Nobody likes code yellow and having to guard ourselves, but that's reality and we'll deal.

I catch sight of myself in the mirror in the foyer. My left eye has one broken vessel in it. I shift to wolf, then shift back. My eye looks normal again. I need Amelia. I need to touch her. Comfort her. Know she knows that I'm here for her. I grab a paper towel, wet it, and wipe my face.

I find her upstairs on her belly on the bed, phone to her ear, feet up in the air, crossed at the ankles.

“He had a calling plan that had more data than mine, and for less, so I switched to it, and now he's used that to track my location. I only got the phone turned on this morning and it's a nearly three-hour drive. Was he just ready to pounce?”

Her eyes cut to me as I put my knee to the end of the bed.

“Gotta go, Mom,” she says. “Okay, yeah. Thanks. I'll see you in a few hours. Okay. Yes please, a case would be good, too, unless it's the same model then I can just swap. Okay, bye.”

She stabs angrily at the screen with her index finger, then tosses the phone on the bed.

“Ugh!” she grunts, sifting her fingers through her hair at the sides of her head. “I can't believe he showed up here.”

“You'll see your mother in a few hours?” I inquire.

“Yeah. She's about to go to Whatshisface's since it'll take him a few hours to get back there. She's gonna grab as much of my stuff as she can, not to mention all the wedding stuff.”

“The wedding stuff?”

“It's all in the basement there. My dress. Centerpieces. Wedding favors. Stuff like that. I have a storage locker with all my furniture from before I sold my condo and moved in with him. She'll stash my stuff while I figure things out.”

“Why will you see her in a couple hours?”

“She's bringing me a new phone. My phone is on his plan, so I don't want him having control over it or seeing my location. I sent her my location from the map.”

“Ah. So you’ve only got clothes there?”

“Clothes, makeup, and wedding stuff I no longer need. I only moved in there a few months ago. The rest of my stuff is in storage from when I sold my condo. Good thing I didn’t sell all my furniture.”

She wraps her arms around herself and stares out the window.

“You okay?”

“No, no I’m not sure I am. What about you?” she asks, “Your eye okay?”

“Fine. A shift cured it. Didn’t hurt.”

She tilts her head.

“Rage induced. Happens sometimes. Don’t worry, it’s nothing. If it gets bad enough that I can’t cure it with a shift, I’ve got eye drops. It’s fine, though. Was just the one eye. Talk to me,” I invite, crawling up to the head of the bed and sitting beside her.

“I don’t feel like talking,” she says.

I get comfortable, grabbing her hand, weaving our fingers together. I kiss the back of her hand and then our eyes meet.

“I feel like a horrible person,” she says softly.

“Why?”

“I’m canceling the wedding eight days before. I might not want to go through with it, I know it’s not right for me, but I can’t help but feel guilty. A lot of people sent gifts. Booked travel. Bought bridesmaids dresses...”

“He definitely had sex that night, baby. I know what I smelled. He had sex earlier today, too, with the same person as the other night.”

“Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“My feisty little wildberry, don’t you see?” I put my mouth to her forehead. “You didn’t cheat on him. You were just biding

time, learning what you didn't want. I think whether you met me or not, you wouldn't be going through with it."

She sinks into me.

"You wouldn't have married him, Amie. You know you deserve more."

She goes tense.

I purr for her for a minute, feeling her melt into me.

I lay back on the bed, taking her with me so she's tucked close, her face on my chest.

Her eyes bounce up to meet mine.

"You n' me are the perfect fit. Not only are you perfect for me, I'm gonna bust my back to give you everything you want, and to be everything you need. No settling necessary."

"You practice that corny speech?" she grumbles into my chest.

I laugh as I run my hand down the back of her head and give her neck an affectionate squeeze. "Guess I'm a poet and didn't know it."

She laughs into my shirt, then looks up at me, and whispers, "You threw him."

I grin, pleased she's saying this with light in her eyes. She likes that I protected her.

"Like... ten feet," she adds.

"Why are we whispering?" I ask.

"I don't know," she whispers, smiling.

My grin widens. "Felt good to throw him."

Her smile slips. "You growled. Probably not a good idea. Could've made him suspicious."

I shrug. "It wasn't too revealing."

She licks her lips. "Maybe not. But what it was? It *was* hot."

Laughter bubbles up from me. "Hot?"

“Hot,” she repeats.

Her eyes scan my face and go molten. The scent of her arousal hits me, and I can’t help but grab her thigh and tug, so she falls back on the bed. I pin her. And this time, she’s not fighting me.

“Want me to show you *hot*?”

Amie bites her lip and her lashes lower.

“Or, you still want me to keep this knot away from you?”

Her eyes trail my face, and she shakes her head just slightly.

“Good,” I say, running my hand from her thigh to skate up to her ribcage, “because I’m not sure I could even if I wanted to. And I don’t want to, baby. Haven’t fucked you in too long.”

Her body shakes with silent laughter.

“What’s so funny, mate?” I cup her breast and drop a kiss on her temple.

“You fucked me last night.”

“Way too long,” I state, a hundred percent serious. And then I add, “Though... you’ve been acting like you don’t want me.” I back off.

She straightens up. “I’ve decided that as long as you keep me here against my will, I’d might as well get something out of it.”

I throw my head back and laugh.

Her smile is so bright, it could light up the world.

I love it.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” I say, my chest swelling with emotion. I caress her face. “But he touched you. I wanted to rip his fuckin’ head off. I don’t want his filthy hands anywhere near you.”

“Well, if he shows up here again, don’t rip his head off. He’d probably sue you.”

I shrug, but I’m thinking, sue me? *If* I let him live.

She licks her lips. Her pupils are dilated, and her arousal fills my senses.

“Though if you bottle up that growl sound you do and sell it, you could make a lot of money. So much money it might not matter who sues you.”

“You like it when I growl?” I ask.

She swallows, eyelashes fluttering, and to me, that’s enough of a response that I flip to hover over her on my knees, palms planted on either side of the pillows she’s leaned against, fencing her in.

“No escaping your predator now, little girl.”

She empties her lungs quickly. Desire is written all over her.

While moving closer, I let a growl roll up from deep down, from my gut, slowly, until I know she can feel the vibrations of it. I finish letting it through my chest, then out my mouth against her collarbone, before my nose ghosts along the column of her throat as she arches. I see the goosebumps on her skin, hear the way her heart speeds up, feel the way her temperature rises. I glance down at her tank top and my eyes rove her hard nipples before I run my tongue along her claiming mark, then pull back, locking gazes.

After a moment of looking into one another’s eyes, after seeing something I haven’t seen before, as if her walls are lowered with me just a little, maybe just enough for now, her eyes drift closed while she lifts up on an elbow, moving in for a kiss, touching her lips to mine as she reaches for my jaw with her free hand.

Her reaching for me, doing this, it strikes a match on my already lit libido. It’s about to become a raging inferno. My tongue slips in to touch hers, and when she whimpers, I go for the fly of her jeans.

After divesting her of them, barely getting them off her ankles, I’m dragging her silky orange thong down, nipping at her hip bone.

She squeaks in surprise when my teeth connect, and this draws another lustful growl from me just before my mouth drifts over to close down over her clit.

Sweet essence of Amelia floods me. I feast on her, getting rewarded with whimpers and the trembling of her legs as she arches into me, seeking more of my mouth. In no time flat, she's clawing at the blankets while grinding into my face.

If he lays a hand or even eyes on my mate again, it won't be easy to contain the urge to rip him to shreds.

I growl again at just the notion, doing it directly against her clit and she whimpers my name.

I need to knot her. Right fucking now.

Her phone lands on the floor with a thud.

Amelia

I have a rash on my inner thighs. To elaborate, I have a stubble burn rash on my inner thighs. And I couldn't be happier about it.

I mean, what more could a girl want? A hot man who growls because she likes it, who physically throws her ex ten feet while growling in the sexiest way? And then who laughs in bed with her and goes down on her, leaving marks behind because he hadn't shaved. Hadn't shaved because she specifically asked him not to.

A happy sigh escapes my lips. This is a sound I don't think I've ever made. Clearly, I'm floating on a bliss cloud.

He's napping beside me, arm thrown over his head, the other wrapped around me.

Sex makes Doggo sleepy, apparently. He's a cat napper, despite being a wolfman.

Because he's asleep, and proving so far to be a fairly deep sleeper, it's another opportunity for me to slip away, but for a switch: instead of planning my escape, I'm thinking... why does he smell so good?

Not like I ever get far anyway when I run. And I can always get him to chase me later...

I put my nose to his warm chest and inhale.

He's warm. He's cuddly. He's beautiful.

He can't get enough of me. He thinks I'm his forever.

He didn't shave because I told him I like stubble.

What else would he do for me just because I asked?

He stood up for me, being protective with the Rick situation and then backed off when I asked him to. Most men with alpha traits wouldn't back down after a testosterone surge. Yet, when I asked him to let me talk to Rick, to go back inside, he did. Though he didn't go far, he did what I asked. Mason gave me what I needed. And came back when Rick tried to touch me. I'm not sure why it feels so huge to me, but it does.

I've never been a girl to try to wrap a guy around her finger, not ever. I've always been super-independent.

But right now, a not-so-tiny part of me wonders what it would be like to languish in a doting man's attention. To get the things I want. To be happily, madly in love. To want someone as much as I want my next breath. To be with someone for reasons more than 'it makes sense'. It made sense to say *yes* to Rick. He said he loved me. It was a grand, public gesture. He wasn't going to hold my infertility against me like Blake did. But did I love him back? Did I think I'd be happy forever? I joked he was my starter husband and said that right to his face all tongue-in-cheek, and he told me I was his starter wife with a big smirk on his face, too. But...

But...

Nothing has ever felt as right as this *right here*, right now.

I lay in Mason's arms for ages while he sleeps, just enjoying his immense body heat, the sound of his steady breathing while I ponder my life. While I ponder the magic I'm in the midst of. Pondering how tragically gorgeous he is. Musing on how strangely right this feels. How it feels like he really *does* want me. It's the magic, of course. No man looks at a woman and knows immediately, down to his bones, that she's *the one*. But I can't help but languish in the wish that this were really my fate. I can't help but want to give in to that voice in the barest of whispers telling me to *let it be*. Let go. Go with it; throw caution to the wind. Let the magical mist swallow me whole.

Because what about the pain when it all gets ripped away from me? If Mason decides he can't be with someone who can't

give him a family. If the spell wears off. Or even if it doesn't wear off... a virile man like this, satisfied with what I can give him? What do I have to offer? The idea of the pain of losing something I'm absolutely all-in for has me dangling on the precipice, not letting myself take that last step to freefall.

How am I to believe that this was really meant to be despite that money was involved? What would my aunt say to me if she were here, witnessing all of this?

She thought I'd pave the way for Ivy, make all this easier for her. But things are all sideways, because Ivy's all over it and I'm the resistant, skeptical one.

Dad always thought Auntie Nelle was a little nutty. In fact, he called her Nutty instead of Nellie. I always thought she was intuitive, smart, fun. She and Mom were always super-close and it devastated all of us when she died.

She was an explorer with a thirst for knowledge and adventure, mostly if it was unique and off the beaten path. She'd be off to a specific ashram for months after hearing about it and taking three or more days to get there via plane, train, boat, bus, rickshaw, whatever. And she always had stories about the people she'd meet on her adventures.

I have a thick stack of post cards from her in my storage unit. I looked so forward to getting those in the mail. With cool pictures on the front, interesting stamps.

She'd catch wind of a church (sometimes a cult) and follow them for a while to, as she would say, "see what they were about; see what knowledge I can glean".

She took a job once with a group of paranormal truth hunters as their personal assistant and went on the road with them to research hauntings, so-called miracles, and other oddities. She said she wanted to know what was out there. Were alien abduction accounts actually legit? Why did some homes have ghosts, and could they be appeased so they'd go off and be in peace or did they actually prefer to stay in their haunts? She believed in magic, all of it. Good magic and dark magic.

Too bad magic couldn't save her from the cancer.

Believe in possibilities, Dear Amie. I believe the world we are on can give us so much. Yes, it can sustain us, can provide our basic needs. But it can also accommodate all of our hopes, dreams, and candle-blown wishes on top of that. Magic? It's there. It's here. It's everywhere if we look for it. You won't see it if you don't look, not unless magic wants you to.

Yeah, magic wanted me to, didn't it?

She believed in an afterlife. She told me not to be sad when she was gone, that she was just off on her next adventure.

A seed seems like it dies before it transforms into something bigger, something beyond that seed's wildest imaginings, dear girl. Though the body of it might appear gone, what was inside that vessel has finally broken through. Don't mourn me. Miss me, think of me, but don't be sad for me. I'm just a seedling here. After I leave, I'd bet my lottery winnings I'll become a truly majestic tree. I'd bet that, except I already spent them. I spent them on something wonderful.

A tear trails down my face. She spent them on us.

Though she was often off on a quest, when she was around, she was the best aunt in the world. I miss her so much.

She took me and my sister to an old cinema once so we could see a marathon of The NeverEnding Story movies. She quizzed us like it was a class, like we were studying for a test.

She wanted us to get the message that you can and should dream up amazing possibilities for yourself. Your future.

My sister was always so pragmatic about everything, and Auntie Nelle would indulge her and then wink at me when Ivy was looking the other way. It felt like a fun secret to have, to listen to my sister play devil's advocate, knowing that magic existed. Ivy didn't want to play Bed Knobs and Broomsticks with us on the four-poster cannonball bed in our *sometimes* guestroom, *sometimes* Auntie Nelle's room. Ivy would roll her

eyes and tell us it was ‘silly’. And then Auntie Nelle would say, “I guess I’m Auntie Silly Nellie then.” And Ivy would feel bad and play along. But she always played like she was humoring us and thought we *were* simpleminded. I wonder what my sister thought the first time she saw her suitor shift into a wolf.

Did she think she’d had her Sprite spiked?

I’m not the skeptic she is and even *I* felt like I was seeing things.

A beautiful, magical man that can turn into a massive wolf?
Watching a majestic, massive animal turn into a man?

And there was the strength he showed when he tossed
Whathisface today!

I was *legit* concerned when he growled and threw Rick. Mason is built, muscular, taller than Rick but Rick has bulk. Mason isn’t a Hulk and his arms and legs aren’t as thick as Rick’s, so Rick was probably thinking he could *take* him. The whole thing looked superhuman when it happened. Beyond concern, I was also quite turned on. Mason wanted to protect me. And he wanted Rick gone because of the notion of ... what? Rick upsetting me? Because Rick and I have history?

Oddly, I was both touched and aroused at that display. I’m not the kind of girl that garners protectiveness from men, not typically a damsel in distress. I’ve never been the girl a guy has been possessive over. I’m mouthy and don’t hesitate to stand up for myself. But it was nice to have someone want to do that for me without forgetting that I have a voice.

Yeah, I still have to figure all this stuff out, but for the moment, knowing that my wedding has been canceled and not feeling anything loom over me in terms of today’s needs, I feel like I can kind of relax for a little bit. A rarity for me.

It’s not like he’s letting me leave and as of now, it’s not like I have anywhere I need to be. It’s not like I haven’t protested and told him the truth about the witchcraft, the fact that I don’t believe this is real. If he’s choosing to believe it and wants to

give me a retreat with great food, a relaxing setting, and life-changing sex? I'd might as well soak it in for a little while at least. Reality will come crashing in as it always inevitably does. And he can't say I didn't warn him.

Though, I already know that when the crash happens, despite me trying to protect myself, it's still gonna hurt like hell.

Mason jolts up out of what seemed like a deep sleep, looking tweaked.

He catches me staring at him from the pillow beside him and shakes off a stupor.

“Your phone dinged twice a few minutes ago and you didn't move. Delayed reaction?”

“Your mother's here. So are you, astonishingly.” He looks down at his stomach. My hand is splayed there.

“Nobody rang the bell.” I snatch my hand away, suddenly feeling self-conscious. He grabs it and brings it to his mouth, eyes crinkling as he does.

“She's just pulling in.” He releases me and then rubs his eyes while throwing his legs off the side of the bed. He rises and stretches.

God, he's got sexy back muscles.

“How do you know she's pulling in?” I ask.

He touches the side of his nose, then leans over and kisses me.

He lifts his phone from the table beside the bed and glances at the screen.

“Gotta take a leak; can you answer when she rings?”

“Yeah, I...”

“But no getaway attempts.” He leans over and kisses me again, rumbling against my throat with a low growl that pulls goosebumps up on me. “Don't make me chase you again today or I might have to punish you.”

He heads for the bathroom, leaving me tingling.

“Threatening me might make me want to run,” I warn, but there’s no fire in my voice. Not angry-fire at least. I’m feeling quite turned on instead.

He pitches a grin over his shoulder at me and goes into the bathroom while scrolling his phone. He doesn’t close the door.

“Maybe I’ll run just to see what you’ll do about it,” I tack on with haughtiness.

He pokes his head back out and with a sexy, dark look informs, “I look forward to that.”

Now my face is hot. Burning hot, because I’m now thinking about what Ivy said on the phone about being punished with sex and the look on Mason’s face when she said it. It sounds like fun.

My phone vibrates. I find it on the carpet and lift it to see a text from Mom.

I’m here.

The doorbell rings.

I’ve been lounging in Mason’s bed in just my tank top and thong. I quickly pull my jeans on and rush down the stairs.

When I open the door, Mom is wearing a blinding smile with her eyes dancing. She’s holding a bag with the Apple logo on it and her minivan is backed into the driveway behind Mason’s truck. The hatch is open, and it’s jam-packed with stuff.

“Trouble finding it?”

“None. Thankfully you gave me your coordinates instead of directions,” she teases.

I snicker. It’s the truth; I’m terrible with directions.

I look my mom over. She looks good today. Better than I’ve seen her look in a while. With the stress in her life the past year, it seemed like she was suddenly aging more rapidly. But today, for a change she doesn’t look tired. She suddenly looks

younger. Like her worry lines are becoming laugh lines. It's like she's got a new spring in her step as she comes in. And it's refreshing to see... seeing what my mother used to be like before my father fucked her over.

My sister and I look like Mom. But I've got Dad's dark hair and Ivy got Mom's blonde. We have Mom's eyes. Our brother has Dad's eyes and Dad's hair. When we were kids, Dad joked that my sister was Samantha and I was Serena from the TV show *Bewitched*. The blonde sweet one and the dark-haired vixen. Dad always dropped comments like that about me and it wasn't until recently that I realized how much it bothered me to be referred to as the evil twin.

But truthfully, Ivy *is* the sweeter one. The dainty little lady. I'm bigger, older, louder and bossier, but that mostly comes from being so protective. Protective of everyone around me.

"Amie. This place!" Mom wanders in with her eyes pivoting and mouth dropped open as she takes it all in.

She then pins me with a wide-eyed look.

"What?" I ask.

"It's perfect for you. Where's your fated mate?"

My eyes roll.

"No, really. This is exactly where you should be living. Not in one of those assembly line carbon copy houses. This is *so* much more your style. As is the wolf shifter."

"I don't live here, though, Mom. I'm just in captivity. And if you think the house denotes whether we belong with the guy or not, don't ask to see where Tyson had been keeping Ivy." I fake-shudder.

I have no idea what the new house they just moved into looks like, but that shack was definitely *roughing it*. Then again, roughing it with the right guy is infinitely better than a mansion with the wrong one.

Mason comes downstairs, fresh-looking in a soft-looking gray turtleneck sweater and faded jeans. Barefoot.

His lips touch my temple and then he's putting his arms around my mom.

"Well, phooey to freedom if this is captivity," Mom says, patting Mason's jaw with affection.

"Mrs. Brennan, nice to see you again. How was the drive?" His eyes are sparkling.

Gah. Why is he so attractive?

I'm thinking Mom is thinking the same thing, though instead of being annoyed by his good looks, she's looking up at him like he hangs the moon.

"It was great." Mom gestures to me. "Word to the wise – don't let Amelia give you directions. Find out the coordinates and find it yourself." She hands me the Apple store bag.

"It's true," I mutter with a shrug.

Mason's shoulders shake with silent laughter. He glances at his wristwatch and then looks to my mom. "Would you like dinner with us? It's nearly that time."

"Oh... um... I..." Mom's eyes bounce to me. "I didn't mean to arrive at dinner time. That's rude."

"It's not rude," Mason corrects. "And we'd be happy to feed you."

"Well, sure, then," she says carefully.

"Make yourself comfortable," he invites. "Wine? Coffee? Something cold to drink?"

"Coffee would be fabulous, thank you. What a great host you are, Mason."

I pull out the new phone and unbox it on the breakfast bar. It's not the phone I have. It's the new model. It's huge. And pretty. And *eep* - expensive. She got me one up from the model I asked for.

"Mom, how much do I owe you for this?" I bite my lip.

"Nothing," she says. "Early Christmas gift."

“Christmas is months away,” I say.

She waves her hand.

I’m about to argue with her when Mason asks, “What to drink for you, wildberry?”

“Wine,” I say, “If we... err... *you* have any.”

“We have plenty. Here. Look.” He directs my attention to the side of the breakfast bar where there’s a little wine fridge.

“Ooh!” Mom reacts. “If I weren’t driving.”

“You’re welcome to stay the night,” Mason offers.

“Actually, I have things to do tonight and tomorrow, but I might take you up on that another time. I will stay for dinner, though, if you’re eating soon and of course if it’s not too much of an imposition.”

And I read what looks like relief in his eyes. My eyes narrow.

“Amie,” Mom says softly, “I need the powder room. Where —”

I point to the door by the front entrance. “That’s the closest one.”

“Thanks, honey. After that, maybe you can give me a tour.”

I give her a warning look. “I’m not qualified to do that, particularly since I don’t live here.”

“I’d be happy to do that if Amelia isn’t comfortable yet.”

“Yet,” I mutter with an eyeroll.

He kisses me again.

Mom disappears into the bathroom. I turn and level a glare at him.

“What did I do now?” he asks, looking amused.

I leave the phones on the table and wander to squat and look at the wine selection.

“You looked relieved she didn’t want to spend the night. Don’t invite someone if you don’t mean it.”

“I *am* relieved, but I did mean it. I wouldn’t want your mother to drive home in the dark or avoid a glass or three of wine because I’m a shitty host,” he says softly. “Though I am relieved, but only because we’re still supposed to be alone. Most new shifter couples don’t see a soul for a week or two and we’ve been lucky to get a few hours at a time before there’s a crisis, a visitor, or *someone*...” He gives me a poignant stare, “escaping.”

I scoff. “Ivy said Bailey says alpha shifters are clingy after they do the mating thing.”

“Clingy? Not sure I like that choice of words but ... not inaccurate.” He shrugs.

Is this guy totally unshakeable?

I pass him a wine with a label I recognize as the similar to the one his mother included in that basket she gave me, the basket that’s now sitting on the coffee table in his living area. This bottle has a peach on the label.

I saw some really nice bath products in that basket. Mason has a big soaker tub up on the top floor, but I’m wary about opening anything or even rooting through to see all of what’s in there because of what that might say about me and this situation, but I’d really love to test out those bath bombs and a body scrub that I saw laying on top.

Mom is back and Mason is pouring me a glass of wine.

“Coffee in a moment, Mrs. Brennan. Taking care of my girl first.”

“The way it should be,” Mom replies with a beaming smile.

“Call me Kathleen, Mason. We’re not formal people.”

“Thanks, Kathleen. I’d normally serve guests first but in my limited experience I’m thinking she might be more agreeable after some of this.”

“You’re astute, for sure, Mason. And I’d say Mom is fine too, but my daughter isn’t quite there yet.”

“Quite,” I mumble. “And I’d be a guest, too, if I weren’t your captive.”

“I’ll get her there,” Mason vows.

“You will,” Mom agrees.

“Excuse me, you two... I happen to be standing right here.”

Mason touches his lips to the tip of my nose before handing me a glass of wine and moving past me toward his coffee maker.

“Well aware of that, baby,” he says with an eye sweep that not only feels like a physical touch, but that also makes my belly dip.

Mom presses her lips tight and then fans herself with one hand, looking directly at me while Mason’s back is turned. I scrunch my nose up in response.

“Your home is lovely, Mason. What do you do for a living?” Mom asks.

“Thank you, Kathleen. I built this place. And that’s my work,” he says while changing out the coffee filter.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I work in design and construction.”

“Like an architect?”

“Love drawing plans and building them out. Did up this place with my pack brothers, my business partners. We’re partners in a construction company, Savage Construction. This place was featured in a decorating magazine. Though probably don’t need to tell you myself since my own mother, when you meet her, will undoubtedly show you one of her two hundred copies.”

“Impressive. Did you say your pack brothers?” Mom asks.

“How does a shifter pack work?”

“I’m the one that needs the powder room now,” I say, heading down the hall, thinking maybe that’s why this house felt so

familiar. Rick's mother is an interior decorator, and she has a coffee table filled with décor magazines at both her office and her home. I've sat leafing through those magazines in both on a number of occasions. That must be why this place felt familiar.

When I'm back, Mason and my mother are laughing like they're up to something. The house is filled with the scent of the brewing coffee, and Mom's wearing a beaming smile that creates a fluttery feeling in my stomach. She wants this for me.

"There are four big trash bags and about half a dozen boxes in my van," Mom casually declares, "Maybe you could grab them if you don't mind?"

Mason replies, "Absolutely."

"What's this?" I ask.

I should've known. Why didn't I clue-in when I saw her stuffed van wide open? Those things aren't for her new apartment in the nearest town at all, are they?

Mason squeezes my hand quick before he passes me on his way to the front door.

"Freeze, Doggo," I order then turn to my mother. "You did *not* bring my clothes here instead of taking them to my storage locker, right, Mother?"

Mason doesn't freeze. Mason just throws one of his signature smirks over his shoulder at me on his way to the door. I growl in frustration.

Mom tries to hold a straight face but she's failing. "Didn't I?"

"I thought that was stuff for your new place," I say through gritted teeth.

"It is... or some of it at least," she shrugs. "The few things of mine are on the second row. I told him just to bring everything in from the third row and the trunk. You're staying here so you might as well have your things. We ran all the wedding stuff to the storage place. I figured you'd want your clothes and shoes,

'n things. I just brought a couple bits and bobs for my apartment. I'll bring more over throughout the weekend."

I'm shaking my head with anger, nostrils flaring at my mother. "How'd you pull that off so fast? It's only been a few hours."

"We hurried."

"Who's we? You and Ivy?"

"Not Ivy. Sally and Caroline helped." She shrugs. "We used Caroline's SUV to get a lot of the stuff into the storage unit."

Two of my bridesmaids.

"Ugh," I groan, rubbing my temples. "You're giving me a headache. You didn't say anything to them about-" I look around.

She waves her hand. "Of course not. I won't breathe a word of any of this to a soul. Are you kidding? As for Sal and Caroline, they didn't hear from you so they showed up at my house looking for you, assuming you might be there when they didn't get an answer at Ivy's. I didn't tell them much, only that you'd had a change of heart and were very upset and needed some time to process the breakup. I asked if they'd do me a solid and help me get your things out of there, so you'd have no reason to go back if you didn't want to. They were all over that and took the opportunity to tell me what they really thought of him. In fact, Sally was on a tirade about him and in the middle of that..." Mom stops and looks at me.

"What?" I roll my hand, signaling to get on with it.

"He stepped up behind her and heard some of it." She wiggles her eyebrows.

"You really didn't like him, did you?" I ask. "Sure did a good job of hiding it."

She lifts one shoulder. "I had reservations. But, it was your life, your decision. Just because I didn't think he was right for you doesn't mean I wasn't going to support your right to make your own decisions."

“And? What’s your opinion of him?” I ask, feeling my face get hot, thinking about my friends and family all hating the man I planned to marry. What would that have said for my social life afterwards? I’m a strong, independent woman, but I love my support system; I need a support system.

Though, a few of them tried, with Ivy that one night to get me to see sense, I guess. I blew them all off, though, didn’t I? I didn’t want to hear it, so I guess I just didn’t.

“And you’re better off without him,” Mom goes on, “His mother and that wedding planner woman met him there right as we were about to leave, and that Carla was rude to me, as usual.”

“As usual?”

She rolls her eyes. “I didn’t want to moan about it before, you know I’m not a big complainer, but the entire time I’ve known Rick’s mother, she treats me like she’s better than me.”

“She’s like that with everyone,” I mutter.

“And today? Well, let’s just say she was even more unpleasant than usual.”

“What happened?”

“I killed her with kindness of course, like I always do.”

“What did she say?”

She waves her hand. “Just mutterings about you calling off the wedding suddenly, about the inconvenience to their family and friends. How she doesn’t understand how you could do this after they’ve been so good to you.” Mom rolls her eyes. “How she hopes I’ll talk sense into you before Rick realizes he can do better. Those people think their shit doesn’t stink.”

Mason is back, two stacked boxes in his arms. He sets them on the floor.

I call out, “Wait. You don’t-”

He smiles, spins to give me his back, and is gone.

I sigh, massaging my temples.

Mom is silent now. And looking a little contrite.

“Mom,” I grumble, “Not to gloss over the Carla shit, I’m really sorry that anybody made you feel like you were beneath them. They’re the assholes. But for real here... why would you bring my stuff over here?”

She tries to hide the mischief but it’s glaringly obvious.

“Unless you’re just expecting me to stay here,” I continue, “to be okay with all this?” I gesture to the room at large.

“I think that’s fairly obvious. Of course I’m okay with this. The question is why *aren’t* you okay with this?”

The coffee machine beeps, announcing the pot is full, so I move over and pour into two cups that Mason had pulled down.

I put sugar in Mom’s. He’s back with two more boxes. He sets them down.

“How do you take your coffee, Doggo?” I call out, not even trying to mask my aggravation. I feel my mother’s eyes on my back, but I studiously ignore her.

“Just black, thanks baby.”

“Don’t bother bringing in any more of my stuff.”

He flashes me a grin and then he’s gone again.

He’s not listening to me. Mom’s not listening to me, either.

I growl out my frustration.

Mom grabs my hand. “Amie.”

I spin to face her.

“What’s wrong? What’s stopping you here?”

I stare in astonishment and thrust my hands into my hair.

“Nobody’s listening to me. I wanted you to put my stuff at *your* place.”

“I’m moving, Amie. This man, this house, it’s all incredible. And it’s yours, sweet girl. *All yours.*”

“Or put it in my storage unit,” I say through clenched teeth, giving her a sharp look.

“It’s full.” She shrugs.

“Then why didn’t you ask me what to do with it? Why didn’t you stick it in the garage at home and then ask me?”

“Well, I needed the house ready for the open house. I thought maybe I’d take it to my new apartment if needed but the minute I pulled up, I knew it belonged here. Look at you with all this color in your cheeks, sparkle in your eyes.” She shrugs. “This is home for you. Isn’t it?”

“Nothing has changed since our earlier conversation. Mason is being obstinate, but...”

“Who’s being obstinate?” Mason asks, coming in with two trash bags.

Mom giggles. “I think we know the answer to that.”

Eesh.

He drops the trash bags and I hear a clunk sound.

“What was that?”

“Probably shoes. Hope you’ve got room in your closet, Mason. My daughter is not only a clothes horse, but her shoe collection? I wouldn’t say it rivals Imelda Marcos, but it’s quite impressive.”

“Plenty of room in my closet, Kathleen.”

I roll my eyes.

“We put the delicate things into the boxes. Caroline and Sally want you to call them, but I told them it might be a minute. Or a week.”

A week sounds about right.

“How about that tour?” Mom asks.

“Follow me,” Mason invites, crooking his arm. “I’ll grab the rest of Amie’s things afterwards.”

“I’m gonna set up my new phone,” I mumble, sitting down on the couch with the wine glass, my new phone, and my old one. “Not that anyone is listening to me these days, so not sure why I’m bothering to even say anything.”

I pull my legs under myself and watch Mom pass Mason a mug, take her own, and then the two of them go upstairs together, wearing conspirator smiles.

I’ve skimmed all recent text messages and listened to all the voicemails on the old phone, including skipping and deleting some *Sheila* messages, rolling my eyes at the passive-aggressive older *Carla* messages that fake-inquire about my wellbeing while reminding me Sheila needs answers on this or that. Then I listen to a voicemail from Gloria, Rick’s sister, asking me to please call her. She left that message after my wedding cancelation announcement.

I bite my lip as I delete her message.

Besides his sweet grandmother, Rick’s sister has been my favorite Bullock family member since Grampa Bullock died, though I haven’t seen Gloria since their grandfather’s funeral, which was before we got engaged as she and her wife live in England where they have their jewelry business. But she’s one of my bridesmaids so she’s on the group chat. I feel bad for ignoring her, that she rearranged her busy schedule to be here next week, but it’s probably best to make a clean break from that family.

I only program Mom and Ivy into my new phone for now and send Ivy a text message with my new number from the old phone as Mason and Mom go downstairs to the bottom level. He’s already toured the top two levels and this one while I ignored them and after the basement, he’ll undoubtedly take her to his fabulous private beach and dock.

I'm about to turn the phone off and take the sim card out, thinking I can add my other contacts to the new phone after I've detoxed from this situation. But my phone announces that Gloria is video calling me. I hit the command that declines.

But I don't hit it properly I guess, because suddenly Gloria's face is on my screen. *Fuck*. My life!

She exclaims, "Oh God. Whoops! I didn't mean to video call you."

She's wide-eyed, trying to smooth her hair with her free hand. She has her reading glasses on, and it looks like she's in bed. She lives in England, so it's got to be late over there.

"Well, I didn't mean to answer, if I'm honest. I'm not trying to be a bitch, Gloria, but it's all a bit soon for me to talk to anybody."

She waves her hand and then she's on the move, going to a different room. "This is me, here. We're friends, aren't we?"

I don't get the chance to answer before she adds, "What did he do?"

I blink hard, surprised. We are sort of friends, but not really, considering I've only met her a handful of times and mostly because she's his sister.

"Or are you just so determined to not join this crazy family. I wouldn't blame you." She rolls her eyes. "If it wasn't him, it was her that turned you off, am I right?"

"Her?"

"My mother." She rolls her eyes. "I know how hard you've tried to be kind. You're both type A personalities, too, but she's *just*... ridiculous."

"It just wasn't going to work out," I tell her. "The whole thing was a big ball of stress and things happened that... that I don't really want to get into. I'm just taking time to decompress. I'll send the ring back, I know it's no longer mine to keep and since you designed it, I'm sure you'll want to-"

“I designed it?” She points to herself.

“Yeah,” I say unsteadily. “Rick told me you designed the engagement ring for me.”

Her head jerks back. “For you?”

“Are you saying you didn’t?”

“I made a ring for... wait. Show me?”

I stare at my naked finger. “I’m not wearing it right now. It’s ... uh... not where I can get to it right now, but...”

I really need to find that ring. I’m dumbfounded at her reaction. I never said anything to her about the ring. Rick told me he told her I loved it, but I haven’t seen her since we got engaged, only had a few text conversations including one I was sure would be uncomfortable when Carla insisted I invite Gloria to be a bridesmaid. Gloria has never made me feel uncomfortable, though.

“Describe it,” she demands, and her eyes have gone razor sharp.

“Uh, it’s got a very large diamond. It’s shaped sort of... marquise cut I guess, I’m not a jewel expert so that might not be right, but it has blue sapphires on the sides...”

She rolls her eyes. “He proposed with *that*?”

“Um, yeah. You know the one I’m talking about?”

“Yeah, I know it.” She looks ticked. “That cheap bastard,” she mutters.

“Is it a zirconia or something,” I ask, confused.

I stand up and glance out the window. Sure enough, Mom and Mason are down by the boats at the waterfront.

“That fucking... grr.” She growls.

“He said you designed that for me. That it was a very expensive one-of-a-kind ring and that you did it at a discount and... is none of that true?”

“The diamond belonged to me, but I didn’t design the ring. He did. With someone else. I didn’t make him pay for it. The diamond belonged to our great grandmother. The one I told you about?”

I nod. Gloria told me that’s how she got into jewelry. It was a family business, she inherited it.

“Oh,” I say, a little perplexed but not totally unsurprised because Gloria has great style, and this didn’t seem like her.

“Is there no chance you two are reconciling?”

“No chance.”

“Are you sure?”

I spit out the truth. “I’m already sleeping with someone else, and he was cheating on me. He also drove drunk the other night, which is an automatic relationship trap door for me, so no. No chance.”

“That stone was one of the ones that was left to me. It’s worth a pretty penny, but there’s a long history of hideousness attached to it, my great grandmother told me all about it, so I had never planned to use it, sell it, give it away, anything. In fact, I had it in a safe for years. Rick and his ex-fiancée designed that ring together,” she blurts. “She loved that stone and the history of it. She was sort of... odd. Considered herself a wiccan or something. I tried to talk her out of it, but she wanted it and Rick wanted her to have whatever she wanted.”

I double-blink as I process this.

“This sounds weird, Amelia, but that stone has bad juju attached to it, and I warned her, but my brother was a skeptic, wouldn’t listen. Nagged and nagged, so in the end, I was like... whatever.”

I never knew Rick was engaged before. I certainly didn’t know he gave me his ex’s ring. But I certainly do believe he nagged Gloria to get what he wanted.

“I wouldn’t have said this to you if there was a chance of reconciling because I know this is pretty unforgiveable and I

told her that diamond is cursed. It's been worn by three women in various forms and all of them had bad luck and untimely deaths, except Tiara. She didn't die, but she had a horrible burn accident and they split up because shortly after her accident, she caught him cheating on her with her twin. She thought it was cool the diamond was cursed. She didn't think it was cool after that accident with a vat of hot cooking oil."

I gasp.

"Yeah," Gloria says.

I gawk at the screen.

"Oh my god."

"You know how family politics can get. When I caught wind Mother hired her sister to be the wedding planner, I very nearly told you. I gave him a piece of my mind. But he said she's the best at what she does, swore he wasn't sleeping with her still, that it'd been a one-off. He pleaded with me to let it go. I'm so sorry, Amelia."

"Sheila Crawford?" I choke out. "That's Rick's ex-fiancé's sister?"

Rick hired her, not Carla. He lied. He lied about so much.

"Yes. And now, I'm just fuming for you. Because there's more."

"What?"

"Obviously, he rushed the wedding because of Gramps' and his eccentricities. He told me that he'd already planned to propose but clearly that's not the whole story. But, Amelia, my brother said he loved you. I never would've kept my mouth shut if I hadn't believed him. I liked you instantly. But if I had any idea that ring was on your finger..." She shakes her head. "He told me you were going to wear a family heirloom from your aunt."

My God. I'm just reeling. I'm jerked back to reality as she waits on the screen, looking upset.

“Um... explain, please? What did rushing the wedding have to do with your grandfather?”

“The joke will,” she clips.

I’m confused. “The joke will what?”

She shakes her head sharply. “No. His last will and testament.”

Huh?

She elaborates, “Of course he didn’t tell you.” She rolls her eyes. “He told me you knew and had a laugh over it.”

“A laugh over what?”

“Gramps wrote a *joke* will that had all this silly stuff in it. You know how eccentric he was. He hinted about it for years. Treasure hunts to find some of the things he left to us and some odd requests for his funeral, and ... I wasn’t able to be there for the reading because I had to leave directly after his funeral for that showcase our store was being featured for, but he filed the joke will and we don’t know if he did it on purpose as a last laugh or if he filed the wrong one by mistake. Grandma said there were two wills. We can’t find the other one.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Grampa used to tease us that we’d have to jump through hoops to get his money when he croaked.”

I know that’s true. He made jokes about it in the hospital. He actually said, “Marry this one,” about four times before Rick and I started dating, when I would pop in for a visit at the hospital during my shift. He once said it, in fact. He said, “I’m changing my will. The only way you get my money is if you marry this one.” I laughed it off. Rick laughed it off. Was that *not* a joke?

Rick was in a mood after the reading of the will. In fact, he disappeared for two days, not returning calls or texts afterwards, and I was curious about what’d happened, but he told me things were going to be held up for a little while with his inheritance and acted like it wasn’t a big deal.

Gloria continues, “If we don’t meet the terms of his will, we’ll just get all the money when Grandma passes away instead and that’s probably not far off, sadly. She’s in her eighties and her health has declined since he died. I’ll try to get my hands on more details. I’ll let you know what I find out?”

“Oh,” I say.

My being engaged was a joke? A joke? Did he ever even love me?

He proposed a week and a half after the funeral. And it seemed out-of-the-blue, but I never made the connection to his grandfather’s will reading.

“I’m sorry. I was looking forward to having someone in the family I can tolerate. I hope we can still be friends.”

“Yeah,” I whisper.

Her face falls. “I’m sorry. I’ve just rambled off stuff that probably has you shook.”

Understatement.

I hear Mom’s voice. She and Mason are back inside. They’ll probably come upstairs any minute.

“I’ve been keeping my phone off. But I’ll check it tomorrow or the next day,” I say.

I need time to wrap my head around all of this. The grand gesture engagement. The declarations of love. They were all fake? I’ve been wearing a ring I hate. A ring with a curse on it? A ring some other woman wore? A woman he cheated on. He cheated on me with that same woman?

“Gotta go,” I say, and my voice comes out hoarse.

“Talk soon,” she says. “I’m really sorry to just drop all this word vomit on you. This... bombshell. It’s not your fault. He’s the jerk. Him, not you. You’re awesome. Gorgeous. You’re lovely. And you didn’t deserve this treatment.”

“Okay. Yeah, thanks,” I whisper absently, and end the call.

I stare into space. Shocked, I think. I don't even know what to think.

Mom's voice echoes up the stairs and I straighten up while trying to clear my expression.

"She's always been spirited, my girl. But she's loyal and protective, though she overthinks things – almost to a fault," Mom says, now at the top of the stairs and Mason is directly behind her, holding the two empty mugs.

Chivalrous. Gorgeous. Being nice to my mom. Rick wasn't terrible to her, but he was very self-absorbed. Not just with Mom. With everybody.

Mom is talking about me like I'm not right here. Though, maybe that's something good. People who talk about you like you're not there when you are probably aren't talking shit about you behind your back.

Talking shit about you while fucking your wedding planner at four in the morning on a weeknight. Probably laughing about how mean she's being to you on purpose. Probably hoping the cursed engagement ring kills you off right after the wedding. I wonder if he put out a big life insurance policy on me.

I stare, sinuses burning and my vision blurs temporarily as I bite back tears. No. No! No emotion. I need to process that phone call later. Without an audience.

Mason comes right to me, leaning over and kissing my forehead. "If you don't mind, we're thinkin' Roxy's for dinner to keep it simple." He's got a strange look on his face as he talks to me. He's searching my face.

"That VIP suite downstairs is mine whenever I visit," Mom declares.

I say nothing, I'm just reminding myself to hold it together.

"The one with the Jacuzzi tub?" she beams. "I've always wanted a tub with jets in my ensuite. When I buy my own house, one I choose instead of one I'm stuck with because my

overbearing husband picks it for me, I'll have that. Maybe I'll hire Mason to build it for me."

"I'd be happy to. Family discount," he says to her, but he's still searching my face.

"How much of a discount is that?" she asks.

My eyes ping pong between them.

Mason turns to look at her. "A hundred percent off, you just buy the building materials, and I get a great discount on those for the business, so I'll order 'em for you." He wins, then turns back to me. "You okay?"

I nod, probably too eagerly. "I'm hungry. Let's go." An idea hits. "Oh... I'll call Ivy and tell her to meet us."

"She's busy tonight," Mom says, waving her hand and gathering her purse up from the counter.

I deflate. I need some time with my sister. For lots of reasons. To unload and analyze this whole Rick situation for one thing. I'm not used to feeling so disconnected from her. Even though we do spat occasionally, we're never out of contact for very long. We always know what's going on with one another.

"Shall we? I'll drive my own van. Then after we eat, I can be on my way from there."

"Wait... I'm not exactly..." I say, smoothing my hair behind my ears.

"You know it's casual over there, and you look perfect," Mason says.

"Just give me five," I say and then head up the stairs woodenly, needing privacy for five minutes. And a sweater and socks, plus a minute with my hairbrush and my emotions.

On my way back down the stairs, our eyes meet, and his expression is full of concern.

I do my best to clear my expression, grabbing my bag and stuffing the two phones inside.

Mason

It was Kathleen's idea to eat at the bar, reasoning that she'd get a chance to have a closer look at her girls' new support system as well as save us the trouble of cooking.

In the back yard, my mate's mother gave me a beaming smile. "I think I like you. I think I like Tyson, too. I think things are working out very well for both of my girls." She nodded and continued, "Yep. Both of them are in good hands. I look forward to days on the boat, days around a dinner table together, and nights going to sleep without worry because I know my girls are happy."

"I'll bust my back to make it so Amelia's happy, Kathleen. I promise," I told her.

She smiled wider, reminding me of her daughter, whose smiles had been rare so far, something I have every intention of changing.

Her expression then dropped. "Amie takes time to come around to something once she's got something else in her head, but understand this, Mason: once she gets there, you'll have no worries; I'm sure of that. It's just... this thing she's just come out of with Rick – I think it was poor timing that she even got serious with him. See, she had a relationship end badly before that, got her heart broken right before we lost my sister, and Amie and my sister were very close so that was really tough on her. On all of us, but especially Amie. And then my ugly split with her father – I doubt she'd have accepted Rick's proposal if it'd been a year later or earlier. It was all in the timing. My daughter just got things piled on, you know? She met him at the hospital when his grandfather was ill. The old gentleman was a charmer and took a shine to Amie, and did his best to play matchmaker. And then he passed away and Amie got pressured into the marriage shortly

afterwards. She seems tough, and she is, but she's also got a heart of gold under all that hair and attitude."

I laughed at that.

She continues, "Timing... I believe timing plays a role here, too. She's met you in time to stop her from making the worst mistake of her life – marrying the wrong man." She paused. "This is just between us, though, okay? My daughter wouldn't be too happy to find out I'm giving you tips. She's determined to be resistant, but my guess is she's close to breaking." She winked.

I smiled wide, hoping my new mother-in-law is correct.

Good thing we didn't wait any longer or we might not have gotten a table at Roxy's, which has a full house. Then again, Friday nights tend to be like this. Same goes for Saturdays.

Most every set of eyes swings in our direction when we step in.

"Cade, this is Kathleen, Amelia's mother," I say, giving him a look that has his shoulders relaxing.

Cade's eyes coast over Kathleen and he gives her a lazy smile. Her face turns pink under his blatant appraisal.

We're under code yellow, so of course he's extra vigilant by being stationed near the door, but now he's looking at Amie's mother like he wants to make a meal of her.

All eyes in the bar are on us. I smile, giving a thumbs up, calling out, "Hey everybody."

I get nods, waves, and greetings called back.

I clear my throat and all eyes are on me.

"This is Kathleen Brennan, my mate's lovely mother," I announce, "She's very welcome here." I'm making sure they know she's not part of our code yellow. "And of course here's my girl, for those who haven't met Amie."

Immediately the mood shifts and there's a collective vibe change that shows me tension has eased up. Smiles. Waves. *Helloes* and *heys* come our way.

Amelia smiles nervously and gives a little wave to the space at large, but though she does this, I feel her fingertips glide up underneath my sweater. She pinches the skin just above my hip. We move further into the space to the last empty booth.

I don't hide my grin as she shoots me a dirty look before sliding into the booth. I sit beside her.

"What was that for?" I ask, putting my lips to the ridge of her ear.

"Don't do that."

"Introduce you as my mate? It's the truth." I kiss the ridge of her ear.

She sighs, working her arms out of the jean jacket she's wearing over the soft pink sweater. The neckline is low, revealing enough cleavage I feel my jeans go tight. I take the jacket from her and hang it on the hook at the end of our booth, telling my cock it needs to wait a little bit to get back inside her.

I feel the warmth of my mate's mother's gaze on me. She's all smiles, taking in the interactions between her daughter and me.

"Take your jacket, Kathleen?" I offer.

"No thank you, Mason. I'm a little chilly, so I'll keep it on."

Cade, dropping menus on the table and leans over, close to Kathleen's ear. "I can turn the heat up, if you like, Kathleen."

Her face goes bright pink as she drinks him in, looking like her temperature has already risen.

"Th-thank you," she stammers.

He gives her another lazy smile.

Kathleen's eyes bounce to her daughter and go huge as Cade saunters back to the bar.

"Holy cow," she mouths.

"Wrong animal, Mom," Amie replies softly.

I feel eyes on me. Roxy. She's at the bar, pouring a beer. She gives me a shaky smile. I smile back and then my eyes move to Amelia, whose eyes are on Roxy, with question.

I wrap my arm around her and run my nose up her neck. It's the wrong side of her neck. We should be sitting on the opposite side of this booth. I'll remember that next time. I graze the mark with my thumb, earning a shiver from her. Her eyes hit mine.

"Don't do that in public," she whispers.

"I'll do it whenever and wherever I need to do, to remind you," I reply.

A hint of my mate's arousal hits my senses.

Yeah. I want this scent in my lungs at all times. Even if I can't act on it right now, it settles me.

"Something between you and Roxy?" she asks.

"Long over," I reply.

She grinds her teeth. I hear them squeak.

Interesting.

"I didn't catch that," Kathleen queries.

"Never mind, Mom," Amie mutters.

Cade is back, resting his hand on Kathleen's shoulder, he leans in near her ear and inhales.

"I've turned the heat up."

"Oh. Th-thank you very much."

Cade looks at me and raises his brows.

"Kathleen, this is Cade." I take the hint.

“Cade,” she says, face flushed, “So nice to meet you.”

She promptly opens her menu and hides behind it.

Amelia has her lips tight like she’s about to laugh. Her eyes meet mine and amusement dances there. I smile and run my palm up and down her arm.. She leans into me and it sets off vibrations in my chest, which makes her lean even closer.

The purr instinct seems automatic now. This one not because I’m trying to comfort or calm her, instead because I feel joy right now. Because of my mate.

The texts that came in while I was asleep were about the minivan pulling through the village. Someone recognized Kathleen. The texts continued to ping about the surveillance rotations for the next forty-eight hours, giving me and Ty a miss since we’re still freshly mated. Jase asked if we should get Tyson onto our text chain and Linc replied he’d already popped by to see Ty earlier about the code yellow, and that Ty wasn’t thrilled about being tied to a phone. He reluctantly agreed after Ivy schooled him on uses for cell phones beyond reading *dad jokes*. Linc included Tyson’s cell number so we could all update our phones.

Amelia was quiet during the drive here, looking lost in thought. And I didn’t like the vibe I got from her. Whoever she was on the phone with as we came in from out back clearly upset her. I was tempted to ask if her ex was calling her, but I decided to leave the conversation until after our time with Kathleen. I really don’t like the intensity of the emotions that came at me and I don’t think it’s about her belongings being dropped off by her mother; it was something I wasn’t feeling when I took Kathleen outside.

“Get the chili fries with whatever you order, Mom. Trust me,” she says. “Anyone who says nothing tastes as good as skinny feels hasn’t tried Roxy’s chili fries.”

And I relax. Because she seems relaxed right now. Happy. And this makes me happy. Her handbag sounds off and her expression drops as she reaches into her bag and checks the

screen of her old phone. Suddenly, the unhappy emotions are back as the smile slips from her face.

“What’s the matter, baby?” I ask, scanning the screen over her shoulder.

Gloria: I’m trying to get answers, but my brother is being evasive. I’ve got a call into Grandma. Stay tuned.

“Nothing,” she mutters and stuffs her phone back into her bag.

“Nothing?” I push.

She shakes her head and pulls her lips tight.

A familiar, but out of place scent hits me and before I can clock it, Amelia’s body goes rigid. I follow her eyes to the door.

Cicely is coming in with her sister Candy as well as Renee. Renee, the bartender I fucked at that motel, the bitch who showed at my place on my mating day.

Amelia and her are locking gazes and the animosity between them is instant.

Renee’s eyes move to mine and go warm. “Mason,” she greets.

Amelia moves closer to me, her warm hand landing on my thigh.

“You two know one another?” Candy asks.

And her question strikes me as fake.

“Yeah, we know one another,” she responds, eyes still on me, words dripping with innuendo.

My eyes dart to my mate. She flicks her hair to the side, and it takes a split second for me to realize she’s drawing attention to her claiming mark by this move, because the length of her hair is now over the opposite shoulder, the claiming mark on display. Looks like it’s good we sat in this position after all.

And it makes me want to pound my chest and roar with triumph.

“Barely,” I mutter.

To Cicely’s credit, she looks uncomfortable. And now I’m guessing she had no knowledge of Renee’s visit. Candy must have given her my address. Considering this is her second time here and there’s never been a reason for her to come by before, I’m extremely unhappy about it.

Cicely reads me, obviously, because she says, “Hey Amie, good to see you. We’ll leave you to your meal. C’mon, girls.”

Candy ignores her sister. “You’re Mason’s new mate? Great to meet you. Is this your mom? Hi, I’m Candy. Oh hey, Pops is comin’ in.”

Lorenzo comes in and looks to his two daughters, Cicely and Candy, and a smile spreads across his face. His eyes catch mine for a beat before they graze Amelia and then land on Kathleen. His eyes stay on Kathleen.

I give Cicely a hard stare and then I look toward the door.

“Hey Pop. Girls, I have a better idea. Follow me.”

“Something I said?” Lorenzo quips.

“Naw, Pops. See you later on.” Cicely kisses her father’s cheek and grabs Candy’s hand. “Let’s go. Renee...”

Renee’s got a sour look on her face, clearly unhappy about being pulled away, which is telling.

“Lorenzo,” I greet.

He approaches.

“Baby, this is Lorenzo. Lor, my Amie. This is her mom, Kathleen Brennan. Lorenzo is retired second alpha from our previous council.” I look to Kathleen. “Lor is one of our respected council elders.”

“Nice to meet you,” Amie reaches for his hand.

“Officially, yes. You saw me earlier.” He reaches out and squeezes Amie’s hand.

“Did I?” she asks.

“Well, my wolf. Grey with white over my muzzle.” He gestures to his face.

“Oh,” she whispers, but says nothing.

Lor turns to her mother.

“Lovely to meet you,” he says, taking Kathleen’s hand and not immediately letting go. “Full house tonight. Mind if I join you?” His eyes are on Kathleen’s face. She’s flushed pink again. He’s still got her hand.

The seat he typically sits at up at the bar is empty, as per usual – nobody takes Lor’s seat.

“Not a problem,” I say, catching sight of Cade in my periphery, eyeing our booth with eyebrows raised.

Kathleen moves over on her side of the bench as Lor takes off his coat and slides in.

“Elders?” Kathleen asks. “You don’t look elderly.”

“Why thank you, Kathy,” he says, eyes alight with mischief. “Any former council member is considered an elder, even if they’re not elderly. I just turned fifty-eight in February.”

“Fifty-eight must be the new thirty-eight,” I muse, teasing.

Amelia

I'd be sitting here fighting the urge to hide my emotions if I didn't have this distraction right now. The distraction? Two wolf shifters vying for my mother's attention. I was a little concerned at seeing the exchange between Mason and Roxy, then further miffed at seeing that bitchy redhead, but it didn't last because Mason's reaction to her made it very clear that he's not interested. And the Roxy thing? She looked at him a lot like she did last time I was here. I think she's hung up on him. I'd be hung up on him, too, if I saw him with another woman. I can't exactly blame her. At least she's not taking it out on me.

But back to my mom.

She's absolutely shell-shocked as this attention she's getting from the two attractive shifters is happening. She's sitting across from me, Mason beside me, and Mom has nudged my calf with her foot about seven times so far. I'd call it a "sit and eat popcorn scene", but I've got chili fries and a double smash burger on a brioche bun coming, so... even better.

First, the attractive guy called Cade who works here is dripping with sexual innuendos and giving my mom bedroom eyes while being overly touchy-feely (and in a hot way, not a creepy way). He's probably ten years younger than Mom and built like a football player with a crew cut and very nice blue eyes.

But then the Daddy Dom guy comes over. A little older than Mom but uber-hot with a... presence. That's the only way I can think to describe him. Lorenzo is well-dressed and with a commanding aura about him, dark hair, dark eyes, and not to mention muscles for days. He sits with us and starts asking Mom about herself, looking into her eyes like he's trying to

hypnotize her. Mom looks like she's about ready to drop to her knees and obey his every command.

Through the conversation and Mom talking about her new place, it transpires that Lorenzo will be following her from here so he can unload her van for her.

Cade overhears this and the next thing I know, he's one-upping Lorenzo and is helping with the big move, now happening on Sunday for the rest of her stuff. He's going to borrow one of the Savage Construction trucks. Lorenzo insists he'll come, too. They're driving together to meet Mom at her house Sunday morning.

Mason offered to go as well and Lorenzo piped up with, "You shouldn't even be here right now, Mase. You've had your honeymoon interrupted how many times now? You two should finish up your food and get out of here now. Go home and bond. I'll take care of your sweet momma, Amelia. Don't you worry about a thing."

"I don't know if I *should* be worried, though," I say. "The males around these parts are rather..." I search for a word.

"Don't fret. She'll be in good, capable hands." He winks at Mason and does it in a way that ensures we all, including Mom, notice.

Mom's eyes widen.

Yeah, because my original thought was correct. OMG Arcana Falls is like The Bermuda Triangle. But instead of being lost at sea, you're whisked away by a hot wolf shifter, never to be seen again.

Because he's knotting you to death.

"Kidnapping my mother will not be tolerated," I announce and immediately, I'm kicked under the table. I yelp in pain, making it very obvious that she just kicked me.

Mom's giving me *shut the fuck up* eyes.

My mouth drops.

Mason chokes on a laugh.

“I should powder my nose,” Mom announces, looking at me pointedly.

“And I should help,” I say, shuffling closer to Mason who slides out to let me out of the booth, then takes my hand to help me up. He drops a kiss on *that* spot on my neck and squeezes my hand with affection before he releases it. I walk away with Jell-O knees, feeling like I’m being watched. I look over my shoulder and see Mason checking me out, and both Lorenzo and Cade checking Mom out.

“One does not allow oneself to be kidnapped without a freshly powdered nose,” I muse once Mom and me are behind the bathroom door.

“Where are you going?” Mom grabs my arm in order to halt me.

“To the stall to pee,” I defend, laughing.

“Hurry,” she snaps, then releases me and gets closer to the mirror, fluffing her blonde hair and rolling her lips.

“You’re popular tonight,” I call out after closing the stall door, sitting to have a tinkle.

“What if he makes a pass at me?” she says a minute later.

“Lorenzo?” I ask.

“Yeah. We’ll be alone in my new apartment.”

“Well...” I finish up and flush. I come out and wash my hands, noting the look of terror mixed with something else on her face. What’s that something else? I’m thinking excitement.

“You do whatever you want to do. You’re a grown woman. You’re a single, unattached female. But if you don’t want his help tonight, or to be alone with him, tell him not to follow.”

“He’s very handsome.”

“Yes...”

“And charming.”

“Mm hm.”

“And big.”

I smile. He is, indeed, big. The man is tall, broad, and attractive with chiseled features.

“So... if you’re not comfortable with this, Mom, we can go out there and say you’re coming back with us to Mason’s for the night and that we’ll help you unload your van in the morning. Or... we can just follow you there. We’ll say I insist on seeing your new place. And then we won’t leave until he —”

“No. That’s okay. I... I can do this.” She takes a deep breath. “I just haven’t dated, haven’t seen a man besides your father without clothes on since... ever.”

“Ever?”

“Other than on TV. Or that one time when we were at the zoo and the streaker streaked by us.”

“That was my first naked man sighting, too.” I shudder at the not-pleasant memory.

“I lost my virginity on my wedding night, Amie,” Mom goes on, “I haven’t been with anyone but Dad. Nothing past second base with anyone else. But I guess I *am* single, so...”

I blink away my surprise. I’ve never asked her about her history pre-Dad. She’s never divulged it. Mom has always been open with me and my sister on the sex topic and I guess I just assumed she had a sex life before my father – or maybe more accurate to say I didn’t really ponder the thought at all. Because you don’t typically imagine your parents having sex. And I don’t really want to, of course.

This is girlfriend territory she and I are in right now and though Mom, Ivy, and me are all very close and friend-like with one another, this is new aspect of girlfriend territory for us.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, Mom.”

“I want to. I just don’t know if I want to... yet.”

“Then make that clear,” I say. “Maybe push him off about tonight, but make it known you’re open to... something else? A coffee or a drink sometime?”

Her mouth twitches in contemplation.

“We’ll come with you; help you unload.”

“Maybe that’d be good,” she whispers.

“That’s what we’ll do. I’ll get a chance to see your apartment, too. And he can come so that leaves him with the notion that you’re open, but you’re not going to be alone with him.”

Mom empties her lungs with a gust. “Good, okay.”

“Okay.” I reach for the door and push it open.

“Though part of me thinks it’d be fun to be kidnapped,” she mutters behind me.

I laugh and we head back to the table arm in arm.

Cade comes to us with dessert that we didn’t order, serving Mom a slice of pie with three dollops of whipped cream, telling her it’s his favorite. He gives me a thick slice of strawberry cheesecake and doesn’t give anything to Lorenzo or Mason. Cade flashes a sexy grin as he leans over Lorenzo to give Mom her pie.

“I can’t possibly,” I say, holding my belly.

“I’ll get you a to-go container?” Cade offers.

“Thank you so much. Perfect.”

“I’ll have mine here,” Mom says. “You two can go on ahead. I’ll be fine.”

“Um...” What?

“Go ahead, Amelia,” Mom pushes.

“I thought you wanted to show me your apartment tonight.”

“Lots of time for that.” She waves dismissively.

“She’s in good hands,” Lorenzo assures.

That’s what I’m afraid of. I give her a quizzical look and she gives me one of reassurance. Okay, I guess.

To summarize, two shapeshifters are helping my mother move and both are acting like they want to date her, one looking a little smug about the fact that he’s going to get alone-time with her tonight since the other has to work.

It’s been entertaining to watch Mom observe the competitive ping-pong between the two men who are clearly friends but who are both interested in asking my mother out.

Mason and Lorenzo argue over the bill, but before it goes too far, Cade announces he’s covered it.

I thank him and hug Mom goodbye. I wave to other smiling faces that are watching us leave.

“Tell me about Lorenzo and Cade,” I request when Mason gets in the truck after having opened and closed the passenger door for me.

“Cade is a single, unmated alpha. He’s Roxy’s uncle.”

“He seems nice.”

“He is,” Mason replies.

“What about Lorenzo?”

“He’s the same position as me in the last generation council-wise. Second born alpha from that council’s calendar year. Also Roxy’s uncle on the other side of her family. A great man. Excellent mentor.”

“So... neither are looking to mate my mother for life?” I ask.

He snickers as he starts the truck.

“He could be looking for companionship that could turn out to be lifelong – difficult to say. He lost his wife about seven years

ago. He was hollow for a long time after that. This is the first time I've seen him show interest in anyone.”

“Interesting, I note. “Will one of them try to kidnap my mother and then bite her neck?”

“Cade hasn't mated. He dates, but he's never identified a woman as his. He seems interested in your mother, but he didn't identify her as his fated mate or the evening would've gone differently.”

“Is that normal? He's what... in his late thirties, early forties?”

“It's not unheard of. Some alphas don't find their perfect other half; though most do.”

“Hm.”

“If Cade identified your mother as his, he'd have done it on sight and scent. There's no birth order waiting period with non-council alphas.”

“But Lorenzo?”

“He already mated. He could be interested in companionship, though. Or just a bit of fun. He could also have a second mating. It's rare, but it happens.”

“Maybe we should follow them to Mom's.”

He laughs. “Your mother is an adult, baby.”

“Well... is Lorenzo going to be a gentleman tonight?”

“No idea. I know I'm not. Can't wait to get you home.”

I look at him and his eyes flash with heat before they return to the road.

“Moon's pigment is fading,” he observes.

I stretch to get a better look at the night sky. He's right. There's not much of a pink hue left.

We missed the sunset tonight. That's disappointing.

He smiles. “Could be interesting what happens next...”

And my heart sinks. He thinks I'm about to be ripe to make a baby with. Each time he has sex with me over the next however long he'll be thinking he's getting me pregnant, tying me to him forever.

"How many kids do you want?" I ask, then clear my throat as that sounded more like a croak.

This right here is another reason – maybe the biggest – that all this can't possibly be fate. Why would fate cheat him like that?

"Never thought about it, really. I'm open to the conversation, though," he says. "You?"

He obviously wants a family. Why would fate pair a super-alpha male with someone who can't help him procreate and make new strong wolf shifters?

And that's the kicker. I should tell him that right here and now, say it out loud so that he'll know. He'll know that I'm not his happily-ever-after. He'll know that this witchcraft shouldn't have happened and that if it hadn't or if it could somehow be undone, he'd have the opportunity to find what he really needs, someone who can give him exactly what he deserves.

I moisten my lips and straighten up, ready to set him straight, ready to get it off my chest, knowing that the change in his features, the look in his eyes will probably be as bad or worse than it was when I shared with Blake what the doctor said to me.

But the words won't come. The words stay lodged in my chest, in that little hidden compartment there that I've occasionally dipped a toe into over the past few days. That little itty-bitty part that holds the very big emotions inside it – the truth. That I wish this *could* be real.

Sadness floods through me. Sadness isn't a strong enough word. Neither is *immense sorrow*.

Grief over the fact that I'm not going to get to carry a baby. Mason's baby. Anybody's baby. Especially sad it can't be Mason's baby.

Blake and I lasted not long after the news.

My relationship died what felt like a slow death, because the writing was on the wall almost immediately. He always knew he wanted kids. At least three, including a boy named after his dad, since his dad got killed by that drunk driver. I stood with tears in my eyes when he told me with tears in his that he didn't need to raise someone else's kids. He felt a deep need to carry on his family line. To look into the eyes of a child that he knew he helped make. That was part him. Part his parents, who died too young. Would I consider a surrogate? I told him I wasn't ready to decide about something like that, needed time to process the news before I would know if I wanted to foster, adopt, or consider going the surrogacy route. And the decline of the relationship was fast from that point on because he was suddenly ready to have kids immediately, even though we hadn't set a wedding date. Blake never even told me he loved me. He acted like he did up until that point, but the death of his parents broke him. He didn't like that I needed time to process. And I didn't like that he wanted so badly to look into a child's eyes that would be part his but not part mine. I don't know why that stung so much, but it did.

We parted ways just before Auntie Nelle came home to die after a big fight when he first made a comment during a nothing spat about how maybe I should go on medication because my hormone disorder was making me a super-bitch. And I knew then that he would always hold my fertility issues against me.

And then after Auntie Nelle's painful end, Dad got caught having an affair. And Mom went through *that* hell right after losing her sister. It happened not long after I introduced Rick to my parents.

Rick, who told me on the first coffee date that he was driven, ambitious, and didn't want children. He knew that to his core to the degree he had a vasectomy when he turned twenty-five.

This shocked me, but I said nothing.

A couple dates later, when I told him I had medical problems that would prevent me from having a child, he said he was looking forward to a full and free life without kids. He went on at length about how kids tied you down, how they'd be a source of stress. Worrying about them. Worrying about whether or not you were screwing them up with your own demons. Worrying about them hurting you by disappointing you. Admitting that he didn't think he was capable of unconditional love.

When I told him I'd always wanted to be a mother, that unconditional love was a notion I could totally get behind, he said he wasn't closed off to the idea of being with someone wanting to adopt and / or fostering as long as that person knew they'd have to do all the work. He said that hypothetically, if I wanted to do it and still be with him, I could do it myself or hire some help but not expect him to give up golf, not expect him to stop being a workaholic. Not expect nighttime feedings or diaper change assistance.

Being with Rick felt pragmatic at the time. Because I knew that if I wanted it, I could do it alone if I needed to. I was strong, independent, and could do whatever I wanted to do.

He left it up to me. And I thought I was okay with that.

But the spark of hope that ignited in my chest when Mason's mother talked about being adopted? The idea that he could be open to that because his mom had a loving adoptive family?

Just thinking about the road with Rick has me all twisted in knots. He gave me someone else's ring. I wore that ugly thing for months and put up with abuse from his mother and the woman he's obviously fucking. Why? Sheila's married, but why wouldn't she leave her husband and just be with Rick herself? The only reason Rick proposed was because of some weird clause in his grampa's will that ... what... named me as the choice for his grandson to marry? A practical joke?

Grampa Bullock was definitely eccentric. And he treated me like a beloved granddaughter almost instantly. Told me I had moxie. That more women needed moxie. Would Rick really go

along with all this just for the sake of money? He's a financial planner who always talks about the fact that he's been setting himself up for the future since he could count past the number of fingers he has. Would he really marry me to get the money when he's going to get that money anyway whenever his Grandma passes away?

We're pulling up behind my car now and I realize I've been lost in thought most of the short drive. Wallowing in my reality.

A fiancé that cheated, that probably didn't really love me at all. Deceived me for months. An incredible wolf shifter that thinks we're meant to be – but who would be sorely disappointed to find out the truth about me.

He gets out of his truck and I do, too, following him inside, my heart heavy, my chest feeling like it's caving in.

As soon as we're inside the door, he shuts and locks it, then lifts me up into his arms like I'm his bride.

"Why are you so sad, wildberry?" he asks, putting his lips to my forehead.

I shake my head and fight off the tears.

"You didn't answer how many you want..." He lets that hang. And his eyes are soft, locked with mine, and I swear it's almost as if he can see what's inside my brain right now.

"And who were you talking to when I was giving your mom the tour? Something's got you upset."

"It doesn't matter," I say. "Can you take me to bed, Mason? Please?"

"Absolutely," he says against my mouth and then carries me to the kitchen, popping the dessert bag into the fridge before he climbs the stairs with me, a look of pure devotion on his gorgeous face.

"You gonna share that dessert with me?"

“Nope. It’s mine. All mine,” I say, trying to be haughty, trying to lighten the mood.

He smiles.

I don’t know what I’m going to do about any of this. I don’t know if there’s anything I *should* do about this.

Maybe Ivy can have her happy ending with Tyson.

And maybe Mom will either fall for one or at least feel wanted for a while between the two shifters who are interested in her. I’m so happy for her – that she’s feeling good about herself, that she looks on top of the world.

But me? The super-alpha that got the short straw by getting me can do so much better than this super-bitch drama queen with the broken reproductive system. Self-loathing isn’t an admirable quality to have, but I can’t help but listen to the inner voice telling me that Mason Quinn deserves so much more than I can give him.

After setting me on the bed, he takes his sweater off, revealing his gorgeous upper body, making my mouth water. I’m trying to tune out my thoughts, to focus on now, on feeling good for a little while.

If I were alone, I’d probably search for joy in that to-go dessert container, but since I’m not alone, I’m thinking I can find a moment without pain under the ministrations of the shifter sex god. And then have the cheesecake later.

“Talk to me, baby.”

I swallow down a lump of pain and try to sound convincing.

“I’m fine.”

“Amelia,” he says softly.

I shake my head. “Talking is overrated. You know what’s not? Fucking.” I lick my lips slowly, deliberately.

He sits on the edge of the bed. “Talk to me.” He looks far too serious.

I get up onto my knees and reach for his fly. He catches my wrist.

“You want my cock, you can talk to me first.”

“I don’t want your cock. Forget it,” I scowl, then storm into the bathroom and slam the door.

Mason

As I hear the shower turn on, I'm assaulted with an onslaught of emotion. As if the emotions I was feeling from her have quadrupled in intensity. After hurrying into the bathroom, I find her in the shower, doubled over.

She's sobbing. Hands over her face. Body trembling.

Pain shunts through my veins at the sight of this. This hurts me. I need to take it away, protect her, make her happy, erase whatever this is. Take this pain away from the both of us because I feel it as acutely as if it's mine. I want to take it with my teeth and rip it to shreds so it can't hurt her anymore.

Fuck. I knew this was messy, the fears and doubts plaguing her, but it feels like they've hit a new level. I quickly strip the rest of my clothes off and climb in with her, pulling her close.

She looks into my eyes and the pain in her features seize my chest. She drags her gaze away and stares at the drain.

"Go away," she pleads.

"What's wrong?"

I want to fix it, whatever it is.

I purr for her, helping her melt into me as the water pounds down on both of us. I do this for a good few minutes before I finally tip her chin up and stop purring.

"Tell me."

Her face contorts, like she's in agony.

"Amelia. Fucking tell me!" I demand.

She startles at this and looks at me with fear.

I purr some more, pulling her cheek to my chest.

“Tell me,” I then repeat, caressing her head. “Please, please tell me. Whatever it is, I can help. I promise I can help if you just open up. I’m your mate. I’m here for you. Whatever happens. Whatever has already happened, baby... I’m here.”

She looks up at me with unguarded pain stamped on her face.

I stroke her cheek.

“I can’t give you what you deserve,” she whimpers.

“What?”

She sobs harder, burying her face in my chest, clinging like she can’t get close enough, like she wants to climb under my skin.

“Explain this to me,” I murmur against the top of her head.

“I can’t... even if this thing with us were meant to be, it’s not. It’s just not.”

“Baby... I don’t understand what you’re saying. It is. I know it’s meant to be.” I squeeze her close, revving up the purring.

“It can’t be. That wouldn’t be fair to you. If this were true, if this were really meant to be, you’d be getting ripped off.”

Ripped off?

“Because?”

“Because if I’m what you get, then poor you.”

“Amelia, explain. Try.”

“I can’t... can’t have children.” Her eyes dart up to me, filled with fear.

I stare.

She looks like she’s waiting for something. For me to say something, do something. For the world to explode. She’s braced.

I do nothing but wait.

She frowns and tries to pull away, but I hold tight and continue to look her in the eyes.

This pain that I see and feel from her physically hurts me. I fucking hate this. I knew the bond with my mate would be unbreakable, would be important, but I never knew it would hurt so much to see another person feel pain.

“I have an ovulation disorder,” she declares, then swallows with pain etched into her features.

“And you think that’s why this can’t be real? Because all I care about is having my own broodmare?”

She flinches. I cup her jaw in both palms.

“Is that what you think?” I demand.

She chokes on a sob, shrugging. I haven’t known her long but based on everything so far, never would’ve expected to see such an extreme opposite to the confident woman I’ve known so far.

“Amie... if fate has us being parents, that’s what we’ll be. If fate has us being the best damn aunt and uncle there ever was to your sister’s kids, it’ll be that.” My thumbs skim across her cheekbones, dashing the tears away even though the shower continues to pour over us. “If a stork sets a baby on the doorstep or we decide to look for one that has a kid that needs a family and we succeed – we’ll know *that’s* the plan.”

She swallows again.

For her to be in this much pain over this, it’s obvious that what she wants more than anything in the world is to be a mother.

“You’re mine,” I say, dropping a kiss over the frown lines between her eyes. “You’re mine and I’m yours and right now, that’s what matters. Neither of us is perfect, but we’re perfect for one another; I believe that. We’ve known one another a couple days, we’ve got all kinds of time to figure out what we want while we enjoy being together. If we decide to have a family, we’ll have a family, even if it doesn’t happen the traditional way. If my mate wants a baby, we will get you one. Okay?”

“You’ll probably resent me for it.”

“Resenting you for something out of your control would make me a short-sighted, selfish asshole, wouldn’t it? You think that’s who I am? You think *you* got ripped off in the fate department?”

She grabs onto me and buries her face in my chest, holding me tight. She does this, but she’s still not letting go of this pain she’s holding onto. I feel it vividly. And I fucking wish I could erase it.

“You’re holding back because you think I won’t want you because of this?” I ask.

“I’m holding back for a lot of reasons, and this happens to be one of them.”

“What else you got? Let’s get it all out here and now so we can move the fuck on, you knowing exactly where I stand. Do you know where I stand, Amie?”

She looks into my eyes with light shining, with hope shining as her chin quivers.

“I stand right with you, baby. Behind you when that’s where I know you need me to be, in front of you when you need me to be a shield, and beside you any other time. What I’ll also do is pick you up when you fall, but wherever possible, catch you before you land. You don’t know me yet, but that’s what you’ll figure out once you give this a chance. Will you do that? Open up enough to let me in? Let me show you how good this is gonna be?”

She grabs me and hops. I catch her, wrapping her legs around my lower back as she attacks my mouth with hers. I spin the tap off and carry her to the counter, sopping wet. I set her down on the countertop and grab towels and try to get her dry, but between the way she’s kissing me, clawing at me to get me closer, along with the scent of her arousal in my lungs, begging to be on my tongue, I can’t wait.

“If this goes sideways, it’ll devastate me,” she whispers, wrapping those sexy legs around me tighter. I give up on the drying and toss the towel.

“It won’t,” I vow as I lift her and head toward the bed.

“If the spell wears off...”

“The spell isn’t about this, about what we feel. We feel this because it’s right. The spell was about your parents, about your mother finding out the truth about your father, about the Youngs getting that money they needed. There was some shit the witches definitely interfered with but the *hows* and *whys* don’t matter. Whatever they did, they did because this is right.”

“If you get sick of me and my drama...”

“Never. You and your drama are mine for the rest of my days.”

We’re going to saturate the sheets, but I don’t give a fuck. It’s gonna happen anyway, because I’m going to fuck her for the next several hours non-stop.

“If...”

“Baby, shut up.”

She leans back and stares in awe. “This is crazy.”

“Not to me, it’s not. To me, it’s perfect.” I set her on the bed. “Once I saw you and got your scent in my lungs, I knew. I’d never been more certain about any-fucking-thing. And then once I tasted you, once I released my first knot inside you, the first moment I felt our connection after giving you my mark, I knew that you were all I needed. Every minute I’m with you, learning more about you, I see that you’re *it* for me. You are. You’re all I need. Kids might be nice, no – would be wonderful, but they don’t have to be blood for us to love them, do they, baby?”

She shakes her head, eyes glistening with moisture.

“Voodoo sex magic,” she whispers.

“And it’s good, isn’t it?” I ask.

She nods.

“So then let’s enjoy it.”

She smiles.

“My mother was adopted by a couple who couldn’t have kids. My grandparents adopted her and my aunts. Shifters adopt, too.” I put a knee to the bed.

“She told me.”

“And you’re still feeling this way?”

She shrugs. “I also heard some alphas reject their mate for infertility. Or take on a mistress.”

“I won’t do either of that. No fucking way!” I growl. “You’ve got a lot to learn about me and my kind, wildberry. About me, especially. But we’re pack animals because we support one another. We live big, full lives of love. Family means everything to us and that’s not just about offspring, it’s about mates, it’s about community. You know?”

She swallows. “It’s not just that... it’s...” She huffs out a sigh.

“Silly girl,” I whisper, then I move down to take her mouth with mine. When I pull back, I add, “All that matters today is you and me are mates. Meant to be. You’re mine forever, baby. And I’m yours. Whether you want me or not.” I throw her legs up and lower my head. Before I get to my goal, I say, “And I do want you. I won’t ever, ever let you go, and I’ll never want to touch another woman. Never.”

My mouth connects with delicious wet skin and I drag my tongue between her silky folds. Fuck, she tastes so good.

I feast on her pussy, getting rewarded with more of Amelia’s arousal and sweet little whimpers.

“Whatever else it is, it’ll all work out,” I say, dropping a kiss on her inner thigh, “But, fuck me if you don’t smell and taste like you’re in heat so let’s just go with it, okay?”

“Okay,” she whispers, tears glistening in her pretty eyes, a smile on her face, her eyes now emitting an even deeper, glowing indigo color.

Fuck, she smells and tastes better than anything. I need to fuck her. I could fuck her non-stop until I take my very last breath.

She's enjoying the oral, so I fight the urge to slide inside for a few more minutes while I lick her clit and pump my fingers in and out of her sweet, tight channel. I keep at it until she's crying out a plea. Fuck, I can't wait a second longer. I climb up her body, kissing, licking, and nipping my way up her smooth, delicious flesh until I get to her claiming mark.

"Your predator needs to devour you," I rasp, spearing her with my aching, rock-hard cock. The second I'm inside her, something urgent crackles to life in my veins. An urge to fuck her that's so fierce, I don't think I could stop if I tried.

Her front teeth are embedded into her lower lip; her eyes are indigo fire – my new favorite color.

I let out a deep groan as my knot detonates, immediately expanding and shooting hot cum inside her. A lot of it. My knot buzzes with a current that's so strong, it hurts. I hiss with the discomfort and drive my body forward, which helps, so that's what I do to ease the ache – slam my hips forward over and over; fuck my mate into the mattress.

I'm in The Rut. I don't think I could stop right now if my life depended on it. The only thing that would stop me is if *her* life depended on it.

I fucking love this woman.

Mine. She's all mine. And look at her. She loves me, too. I know she does. I feel it as clearly as I feel my own feelings for her.

She lets out a wounded-sounding cry as I roar while filling her with my essence, her tight heat choking my cock in the best way.

I want to paint her with my cum while I feast on her. I twist, flipping her so I'm sitting on the bed, my legs hanging off. She's riding my knot, holding tight to my shoulders as I rock her back and forth on me, suckling my mark on her and growling as more cum shoots inside her. Her nails dig into my

back, her sweet cries of ecstasy filling my ears and her mouth-watering scent permeating my flesh. Her head is thrown back and her mouth is open, eyes closed, expression lust-laden. Not only will Amelia always smell like me, I'll smell like her, too. I'm hers as much as she's mine.

She's drawn my blood on my back and it makes me want to roar out with pride. This woman is mine and she's a warrior who's fought against a world of pain. She'll be victorious. I'll make her so fucking happy, she'll forget. I'll fill her with love, with happiness instead.

I'm drunk on her. I've got a mouth full of breast, and my thumb circling her tight asshole. My knot releases halfway and then expands again, feeling even larger, vibrating even harder. As some of my cum leaks from her, I use it to lubricate her tight ring and slowly push my thumb inside her ass.

"Mason," she cries out, "Oh fuck, baby."

I growl in agreement, drawing her other nipple into my mouth and gently biting down.

"Oh G-god," she sobs, her body trembling, both from her climax as well as from my oscillating knot.

Even more sensation rolls from my spine up to my fingertips. Finally, my knot shrinks slowly, completely, and it feels like I'm washed in warm rain. When I'm able to pull out, I'm still hard. I want more. Now. My lap is drenched with our fluids.

"I'm not done with you yet," I advise.

She whimpers in reply, body melting, boneless.

I turn her to her belly and slide back inside while I continue to play with her perfect curvy ass, the sound of flesh slapping flesh along with the sweet song of my Amelia continuing to whimper. I watch her fists flex as she clenches the bedding. My eyes graze her perfect skin marred only by goosebumps that I know I've brought. She fucking loves this. She loves my cock, my knot, my fingers and my mouth. And I'm absolutely sure of it by the emotion coming at me from her tonight, she's ready to let herself fall in love with me.

“I love you, baby,” I say, leaning over close enough to look into her eyes, which snap open. “I do. I love you.” I kiss her lips and her eyes drift closed, a tear sliding out of one. I dot kisses up to her eyelid, before catching the tear on her cheek. “I know this down to my soul. You might not be ready to say it back, but I feel it from you. You love me, too. It’s okay to love me, Amie. It’s safe. I fucking swear to you it’s safe to love me back. Fall with me. Feel this with me. It’s amazing, baby. Let yourself have it. Not just for one night. Let yourself have it. I’m all yours.”

I pull out, flip her to her back and she grabs on, clamping tighter around my cock while gripping me with her arms and legs. She weeps as I continue to fuck her. There’s still emotion coming at me from her and now it’s not pain. Instead, it’s beautiful. It’s falling down on me like more warm rain, every drop hitting my skin expanding into more emotion. I soak those beautiful emotions in, every perfect one of them as I continue to fuck her for hours non-stop, pulling climax after climax from her before she falls asleep in my arms, mouth swollen from the kissing, my back and my ass cheeks marked up from her fingernails, my shoulder showing her teeth marks. I could go another round, but she needs sleep.

Our bodies glisten with perspiration and the sheets are damp from a combination of the shower, sweat, and our mating juices, so I roll us to the slightly drier side. I’m purring for her. She’s smiling while sleeping. And I could not fucking be happier.

Amelia

I wake up in the dark.

I'm confused. I feel something strange, something sort of... bereft.

I bolt up to sitting, clutching the covers to my naked body while my eyes dart around the dark space. Wrapping the top sheet around myself like a toga, I rise shakily.

Mason. Where is he?

It's wet between my thighs. If I didn't know better, I'd think I peed the bed. But I *do* know better. As I walk toward the bathroom, fluid trickles down my inner thighs. I wipe it away with tissue as I sit and use the toilet, then rise, wash my hands and face, then brush my teeth before I throw on his turtleneck from yesterday and wander downstairs on rubbery legs.

It's dark. Quiet. The display on the microwave says 6:17. I look outside. Mason's truck. My car. I look downstairs. Dark. Out the window out back. No sign of Mason. Where is he?

My heart feels like it's thumping at a strange tempo, and too hard against my chest wall. Something is wrong. I'm trembling. I'm not sure what this is, but putting my proverbial nurse hat on right now, I suspect I'm having a panic attack.

I go back to the front foyer and among the stuff he brought in from Mom's van last night, I see the table has his keys, wallet, and phone. My heart plummets. I search upstairs again, this time checking the rooms on the second floor. There are three good-sized rooms and a bathroom along with the loft area that serves as another living space. The bedrooms are empty, not even any furniture in them. Future kid bedrooms, obviously, since the basement has two guest rooms. One of the second-floor rooms has an ensuite bathroom and walk-in closet. It's

big enough to be a master, too, in case someone preferred to be next to their kids' rooms, which I'm sure I would. If I had kids.

My heart aches a little amid my distress. It's that familiar ache I've grown used to. He built this house for a family. A family he wouldn't mind adopting according to him.

I feel like I'm about to hyperventilate, so I take some steadying breaths, feeling the echoes of the wonderful things he said last night. But being by myself just feels wrong.

I go back up to his bedroom and strip the sheets off the bed. I take a fast but thorough shower before I dress in yoga pants and a hoodie, and then I find clean bedding in the closet, so I put it on and take the dirty bedding to the laundry room in the basement.

And then I pace. I pace all four levels of the house, thinking it's probably not a good idea to drink coffee when I'm feeling this jittery, but it's morning and the sun is rising, so I talk myself into it. I start it up and watch it drip into the carafe in slow motion while drumming my fingertips on the counter, gnawing on the inside of my cheek until it's nearly raw. Needing a different distraction, I decide to get my phone from upstairs. I'll call Ivy.

Yeah, it's assholeish to call this early, but I need a familiar voice. I need something... I don't know what. Or I suspect I *do* know what I need, but he's not here.

So, another distraction it is. If I can't get ahold of her, I'll try Mom. Mom always answers, no matter what time it is. Though... is Mom even alone? Is she back home or in her new apartment? Did she spend the night with Lorenzo?

I hurry upstairs to fetch my new phone from my bag, which is on the nightstand.

I pull out both phones, but before I give in to the urge to turn on the old phone to see if there are any texts from Gloria, I hear the front door open, so I spin and rush down to the top of the final flight of stairs and watch him stroll into the kitchen,

nude. He's looking damp and out of breath when his eyes meet mine.

"Good morning, wildberry." He smiles, then turns the tap on and puts his mouth under it and drinks like he's parched.

I grip the railing, feeling like the light, the *life* is back in my body at the sight of this man. Relief, sweet relief. But then I feel something else, and before I can stop myself, I'm asking in an accusing tone, "Where were you?"

I sound angry.

He lifts his head, turns the tap off and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Went on a run. Met my pack brothers. Do it every day around dawn if I can. You were asleep, so —"

"I was freaked," I snap.

He hurries up the stairs toward me.

"Why's your heart racing so hard?" He looks me over with concern as he approaches. I back up, holding a hand up, as if to ward him off.

"I woke up and... and... I was freaked," I repeat.

I'm trembling now. I'm feeling fear mixed with anger. But, why?

"Not nice to wake up alone when you're expecting to find someone beside you, is it?" he teases.

"Oh, so tit for tat?" I ask, incredulous.

"No baby, not at all." His eyes change and now he looks confused. "Sorry you were worried, but... wait. Were you worried? Did you miss me?"

"What happened to leaving a note? You said you'd leave a note if you had to go somewhere, told me to do that, too, and no note!"

"I did write you a note. Come on." He tags my hand and we walk up to the third floor.

My hands are shaking, my knees are wobbly, and I don't know why. And even worse, it feels like my throat is closing.

Mason squats to reach to the rug between his bed and nightstand, then rises holding a yellow Post-It.

"Oh," I whisper, heart stuttering in my chest.

"Must've fallen off." He flashes it at me.

Gone for a quick run. I'll make you crepes when I get home.

"Oh," I whisper again and then fold my arms over my chest angrily. Not sure why I'm angry, but I am.

"How long you been up?"

"Half an hour," I mutter.

"You made the bed," he says.

"It needed it," I reply.

He smirks.

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. I let it win.

Mason moves in for a kiss, capturing my face between both hands. I moan as our mouths touch. I feel like I'm sinking, falling into the sweetest bliss when three consecutive beeps sound off from downstairs.

He takes a deep inhale at my throat, backing away a little bit still holding my face. "You made coffee. I want some of that. But first, some of this." He reaches for me.

I lift my hands up to block him. And I'm not sure why.

"What's the matter, baby? You mad you can't be mad at me?" His face is alight with mischief. "I haven't had a chance to make you mad yet. Give me a couple minutes, though..."

"I was freaked out," I repeat, unsure why I keep saying that and not explaining myself. It's like I can't articulate myself right now. It's not rational, is it? Why was I was having a panic attack? And now that the panic is gone, why am I angry?

I guess I've been hanging onto my futile fight for so long, I'm not sure what I am this morning. Smiling one second, shaking the next, wanting to jump his bones throughout.

"I like to run, shifted, with the guys as the sun comes up. It's a great way to start the day. Days that I don't do it, it's like my wolf's pawing at the door in my mind." He taps his temple with his index finger. "Gives me a chance to touch base with the other council brothers, too. We're under code yellow right now, meaning everyone is on high alert in case your ex comes back sniffing around. Plus we're a man up with Ty and a man down at the same time with Rye, so... my council co-alphas and me need to be in touch. Since you 'n I are freshly mated it's really the only time I'll get with them for at least the next several days. So, now you know. I won't leave another note now, but know when you wake up if it's around dawn, I'm running and I'll be back to you soon. You're having new mate separation anxiety, I think."

"Oh," I say.

"You want me to skip it tomorrow?"

"Of course not." I shake my head vigorously.

"You sure?"

I nod. I'm feeling embarrassed.

"Good." He smiles.

That he would even consider skipping it because I woke up freaked out at being alone is kind of crazy. And kind of amazing. And, from what I'm starting to figure out – totally Mason.

A surge of affection blooms in my chest. But I'm still embarrassed.

"I could use some coffee, too," I say and I'm about to walk away, catch my breath and try to resume normal instead of crazy-Amie drama queen behavior, but he catches me in his arms. "I need another good morning kiss, mate."

God, when he says it like that, in that possessive-sounding rasp, it sounds like the sexiest word in the world. *Mate*.

He cradles my face and pulls me close, pressing a soft, sweet kiss against my mouth. It turns hungry, instantly, and I think I'm the one that shifts it into that. And then we're tumbling onto his bed and he's pulling my clothes off.

"Did you want to be mad at me so you could run away from me?" he asks as he runs his nose up my hairline, inhaling me.

"Huh?" I'm pedaling my yoga pants off as fast as my feet will go, thinking that for some reason his sweat smells good.

Now he's peppering kisses all over my neck. Well, not all over, he's missing *that* spot. I crane my neck to give him better access as I inhale his delicious aroma.

"Were you pickin' a fight, lookin' to run from me so I'd chase you?" He suckles my earlobe and then growls in my ear. "You want me to chase you?"

My legs wind around him, my fingers scrub at his jaw, which is more than stubbled now, since he hasn't shaved in a couple days. It's deliciously prickly, but in another day or two, it'll probably be soft. I think I'm ready for him to shave it off so it can grow back prickly sooner.

"You were pissed off at me. And then disappointed that I left a note? Why, because you're angling for a fight?"

"Huh?"

"Aren't you gonna play along, wildberry?"

I startle. *Oh*.

"C'mon, play along," he whispers and then sucks on my neck right *there*, right where I want it.

Mm. But he lets go too soon, so I instinctively grab the back of his head and tug on his short hair.

I wish it was *just* that kind of game, instead of me being a total lunatic. But maybe I'll play along.

“I don’t think you were done there yet.” I stretch my neck as a hint about what I want.

He kisses between my boobs instead. “Don’t be bossy,” he says.

“That’s it, forget it.” I jump up. “I’m not in the mood for this.”

His eyes light with mischief. “No?”

“Nope,” I state, then shove him as I roll off the bed. I walk to the doorway, turn around and poke my tongue out at him.

He’s on his feet and he’s making his way toward me.

I take off running across the bridge to the stairs and then I’m rushing down them. He’s coming up behind me.

And a giggle bubbles up.

“Gonna get you,” he warns, and the tone of his voice makes my nipples tingle.

When I get to the bottom step on the main floor, he’s suddenly scooping me up over his shoulder.

I squeal in panic as my body goes upside down over his shoulder. Blood rushes to my head as my stomach pitches.

“No, no-no. Not upside down, Mason, No.” I grab his waist with my hands.

“Got ‘cha,” he declares, triumphantly.

“No! Switch me to bride style, please. You know I hate this.”

He slaps my ass. “I’m not dropping you, baby. You’re gonna have to trust me.”

And he carries me back up to the third floor like that.

By the time he drops me on his bed, I am *actually* mad. Legitimately fuming! I shove him while spitting hair out of my mouth. “Don’t fucking do that!”

“You think,” he moves in close, so close our noses are almost touching, “I’d drop you?”

The intensity in his eyes rocks me to my core and knocks the anger straight out of me.

“No,” I whisper.

“I would never drop you.”

“But don’t carry me like that.”

“You can handle it,” he teases, mouth twitching.

I shove him and try to move him away and he catches me and puts me on my back, pinning me and grinding his erection against me while slipping his tongue between my now parted lips.

“I’ll never drop you,” he says against my mouth, “Never hurt you. Not ever.”

It’s a struggle to work down a swallow as I stare into his gorgeous dark eyes.

“Okay,” I whisper sweetly and caress his jaw, “But don’t carry me like that, or else...” I moisten my lips with my tongue and as his eyes drop to my mouth, I haughtily warn, “I’ll knee you in the nuts again.” I tug on his lower lip with my teeth and then release it.

He laughs against my mouth. “Not nice.”

“You’ve been warned,” I tell him with a shrug.

“And I’m warning you, mate, I’ll carry you any way I see fit.”

My eyes flash with anger. But despite that, he is *shit-hot*.

And he knows it.

He caresses my cheek as his eyes go soft. “I’m sorry you were freaked, baby. I’m here. If ever you wake at the crack of dawn and I’m not here, I’ll be back soon.”

“Okay,” I whisper and wrap my arms around him.

“Bride style next time. For my bride. Okay?” he asks.

I bite my lip, unable to form an answer.

“You want crepes before or after you get fucked?” he asks.

“I wanna get fucked before *and* after crepes,” I say, smiling.

“Good answer. I wanna spend the day in bed with you. We can take out the manicotti my mother sent. It’s in the freezer.”

“And drink the rest of the honey wine she sent?”

“Yeah. We’ll do that. No interruptions today. Just you ‘n me. Sound good?”

“Okay. Except I need to check in with my mom just once. Find out how it went last night.”

“Okay, baby. But other than that, you’re all mine?” The warmth in his eyes is toasty, so toasty, I feel like they could keep me warm out in the snow.

“All yours,” I whisper. “Maybe tomorrow can we go for an hour to help them unload the truck? Then when we come back, I’ll make *you* dinner.”

“Whatever you want.”

“Okay.” I kiss him. “You didn’t ask what I’ll cook.”

“I don’t care what you cook, Amie. Don’t care what it tastes like, either. Just love that you wanna cook for me at all.”

My hand drifts up his chest as I kiss him.

He hums a sound of approval as his hand glides up my ribcage to my breast and then I’m running my hand down over his erection.

“What you gonna cook?” he asks.

“Maybe you’ll have to wait ‘n see,” I tease.

“Pretty sure that on day one you said you didn’t cook or clean.”

“I know.”

“You lied?”

“You’ll see, I guess.”

“You did some domestic stuff this morning...”

“The bed was... you know...” I wrinkle my nose. “In need of changing.”

“You made coffee. Where’d you put those sheets and blankets?”

“I started some laundry.”

“So you did lie. You do clean and cook?”

“Maybe.”

“You angling for a punishment fuck?”

“What would denote the need for that? Being a good cook?”

“Lyin’ to me about that, maybe...”

“Mm. I guess we’ll see,” I say.

“We will.” He deeply inhales. “Smells like that’s exactly what you want. But right now, I want it sweet. Wanna keep seein’ this sweet look in your eyes for a while. That okay with you?”

“Okay,” I whisper. “But do one thing for me before you fuck me.”

“Anything,” he says, giving me goosebumps.

I kiss him, then request, “Growl for me, Doggo.”

“He unloaded the van and looked around. We talked for a few minutes, and then he left,” Mom tells me.

“Oh?” I say into the phone. “Are you disappointed he didn’t try anything?” I smooth out the comforter on Mason’s bed and roll onto my belly so I can look out the window. The sun is shining, and it sounds like there are birds directly outside the window.

“No. Even though he didn’t make a big move, there were signs he’s interested. And I liked that they weren’t... you know... overt.”

“Such as?”

“Such as he asked me out.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. And he kissed my hand before he left. It was very gentlemanly.”

“Nice. So... you’re going out with him?”

“He asked if I’d like to have dinner with him one day next week. He’s still coming back tomorrow to help with the bigger move, so we’ll make plans then.”

“You want me there? Tomorrow, I mean. I could come. Help you unpack.”

“No, baby girl. Don’t worry; you have your own unpacking to do.”

I sigh. But I don’t disagree. I can’t think about that. I can’t think about much. I’ve been fucked, fed, and fucked again so far today and oh... I see that Mason is leaning in the doorway of his bedroom looking at me with intention in his eyes. He’s wearing a pair of jeans and nothing else. He moistens his lips and scratches his stubbled jaw while his eyes work over me. I’m thinking those eyes are filled with carnal intentions. How come I’m not sore? How can I be ready for more?

Oh. He straightens up and I notice that he’s holding that wicker basket his mom brought over. He steps in and sets it on the end of the bed, then pulls out a bath bomb and raises his eyebrows, holding it up.

Mom pipes up. “How about you enjoy the rest of the weekend and call me Monday? You good?”

“Yeah. I think I am,” I say, nodding to Mason who wiggles his eyebrows and then slips into the bathroom with the baseball-sized bath bomb.

“Yeah?” Mom asks. “You are?”

I hear the taps spring to life in the bathroom.

“Maybe,” I whisper.

“That makes me happy.”

“Good luck with the open house,” I say.

“Thanks. Talk to you later, sweetheart. Love you.”

“Love you right back.”

I put the phone down and nab the body scrub and an exfoliating mitt from the basket, then meet Mason in the bathroom.

“Are you joining me?” I ask as Mason sets two fluffy towels on the ledge of the tub.

“One’s for your hair,” he says.

Fragrant bubbles are rising.

I reach into the cupboard where he keeps the towels and pull out two more. “Join me.”

He smiles.

I then pull open a drawer under the vanity cabinet, rooting through his toiletries and find what I’m looking for. A razor. I open the cupboard beside the towel cupboard and find shaving cream and aftershave gel.

Mason watches me with avid interest.

“You borrowin’ my razor, wildberry?”

“Get naked, Doggo. Take a bath with me.”

A few minutes later, I’m straddling him in the deep tub, surrounded by bubbles, his palms drifting up and down my legs sweetly while I shave his face, slowly, carefully.

As I take the final stroke, he’s lifting my hips up a little, then moving me back down so that slowly, inch by inch, I get filled with his hard cock.

“You’ve got a new job, mate. This is the only way this face is getting shaved from here on,” he whispers against my mouth.

“Hot as fuck.”

My head rolls back as his hot mouth covers my claiming mark.

My old phone makes noise. I'm in the kitchen, making tea, getting ready to sit out on the upper deck while Mason naps.

Despite the way things went last night and today so far, I'm not quite ready to unpack. I'm in a state of... wait and see, I guess. The doubts, the stress... both keep trying to creep in. I'm half-expecting that any minute he's going to realize this is all a colossal mistake and toss me out on my butt. And I guess that was part of my stress levels this morning when I woke up and he wasn't here. Like my suspicion that last night was too good to be true was about to be confirmed in the morning light.

I go upstairs with my tea and the thick throw from the couch in the living area and pull my old phone out of my bag. A text from Gloria. A long one. I tuck the old phone into my hoodie pocket with my new phone and take a fortifying breath before slipping outside onto the deck with my tea.

It's a little chilly, but the sun is out, the birds are making noises, and the view is incredibly serene.

I wrap the throw around my shoulders and set my tea on the table between the two lounge chairs.

I stare at the peaceful lake for a moment, thinking maybe I should leave this text until tomorrow. Though... I'm not sure I can stay inside my happy sex bubble, enjoying what Mason is calling our bonding time. We've already had sex several times today, including after crepes and bacon which was fed to me by Mason while I sat on his lap. We couldn't keep our hands off one another. We then made out repeatedly while doing the dishes together before I went upstairs and called Mom. Then, while we were in the tub we had more sex that started in there and continued on in his bed afterwards.

And I'm already thinking about sex again, not long later. I'm thinking that when the weather gets nicer, we can be having sex on this deck in this awesome lounge chair. In broad daylight. With dirty-talking. And at sunset. With more dirty-talking.

He's napping in the buff in his bed and looking at his shoulders, that tight ass and those muscled legs, I'm tempted to wake him up. How can I still be horny? The moon phase he talked about? The voodoo sex magic? The fact that he's extraordinarily talented in the sex department? The fact that I'm falling for him?

I swing my legs up, adjusting the back to a comfortable position before repositioning the blanket and lifting the phone to read Gloria's text, taking a deep, fortifying breath.

Gloria: A little more information. 1. He reused his wedding date with Tiara. And the venue. He had deposits down on that country club.

Wow. So I was slotted in as an alternative. I stare at the sky for a moment before my eyes bounce back to my screen and I continue reading her text.

He's having money problems. I don't know details, but from a quick convo with my mother he is devastated the wedding is off but she also says he's having cashflow probs because of a bad deal at work and was counting on his inheritance which will now be screwed because of the breakup and the joke will. She insists that's not why he was rushing the wedding but says she doesn't have the cashflow to help him out of his jam so if he can't figure his shit (meaning get you to the church on time) out she wants me to bail him out to the tune of 570K. Jerk-face can figure his own stuff out. I'm so sorry this happened to you. He's a cretin. Will let you know if I find out more.

I read it twice before I take a deep breath and reply.

Me: Thank you for telling me. I appreciate it.

I get just one sip of my too-hot tea into my mouth before she responds.

Gloria: I hate this.

Me, too.

She dings me again not a minute later.

Gloria: I'm so sad we're not going to be sisters. I hope we'll still be friends. You have a place to stay anytime you come across the pond and I'm coming there anyway since my flight was already booked for the wedding. I plan to give my brother a piece of my mind, visit Grandma and hit some of my favorite old haunts. Want to meet up for sushi?

Me: I'm not sure. Can I let you know?

Gloria: Sure thing. At least a coffee, I hope. I'll be there for four days.

Me: I'm out of town taking a breather. No promises but hopefully we can connect.

Three missed calls are from Rick. I turn the phone off.

He used me. He cheated. At least I found out before promising to spend the rest of my life with him, for better or for worse. Because it's looking like it would have been a whole lot of *for worse*.

Once he got the fat check, maybe he'd have ended it so he could be with the cunt wedding planner. I'm not sure I even care all that much. Did I even love him or was I just going along with it because he asked? Because he *said* he loved me?

There's a man in that bed who wants me, who strangely thinks he loves me despite barely knowing me. And at this moment, I think I'm going to go wake him up and have more sex.

Maybe get him to chase me some more.

Maybe let him catch me and keep me. Forever.

Maybe that *is* what's supposed to happen.

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Mason

I jackknife up in bed, startled by a loud crash. Something's wrong with Amelia. Panic assaults me from the inside out. It's our bond.

As soon as I'm on my feet, I hear her cry of distress and follow my nose to the deck off the bedroom. No Amelia. What? I can't compute this at all because I smell her.

I hear her again, so peer over the railing. She's dangling, hanging onto two spindles of the deck. A ladder lies on the grass below.

She whimpers. "I can't hold on."

"What the fuck? Hang on, baby."

It'd be twenty feet to the ground, but it'd likely be more as she could fall into my empty swimming pool.

"This might get loud, Amie. Don't startle. Just hang on. It'll be half a sec."

"I can't, Mason. I'm weak as fuck."

"Half a..." I reach out and gripping the handrail with both hands, yank up the entire section – "sec..."

I toss it behind me and as it crashes onto the patio furniture. I grab one deck post and a spindle a foot to the right of Amie's left hand, and yank, hauling them both up so I can reach to the left and catch her by both wrists.

"Let go," I demand.

She whimpers. She's still hanging on, too tight, to one spindle, one rim joist. Likely running on pure adrenaline. I don't want to yank too hard and hurt her.

"I've got you, baby. Let go."

She finally loosens her grip and I haul her up and fall back on my ass as she collapses into my body.

Immediately, she's bawling, body bucking with her sobs.

I wrap her tight, ignoring the decking material poking my lower back.

"Got you," I say, "It's okay." I purr for her.

She sighs out a lengthy breath and melts like butter into me.

I purr for a solid three minutes, while stroking her hair before I get to my feet and carry her back inside, curling up on the big round chair in the corner with her on my lap, her head tucked under my chin.

"Now," I whisper, dropping a kiss on the top of her head, "Can I ask what the fuck that was about?"

She looks up at me and winces. "It was absolute stupidity is what it was."

I wait for her to explain. She shakes her head, rolling her eyes. "A nest with three tiny baby birds fell to the ground out there. They were so little, they hardly had even any feathers. So I went down there and decided to try to get the nest put back. It was just under your deck, tucked in. Look." She gets off my lap and tugs my hand to go back outside.

"Ooh, whoa. Woozy." She sways at the sight of the broken deck and sinks back against me.

"Yeah, you're afraid of heights, right? And you climbed a ladder to put the bird's nest back? Why didn't you wake me?"

She stares blankly at me and then slowly, her shoulders rise in a hesitant shrug. She's used to fending for herself. And it pisses me off. She could've been hurt.

She continues explaining, "Sometimes I do stupid shit. And I'm a klutz. So... stupid shit plus klutziness can equal disaster."

I blow out a breath.

She keeps talking. “So I very carefully carried it up, which wasn’t easy because I’m not remotely coordinated. I tried to just snug it back under there, but I had to lean a bit and...”

“And you could’ve broken your neck,” I say, anger rising.

She bites her lip. “Can we go back inside? This is makin’ me woozy.”

“Yeah, we’ll go inside. Go inside where I’ll spank your bare ass.”

I take her back inside and close the door. I sit on the edge of the bed and stare at my mate.

She’s staring at me with her top teeth embedded in her bottom lip, a flush in her cheeks. She looks embarrassed.

“I hate to break it to you, baby, but that momma bird might not come back after you fuckin’ with her nest,” I advise.

Amelia’s expression goes from contrite and embarrassed to mortified. “What?”

I nod.

“No!” she gasps.

“It’s what they say.”

She marches outside and returns with her phone.

A moment later, she’s scrolling her screen frantically.

“It’s most likely a rumor. She’ll probably come back.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” I say.

“If she’s not back soon, we need to go buy a syringe and some ...” she keeps scrolling “cat food or dog food or meal worms. Ew.”

“We’ll see what happens. I’m gonna go fix that.”

“No! Leave the deck until we know the mother bird is back. If you go hammering and making a racket, she could stay away. Or you could knock their nest loose. It was built in a pretty small ledge.”

I watch her continue to scroll on her phone, nibbling on her lip as her eyes scan the screen.

The mother bird came back. And the joy in my mate's eyes when that happened made me fall further in love with her.

She then insisted we need a bird feeder and bird bath, kept full directly below the deck so that the mother will have everything she needs to stay close and look after her babies. And a bird house so that birds can more safely have a place to store their nests rather than underneath my deck.

Despite the angry way she demands these things, like my lack of deck design and building skills are responsible for the whole ordeal, I am loving this woman more and more with every passing moment.

Amelia

Dangerous things are happening to me.

Extremely dangerous. Because I keep catching myself thinking about the future. A future with Mason.

Thinking while we eat the manicotti that it'll be nice when the weather warms up some more and we can eat while watching the sunset outside. Thinking about barbecuing. I'm thinking about how many swimsuits I own and how I could get use of them in his pool. Not just the pool, the lake. It's a bit soon for that, and I find myself hoping I'll still be here in July and August when it's nice enough to do all those things. And waterskiing. Tubing. Mason has all sorts of lake toys. I envision one of those party rafts with a trampoline, me, Ivy, Bailey, Skye, Mom, and Cicely all out there having a laugh.

I'm imagining being on Mason's boat, steering while he's wrapped those arms around me from behind, showing me how to drive. And I'm imagining Mom, Ivy, and our little brother Leo out there, too. I didn't want to go on another cruise, being stuck on a big, crowded ship for a week with no land in sight and visions of the sinking Titanic in my brain, but an afternoon on a pretty lake on a boat with just a handful of us? I'm all over that idea.

I'm imagining playing darts at Roxy's with him and his friends.

I'm imagining going for that pedicure with Skye. Calling up Cicely and Bailey to go do something. I'm thinking about making memories.

I'm thinking about calling Skye to tell her how great her bath bombs smell, how soft my skin is after using one and how nice that sugar exfoliant is.

I've already scrolled through some online retailers looking at bird houses, bird baths, and other bird accessories for the family of what I now know (since Momma bird came back) are robins living in his back yard.

I should be looking for therapy because what the heck happened to me today? I still don't know how me, of all people, wound up on a ladder putting a baby bird nest back when I'm deathly afraid of heights and the not insignificant fact that I'm the klutziest klutz that ever klutzed the planet.

Mason was like a superhero, ripping his deck apart with his bare hands to save me. Talk about strong. Talk about relief when he hauled me up as I dangled over my doom.

As I'm drinking the final glass of the honey wine in the bottle Skye sent, I'm thinking about how I might be able to fit all of my shoes on the shoe shelf in Mason's closet.

I'm thinking dangerously.

And right now I'm doing it in the arms of the hot shifter who can't get enough of me.

Today has been like a vacation. Other than my near-death experience, of course.

My face feels funny from all the smiling. My tummy feels like I've done sit-ups from all the laughing. And strangely, my vagina doesn't hurt despite that we've had sex so many times I've lost count.

I fall asleep early, being spooned while a movie plays on the big television on the second-floor loft's couch. He doesn't have a television in his bedroom, so I wake up when he carries me to bed, like I'm his bride. Looking at me with affection before holding me close, purring until I fall back asleep.

It's a warm, sunny Sunday and we're on our way to Drowsy Hollow.

It's not far away to Mom's new apartment and though I didn't get a chance to reminisce when I came to Drowsy Hollow to

look for my sister when I got here almost a week ago, I now take the time to do that.

I point out the public school to Mason, as I went there for the first few years of my schooling before we moved a couple hours away to a bigger city for my father's job.

I have fond memories of it, particularly of the big production they made of Halloween each year. The influence of that on me as a kid is probably why I've always celebrated Halloween in a big way.

The town's annual Halloween party and costume parade happened at the school, and seemed to involve the entire town. And I think I still have a signed copy in storage of the storybook from the local author who wrote a children's book based on local legend about a cloaked man that used to go on a murdering spree every Halloween to find a new head, which seems like a strange story to terrify little kids with, but I guess that's where a lot of old stories come from – children's books often contained cautionary tales as the moral – this one clearly that it's a bad idea to wander the woods after dark.

Mason tells me that not only does he know that story, but it's based on fact, from two centuries ago, and that the witches assigned to the town are part of that story, that their magic made the annual massacres stop. Now that I've seen supernatural things with my own eyes, I find the concept even more bone-chilling.

When we pull up behind Drowsy Hollow Dry Cleaning, Cade and Lorenzo are carrying Mom's couch toward the back entrance. They've both got their 'guns' on display, too. Cade is in jeans and a tight t-shirt and Lorenzo has a muscle-hugging Henley on. They're both in incredible physical shape. Mom looks on from the side, not seeing us straight away, evidently taking in an eyeful of shifter candy.

They disappear inside and Mom snaps out of her sexy shifter stupor and waves. "What are you two doing here?"

“We wanted to help,” I say, approaching. “And check in to make sure you’re okay. Let me see your neck,” I tease.

“That’s so sweet. But it wasn’t necessary.” She flashes her throat. “No neck love buttons.”

Mason snickers from behind me. “That’s my cue to carry some furniture. Hi Kathleen.” He drops a kiss on Mom’s forehead and then goes into the truck.

“Hi Mason. Thank you so much for coming.” She gives him a beaming smile.

Mason passes me with a box in his hands.

“Photo albums?” he asks, eyeing the Sharpie writing on the box. “Any baby pictures of Amie in here?”

“Loads,” Mom says. “She was a beautiful baby.”

“I bet she was,” he says and heads in through the back door.

“Nobody kidnapped you yet,” I casually observe. “How’s life otherwise?”

“Yet,” the returning Cade says from beside me.

I giggle. Mom blushes.

“The house sold. Forty thousand above asking.” Mom beams.

“Wow, Mom!”

“I know! It feels great to be moving on with some extra money in my pocket.”

Another door opens. It’s beside Mom’s door and this one leads into the cleaners.

An attractive brunette with piercing smoky gray eyes steps out.

“Hello,” she greets, taking in a breath of fresh air. And then she reaches into the pocket of her long red cardigan, pulls out a vape, and takes a long pull.

Okay, so not fresh air. Nicotine fix.

“Hi again, Vivica. This is my daughter, Amelia. Amelia, Vivica Young is one of the landlords.”

“Everyone calls me Vivi. Nice to meet you.” She shakes my hand. And while she does, her hand tightens just a little. She looks straight into my eyes for a beat before she lets go.

Well, that was unnerving, especially with that piercing gaze. She’s a witch. Mason called them the “Young sisters”.

Weird. I’m standing here looking at a witch. A relative of Auntie Nelle’s fortune teller.

“Just stopped in to take care of the handover with your mom,” Vivi says. “We live out of town as my sister told your mom and as my other sister told your mate, *but* we’re always a phone call or a text away if there’s... anything.”

She turns her gaze to my mother, but it strangely feels like she can read my mind.

She knows who I am. She said ‘mate’. And for some reason, it feels like cold fingers have walked their way up my spine. I’m unable to stop the physical shudder reaction.

“Thank you,” Mom says. “This will be my first time living alone in my life. Well, other than the past few months since my husband left. But this feels like the fresh start I want.”

Mom’s chattering voice sounds a little hollow to me. Because my thoughts are racing. I’m wondering about the witchcraft, feeling like I should ask some questions. And although Vivica Young’s eyes are on Mom, it feels like she’s acutely aware of me and my vibe right now. I have no idea what to even ask. The fact that Mom has access to them though now as her landlord is a good thing, I think.

Mason comes out with Lorenzo and Cade and they’re all smiling. Until Mason locks eyes with Vivica. His expression changes and the look in his eyes chills my blood.

“Mason Quinn, I’m Vivica Young.” She extends her hand to shake his.

“A word?” he requests, looking serious, and not accepting her hand.

She opens the door to the dry cleaners and gestures for him to go ahead. He prowls inside angrily. She follows. The door slams shut, and it does it so hard, my bones rattle.

“What’s that all about, I wonder...” Mom muses.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, telling myself not to react, not to freak out. I don’t like the vibe I just got. At all.

Lorenzo’s eyes are on me and they’re sharp.

“Don’t go there,” he says. “It’s a pack issue. Mason’s just dealing with a pack issue.”

“What’s this?” Mom asks.

“Your daughter looks like her mind is going to the wrong place. This is why new couples need to be alone. Not going out in public when the bond is still settling in. Complicating matters with their possessiveness.”

“Amelia’s not possessive.” Mom waves a hand. And then Mom looks at me and flinches. “Or... she wasn’t.”

Is this fear about Mason stepping out on me with a pretty woman? Is this me wondering why he’s having a private conversation with the witch – the witch that knows exactly what’s what here? Is there more? Is there something I don’t know?

It’s not surprising I’m freaked, wondering about this what with finding out my relationship with Whatshisface was based on secrets, lies, and bad intentions.

I grab a box from the back of the truck and gesture with my head. “Let’s go. Show me your new pad. Is that greenhouse on the roof patio up there yours to use?”

Mason

I did not like that I couldn't smell the witch, not even when I set eyes on her. Not one fucking bit. It means she's disguising her scent. I want to know why.

I follow her into the back office. Today, the bookcase is in place, hiding their covenstead. She sits on the desk instead of in the chair behind it, crossing her legs.

"What can I do for you?" she asks, casually.

"Why are you here?" I demand.

"We have a new tenant. I'm here mostly to finalize things related to that."

"Mostly?" I repeat.

"Mostly."

"You own this building?" I ask.

"We're in charge of it."

"You're not the witch that fucked Riley Savage over?"

"You're talking about my youngest sister, Erica. I'm Vivica."

"Where is Erica?"

"That's not for me to say."

"You're not here to interfere further with my pack?"

"Not at all."

"My mate's mother gonna be affected by your magic since your covenstead is below her bedroom?"

"No. Not at all. She's perfectly safe up there. That room has the proper safeguards."

“Why are you disguising your scent?” I demand.

“I’ve done it at Erica’s request, in an effort to minimize the... hoopla around my being here. It has nothing to do with you or your mate. But, I do have to warn you, my gifts tell me something is amiss, so I feel compelled to give you this.” She hands me a business card. I glance at it before stuffing it into my jeans pocket.

She fiddles with the hem of her long sweater, seeming uncomfortable under my appraisal.

“Our coven worked closely with your pack when it was formed,” she says. “We were very intertwined for a long time. That diminished through the generations but was still in place until Graydon Blackwood divorced my cousin, but...”

“Repeat that.”

“Graydon Blackwood was mated to Soleil and their connection was severed. When that happened, our coven backed away. At Graydon’s request.”

Graydon was sixth alpha in the previous council birth order. Everyone knows Greyson’s mother went away when he was an infant, but no one will talk about why. Graydon met Carrie at an age where Greyson was young enough that she’s the only mother he recognizes. “Mimi’s daughter?” I ask.

“Mimi’s twin’s daughter. Mimi’s twin died while giving birth to Soleil. I’m surprised with you being part of the Arcana Falls alpha council, that this isn’t something you’re up to speed on.”

“Greyson’s biological mother is a Young coven witch?”

“We’re aware Greyson Blackwood is part of your council. His mother was part of our coven, yes.”

“Was?”

“Was.”

“She deceased?” I ask.

Vivica’s mouth tightens. “I’m not at liberty to say, not unless it’s her son that’s asking.”

“So, if Greyson wants information about his biological mother, he can ask for it?”

She nods. “He’s family. We don’t know him, but he’s family.”

“So, you can’t tell Riley about his situation, but you *can* tell Grey about his?”

“Correct.”

“And you’ve told me enough that you know I’ll tell Grey so clearly you want Grey to reach out.”

She says nothing.

“Why can’t you tell me more about Erica and Riley?”

She shakes her head. “It’s complex.”

“But he can’t find her.”

“I know.”

“He’s looking,” I warn.

“I know that, too,” she says.

Well, this is frustrating. I grind my molars.

“Dani said your coven won’t sever my connection with my mate even if she pays for that. That’s true?”

“That’s true.”

“But it could be done.”

“It could, with dark magic.”

“Was it dark magic that severed the connection with Graydon and Soleil?”

“No. Because they both agreed to the severing.”

“None of your sisters dabble, except Erica?”

“Who said Erica dabbles in dark magic?” she asks quietly.

“If Erica fucked with spells to cast herself as Riley’s mate then isn’t that black magic?” I volley.

“Did someone say that’s what she did?” She’s looking directly into my eyes as she says this. There’s something in her gaze that tells me to pay close attention, not that I wouldn’t otherwise.

I replay the conversation I had here with her sister and great aunt. Neither of them confirmed that. We were the ones that said it.

“It’s assumed.”

She flexes her eyebrows.

I wait for her to elaborate.

She doesn’t. She folds her arms and waits; she’s waiting for me to draw new conclusions from her body language.

Finally, I try, “Is Erica Young Riley Savage’s fated mate?”

She says nothing with her mouth, but this is a revelation because the answer is in her eyes.

“She *is* his?” I ask.

She moistens her lips and still.. says nothing.

“Was Soleil Graydon’s fated mate, too?”

“I can’t discuss that with you. I apologize if this is frustrating. I do have a feeling your council might need us, though I can’t pinpoint precisely why, so that’s why I’ve given you my card.”

“I have your sister Dani’s card. Any reason I need yours, too?”

“You can reach any of us through me or Danica, but I tend to answer calls quickly.”

“I can reach out to any of you except for Erica?”

She gives me a tight smile. “All situations will resolve themselves. It’s just a question of *when*.”

“I’m guessing it’s pointless to ask what that means?”

“I can’t-”

“Can’t tell me that,” I finish for her, “Right. What’s your gift? Or can you tell me *that*?” I’m wondering if knowing what this

gift is might give me a clue as to why my pack might need these witches.

“We all have at least one gift. Mine is precognition. I’m not getting anything solid, but I know something is coming and you might need us.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Our coven is large. I have four sisters. We have cousins, second cousins.”

“And you’re saying Greyson Blackwood is a cousin, meaning he’s not only shifter, he’s also part warlock?”

“Correct.”

Not a surprise. Greyson’s got unusual strengths. Unhoned, clearly, since he doesn’t practice witchcraft, but his powers of persuasion are something we’ve always marveled about.

“You can’t give me any clues about what your gift is telling you?”

She shakes her head. “Not because I’m holding back, because I don’t know.”

“What about your sisters? Can you tell me what their gifts are? Could those gifts be put together with yours to figure this out?”

“Sometimes it *does* work that way, but it isn’t right now. Veronica’s is psychometry, though, so we could have her spend time with your pack to see if she can pick up on anything, but she’s on assignment right now. Jess is a medium and she was already here and couldn’t pick up on anything. Dani is a healer, so her strengths often come in after a trauma instead of proactively.”

“You’re thinking we’re about to have some trauma?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Erica? What’s her gift?”

“Spell-writing.”

I scoff. *Figures*. “Can she undo spells too?”

Vivica shakes her head with determination in her expression. “She won’t play with black magic – you need not be concerned with that. Listen, I can’t tell you what’s coming, but beyond the issues with Erica and Riley Savage, something *is* coming, and if you need help, call. If Greyson Blackwood wants to know us, we’re also open to that. We’d like that very much, in fact.”

“I’ll tell him.” I spin to head out the way I came.

She doesn’t follow.

Once out back, I walk up the running boards sticking out of the back of the truck and find Cade waiting, holding the side of a large dresser. I grab the other side. His eyes are on me.

“All good?”

“Think so.”

When I don’t offer further information, he starts moving and we walk the furniture down the walking board, then inside the building and make our way up the steep staircase, me heading backwards, Cade forward-facing.

“These stairs are a bitch,” Amie says from behind me at the top of the staircase. “You okay down there, Doggo?”

“I’m good,” I say, smiling over my shoulder at her.

I don’t like the look in her eyes. It feels like she’s tweaked about something.

“How ‘bout you, there, Guns?”

Guns? I quirk an eyebrow up at what she’s just called Cade.

He grins. “Absolutely fine.”

There’s a beat of silence, but then his grin slips when she drawls, “You sure are.”

I look over my shoulder again, but she’s disappeared out of view.

Cade’s eyes hit mine and there’s alarm in them.

My girl is pissed off at me and she's just thrown down the gauntlet.

I grind my molars and we take the dresser the rest of the way up.

"Where does this go, pretty lady?" Cade asks Kathleen, who is standing at the kitchen counter, stirring the contents of a coffee mug. Lorenzo has a shoulder leaned against the fridge, smiling while giving her his attention with a donut in his hand.

Kathleen's eyes dart to us and she points. "Just the master bedroom would be perfect, thanks so much. And come get a drink. And a donut." She gestures to a bakery box.

We deposit the dresser in the large bedroom and head back to the kitchen.

"I'd love a coffee," Cade says, "What kinds of donuts you got there?"

"Help yourself. An assortment." She lifts the box lid so Cade can peer inside. "Mason?"

"No thanks."

"If you change your mind, help yourself. Thanks for coming by to help."

"You need help with anything at all, don't hesitate to ask. That's what family is for. Where's your daughter?" I ask, though my nose senses where my mate is.

"I think she went to powder her nose." She gestures toward a closed door.

I stalk that way and then open the door and step inside, finding Amie in front of the mirror, applying lipstick. She shoots me a look of surprise as she caps it and puts it back into her bag, which sits on the vanity.

She then spins to face me with sharpness in her eyes. I close the door, then lift her up by her hips and sit her on the vanity, moving in close until our noses are touching.

“You want me to teach you a lesson?” I grind out, gripping her hips with intention.

Her eyes widen. “What?”

“If you think for a second that flirting with another man to get back at me is a weapon you’ll get the chance to call on again, I’m telling you right now, don’t do it or you’ll get punished. And it’ll be the kind of punishment you won’t forget.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ll be reminded of who you belong to, baby, because I will *fucking* show you.”

She chokes out, “Oh, really?”

She’s about to throw some sass.

“You want me to spell it out?” I offer.

“I think you’d better,” she answers a bit breathlessly.

“You flirt with a man like that again, I’ll fuck you in front of him.”

Her mouth drops open in shock.

“Don’t fuck around, Amie. You doing something like that, if I were someone else, I might beat the living shit out of him for it and it wouldn’t be his fault. It’d be yours. So don’t pull that bullshit again. Understand me? You’re new to my world so here’s your warning. Shit like that could send me into The Rut and a super-alpha’s biology means I won’t give a fuck who’s around to see it.”

She continues staring, wide-eyed, not speaking, so I speak again. “I needed to talk to that woman about the shit her sister pulled that’s fucking with Riley. Riley’s my closest friend, he’s like a brother to me, and he’s a good fucking guy that got fucked over bad. Leaving him in mourning for over six fucking years. He thought she drowned. I went in there because of that shit and concern about her being near you after you threatening to try to get our bond untied, and that woman is hiding her scent so that had me tweaked. Okay?”

She nods subtly.

I haven't known her long, but so far, haven't seen my typically sassy woman react like this. It belatedly occurs to me that she's aroused, so I part her knees and pull her closer. When she's flush against my pelvis, legs wrapped around my lower back, I grab her ponytail and hang on while I give her a rough kiss, with tongue. When I pull back, her eyes are glossed over and I know by sight, smell, and through our connection that she's ready to be fucked.

"Now," I say low, against the skin behind her ear, "I'm goin' to go help get the rest of your mother's shit in here, then we're going home and I'm gonna fuck you. Hard. The only reason you're not getting it right here, right now, is because your mother needs her furniture brought up. Understand?" I back up and look her in the eyes.

She swallows hard, still just staring, so I lean in and suck on her claiming mark briefly, pulling a breathless whimper from her before I turn and go back to move the rest of the fucking furniture.

Amelia

That was the hottest one-sided conversation I've had in my life. Or maybe it was tied with the conversation we had while he fucked me in the woods and got all bossy during the outdoor interlude, I don't know; I only know that for some strange reason, him being *that* possessive and livid with me for mild flirtation with another guy, but yet still all over me, reminding me that I'm *his* and that he's going to fuck me again soon is insanely hot.

And bonus points for Doggo for putting whatever fears I had to rest by explaining – without a prompt from me – what he was doing stalking off to go behind closed doors with that gorgeous woman.

Whoa. I'm completely flustered here. And I have a stupid smile on my pink face.

I splash cold water on my face, because I have to, and I could do with a splashing of the same between my legs, but since that's not exactly realistic, I dry my hands, then I put my bag back over myself cross body and head back to the kitchen to gulp back three quarters of a bottle of water before going down the stairs to see what else I can help carry up. So that we can be done. So we can hurry home and have more sex.

We're pulling down a quiet country road, nothing but trees around, after having stopped at the supermarket near Mom's new apartment so I could get the ingredients I needed for dinner (Mason came in, pushed the cart and he insisted on paying but was broody the whole time, and I found it incredibly scintillating), and I'm nattering almost nonsensically about nothing important, just about how much Mom will love that little greenhouse out back on the roof patio

of her new apartment and how she'll grow tomatoes and jar up some of her chili sauce that's amazing inside an omelet. I also wax lyrical about her homemade pickles and jam. I can't stop myself from babbling and I think it's a nervous reaction to the alpha intensity rolling off him. He keeps cracking his neck. Flexing his jaw. Giving me these... looks.

Abruptly, he pulls over to the side of the road and puts his truck in park.

I'm about to question the move when I hear click and then click again. Both my and his seatbelts spring back, and I squeak with surprise as I'm pulled across the console that separates the two front seats. He's planting me astride him.

"Oh. Hi there," I chirp happily, adjusting my position slightly to get more comfortable.

He growls, deep, and it vibrates straight through me as he grabs my face with both hands so he can pull my mouth to his.

"Get these fucking things off," he orders and starts pulling at my clothes.

"What? Here?" I ask.

"Fucking right." He hits a control and his seat flies back so that he's in a nearly prone position. He goes for his fly. "Jeans off, wildberry. Right now."

"You still mad at me?" I ask.

"Yeah," he breathes.

"And you're going to reward me with an orgasm?" I ask, cheekily, unable to keep the smile from tugging at the corners of my mouth.

His eyes glitter in response. "Changed my mind."

My stomach bottoms out as he sets me back on the passenger side.

"You're giving me one," he adds, and I watch as he pulls his cock out of his jeans.

My mouth drops open. It looks angry. Hard. And I want it.

“Yeah. Stretch that jaw out, Amelia. Stretch it good, because your smart mouth is about to be stuffed full of your mate’s cock. Get your jeans off, now, and get on your knees.”

I oblige with the jeans (after kicking my Toms off my feet) and though it is a teensy bit awkward to do in the front of the truck, I manage. When the jeans and shoes are on the floormat, he crooks his finger to beckon me, and I stretch forward over that console and wrap my mouth around his cock with my ass up in the air.

God, I hope nobody sees us.

Or maybe I don’t even care.

Who am I right now?

I’ve got a mouth full of Mason. He growls in response to my suction. I look up and he’s staring down at me slack-jawed, glittery-eyed, and just when I think he couldn’t be any more fucking sexy, he fists my ponytail, flexing his bicep.

I twirl my tongue around the tip and then take him deep.

“Fuck,” he growls, lets go of my ponytail and then fingertips move down my back and slip inside my underwear.

Thick, warm fingers glide down between my ass cheeks, then slide up, directly inside my dripping-wet core.

I make a sound of approval with a mouth full of him. He pumps his fingers in and out a few times and then something is breaching my butthole. Oh. This again. He did this before and I liked it. A lot. No guy has even tried this on me before Mason.

I like it this time, too. I reposition just a little to get a slightly more comfortable angle, and cup his balls as I go deep again.

“Fuck yeah, baby. Suck.”

I oblige, going harder.

“Bob a little,” he orders.

I do that, too for a couple minutes.

“I need inside you. Come ride me.”

He pulls my hair back and I release him from my mouth with a pop sound before he brings me, by the hips, to his lap. Mason yanks my undies to the side, and then he’s slamming inside me.

Fuck yes, this is good. So good.

Fingers go between my legs, circling my clit as I bounce up and down, hanging onto his sexy shoulders. Yes... he *is* going to give me an orgasm, too.

“Gimme that mouth,” he orders and then we’re kissing.

“You’d better stop gloating, baby,” he warns.

I try to neutralize my expression, whatever it says, but I don’t think it helps, because he growls again.

Fucking hot.

Mason can kiss. He really can. Between the soft, strong lips, the tongue talent, and the sounds he makes, my super-alpha is super-hot. I continue riding him and he continues playing between my legs with his right hand. When his left hand snakes under my shirt, rips the cup of my bra down and then he adds in nipple stimulation, I’m a goner.

I’m already coming when the vibrations start inside me from his pulsing knot and as whimpers come out of my mouth, he continues lapping at my tongue with his, twisting my nipple a little and keeping at my clit.

I cry out, loud, feeling his hot cum fill me.

A minute later, he’s holding my boobs, mouth at that amazing spot on my neck, groaning, “Wildberry.”

We’re both lax and just stay still for a minute.

“If you’re coming the whole time you’re fucking me, how do you know when you’re coming?” I ask.

He laughs.

“I mean, sometimes, not every time, but sometimes it feels like you’re ejaculating the whole time.”

I lift up. His hands leave my boobs and his fingers intertwine with mine. He first brings my left hand to his mouth for a kiss on my index knuckle, then he’s kissing my right hand, this time on the center of my palm.

“I mean, if you’re hard and coming and coming and coming and still hard and then coming again, how does that even work?”

“There’s one sensation inside you, another when I knot. It keeps going until the knot deflates, then changes. When it slows down to nothing but a pleasant feeling like the beginning and I slowly go soft, I know I’m done. Though sometimes, I get hard again immediately, and I get more.”

“Sounds like wolf shifters get much more potent orgasms than human men,” I observe.

“It’s good to be me,” he says with a shrug and a smile.

“Is our fight over?” I ask.

His expression darkens and he looks pissed off again.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper and then I kiss him.

He grabs my face and stares into my eyes. The darkness is gone.

“I love you,” he says, a fierceness in his tone that is unmistakable. I don’t think he’s angry any longer.

I moisten my lips and kiss him again, a butterfly nest alive and zinging in my belly.

“Our fight is definitely over,” he says, then lifts me up, about to deposit me back onto the other seat, I guess, but I immediately leak cum all over his jeans, so he sits me back on his lap and as I grumble, “Ew,” he’s reaching up into his sun visor and pulling out a fat wad of Kleenex.

He dabs at the both of us and I then scoot back to the passenger side, pull my jeans on and buckle up.

“Definitely need a shower when we get home,” I mutter, buckling up my seatbelt.

It occurs he’s still, despite that the car is now running. I look over at him.

His eyes are on me.

“You said home,” he says.

My body goes stiff.

Mason smiles. His smile is so wide and so beautiful, I feel like I’m about to burst into tears at the sight of it. Because wow... the idea that I, Amelia Brennan, can make someone smile *like that*? It feels good.

My chin trembles. He leans over and sweetly kisses me, making me melt.

He purrs for just a moment before rasping, “I love you, baby. I really love that you just called it home. That’s what it is. I want you there, with me, forever. Building our life together.” He caresses my cheekbones with his thumb. “I *know*... I know this frightens you but the last day or so of you opening up to me – keep doin’ it, okay? It’s fucking beautiful. I’m so fucking happy. I will bust my ass to make sure you’re never sorry for opening up, baby, I mean that.”

I swallow and bite my lip, tingles trilling their way up and down my body. I say nothing, because if I try to talk I not only have no earthly idea what might come out of my mouth, but I suspect it would be mostly indecipherable ugly-crying sounds.

He clicks his seatbelt on and shifts the truck into drive, taking us back to his house. Taking us home.

After a shower for two that resulted in – yep – more sex, I’m in the closet in a bra and undies while pulling clothes out of my bag and deducing it’s almost time for me to either do laundry or unpack some of my things, which are all stacked in front of me (Mason brought them upstairs at some stage, escaping my attention). I then remember I left bedding in the

washing machine and that I'll have to re-wash it. This thought is interrupted by an unfamiliar ringtone. *Oh*. My new phone.

I fetch it from my bag in the bedroom.

Ivy calling.

"Hey," I greet excitedly.

God, I miss my sister.

"Hey," she returns. "How are you?"

"I'm... good," I say. "Hang on, I need to put clothes on. I'll be super-fast."

I dash into the closet and set the phone down before I pull on the last pair of clean jeans and throw on a clingy low-cut black top with thumb loops. I grab the phone and put it to my ear.

"I'm back; sorry about that."

I head for the stairs so I can go down and get something to drink.

"I just talked to Mom," Ivy says. "She said things seem good with you and Mason."

I snicker. "Well, let's just say we argue a lot. He ends arguments with orgasms. And this might be why we argue a lot."

She giggles, then asks, "Because?"

"Because I've been fighting this tooth and nail, not believing it can possibly be real. I mean, c'mon... voodoo sex magic?"

She laughs.

I keep going, "And he's been fighting hard to show me that it is. Real, I mean. It's been a lot. A lot of me running and fighting and a lot of him chasing and then ... ending those arguments with O's. This guy does not give up. He's so bossy. And you know me. I'm bossy, too."

"I hear that," she replies, and I don't know how different her shifter is from mine, but I'd wager that there are likely some

similarities. “I can entirely relate. So, are you giving it a chance, then?”

“Um, I’m giving it ... day by day,” I grumble. “I don’t think I have much choice.”

She laughs.

“How are you?” I ask as I reach into the fridge and get a bottle of water.

“This whole thing is crazy, right? But honestly, Amie, it’s amazing,” she says. “And for me, things are good now. It was a shaky start. Some tough things happened.” She pauses for a few breaths and then continues, voice softer, “We’re working together to... you know... find whatever our new normal will be. I’m just enjoying my time with Ty. We’ve been getting settled in the house he should’ve grown up in, long story but he was abducted as a baby and raised by a very not-nice uncle who murdered his father and lied about his family, and... like I said, long story. Tyson has a bit of a Tarzan personality. He’s learning to be a person, learning to be in a pack. It’s really amazing to watch him build bonds with all these people that have mourned him for years. He’s getting acclimated to life around people, around other shifters, and me... and... we’re thinking we should make plans for a wedding ceremony here in the back yard. Have everyone in the pack over. Something to signify a new beginning. For me and Ty. For the whole pack. Maybe soon.”

“How soon?”

“As soon as possible,” she replies.

“You’re sure you want to get married so fast?” I ask.

“When you know, you know. I never knew before. Never. And I know now. He thinks of us as already married, so this will be ... you know, my showing him that I do too.”

I bite my lip, pondering some things.

“So...” she goes on shakily, “I hope you’ll support my decision like I tried to support yours even when I wasn’t sure I

agreed with it.”

Ouch.

“Yeah, but Ivy, you told me what you thought even if you tried to be supportive.”

“I know,” she says.

“So I’m gonna tell you what I think, too,” I advise.

“I’d expect nothing less. But, Ames, it’s not going to change my mind,” she says. “And I’d really love it if you’d be my maid of honor.”

Mason comes up from the basement, a smile on his face. He’s shirtless. *Yum*. He kisses my cheekbone and reaches into the fridge, pulls out a beer and I lean against the counter and watch him go to the couch, sit, and grab the remote.

“Of course I will.” I break the silence as Mason turns the television on.

“Oh?” She sounds surprised.

And then, a sniffle. She sounds like she’s emotional.

“When are you and Tyson getting married?” I ask, trying to hold my own emotions in check. Hearing my sister like this gets me all misty-eyed.

This gets Mason’s attention.

“I mean... soon, I think,” Ivy answers with a sniffle.

“Why don’t you do it next weekend. Next Saturday?” I suggest.

“Next Saturday?” she checks.

“Yeah. I’ve got stuff with the date on it. I mean, we’ll have to print labels or Wite-Out the wrong names, but... you might as well use the stuff with the date on it. Conserve trees and all...”

She doesn’t say anything.

“Unless you think it’s a bad omen to use the date I was supposed to use. You don’t have to...”

“No,” Ivy replies. “Not at all. I’d... I’d love to. But you’re not gonna be upset that it was your day and now it’ll be... mine?”

“Of course not. Listen...” I moisten my lips. “My wedding was going to be gorgeous. Lavish. Beautiful. And almost nothing about it my choice. Not the venue, the meals, not the centerpieces, nor the invitations. I was in a battle to even have the songs I wanted played at the reception, so this is all for the best. Whatever you want from it to give you *your* special day, have it. The ice wine and the chocolate shot glasses and the candied almonds in the little boxes. The décor I bought. The miles and miles of ribbon I curled. All the bride undies and bride and groom robes and flip flops. God, there’s oodles of stuff and I won’t use it, so I’d rather give it all to you than throw it out or go through the hassle of selling whatever isn’t personalized.”

“Except the dress,” she says.

“Take the dress,” I say. “Wedding gift from me to you.”

“Take the dress?” Ivy asks.

“Yeah.”

“Take the dress?” she repeats like she doesn’t understand.

“It’s all yours.”

“But you love that dress!” she exclaims. “You said yes to that dress. No. You said FUCK YES to that dress.”

“Don’t be a drama queen,” I tease.

She’s silent.

I sigh. “I’m not getting married, Ives; I don’t need the dress. I would much rather see it on you than let it go to waste. It’s got a corset back, so you’ll just tighten the laces up since you’re smaller than me. Mom can handle whatever alterations you need. A few darts and cinching here and there around the hips. We might need to stuff your bra a bit since I needed to have the boob area let out, but I’m sure we’ll make it work. You’ll be beautiful.”

“Really? You’re sure, Amelia?”

“A hundred percent. Use whatever you want, toss what you don’t. No pressure. It’s all in my storage unit where I’ve got all my furniture. Mom took it there the other day. There’s tulle, pew bows, twinkle light strings for the tables, fake flowers that I got on sale, and other stuff. I’ll come over and help you set up for it. Just get someone to do the ceremony and hire a caterer. The rest is done.”

“Really?”

“Really, Ivy.”

“Oh my God. Ty! We’re getting married Saturday!”

I hear a deep voice in the background, and I don’t make out much of what he says, but it sounds like something to the effect of already being married and then a deep laugh before something about party food.

“I want to catch up some more but Tyson’s being kind of handsy, Ames.”

“No problem. Talk to Mom. She has my locker key. We can get on a three-way-call later and make some plans. I need to get started on dinner here. I’m making Mason my chicken roulade and tortellini bake, and that takes a while. I’ll call you tomorrow?”

“You’re making him food? Things *must* be going well over there,” she observes.

“We’ll see what happens,” I whisper.

Mason’s eyes are on the television, but by the smile on his face, I’m thinking he’s hearing Ivy clearly from there.

“Well, I’ll let you get back to it then.”

“Wait, “ I shout, “Did Mom tell you she’s got two shapeshifter suitors?”

“Oh yes, I saw them. However will she choose?”

“You saw them?” I ask. “When?”

“We got there about ten minutes after you and Mason left Mom’s. They were both working overtime to impress her. Cade set up her bed and Lorenzo was very unhappy about that.”

I snicker, but then complain, “I can’t believe we missed you by ten minutes. That sucks.”

“Yeah, it does. But we’re a short drive apart and from what I hear, a quick boat ride from one another. Oh! Maybe we’ll get jet skis.”

“There’s an idea!” I reply excitedly. “Jet ski margarita pitcher delivery!”

“Ooh,” she replies.

“Mason’s parents make wine and moonshine. You need to try that moonshine punch.”

“Maybe we’ll ask if we can have some at the reception on Saturday,” she says.

“Great idea. I’ll ask Mason for his mom’s phone number. We’ll talk tomorrow?”

“Sounds good. Love ya. Thank you, Amelia. Seriously.”

“My pleasure. Truly, Ivy. You know you’re my favorite sister.”

She laughs.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, but... I’m there with bells on for you,” I say softly.

“I do. Love you, sis. I’m happy. I want you to be happy. I think if you open up and give this a chance, you will be.”

“Yeah,” I say softly, looking over at Mason who is still smiling, even though he’s flicking aimlessly through TV channels, so it’s obvious he’s eavesdropping.

“We have so much to get caught up on,” she adds.

“We sure do,” I agree.

“Soon,” she promises.

“Very, I hope.”

“Bye Ames. Talk later.”

“Bye, Ives.” I end the call, set the phone down, and turn to start getting supplies out of the fridge.

I feel heat at my back. And then lips are touching that space between my shoulder and my neck. And then I’m turned around, pressed against the fridge, lifted up by my thighs and then set on the counter.

“I need to start making dinner. It’s very elaborate and laborious so…”

“It can wait,” he says against my jaw before his lips move to mine.

“We have a wedding to attend next Saturday. I’m gonna need a pretty dress. You got a suit?”

“I’ve got several.”

I’m looking forward to seeing Mason in a suit.

This is the most incredible sunset my eyes have ever seen.

The position of the large, purple sun just slightly hovering over the horizon, pale yellow rays fanned out in a panoramic view interspersed with pink clouds and a dove gray sky... I’m staring at a real-life nature painting that’s so perfect, it’s like a studio set from a romantic movie.

I’m snuggled, back against Mason’s front on the chaise lounge on the deck off the kitchen (I haven’t let him fix the upstairs deck yet, but made a comment about the lounge chair so he brought one down here) with his legs bracketing mine, two half-glasses of wine beside the empty cheesecake container with two forks from Roxy’s. There’s a thick blanket wrapped around us, but I probably don’t even need it, since Mason’s body heat is keeping me warm.

My eyes are moist. My front teeth are embedded in my bottom lip, and I’ve never, ever felt like this.

He loved the dinner I made, insisted on doing clean-up but I helped, wanting to be close to him, enjoying the banter as he waxed poetic, praising my food.

And then he got the wine and dessert and suggested we sit out here to watch the sun go to bed.

I want to live my life in this house, with this view, and this man.

I want it.

I want it so much.

I sink back into him, feeling his lips touch my temple.

“Why the tears, baby?” he asks gently. “You feel happy.”

“I *am* happy,” I admit. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy. And it scares me. It scares me so much. I’m fucking terrified it’ll disappear, suddenly be gone in a puff of smoke.”

His body stiffens and then he turns me over so that we’re side by side, my jaw tipped up so that we’re also eye-to-eye.

He stares deeply for a beat, then he’s kissing me.

“Nothing to be afraid of. You’ve got me. Nothin’ll change it. I swear it.” He kisses me some more. He keeps kissing me until the sun is completely gone.

The sun is completely gone, and so am I.

Gone for Mason Quinn.

Mason

It's Wednesday night and we're walking hand in hand into Roxy's for dinner. And more importantly, to play out our wager.

If I win at darts, she unpacks her clothes. If she wins, I'm her sexual slave for a day. Either way, we both win. And the emotion that came at me from my mate when I stated what I wanted upon winning, I'm wondering if she's already decided to let me win. Not that I think she's the better dart player.

Multiple sets of eyes and plenty of smiles hit us when we step inside.

And the joy coming from her at the peoples' reaction to her lets me know it's the right call to share her with my pack, even though I want to keep her all to myself.

Grey and Joel wave from the back corner table and I get greeted by Linc, who's by the door, with a back slap.

Lorenzo came in just before we did, I saw him walk in when we were pulling up, and he waves as he pulls himself up onto his usual barstool.

"You playin' Cade tonight?" I ask.

"I am," Linc says. "He's on a date."

"A date?" Amelia inquires.

"Yep, with Kathy."

"Kathy?" I ask.

"Amelia's ma."

"Oh," Amelia says. "I thought she had a date this week with Lorenzo."

"She did. Last night," Linc says with a smirk.

“Didn’t go well?” I ask.

“According to Lor it did,” Linc supplies.

“Oh,” Amelia replies, looking absolutely delighted. “Wolf shifter love triangle? This could be interesting...”

Bailey Blackwood and Lucy Savage (Riley’s mother, Cat Savage’s sister) wave at Amelia from a table on the opposite end of the place and Amelia waves excitedly and gestures with an ‘I’ll call you’ hand signal. Bailey gives her the thumbs up.

I steer Amelia toward an empty booth as she waves at Lorenzo over at the bar. He waves back, a big smile on his face.

Music plays and familiar smells fill the space. It’s not bad to be out, but I was enjoying the past few days at home with my mate. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to leave our bubble, it’s been fucking incredible having Amie all to myself the last few days, having no interruptions other than a one hour visit from my parents when they stopped by to bring more wine and have a coffee with us. My father and I had a coffee. The women had two glasses of wine each.

My mate and my mother are thick as thieves. It makes me happy.

Other than that, it’s just been us, other than my daily dawn run and check-ins with the council alphas. I’ve needed that, to make sure I’m tending to my wolf, ensure I know what’s going on with the pack despite this code yellow.

But other than that, I’ve been in a bubble with my mate. Cooking together, watching television or movies. Sitting on the deck at sunset. Wrapped around one another as we get to know each other. Fucking like it’s about to go out of style.

She likes watching sports, but doesn’t play them. I’d rather play than watch, but I enjoy watching her get worked up over them. She can cook. She prefers baths to showers and wears different fragrances each day. She also redoes her fingernails every second day, says she doesn’t do her nails when she’s working, doesn’t think it’s hygienic for patients when nail

polish can chip and can't stand the look of chipped polish, so she works on her nails at the first sign of an imperfection.

She gives incredible massages. She has shit taste in music.

She snores and likes to sleep with her ass tucked into my pelvis, her feet against my shins. And Amelia gives the best head I've had in my life.

She sends a tsunami of emotion at me through the connection we have and it's fucking beautiful, shines in her eyes, turns them that pretty indigo blue that only fades when she's annoyed at something, and it fades just marginally.

I'm hopeful life will return to an uncoded situation soon. I asked Amie last night if she thought her ex would poke around again. She shrugged and sent a wave of frustration through the room. She's still resolving issues with that breakup. Didn't want to discuss it when I asked her what was frustrating her. And I don't fucking like it, but I suppose I can understand it. Seems like she's still opening up to me, slowly. Petal by petal.

I'm enjoying every moment of our time alone, but it's pretty close to time to step back into reality. I need to get back to work. I also need to share the load of responsibility with my council co-alfas what with the fact that they're already down Riley, Tyson is still ramping up, and we're in a code yellow.

The more hands-on I am, the better for the entire pack. And I have a deep need to contribute, to help care for our pack. As for Tyson, all of us are bonding with him. During every morning run I see how he fits. He's got a good head and he's easy to be around. He's competitive, which all of us appreciate, because it means we're cut from the same cloth. He's got us all mastering the half-shift, which we're only practicing inside the cave behind the Arcana Falls to be sure we're not seen. He's asking questions, he's listening, and he's not only enjoying time with his woman, he's also beginning to make the rounds so he can get to know everyone in his pack.

And we're anxious for Riley to come home and complete the council.

Nobody has talked to Rye voice-to-voice, though Joel and Ty have both had texts from him. Rye will be home in time for the wedding and he's standing up with Ty as his best man.

I called him to give him the additional information I got from Vivica Young. Not that it was a hard confirmation, but a soft one for sure. He didn't answer. I fired off a text after we got back from The Hollow on Sunday to tell him I had a conversation with Vivica and though I didn't know how to help him find Erica, I wanted to fill him in on the conversation. He replied Monday night, saying he'd give me a call in a day or two.

He's calling now that Amelia and I are seated at the booth in Roxy's.

"Gotta take this, baby. Can you order me a beer and... what are you ordering?"

"Okay, Doggo," she says, lifting the menu. "Chili fries and smash burgers might be what I'm having."

"Again?"

"Again."

"Order me the back ribs and a baked potato?"

She gives me the thumbs up as her eyes rove over the menu. I answer my phone with, "Hey, Rye, how are you man?" I step outside.

"Hey brother," he replies, "how's mated life?"

"It's good," I breathe out, leaning against the railing outside the door. "It was rough for the first few days, but she's finally settlin' in, I think."

"Glad to hear it, Mase."

"You're on your way home for Ty's wedding?"

"Yeah. I'll be home by Friday. Checking one more lead first."

"I wanted to tell you something about my conversation with Vivica Young. You know she's got four sisters?"

“Yeah, I know that now. Vivica is the oldest. Had the pleasure the other day.” His tone relays it was not a pleasure.

“I’m pickin’ up on the fact Erica might be your true mate, brother. Not just because of the spell. But because she is.”

I hear nothing. Not even background noise.

“You there still?”

“I’m here,” Riley answers.

“I got the impression, though that’s not fact. Vivica wouldn’t say much, but she didn’t deny it and her eyes said what her mouth didn’t need to say.”

“Right,” he mutters.

“Not that it makes it any better...but wanted you to know.”

“Might make it worse,” Rye mutters. “Means once I find this bitch, I’m stuck with her.”

“Brother,” I mutter, hating this for him.

“Fuck,” he bites off.

“Sorry, like I said, I don’t know this for a fact but...”

“I trust your instincts, Mase. I’m sure you’re right. Thanks for tellin’ me.”

“We’ve got work to do with this coven. We need to stay connected like the retired council did. They’re related to Grey.”

“Come again?”

“Greyson’s birth mother is a Young witch.”

“You’re joking.”

“We noticed Mimi Young’s eyes were the same as Grey’s that day, but Vivica’s are, too. I got confirmation from Vivica that they’re related, meaning Grey’s part warlock.”

“You’ve told him this?”

“Yeah. Called him Sunday after we got back. Talked further on it Monday morning on our run. They’re open to meeting with him, but he says it’s not on his radar; he’s more worried about the pack.”

“Worried about me, you mean.”

Grey’s definitely more worried about everyone else than learning about a mother he doesn’t remember. And there’s things he’s not saying about the situation, too. I don’t know what the story is there, but Greyson’s feeling conflict about that unknown side of his family. I’m sure he’ll get into that when he’s ready.

“Yeah you. Also the code yellow due to my mate’s ex. Just thought you’d want to know all you’ve missed.”

“I hear I’ve missed the half-shifting lessons. You’re all doin’ it?”

“I was the last of the group who are here but yeah. Pretty wild.”

“Got some catchin’ up to do.”

“Since Graydon and Greyson’s mother were able to sever their bond, that could mean you can do the same.”

Riley doesn’t answer.

“You need anything?”

“Knowing everything is good there is all I need at the moment, since that’s the best I’m getting.”

“Wish I had answers.”

“I’ll see you in a couple days. Enjoy your time with your little spitfire.”

“I am. I really fucking am.”

“Glad to hear it, Mason,” he says gruffly. I believe him. “After what you went through when Ty came back... I’m really happy for you, bro.”

“See you soon. You need anything, say the word.” I want him to get his *happy*. He’s been through a fuck-ton more bullshit than I’ve had to deal with.

“Appreciate it. Bye.”

“Bye, Riley.”

As I’m ending the call, a vibe hits me. Something problematic. Like a large collective spike of panic, Amelia’s panic the loudest.

I hurry inside and see Lorenzo unconscious on the floor by his stool and Amie rushing to his side.

“Call an ambulance!” she shouts, squatting, lifting his wrist to check his pulse.

“We’ll take him to Cat,” Roxy says, lifting a phone, “I’ll call and say you’re on the way.”

Amie is frowning when I reach her.

“I think he needs a hospital.”

Linc rushes over and lifts him.

Roxy speaks into the phone. “Cat, Uncle Lor dropped in the bar. We’re heading over. Amelia, Mason’s... mate is with him... Yeah, one sec.” Roxy passes the phone to Amie.

We’re in the clinic. Lorenzo is ready to leave, but Cat’s talked him into staying for a couple more hours so she can observe.

Lorenzo dropped out of nowhere.

And then Lorenzo couldn’t shift.

I’ve known him my whole life and the frustration coming from him when he couldn’t shift was palpable. It generated such an onslaught of negativity from him that I physically put my mate behind myself.

Ten minutes later, he tried again and succeeded.

Beyond that, he has a deep bruise on his lower back from an injury while he was running as wolf over a week ago and it hasn't healed despite multiple shifts. He also told Cat he's had a headache all day, and he's never had one in his life.

He showed to Roxy's for dinner as per his usual routine after running errands in The Hollow and doesn't remember collapsing. But that a super-alpha in our pack had difficulty shifting today is a concern. That he hasn't healed. That he's got symptoms he's never had.

Cat said when he arrived his blood pressure was dangerously low.

Shifting is as easy to do as walking for a council alpha. It's who we are. It's *what* we are.

Cat tells us that Gus came in a couple days ago and he too had trouble shifting, a headache, and low blood pressure. And after Gus having problems healing after a shift last week, this means something is amiss. There needs to be a council meeting. And we'll call in our historian Bailey, the retired historian, and the retired council alphas while Cat runs some bloodwork and confers with her contacts in Scotland.

"Why don't you people take it seriously when a trained medical professional states that someone needs a hospital?" Amie grumbles from Cat's waiting room.

"Do you think we don't know how to handle medical emergencies? That we haven't done so for our entire history? Cat is the healer."

"Do you not realize, Mason, that Cat didn't know why my sister was running a fever, hasn't been able to figure out why Gus couldn't heal after shifting, and that she didn't have an answer when he told her he couldn't shift the other day? Maybe it's time to bring in some professionals."

"You mean professionals from the mainstream world who don't know shifters exist? How's that gonna help?" I fire back.

"We have supernatural specialists," Cat puts in. "I've got someone flying over. And incidentally, Amelia, I do have

medical training. I went to medical school in the mainstream world and then did an internship in Washington at a renowned supernatural hospital under the tutelage of a top doctor and researcher, Dr. Adrian Constantin. I can treat shifters, fae, vampires, and other supernaturals.”

“I wasn’t trying to be confrontational Cat.” Amie raises her hands defensively.

“I’m not trying to be defensive either. I’m stating facts. I have training and practical experience. And I have access to a wealth of resources here at home as well as abroad.”

“Okay,” she whispers, looking remorseful. “I apologize. In my world, when something like this happens, you go to a hospital. I work in a hospital. It’s my go-to.”

Cat rests her hand on Amelia’s forearm, speaking softly, “I understand. But now that you’re part of the pack and because you’ve got medical training, too, not to mention it shows how much you care about the quality of care someone receives, I’d love to talk about you signing on to work here with me. I could use the help.”

“Okay,” Amie whispers. “We can talk about that. Until then, what can I do to help?”

“I’d like to examine everyone in the pack and put together a quick survey for everyone, which could help us pinpoint any similarities in symptoms, places they’ve been, things they’ve consumed, and so forth. If we don’t find out quickly what this might be between Gus and Lorenzo’s samples, we might want to collect urine and blood samples from everyone. It’ll be a lot of work. Maybe Amelia, you and I could set up a list for preliminary questionnaires and mini exams to start with.”

“Definitely,” Amie agrees.

They sit down together to start mapping out their plan.

“I’m calling a council meeting,” I call out, eyes on Linc who is leaned against the wall, then turn my eyes to my mate. “Are you fine here with Cat while I go do that, baby?”

She nods. “Yes. Go do what you need to do.” She gives me a smile, her eyes and our connection both flaring in my chest.

I lean over and kiss her, thumb grazing over my mark as I do, thinking that I want to run calling the witches by the council.

My first instinct is that I don’t trust them. Do we want them to know there’s potential weakness here? Does this have anything to do with Vivica Young’s precognition skills and the fact that she thinks we might need help from the witches?

Or is all of this a trap? Part of a larger scheme by those witches who have fucked with me, fucked Riley over, and now want Greyson in the ‘family’ fold?

Amelia

It's Thursday night and I'm exhausted. I'm standing in the doorway of the clinic, waiting for Mason, who's on his way to pick me up.

Thankfully, there haven't been any further health issues with anyone in the pack since Lorenzo collapsing, but the town is currently under what Mason called a code orange (one step down from a full-on red alert which is reserved for extreme danger), and everyone is staying close to home, and *in* the village other than for absolutely necessary reasons.

And I've now met nearly half the pack. And it's been a whirlwind. The rest are coming tomorrow, save anyone out of town as myself and Cat along with Cat's mother-in-law, an elderly lady who still has all her mental faculties and who used to be the pack healer went about examining everyone as they came in, just doing a quick vitals check and questionnaire. Bailey helped too, with the data side of things and it was a continuous flow of people today. Mason dropped me off at dawn before he went for his morning run and now at 7:00 at night, we're finally packing it in for the night with plans to do the rest tomorrow before I head over to help Ivy get ready for the wedding Saturday.

I'm tired, hungry, I miss Mason, and I'm also invigorated by today's work. Caring for the people of a whole village? Something about it was just really... satisfying.

I think I could do this. I hate that they're worried about what's causing this and I hope it's nothing serious, but I feel like a little family practice like this could be right up my alley. And I like, a whole lot, that as soon as a second case of a mysterious illness shows up, they are doing their best to take control. This says good things about how this village cares for their people.

I want to help. Though, I don't know if I'm totally qualified. I mean, I'm a trained nurse with a good couple years of on-the-job experience under my belt, in an ER that sees all sorts of trauma as well as minor injuries, but I'm human and these people are supernatural. I said this to Cat earlier tonight, but she tells me she thinks I *can* help long term and she'd love to take me under her wing.

She's overworked and wants more free time, too. She's heavily into botany and wants more time to devote to it and expects she'll have even less time to devote to it as the pack population 'explodes' (her word) with the council alphas beginning to pair up.

Mason came in at noon to bring us some lunch while I was holding a newborn baby, the baby of Sean and his wife Lorraine. Sean was the one who handed out cigars and shots of celebratory whisky the night I got drunk at Roxy's. His baby boy, Arsen, stole my heart the minute I laid eyes on him and when Mason walked in and stopped cold, making me freeze mid-coo, seeing the look on his face? It had my insides doing somersaults. Of course this was followed by my insides dropping with dread – that old feeling coming over me, that sadness. Women joke about ovaries doing an egg-drop at a hot guy, but unfortunately for me, my ovaries spend their time alternately dazed, then confused.

His eyes went sharp as he obviously picked up on my vibe and then he kissed me with a fierceness that had Lorraine coming to divest us of the baby.

Mason then whispered against my mouth, "Don't go there. You don't need to. We're gonna have everything we want some way, somehow."

I wanted to tell him I'm fine. I wanted to say 'it's too soon for us to worry about this' but instead, I nearly burst into tears, feeling lucky, feeling hopeful, feeling concerned gazes upon us. I brightly smiled and handed out stickers to Lorraine's three-year-old daughter, who in a teeny, sweet-as-pie voice, requested an extra one for her big "bruver" who is at school.

As I'm standing in the doorway now, waiting for Mason and daydreaming about a hot bath and some food, my phone makes a sound that confuses me until I realize it's my new phone. I've left the old one off and in my purse. I haven't checked it since I read Gloria's last message and the temptation to just toss it has been real. I do owe my friends some callbacks eventually though. I really don't want to just vanish from their lives. I've got some great friends. And I'll need to decide what to do about my job at the hospital. I'll think more about all this next week, I guess.

I lift my phone from my bag and eye the screen.

Ivy: I can't believe you didn't call me to come help you and Cat today. How is everything?

I write back.

Me: It's all good. You can help next week if needed. I'll be there as early as poss tomorrow to help you get things set up for Saturday. I just have to help at the clinic until the afternoon. All good? Need anything?

Ivy: All is good so far. Mom is here and working on alterations for the dress. We've got food and booze organized including some moonshine and wine from Mason's parents. We're a little short on fresh flowers but it's okay. All sorts of tulips bloomed suddenly in the backyard, like MAGIC, and it's going to be perfect. Right now I'm putting together some playlists for dancing.

Me: I have my iPod. 4000 songs. I'll bring it to you when I come over tomorrow.

Ivy: We should be good. (i.e: No thanks to your 80s dance party. LOL.)

I see the headlights of Mason's truck coming toward me and I'm thinking, *nice try, Ivy*. She always says I have shit taste in music. She's full of it.

Me: I'll bring it anyway. Mason's here to get me. Gotta go. Cya tomorrow. Love you.

Ivy puts a heart on my message, so I tuck my phone away with a smile.

When I get in, he's leaned over, lips puckered, waiting for his kiss. He smells amazing.

I touch my mouth to his and rake my nails along his stubbled jaw. "Hey Doggo."

"How was the rest of your day, baby?" He pulls me back for a second kiss.

"It was crazy. But good. I was happy to help."

He smiles and not just with his mouth, with his eyes, too. The look on his face has me all squishy inside. He likes that I'm helping out. Helping out is who I am, though. I'm glad that there haven't been any more signs of problems or illnesses so far, but everyone is very concerned with whatever it is that's made Lorenzo and Gus show the unusual symptoms. They're both doing fine right now and hopefully it stays that way.

I talked to Mom on the phone earlier, too, and lovingly teased her about her new persona as Kathy – the local non-shifting Cougar, human wolf-shifter heartbreaker, and she giggled like a schoolgirl. She's gone on a date with both Cade and Lorenzo and visited with Lorenzo today here in Arcana Falls to bring him some homemade soup before she headed to go work on Ivy's dress.

Cade kissed her *goodnight* last night, she said. And then Lorenzo kissed her today!

I need a proper catch-up with her beyond a quick phone call. It was so busy today that I haven't gotten the scoop on which of the two shapeshifters is in the lead for Mom's affections.

Mason's phone rings as he's pulling away.

He answers it on speaker.

"Joel?"

"Mercedes is back," Joel states, "It's heading toward your place. Two people in it."

“Two?”

“Female passenger,” Joel replies.

“Thanks, brother.”

“Need backup?” Joel offers.

“Don’t think so,” Mason replies.

“Me and Jase are on standby if you do.”

“Got it. Thanks, Joel.” He ends the call.

“What was that?” I ask. “Mercedes?”

“Your ex.”

I was afraid of that when I heard what Joel said.

“What now?” I grumble.

“We’re about to find out.”

I’m tired. And hungry. I want food and a bath and then an hour in bed with Mason before I pass out so I can get up at dawn in the morning and help with the rest of the exams. The idea of dealing with Rick right now makes me want to stomp my feet and have a full-on Amelia Brennan drama queen fit.

And Rick and a woman... I’m guessing it’s either his mother or the cunt wedding planner slash mistress, and I’m not happy about it.

As soon as we pull in, Carla gets out of his car and does her worst to level me with a glare.

It bounces off me. I feel a sudden wave of relief. I don’t have to deal with this bitch anymore.

“So it’s true,” she hisses, when I’m out of Mason’s truck.

“You’re a two-timing whore.”

Rick snaps something to her under his breath as he gets out of the driver’s side and grinds his teeth as he takes in Mason, but then his eyes change when he sees me and it’s a painted-on look I’ve seen too many times. Fake concern or something.

Fake. Yeah, fake is the right word for Rick Bullock. This is the first time in the entirety of the time I've known him where he's retorted against her treating me negatively. He must want something from me.

I cross my arms over my chest.

"I'm two-timing?" I laugh. "Ask your son who stepped out first, Carla. Ask him who of the two of us is the liar."

Rick's back straightens and he looks at me quizzically. "Liar?"

I ended things the day I met Mason. Rick would've kept going, kept cheating on me. Until when? Until he got his fat check and dumped me?

My eyes roll at his feigned innocence act. "I'm not sure why you're here, but it's been a very long day for us, so please, get whatever this is over with."

"I need to speak with you," Rick says. "You're not taking my calls or answering my texts and it's important."

"I haven't even bothered to read your texts, Rick. That's how *done* I am."

"Talk," Mason clips from beside me. So close our arms are touching. He wraps an arm around me, making his point.

"Talk, so we can get on with our evening."

Carla looks at me like I'm something she's just scraped off her shoe.

"I need your help, Amelia," Rick states. "I'll make it worth your while."

"Must we have this conversation on the driveway?" Carla inquires.

"Yes," I answer, giving Carla an unfiltered look, showing her precisely what I think of her. God, it feels good to hold nothing back since I no longer have respect for Rick. "And make it snappy."

"I'd rather we talk alone." Rick requests.

“No,” Mason replies before I can form an answer.

And his answer would’ve been my answer anyway.

Rick looks uncomfortable. His face has gone red.

He swallows before speaking and it looks like he’s doing it with difficulty, “My inheritance is tied up with me getting married before my thirtieth birthday next week.”

Mason barks out a surprised laugh.

Rick looks at me searchingly. I show him with my face that I’m not surprised.

“Marry me and I’ll write you a cashier’s check for a million dollars as soon as I get my inheritance. Should be no more than ten business days after we submit the marriage license to my grandfather’s lawyer. Then you can file for an annulment, divorce, whatever it’d be.”

Mason lets out a low growl. I put my arm around him and give him a reassuring squeeze.

“No thank you,” I say.

Rick blinks in surprise.

“A million dollars, Amelia. I’ll put it in writing. Revise our prenup.”

“Nope.”

He frowns and stares for a solid ten seconds before he chokes out, “You’re serious?”

“I’m serious,” I reply. “There are things in life that are so much more important than money.”

“Be smart,” Carla warns.

I ignore her. And it feels good.

“You’re a disgusting human being, Rick Bullock. Go. Find someone else,” I say.

“Amelia! That’s hardly...” Carla starts, but Rick interrupts her.

“I could. I could find someone for a fraction of that price. But we’ve got everything booked. Everything, Amelia. It’s all arranged. Just show up, stay for the reception and put on a good show. Then a couple weeks later, you’ll be a wealthy woman. Make my life easier. Just that. And it’ll be a cool million for you. Easy peasy.”

I scoff. “I know it has to be me. Gloria told me.”

I watch the shock register on his face.

“She told me about the practical joke your grandfather was playing that went wrong. Or that he went through with to have the last laugh. She also told me you’re having cashflow problems and that’s why you can’t wait for your inheritance. Clear to me now how you guys managed to get that venue booked on such short notice. You never loved me. I’m just a stand-in. For Tiara. Or Sheila. Or whatever... just a way to get your hands on your inheritance sooner.”

Carla pales and clutches her throat, looking horrified.

I scoff. “You used me. You lied. You talked me into whatever you talked me into because it was already booked and paid for. You’re a sick human being. I’d say, ‘have a nice life’ but instead I’ll say, ‘have the life you deserve’.” I turn to head to the door.

“Amelia, please. It’s not like that.”

He reaches for my hand.

Mason is instantly between us, staring down at him. “Do not fucking touch her.”

Rick backs up.

“It wasn’t like that,” he repeats.

“Oh, it wasn’t like that? Gloria didn’t design that ring for me. Your ex designed it. She wore it. You didn’t pay for it either, your sister gave you the stone because your ex wanted it. The stone with bad luck attached to it that wreaked havoc on your poor fiancée who you cheated on? The same woman you later cheated on me with? The audacity to cheat on me with Sheila

while Sheila practically tortured me during the planning of this sham wedding. Do you secretly hate me?"

"No," he chokes out. "Not at all."

"I'm done dealing with you, your crap, and your... mother."

Carla gasps.

"Carla, you're mean. To everyone. I only tolerated it for Rick's sake. I'd suggest you take a look at the way you treat people, but you probably won't so I'm not gonna waste my breath." I turn to Rick. "I'd like you to write me a check though, for the investment I made with the profit from my condo. You're no longer my financial planner."

He winces. "I need my cashflow problems ironed out before I can do that, Amelia."

I gawk. "You lost that money?"

"I need your help to get flush again."

I stare in shock for a solid minute. He screwed me over for my money as well as everything else.

"Goodbye. I'll send back the hideous ring with the bad juju when I find it."

"Find it?" Carla inquires.

I shrug. "Mason ripped it off my finger the first time he fucked me and threw it. It's like he knew it was meaningless or something."

Mason gives me an affectionate squeeze.

"It'll turn up eventually," I add, shrugging again.

"That ring is worth a lot of money, young lady. We'll see you in court if it's not returned immediately."

"Is it worth more than what you've lost from my condo?" I ask Rick.

"I never wanted to hurt you. Help me, please. It's really important, Amelia," Rick tries.

“Were you going to dump me as soon as you got your fat check?” I ask.

“No!”

And I know he’s lying. My bullshit detector with Rick has been broken but it’s currently operating at full capacity.

“I can’t help you,” I say flatly.

He shakes his head in disbelief. “You mean you won’t. Because you can help me. You’re just choosing not to?”

“Take your pick. It’s just not happening.”

“Amelia...” He looks desperate. “I’m in big trouble if I don’t correct my cashflow issue immediately.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s a long story. It’s complicated.”

“You know, it’s none of my business. I don’t care,” I hiss. “I have someone who wants me. Someone who listens to me. Someone who appreciates me. In the week and a half since I’ve been with him, he’s shown me more of what a relationship is supposed to be than you did the entire nine months we were together. Please go. Don’t contact me again.”

“Two million,” Rick blurts.

I laugh.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Mason snaps.

Carla, who has been on the sideline with a hypercritical scowl pointed at me speaks up again. “I know this house. I worked for the magazine that featured it when it was on the cover and the center spread.”

This is something I put together the other day, but why is she bringing it up at this particular moment?

She gives Mason a saccharine smile. “I now have my own firm and sit on the board for another very popular magazine, even more popular than the one your home was featured in. I

understand that your company got a lot of new business as a result of that feature.”

Mason’s eyes are on her, but I can’t read them.

“If you’re a savvy businessman, you won’t get in the way of this. I can make it so nobody will work with your firm or so that *everyone* will. My name is platinum in the design industry for the state, so choose wisely Mr. Quinn. Choose wisely, Amelia. This opportunity won’t come around again.”

“You guys will not fuck with Mason over this,” I hiss.

Mason drops a kiss on my temple and laughs. “I don’t give a fuck who you are or how much money you’ve got, I’m not for sale. Neither is my woman. Let’s go inside, baby.”

“Think about it,” Rick calls out as Mason turns me and we swiftly move inside, not giving them a backwards glance. But as soon as Mason locks the door, he lets out an angry growl.

And I turn to see what’s happening outside. Through the stained-glass window, I see Rick and his mother converse for a minute before Rick throws his arms up in the air with frustration etched into his features and if he were a cartoon, there would be steam coming from his ears. They get in his car.

I turn to Mason, who snaps, “What the fuck”, as he tosses his phone and keys on the console table. “Those fuckin’ people are whacked.”

“Yeah. Let him figure his own problems out.”

“You tempted to take the money?”

I stare at him.

“A little tempted?” he pushes.

“No,” I whisper. “Why would you even ask?”

He shrugs. “I’m not hard up for cash, I’m doin’ well, especially since that magazine article, but I grew up working class and I’ve got some money put away, but I’m always gonna be workin’ class, baby.”

“My parents aren’t rich either.” I shrug. “I wasn’t with him for his money. Is that what you think?”

“He stands to inherit about sixty million now. Another forty-odd million when his grandmother dies. That family has money on both sides.”

“How do you know that?” I knew Rick’s grandparents were wealthy, but I didn’t ever know *how* wealthy.

“We’re under code orange. We’re investigating all threats that have us under that code. The illnesses *and* the ex who might be thinkin’ about retaliating against me for the fact you’re not going back to him, the fact that you’re now mine and that’s stopping him from getting his inheritance.”

“I don’t care about his money. Do you think I was with him for that? Did you know his money was tied to our getting married?”

“No, didn’t know that much. And I didn’t say that, baby. It’s just an easy offer. Marry the guy and then wait a couple weeks and have all that cash.”

“I don’t want it,” I snap.

And then I rear back. *Wait*. My stomach pitches.

“Do you want me to take it?” I ask softly, then swallow hard.

“Are you worried Carla will ruin your company? I mean... if you need me to-”

“Stop.” He pulls me into his arms with such force I squeak.

He cups my jaw and stares into my eyes. “You’d do that for me?” he asks, his eyes warm.

I bite my lip.

He lets out a big breath. “You’d do that for me.”

I don’t say anything. I’m stuck on how warm and expressive his eyes are right now.

He sighs again. “Couldn’t give two shits if she tries to hurt my business. I’m not for sale. And I’m not afraid of anybody. I

don't want you marrying him. You're mine, baby. All mine."

"Then why are we talking about this?" I ask.

"I'm having trouble reading you right now. Just talking it out with you," he replies. "You haven't said anything about all that stuff you found out from his sister."

I shrug. "I was processing. And I processed it quickly. You distracted me with your relentless pursuit of me, I guess, so I got over it pretty quick."

"Meant to tell you, I saw that ring upstairs wedged in the track for the patio doors in our room," he adds.

"Oh," I say. "I'll grab it and courier it to him. Gloria said it's bad luck or something. Looks like I met you just in time. My luck changed for the better just as you got it off my finger."

"You found out all that from his sister when? The night we went to Roxy's with your ma?"

I nod.

"You didn't say anything. I saw the name Gloria over your shoulder in a text in the restaurant. But it felt like you were upset. Really upset."

I shrug. "It stung. Stung that I was lied to. But it doesn't matter. I didn't love him. I guess I said *yes* because I was in a lot of pain when he asked." I shrug again. "He *said* he loved me, and I guess because he didn't need a woman who could give him kids."

Mason's expression goes even softer.

I keep talking. "Probably partly because his grandfather was sweet to me before he died and set us up and I was in a terrible place after Aunt Nelle died, after my previous ex dumped me for my fertility problems, after Dad cheated on Mom. Rick was there. He put forth a good argument for what a future with him would look like. He did a grand romantic gesture proposal. I never cared that he stood to inherit a lot of money. Never even knew how much he'd inherit. I mean... we split the bills down the middle when I moved in with him and I

figured it'd always be that way." I scoff. "I didn't care. I like my job and make good money. I figured I'd be okay with him, that my heart wouldn't get broken. I knew what I'd be getting. A driven guy that liked nice things. I like nice things, but I don't have any problem working for and getting them for myself. I was totally fine to drive my old car. I love designer clothes, but I love them even more when I get them on sale. I'm not materialistic. Rick... he... just felt... I dunno... safe. That's probably why I said yes."

"Then he broke your heart anyway."

"He didn't."

"He wasn't faithful. He didn't stand up for you. I will be faithful, and I'll always take your back, baby."

"How are you this sweet?" I ask.

"I'm just yours, Amelia. Never belonged to anybody else and I never will. And you're all mine and all I want."

I'm melting. "Women around here are pining for you, though. The redhead. Roxy."

"Doesn't matter. Nothing's gonna change that I'm yours, okay? I promise you – if anybody tries to hurt you again, they'll have to get past me. And baby, I'll fight to the death to stop them."

My insides feel funny right now. I'm trying really hard to not cry.

"He didn't break my heart," I whisper, voice cracking with emotion. "He just showed me what I don't want from a relationship. Showed me that I need more from life. I wasn't sure that I'd have that, though. But you've shown me it's possible. It's possible to have all I want."

Mason's expression goes from toasty warm to lighting with a different kind of spark. A lustful one. He takes my face into both hands.

"You've shown me what I *do* want, Mason Quinn. You've made me trust again. If you weren't here, beside me, getting

up in my grill and showing me I could believe in the possibility of being happy, really happy, I would've probably sworn relationships off forever after finding out the truth about him. If I'd found out. Maybe I was meant to find out who he really is. Maybe I was meant to find you. If I hadn't, I probably would've been none-the-wiser and gone ahead and married him and then got dumped once he got his inheritance. Or struck dead by lightning because of the cursed ring. I don't know. And frankly..." I lift one shoulder and let it drop. "I don't care, really."

The intensity in his eyes has me self-conscious. And suddenly it hits me how very forthright about my emotions I was just being. That is *so* not like me.

"What do we have to eat?" I ask, deflecting, "I'm starving."

"Nuh uh. Not so fast. I'm starving, too. For you, my mate," he says and then he lifts me up into his arms.

Amelia

Meat-scented smoke billows from the barbecue Jase is manning on the concrete patio that runs along the back of Tyson's house. Lincoln and Greyson stand with him, all three with beer bottles in hand and I've already teased that no matter the occasion, when there's a man at a grill he needs moral support in the form of buddies standing beside him with beers.

Tyson is on a porch swing on the opposite end of that patio, Ivy on his lap and they're whispering to one another. He's shirtless, in swim trunks, and my sister looks happy and sun-kissed in her swimsuit with a mesh cover-up. It feels like summer today and when Mom and I got here, we actually couldn't find them. We later figured out they were gone swimming and while it's extra-warm out I can't imagine the river wasn't at least a little bit chilly. Then again, my sister always got her polar bear patch every year at summer camp, for taking a six o'clock dip every morning. I never once got that badge. Not that I cared about the patch. I more cared about the older male camp counselors and finding ways to get their attention, which wasn't difficult since I was an early bloomer and in a bra by eleven years old.

Since nobody answered but the door was unlocked, Mom took me on a tour of their beautiful house while we looked for them (being extra loud in case they were 'busy'.) The patio door was open, letting the sun in and there were towels and suntan lotion on the patio, so we figured they'd just gone for a walk and got down to the business of organizing some of the wedding stuff, which was in the dining room.

Mom spotted them swimming back from the waterfall about half an hour later while we were elbows-deep in wedding favors spread out on their huge dining room table. My heart flared at the sight of them walking hand in hand toward the

house, smiles on their faces and love in my sister's gaze. Based on the way my sister was behaving, I suspect they were going at it hot and heavy back there on the rocks by the waterfall.

"Hi! You're here," she greeted and threw her arms around Mom, then me.

"You're soggy," I remarked.

"You're early," she replied.

"Mom picked me up at the clinic a little while ago."

"Hello ladies," Tyson greeted.

"Hey," I said.

He kissed Mom's cheek and then patted my head affectionately, which struck me as unexpected, but I gave him a smile.

Tyson disappeared, then, saying he was going with Greyson to pick up his suit for tomorrow and would be back shortly.

The past few hours were the Brennan girls setting things up for tomorrow and chatting about Mom's dating life, about Ivy's wedding tomorrow, interspersed with them asking questions about me and Mason. I haven't bothered to say anything to Mom or Ivy about the drama with Rick. I don't want to overshadow Ivy's wedding day; I'll fill them in later.

And now, the food is smelling good, there are lots of people around, and everything is done for tomorrow between what we've done here and what a handful of the women from the pack have done to get the town hall ready for the reception.

I feel warmth on my face and realize Mason is watching me smile at my sister and her man. Mason is at the tall wedding arch that someone dropped off with the tables and chairs. We've already decorated with white fake flowers and the occasional purple bloom. Mason and Joel are currently weaving string lights through it.

The ceremony happens at dusk here tomorrow with about a hundred guests and then the bride and groom as well as the rest of us are heading through the village on foot to the town hall where the reception is happening with the rest of the pack. Everything was going to be done here, but there was a last-minute change, because the guest list is so large and also because the alpha council wanted the event split up for security reasons. Four hundred and some-odd more people will be joining for the rest of the celebration at the town hall. My sister's wedding is going to have more guests than mine would have. And I'd bet people will have a whole lot more fun, too. In addition to everyone in Arcana Falls being invited, Cat said some alphas and their top beta pack members from several other packs as well as some security detail are also factored in.

Mom and I are currently at one of the three large picnic tables set up on the grass a few feet away from the patio for tonight's dinner, which is just for the council alphas, Cat and Stan, and Cat's sister and Tyson's uncle. Right now, with all the wedding stuff done, me and Mom are having a glass of wine and a quiet chat while Tyson and Ivy cuddle on the back porch swing, acting like nobody else is even here.

"I just don't know how this is my life," Mom muses. "To have the attention of two men at once? Two very attractive men who are markedly different from your father? It's been fun." She shrugs, fiddling with fake flowers we've put aside to weave into Ivy's hair tomorrow.

"Sounds like it's good to be 'Kathy' instead of Kathleen," I tease.

She smiles brightly.

"And both suitors are going to be here tomorrow for the wedding, so your dance card is going to be full tomorrow, for sure. Still not sure which direction you're leaning?"

"Well..." she whispers.

I move in. "Keep it low or these guys with their supersonic hearing will hear," I warn.

“I don’t know yet,” she whispers. “It’s too soon to make a decision. They’re both wonderful. And I don’t know that either of them expect me to decide between them. It’s just been fun so far. It’s been one date. And that doesn’t mean anyone wants to have a commitment.”

“They’re both alphas, Mom, and I don’t know a whole lot about alpha traits so far, but...”

My sister joins us and cuts me off, “They’re gonna want you to decide. And soon. Else there might be a brawl. Don’t have men brawling on my wedding day, Mom.” Ivy throws herself into a chair beside me and pops the tab on her can of Sprite.

“What can I say?” Mom flutters her lashes and flips her hair. “I’m in demand.”

We both laugh.

“Well, for now, I’m just having fun.” Mom shrugs.

“Do we need to have the birth control talk?” Ivy teases.

I laugh.

Mom rolls her eyes.

“Too bad it’s not a fated mate situation, though,” Ivy whispers. “Mom will miss out on the knotting.”

“Poor Mom,” I whisper.

“And the neck clit,” Ivy adds.

Mom’s face drops. And she looks sorely disappointed.

“Bailey’s mom was a second wife and I think she gets the knot,” I say.

“Really?” Ivy asks.

Mom straightens up.

“So, my best guess is that there’s more of a chance of that if you hook up with Lorenzo.”

“Why?” Mom asks.

“Because Cade is an unmated alpha. Lorenzo is a widowed alpha. You could pick Cade and he could suddenly identify his fated mate and drop you like a hot potato.”

“How do you know so much more about this than me?” Ivy asks.

“I got drunk with a couple of the girls last week. Cicely filled me in. She’s sworn off alphas for now. She has a thing for Lincoln and since he’s never mated but is in line to mate, probably soon...”

I feel heat on the back of my neck and look over and see Lincoln is staring at me, a face of stone. He’s over by the cooler, no longer at the barbeque grill.

Oh shit. Supersonic hearing. *Duh, Amelia!*

Yikes. I wiggle my fingers and giggle nervously.

He cracks open another beer and flicks the cap into the cooler before taking a long drink, looking pissed off.

I look to Mom and Ivy who both look uncomfortable.

“I think I need to make a call to Cicely,” I whisper.

“Yep,” Ivy replies.

Laughter breaks out and I look over and see Tyson at the arched wedding pergola where Mason and Joel are stringing lights round the flowers that me and Mom weaved through earlier. Mason and Tyson are both laughing hard, looking happy. The smile on my gorgeous man’s face fills me with joy. His eyes cut to me and go even warmer, so I blow him a kiss.

He reaches out and pretends to catch it. *Swoon.*

“Food’s ready! Where are the parents?” Jase calls out.

“They’ll be here any minute,” Tyson answers.

Me, Ivy, and Mom dash indoors to grab the salads from the fridge and as I step out, I look around. It looks perfect. Everything is ready for my sister and her big day tomorrow. Mom brought me three dresses to choose from, from a dress

shop a few towns over since I couldn't get away after the mayhem at the clinic yesterday. I chose a royal purple lace dress with a scalloped off the shoulder neckline.

All in all, it's been great this afternoon, finally spending time with Mom and Ivy. And in addition to the beautiful weather today, the grass and trees have fully woken from their wintertime nap and the back of Tyson's home has lush flowerbeds filled with tulips and daffodils.

The spot is the perfect outdoor wedding spot with the river, the beautiful rocky waterfall in the backdrop, and this house is gorgeous, too. I teased Ivy about that shack she and Tyson were staying in. Her reaction told me that she's got fond memories of where her and Tyson had their beginning.

Several of the women are pulling together to get the town hall ready for the reception tomorrow.

Ivy told me there were pack mating ceremony traditions that she would have liked to have integrated into the big day but with the current code orange status, it would all be handled like a mainstream ceremony with a few small exceptions, things that were often used in pagan weddings that they'd observe in homage to the old ways.

Stan, Cat's partner of the last several years, a non-shifter who owns a pharmacy in Drowsy Hollow, had gone online this week and got ordained so that he could perform the marriage ceremony.

"Cat's here, let's eat," Jase calls out from the grill as Cat and Stan stroll in.

"Everything okay?" I ask her. "Any changes? Any more cases?"

"None so far. And we're all done with the exams and surveys. Fingers crossed everything continues to be uneventful so we can enjoy the wedding."

"Fingers crossed," I agree.

Riley arrives. He goes right to Tyson and throws his arms around him and the two embrace with back slaps.

Mason, Greyson, Joel, Lincoln, and Jase all head over and take turns doing the hug slash back slap thing with Riley.

“This a wedding or a funeral?” Riley calls out. “The place went dead when I walked in. Stop that shit.”

“Figures you showed in time for food,” Jase grumbles.

“That’s Riley’s parents, Ty’s aunt and uncle,” Ivy says, pointing out Lucy who I already met coming in with her husband.

“Uncle Atticus, this is my sister, Amelia.”

“Lovely to meet you,” Atticus says.

I see the resemblance to Tyson and Riley as he comes in, hugs his son and then hugs Tyson. Ivy gets scooped into hugs and then they all do the same with me, too.

With everyone here, we all sit down to enjoy some grilled surf ‘n turf, baked potatoes, and salad together.

Mason

“Seven of us in one place feels very fucking right,” I say, lifting my beer bottle. “We doin’ a run in the morning?” I look to Tyson.

“Of course,” he says.

Riley smiles, but it’s a little tight.

All of us lift our drinks to toast. We’re all sitting around the fire pit at the shore, facing the waterfall with a campfire going. It’s dusk and the girls are inside, doing some wedding stuff for tomorrow. Ty’s mom and Stan as well as Riley’s folks just left.

We had a nice meal. There was a lot of laughter. And two of the seven of us have our women and I truly look forward to how right it will feel when it’s us seven with our seven mates. And kids. As many as we can make between us and if Amie and I can’t have any biologically, I’m already sure I’m down to adopt.

Unburdening herself from that medical fact opened things up for us. I know it still bothers her; I saw it written all over her face as well as felt it through our connection when our eyes locked in the clinic while she was holding Sean’s new son.

It’ll work out. It all will.

My eyes move to Riley who stares into the flames. I want peace for him.

“I’m here until Tuesday,” he says, “Wednesday the latest, just for Ty’s wedding and to sort some shit out for Savage Construction. Got one quick basement job and then I’ll hit the road again.”

“I’ll jump on that and help,” I say, knowing which job he’s talking about.

“You had enough time with your new mate?” Grey asks. “You feelin’ safe enough to leave her alone?”

“We’ve come a long way in the last few days,” I reply.

“Good news,” Tyson pipes up.

“You want help?” Grey asks. “On the road, I mean?”

Their eyes meet.

“The rest of these Young people want to meet me. Maybe I can help flush her out.”

“Not a bad idea,” Joel puts in.

“Whatever you need, man,” Grey offers. “If you want me to come and then get out of your way after I try to flush her out... whatever you need. Or if not, if you wanna leave earlier, I’ll get on the job with Mase. Just let me know what you need.”

Riley sips his beer. “Thanks, Grey. I’ll think on that, let you know.” Riley rakes his hand through his hair. “Anyway, enough long faces here. I’m here for a celebration, so let’s fuckin’ celebrate. Ty’s home. He’s mated. So’s Mase. And Ty’s part of our pack. I’m putting a bookmark on the other shit until after the wedding. All’s good right now.”

All isn’t good for Riley, but I get it, his declaration. He doesn’t want to bring the mood down. I mean, I guess I don’t completely get it – nobody but Riley knows what he feels like after being put through this, but I know what it’s like to feel like life’s being ripped apart out of your control, not wanting a bunch of spectators getting a front row seat to the carnage. Riley put his pack before himself to come home for Tyson but other than this pit stop, he has a single-minded focus right now. We may be pack animals, we rely on one another and crave the bosom of the family at the best of times as well as the worst of times, but this is different. Mourning a mate would involve a very solo set of emotions, I’m guessing, and he’s not doing a typical mourning. He’s already lived in mourning for years and is now coming to grips with the reality of the betrayal.

Ivy pokes her head out the door. “Ty?” she calls out.

He rises and jogs over there. I lift another log and put it on the fire.

Commotion makes all our gazes swing to the back patio.

“Not happening,” Tyson growls.

Ivy throws her arms up in the air with frustration.

Amelia and her mother look like they’re trying to diffuse a situation where Ty’s losing his cool.

“Tell him!” Ivy pleads, looking in our direction.

“Tell him what?” Jase calls out and then we’re all on the move to the back patio.

“That the bride and groom part ways the night before the wedding until they see one another at the altar.”

None of the other six of us say anything.

“She’s correct,” Amelia remarks.

Kathleen nods. “It’s customary.”

“It’s bullshit is what it is,” Ty remarks. “I’m not spending a night away from you.”

“Tell him guys,” Ivy pleads, looking to the six of us for help.

“That’s a human custom, not a shifter one,” I pipe up.

“You’re not helping,” Amelia mutters while her sister’s eyes slash across me with anger.

“It’s a fact,” Jase adds. “We have other traditions for old school mating ceremonies, but you girls might not be down for some of them and sadly, our code status means we can’t observe the others.”

“I’m not being apart from you.” Tyson folds his arms over his chest.

“It’s one night!” Ivy whines. “We’ll have the rest of our nights together.”

“No,” he denies. “You’re already mine. I’ve already got you for all my nights. I won’t spend a night apart from you for a human custom that doesn’t make sense. That’s stupid.”

She frowns. “You said you’d let me have my style of wedding.”

“And I am. I have a suit. We’re having a party. I’m doing that, Ivy.”

“This is part of that.”

“No,” he refuses.

“Maybe we should head home,” I offer. “Amie?”

She shakes her head sharply. “Me and Mom will stay here with Ivy. Take Tyson home with you. How about that? All of you go and have a boys’ night. Go play some pool. Hang out. Get drunk.”

“I don’t get drunk,” Tyson clips.

Amelia rears back. “Or not. Just go sleep somewhere else.”

“It’s tradition for the bride and groom to split up,” Kathleen says in a placating tone. “It’ll be less than twenty-four hours. Think of how excited you’ll be to see your bride tomorrow at the altar when you haven’t seen her all day.”

Tyson bares his teeth but doesn’t speak.

“This is important to Ivy,” Kathleen whispers, touching his arm. “A marriage is about compromise, isn’t it? My daughter will have to compromise with you on some things and you’ll do the same for her. If everything is only about what one person wants, a marriage will become bitter and unhappy. Trust me, *I know*.”

Tyson, who has stopped baring his teeth lets out a heavy sigh, eyes on his mate. She pouts and he sighs again before nodding and grabbing Ivy’s hand, tugging her toward the door.

Five minutes later, Tyson comes out with the bag containing his suit and his shoes.

Ivy peeks out the door and gives her sister and mother a smile.

“Goodnight everyone. See you tomorrow,” Ivy waves.

Amie steps up to me, lifts up onto her tiptoes, and says, “Goodnight, Doggo. See you tomorrow.” She kisses me.

“Wait. I didn’t sign up for a night away from you,” I say against her claiming mark, wrapping my arms around her waist.

“My sister needs me. And absence will make the heart grow fonder.”

“My heart is pretty fucking fond, wildberry.” I grab her ass with both hands.

She’s wearing a pretty pink dress today and ever since I saw her in it, I’ve wanted to bend her over and lift it up over her sweet ass.

She gives me a bright smile. “Take care of Ty for Ivy. Sweet dreams, Mase. See you tomorrow.”

“Love you, baby,” I say. “Be good.” I squeeze her ass for good measure. “And I’m giving you tonight so if you make me have a human wedding, I won’t be giving you the night before that.” Her eyes shine briefly and then the light dims. “I don’t want a human style wedding.”

I shrug. “That’s fine. We’re already married anyway.”

The spark is back in her eyes. She smiles and bites her lip. She looks happy. It feels like she’s happy. This makes *me* very fucking happy.

“We runnin’ to my place?” I ask the guys.

“Good idea,” Tyson says. “Your mate said play pool. You have a pool table? I like a game of pool.”

“I do. Let’s go,” I say, then aim my eyes at Amie. “We’ll come back for the clothes.”

“On my call, last one there makes drinks for everyone,” Riley quips.

Amelia

Suddenly, there are seven incredibly hot men shedding their clothes in front of me, Mom, and Ivy – doing it without a shred of modesty. For a second ... they're all bare-naked. All of them.

I don't get a chance to leisurely take that all in, and there's a whole lot *to* take in, because then there are seven massive wolves with flowing manes. Tyson, pure black. Mason, pure white. Riley, a solid chocolate brown color. Greyson as a wolf is, not surprisingly by his name and his dark gray eye color, a light gray with darker gray around his face. Jase's fur is sand-colored and his tail looks like the tip has been dipped in white paint. Lincoln's wolf is a faded ginger color with a darker ginger mask around his face and kohl-like outline around his eyes. Joel has a white face but black body, mostly white legs.

Riley lets out a deep bark and at that, they all break into a run at full speed. All seven of them sprint off in a race, and the ground actually shakes.

I lift my jaw up from the grass and survey the pile of clothes and shoes. And... Tyson's suit bag.

"Holy cow," Mom mutters from behind me. "That's... that's... insane. Did that really just happen?"

Yep.

"That really just happened?" Mom asks again, voice two octaves higher.

"It happened, Mom," I reply, realizing she knew they were shifters but hadn't actually seen any shifting until now.

"Not sure I'll ever get used to that," Ivy muses as she lifts up Tyson's suit bag and hangs it from the frame under the patio umbrella, so it won't wrinkle.

“I need a drink. A stiff one,” Mom says. “No pun intended. Though... I could use a stiff coupla things after that sight.”

“Ew!” I say. “Rude!”

My sister laughs.

An idea comes to me. “Actually, I think we could all do with a drink. In fact, I think we also need a bachelorette party.” I look to my sister.

Her eyes light up.

“Let me make a couple calls,” I say, glad I got Bailey’s and Cat’s numbers put into my new phone yesterday.

My sister has never looked more beautiful and never looked happier. We were up until three o’clock in the morning getting drunk around the campfire with Mason’s mom, Tyson’s mom, Bailey, Cicely, Lucy, and Riley’s sister Trina who we just met, and I absolutely adore her. I’m surprised we didn’t wake up with hangovers. But luckily, we all dodged that bullet.

Ivy now slowly, purposefully walks toward the shore, toward her groom, the Arcana Falls the backdrop. The sky is a brilliant mosaic of orange, lilac, pink, and purple swirls.

The white wedding dress I bought looks absolutely perfect on her. The purple flowers in her blonde and purple hair match the purple in the sunset as well as her wedding accents. It’s like the sky is telling us it was meant to be.

Her eyes flare an even darker purple than I’ve seen so far, aimed at her groom, and it looks like a trick of the light, but somehow I suspect it’s not; instead it’s related to the magic around here. My sister and I had the same eye color all our lives until now. Hers look more purple and I could swear, looking in the mirror the last few days, that mine looked a different, darker shade of blue.

Mom’s eyes are bright with unshed tears as Ivy passes me the bouquet. A blue and purple butterfly lands on it just as I take it from her.

I smile at it as it sits on a flower, wings slowly flexing up and down, the soft wing brushing my index finger.

“Aunt Nelle,” Ivy whispers, looking over her shoulder at me before she turns to her groom. I look down at the butterfly and I’m not sure what Ivy means by that. My eyes move back to Tyson.

And from my vantage point, the way he looks at her? *Swoon*.

He looks gorgeous, too. His dark hair is loose, curly, falling several inches below his shoulders. He fills out his black suit very, *very* nicely.

Seeing the emotion, the devotion in his eyes as she puts her hands into his palms, I have to fight to stop myself from letting out the ugly-cry sob that’s sitting in the center of my throat.

I’m suddenly sad my father isn’t here for Ivy. Sad that his actions have made him an outsider in his family.

Our little brother won’t care much about missing the wedding, but Dad is losing out here. There was a missed call from him yesterday on my old phone. I haven’t listened my full voicemail box and assume that if he tried to leave a message it’d be about thinking it was my wedding day eve. He’s been out of the loop and unaware that it’s the sweet blonde’s wedding day today instead of the evil dark-haired one. I only turned that phone on to message my bridesmaids to tell them I was alive and kicking and doing fine. That I’d be in touch next week.

Right here, right now, I’m feeling like I’m where I’m supposed to be. Watching my sister get her happy ending instead of standing at an altar in a church I didn’t choose, marrying a man who didn’t really love me.

The bridal march’s volume fades, and Stan starts to speak to the crowd of about a hundred people. We’re a captive audience while Tyson Savage and Ivy Adeline Brennan recite their vows to one another, promising forever and both of them doing it with conviction.

I believe them wholeheartedly. I can't imagine anyone here wouldn't. But when Stan offers the guests the option to voice their objection to the marriage, Tyson lets out a low, warning growl as his eyes scan the crowd.

"It's a technicality, Ty. Not to worry," Stan cheerfully says.

The crowd laughs. Tyson's expression says he doesn't find it funny, but then Ivy jiggles his hands and as his eyes settle back on her, the anger vanishes, love shining in his eyes.

As she makes her promises, it looks like the man is washed in love, totally drenched with it. My sinuses are burning as I watch this beauty in front of me.

The moment Stan pronounces them husband and wife, a chorus of wolf howls fills the air, startling me and my sister and probably Mom, too, who sits between Lorenzo and Cade in the first row behind me.

Nobody has shifted into their wolf forms, but every male in the yard is making that sound, including my man, who also sits in the front row beside Catrina and her sister Lucy, along with Tyson's grandparents, Atticus, and the other alphas from the council. And damn does Mason look good in a suit. And he has more than stubble, which is incredibly hot.

I missed him this morning when I woke. A lot. I didn't have a chance to miss him at bedtime because I fell asleep in my sister's bed where we drunkenly giggled, talking in Pig Latin until Mom came in and told us to go to "leep-say" (sleep) so we wouldn't have "ags-bay" (bags) under our eyes today.

But when I woke this morning, I felt a niggles of panic when I realized he wasn't beside me. Mom made us pancakes and café mocha shakes and it was a perfect morning together.

At the declaration and the invitation for Tyson to kiss his bride, Tyson looks at Stan, confused. Maybe because he's not used to being given permission to kiss his woman.

Ivy is the one that goes for it first. She grabs Tyson's jaw with both hands and hops up. He catches her by the thighs and

Riley has to move back to avoid being taken out by my sister's feet as they have a movie-worthy kiss.

The music's volume quickly goes up, courtesy of Cade, who has the tablet to control the speaker. He'll man the music again at the reception tonight, and the song Celebration by Kool and the Gang (my choice!) blares through the speaker. All of us in attendance throw eco-friendly wildflower seed confetti and birdseed up in the air, and then me and Riley rush to the side table to start pouring the mead that Mason's parents supplied.

After a glass, we'll take some photos, and then everyone will walk to the town hall for the dinner and dance with the rest of the pack lining the streets all the way, ready to congratulate them.

Ivy and Tyson have danced their first dance to the UB-40 version of *I Can't Help Falling in Love with You* and now many couples, dozens, are up on the dancefloor, moving together to *To Make You Feel My Love* by Garth Brooks, including me and my shifter.

I scrub his jaw with my purple nails.

"Couldn't shave this morning. My personal face groomer wasn't there."

I smile wide. "I like it. But I'll shave you tomorrow."

"I'll like *that*," he returns.

His eyes are warm and happy as he looks at me and I'm not trying to hide how I feel, at all. It feels like I'm floating as we dance together, looking into one another's eyes.

In fact, all day I've been basking in my feelings. Must be the wedding. Must be the people surrounding me. Must be the way Mason looks at me. Love is in the air.

It was a beautiful wedding, and the reception is promising to be a fun night. The hall is a converted barn at what's known as the four corners of the village, across the street from the gas station where my journey started. The entire indoor space is decorated with twinkle lights. All the tables are covered in

white linen with purple accents and with oodles of people. There's been a mountain of food. Delicious food.

A bunch of the ladies have just set up the most massive dessert buffet I've ever laid eyes on and I'm looking forward to digging in.

Unlike a traditional wedding with the receiving line (the parade to the town hall from Tyson's house negated the need for that, I suppose) and all the speeches, this has just been a non-traditional party, but I've gotten in Cade's ear a couple times about a few things that need to be done with him as the emcee.

Very soon, the bride and groom will be cutting the cake, then a few other traditions like the garter toss and bouquet throw. Tyson has been told he and Ivy can leave any time after the bouquet gets tossed and a few minutes ago, the groom jerked his chin at me, asking if it was time for that.

He wants to take my sister home. But he might have trouble getting her off the dance floor. She's been having a blast.

Mom is slow dancing with Cade right now and Lorenzo doesn't look too happy about it. I have a feeling he'll be making sure to get the next dance.

I'm standing in the shadows, laughing with Bailey and Cicely as Tyson, who has just successfully removed my sister's garter with his teeth flings it backwards.

Greyson's arm flies up and he catches it in a fist. The whole place breaks out with roars of happiness.

Greyson Blackwood is expected to be the next council super-alpha to mate because of their birth order mating rule.

"That looked fixed," I say.

"It wasn't," Bailey denies.

I shrug. "In a minute, you guys have to line up behind Ivy so that you can see if any of you catch that bouquet, see which

woman might be married off first.”

“Maybe all seven will marry outsiders,” Cicely mutters with disappointment.

And then her expression drops. “Not that I think you’re an outsider. You and Ivy, you belong here, clearly, I just mean...”

I give her a smile and wave my hand. “I know what you mean. The one who catches the bouquet isn’t necessarily marrying an alpha from your council, it’s just that their wedding is supposed to be *next*.”

“We do watch television and movies, you know,” Cicely says. “Familiar with your wedding customs; it’s just that it’s most little girls’ dreams to be mated to alphas is all. Little girls from around here dream of council alphas.” She shrugs. “And now three of them, nearly half, are out of the running.”

“Not necessarily,” I say, “Riley could mate with one of you since that girl wasn’t –”

“Nope. She’s his destined mate apparently,” Bailey says. “Mason found that out from your Mom’s landlord.”

“Oh. News to me.” Mason told me he talked to Vivica about the Riley situation but didn’t offer further information, I guess because he was dying to fuck me at that point. At that thought, my belly dips and my eyes find him over by one of the beer kegs on the far side of the hall. He’s talking to Sean and Gus.

“Though, keep that under your hat,” Bailey adds, “I’m not sure we want any gossip spreading about that situation, especially today.”

“What gossip?” A female voice cuts in.

I look to my side and see a pretty blonde woman I met at Roxy’s bar my first time there. I can’t remember her name right now. She doesn’t get along with Bailey. She’s Jase’s sister.

“No gossip, Sherry,” Bailey mutters.

Sherry. Right.

Ivy is waving at me from the center of the dance floor. “Get the girls all over here. My turn!” She holds her bouquet up.

I put my fingers in my mouth and let out a loud wolf whistle. And it’s effective, too, because hundreds of sets of eyes swing my way. *Ha. Wolf whistle.*

“All unmar...err... *un-mated* women, line up behind the bride to see if you can catch the bouquet. Our traditions say the lass that catches it will be the next one to get hitched,” I call out. “Cade. Hit it!”

All the Single Ladies by Beyonce starts blasting and Ivy, beaming with a big smile, gets ready to throw her bouquet.

I’m standing on the sidelines as dozens of women get behind Ivy.

“You’re not interested?” I ask Sherry, who stands beside me. “Or are you married, err... mated?”

She shrugs. “Unmated so far. But in human customs? Not particularly interested.”

Ivy sends the bouquet backwards and it flies up high before landing in Bailey’s arms.

She gasps and her eyes slide to Jase off to the side.

He’s not even looking her way. Aw, Bailey...

She has such a crush on him, didn’t take my advice the day we met to make a pass at him at Roxy’s bar. And in fact admitted the other day at the clinic that she’s been smitten with him since she was ten years old, and he rescued her from being bullied by his sister. The sister that’s standing beside me right now, in fact.

“It’s good your sister was able to be here,” Sherry says. “Not sure most humans would be able to do this. Especially here.”

Yeah, this nasty sister of Jase’s. Time to shake her off and party with nicer people. But what she just said soaks in, so my eyes slide to her. “Pardon?”

“After what happened the night of the strawberry moon dance, I would’ve bet money she’d hide away and not want to show her face around here for a good long while. It hasn’t been that long. I’m just surprised. She seems shy.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Sherry smiles wide and drinks back a mouthful of her wine.

“You know...” she says after swallowing, “After what happened between her, Tyson, and Mason down there in almost the exact spot where they’re standing right now.”

“What?” I ask. “What happened?”

“You didn’t hear?” Sherry looks positively delighted. And then does an exaggerated wince.

My blood runs cold. She looks like she’s got the juiciest gossip in the world and her expression tells me that not only is what she about to tell me something bad, but also... she’s thrilled at being the one to tell it.

“When Tyson rutted your sister publicly after Mason made it clear he wanted her.”

The world stops turning and it feels like the blood has all drained straight out of me.

“Right there in front of over half the pack,” she continues.

“The only reason it didn’t end in a fight is because all the alphas that were here tethered their will and bond to keep the two of them from ripping one another apart. Thankfully, they were able to diffuse the situation and the damage was minimal. Other than the damage to your sister, of course.” She shrugs.

“Rutted?” I whisper.

“He half-shifted and threw her on the floor, fucked her in front of everyone in a half-shifted form. It was brutal. I’ve heard of shifters being able to half shift and hold it but never saw it before that night. A lot of us were shook, girl. Shook! She was trying to claw her way away from him. They had to sand the floor down there, sand out her nail marks and the blood stains. Catrina made sure that was done before today. Made sure the

setup made the space look as different as possible from that night, too.”

I blink in astonishment as I process what she’s saying. She keeps talking.

“Mason’s blood too, I guess. Mason’s eyes were bleeding. Tyson wanted to kill him, but Mase bared his throat and things cooled. I’m sure you’ve heard how alphas are sometimes rough when they claim their mate and that bond is until death, but your sister looked like she wanted to die right there. I’m surprised she’s looking so happy this soon.” She takes another gulp of her wine and eyes me from head to toe. “I know your kind doesn’t exactly understand our primal sides. I guess she got okay with it.” She shrugs. “Though, having that delicious beast as her mate? I guess most women would get okay with just about anything to be mated to first alpha of this pack. He is absolutely scrumptious.” Her eyes dance with delight at what’s undoubtedly the obviousness of the situation – that I had no idea about any of this.

My eyes find Mason in the crowd. He’s talking to my sister. They’re both smiling. My sister laughs at something he says.

Something inside me, something I’ve never felt before the past week, the same something I fought to not feel but that I let out from behind the armor? It shrivels up, withers, and turns to dust in the middle of my chest.

Mason’s eyes slice to me and immediately, his expression changes. Once again, it’s like he’s read my mind.

Shoop by Salt n’ Pepa comes on and Bailey and another girl named Audrey rush over to me. “Wanna dance, Amie?” Audrey asks.

“Excuse me,” I say to them, seeing Sherry, the raging cunt bitch smiling like she’s the cat who got the cream. Mason is hurrying in my direction past Tyson and Ivy, who are now kissing by the dessert table, which feels like an algebra problem I can’t possibly solve. I give my head a shake, as if to

shake all the visions swimming in my brain free, and I'm so, *fucking* out of here.

I run in the opposite direction, pushing my way past dozens of people to get outside.

There are a lot of people outside, too; people trying to talk to me, smiling faces that lose their smiles as I struggle to get away. Where am I even going? I think Mason's house is to the right. Shit. My bag is at Ivy's house. I mean Tyson's house.

I'll start at Mason's. Get my shit, which isn't unpacked yet, so that makes it easier. I kick my high heels off and grab them, then move in that direction.

"Amie!" I hear called out from behind me.

Mason.

No. Fuck no. Just hearing his voice, that sound tears through me like a poison arrow through my heart.

I break into a run.

"Amelia!" His voice is closer as I approach the gas station across the street.

I try to run faster.

"Baby." He catches me with an arm around my waist and I go up into the air.

A horrible sound of agony is ripped from me as I struggle to get out of his grip. We wind up on the grass. He's on his butt, me in his lap.

"Baby," he says in a gruff, pained voice, putting his nose to my neck, to that claiming mark. And suddenly, I feel dirty.

I feel dirty and cheap and so, so fucking stupid.

"You wanted my sister," I croak out.

I can't see his face, but his body slumps.

"You wanted Ivy," I repeat, staring at the dark sky. Clouds are moving fast across it. The sky looks angry.

“No. No, I didn’t.” His arms band even tighter around me, like he’s afraid I’ll bolt.

“No?” I snap, incredulous. “You didn’t get into it with Tyson there in that very barn and watch him fuck my sister in public to prove that... that what? That he’s gonna get to keep her, that ...what? He was the bigger man? *The* alpha of all the alphas? I can’t believe this shit.”

My gaze finally lands on his face. His gorgeous face that looks like I’ve slapped it.

“Or what? What the fuck, Mason?”

“That’s not...” He rakes his hand through his hair and doesn’t finish his sentence.

I stare at him, sitting in the grass, looking... I don’t know how to decode the look on his face, but feelings course through me. All sorts of ugly feelings.

Second choice. A backup plan. Again.

And this place, these people, it all seemed so perfect, but my sister... my poor fucking sister. What the fuck?

Flashes of Ivy’s face, the pain and loss etched into her eyes when she came to me exactly two weeks ago, the day they came and dragged her back. Three of them. They dragged her back after Tyson fucked her in a half-monster form. In front of all sorts of people at a dance.

Because Mason wanted her. Mason didn’t stop him from doing that to her either. None of them did.

I shake my head slowly; accusation must be all over my face.

“It wasn’t like that. I was confused. Something was off. With the witchcraft. I was confused. I didn’t know why. The pack council alphas mate in birth order. Bailey said the history said maybe Ty would’ve been matched with you because you’re the older sister, Ivy with me, but the witchcraft or nature changed things up and... and... I was confused, I guess, while it was all getting unraveled by magic.”

My chest feels like it's caving in.

"Until I saw you," he says, voice deeper, stronger, "I saw you and it was clear. It was crystal clear, Amie. It's you. It was never her."

"Fuck you," I spit.

He reaches for me and I retreat, trying to scamper backwards. He snatches me anyway, and rises to his feet. He's got me in his arms like I'm his bride.

And that fucking hurts.

"Put me down. Put me –"

"No. Let's go home. I'll tell you the whole story. All of it."

Tears stream down my face. I try to struggle. "I don't c-care," I manage to say. "Save your story for someone who wants to hear it."

"Baby, please," he pleads, and the pain on his face hurts me physically. Maybe as much as the rest of it.

How the fuck was I so stupid to let myself fall for this? I didn't guard my heart. I didn't keep my head straight. I fell for it. My defenses melted away, day by day, until today where I find myself stripped of all that armor and absolutely vulnerable. Stupid me; I've allowed this to happen, I only have myself to blame.

He begins to purr and like usual, I stop fighting. Fucking voodoo. I don't stop crying, though. If anything, I cry harder.

Why didn't Ivy tell me? Why is Ivy now officially married to her rapist? Her abductor? Why didn't she fucking tell me that my abductor wanted her first?

He stops purring to say, "Amie, baby, don't think what you're thinkin'. I love you. It's you. Only you. Things fucked with me, but it's you. I knew the second I saw you. I'd been a fucking wreck for over a week until I saw you. You put me back together. I swear to fuck, baby. It's only ever been you. Tyson went into a rut out of fury because my head was fucked

and he could see inside it because of our pack bond, so knew I was confused. But things were all just that, just confused. Because of the witchcraft. Not because I wanted your sister. I didn't know what was wrong with me..."

An ugly sob comes from me. He growls in frustration. I'm barely able to see with the tears that just keep falling. I feel like I want to curl up and die.

"What's wrong?" I hear Bailey ask with alarm as we pass the barn where the party is still in full swing.

"Sherry Creed is what's fucking wrong," Mason growls.

"What did she do?" Bailey demands. "Amelia, are you okay?"

"Not now, Bailey," Mason snaps. "Get her brother to get her the fuck out of there. Don't let any of that bullshit she's spouting leak out from her and upset Ivy or Tyson. It's their night."

I scoff.

"She didn't," Bailey hisses, staring at me.

"She fucking did," Mason clips, then moves faster with me in his arms. I don't know where his truck is, but he's carrying me for a long time. I realize after about ten minutes that we're walking back to his house. I was going the wrong way. Of course. Story of my life. Going the wrong way. Falling for the wrong men.

Lightning flashes and then thunder booms in the sky.

Rain. Fat drops of rain come fast, come hard. The dark, wet sky sounds furious.

I see lightning hit a tree and watch it split down the middle. It crashes away from us, hitting the ground with thunderous noise that's amplified by more angry thunder. The lightning-split tree probably looks a lot like the barely beating thing in my chest right now.

"Fuck," he cusses and breaks into a jog with me in his arms and the longer he's running, the harder the rain comes down

on us. The wind picks up, blowing my tears off my face. But that doesn't stop them from coming; I cry the whole way there.

By the time we finally get to his house, you could probably wring us out to fill the swimming pool in his back yard.

The door slams and he carries me straight upstairs into the master bedroom bathroom, sets me on the counter and pulls towels from the cupboard.

I try to get off the counter, but he grabs my hips and starts purring, so I just flop against him as he dabs at my face and hair, making that sound while he dries me.

He then undresses me, making the sound all the while, then dries my now goosebumpy, freezing-cold naked and limp body.

He strips down, dries himself quickly, dropping the wet towels on the floor with his suit and shoes and my dress and underwear and then he plucks me off the counter and carries me to bed, throwing the blanket back and climbing in with me, pulling me close and then covering us.

My teeth chatter. He wraps me up with his arms, tugs the blankets closer, and holds me close, purring louder. His body is suddenly warming me, like he's a heating lamp. His purring travels into my skin, through my bones, down to my marrow as I continue to bawl my eyes out for all my stupidity, for what happened to my sister, for the fact that I've never felt so fucking broken in my life.

"Baby, listen..."

"N-no. No," I whimper.

The purring starts up again. He keeps purring, so he can't do any more talking. I weep until I fall asleep.

I wake up, alone. And like a tsunami, the emotions crash over me. I've got a weird view of doors. *Oh*. He's pulled those

pocket doors over. I get out of bed and on my way to the bathroom, I put my ear to the wood. I hear voices downstairs.

I go into the bathroom and close the door, then lock it.

My eyes are swollen from last night. Red. My hair is a disaster. And things are even worse on the inside.

When I emerge after a scalding hot shower, I don't feel any better. In fact, it feels like there's a thousand pounds of lead in my chest.

I open the bathroom door, still wrapped in towels, and see my sister standing there. Looking pretty, wearing a purple dress with a white cardigan. Her eyes are full of concern.

"Oh Amie," she whispers.

I immediately burst into ugly sobs and fall into her, nearly losing my towel.

Ivy wraps her arms around me and tries to steer me to the bed.

"I n-need clothes," I stammer, gesturing to the closet.

"I've gotchu," she whispers, continuing to steer me to the bed and once I'm sitting, she goes into the closet.

Mason is in the doorway with a coffee cup in his hand. Our eyes meet and I crumble.

He brings it over and pulls me close.

"No," I cry out, pulling away while clinging to my towel.

"Mason, give us a couple minutes, okay?" Ivy requests.

Mason hesitates. He looks almost as bad as I do. His eyes are bloodshot and I don't think he's slept.

He heaves out a sigh and puts his mouth to my forehead.

"I love you. I wanna talk to you, explain."

"I don't need you to do that," I mutter. "I don't want anything from y-you."

His body goes tight and he stares directly into my eyes.

"Amelia."

I tear my gaze away and mercifully, he goes. Ivy sets a bundle of clothes and a hairbrush on the bed before pulling the doors closed and turning to me. Her chin wobbles.

I reach for the panties and bra she put down and get into them, crying and taking probably five times as long to get them on as I would if I had my shit together. I nearly trip getting my undies on. My sister steadies me and I manage to pull them up. She then helps to clip my bra shut before pulling a big, red sweatshirt over my head. I sit down, pulling my arms through and then manage to get my yoga pants up.

I'm wearing someone else's sweatshirt. It's big on me. I look down at it and see a Boston University logo. Mason's.

For some reason, this cranks the waterworks up some more. I flop back on the bed.

Ivy climbs on and lays beside me and holds my hand.

"Amie, I..." She stops.

"I don't wanna wear this," I whisper.

"Your suitcase had no clean tops," she says. "I didn't know if I should dig into your bags and boxes."

I look at her. "He raped you."

Color drains from her face.

"He fucked you in public? Half-shifted? And you were bleeding? And then you tried to escape and he dragged you back and infected you with his sperm – landing you in harm's way again because your body was allergic to it."

"My body was allergic to the birth control pill," she says softly.

"Oh, give me a fucking break," I snap, "You've been on the pill since you were a teenager. It never caused problems before."

"I wasn't a teenager. I was twenty-one. And anyway..."

"You were nineteen."

“I was not nineteen.”

“I remember having to get them for you on the way to that concert for that stupid boy band you liked and we went to the concert three days after my twentieth, your nineteenth birthday. I know this was the year before I could drink and your drama that night made me wish it was one year later!”

“As if you didn’t drink underage.” She rolls her eyes.

“Bottom line, you’ve got Stockholm Syndrome.” I point at her. “You just married a monster who kidnapped you, raped you in public, and you’re fucking fawning all over him. We need to get the fuck outta here. And then the first thing we’re doing is getting you a psychiatrist.”

She bolts up to standing and shouts, “You know nothing about him or what he endured before he found me!”

I roll my eyes.

She leans forward aggressively, “You know nothing about the emotions we’ve felt through this time together, the connection we have. No wait, you *do* know about that connection because you’re developing one yourself!”

“I was deluded. I knew, I fucking knew it wasn’t logical,” I tap my temple, “wasn’t real, and still, I let myself fall for the bullshit. I’ll get a psychiatrist too. Maybe we’ll both go to the same one and they’ll give us a Brennan, sister discount. Because we’re both fucked in the head.”

“Amie, your road might be different from mine but surely you can see the similarities. I don’t like what happened. It was the worst thing that happened in my entire fucking life.”

My expression drops. “I can’t imagine, Ivy. I’m so fucking sorry that happened to you.” I grab her and hug her.

She shudders out a breath. I do the same.

We’re quiet for a moment, just hugging one another.

Then she speaks again. “The worst thing that ever happened to me, Ames. Until I was faced with the idea of a life without Ty,

a life where he'd be a basic animal living in the woods because he could not bear to live in human form without me.” She pulls back from me. “I knew. I knew that what happened at that dance would be the second worst thing to happen to me because the worst thing I can imagine is not spending my life with Tyson.”

I blow out a breath. She grabs my hairbrush from the bottom of the bed and starts working it through my hair.

“I knew it was something bad when you were at my place, I mean Rick’s place,” I whisper.

“It was. And he brought me back and believe me, I didn’t just jump back into his arms. I was broken. I was destroyed.”

“But Ivy, you married him. You let them arrange a party in the same place the bad thing happened.”

The hairbrush on my scalp feels soothing. She doesn’t speak for a minute, just keeps brushing. So, finally I take the brush from her and toss it, staring into her eyes, seeing the warring emotions there.

“I know,” she whispers. “And Tyson didn’t push for that. He said no, in fact, but I wanted to make sure the whole pack could come and that was the place that would accommodate everyone. It wouldn’t have worked at Tyson’s house with that many people. So I knew I’d have to get over it. Ty and I went there beforehand to see if I could handle it. If I couldn’t, he was going to ask Mason if we could do it here since Mason has the biggest back yard. But walking in there and seeing it decorated for us, seeing all those people helping out to get it ready, people I was afraid to face again... something came over me and I knew I could. Believe me, Amelia, he’s sorry about what happened. He’s proven how sorry he was. When you love someone, you forgive them when they fuck up.”

I shake my head. “You’ve been acting like... like this is the best thing that’s ever happened to you. And most of all, you didn’t say anything. I had to hear it from a stranger. A stranger who took great pleasure in telling me that happened to you,

and she told me it happened in the very place you were standing while she was telling me and there you were, laughing with Mason and Tyson when just two weeks earlier-”

“I know. I was going to tell you after the wedding. I was giving you time to settle in with Mason, I was giving you time with the pack to see how amazing it could be to be part of this. How amazing it *will* be.”

“Sherry said Cat Savage made them sand the floor to sand out the blood and claw marks you left. You. You’re not an animal with claws and yet what that animal did to you...”

“Stop.” She raises her hand and takes a big breath. “I don’t need a reminder.”

I reach for the cup of coffee.

“And Mason wanted you and couldn’t have you because Tyson proved you’re his and so Mason got me instead.”

“That’s not true,” Ivy says sharply.

“Sherry said-”

“Sherry is a bitch, everyone says so, and she doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Mason didn’t make any moves on me. Mason just got confused and Tyson can read things from the other council alphas and it turned him primal. Apparently primal matings happen occasionally. What happened to me wasn’t the first time this pack has seen it happen. It’s most likely to happen early on after a mating and we were very early on.”

“Yeah, so none of them stopped it because it’s perfectly fine for a woman to be brutally raped in front of a bunch of people.”

“Tyson is their top alpha.”

I scoff again and sip my coffee.

“Nobody knew why Mason had a strange reaction to me. From what I’ve heard, he was on his way home that night that Tyson and I met and something weird happened that we now figure

was the witchcraft to do with whatever Aunt Nelle set in motion. He was missing for days and doesn't know where he was. Mason was messed up from that night until the Strawberry Moon party and being around me and Tyson messed him up more. I don't know all of that story. Did Mason explain it?"

"We haven't really talked," I say softly.

"Talk to him. Bailey came by to drop your purse off last night and Mason was a total wreck, she said. They tried to keep all this from me so that I wouldn't get upset at our reception, but I couldn't find you, Mom couldn't find you and there was some murmurs in the crowd that let me know something was up. And then I watched Bailey punch Sherry right in the mouth, so I knew something bad was happening. Bailey isn't a violent person."

This shocks me. I say nothing. Bailey knew, obviously, and she's just another person who didn't tell me anything.

"I wanted to come, right away, but Bailey said you were sleeping, she talked to Mason, and he told her we could come back in the morning. Bailey is downstairs right now. She might be able to explain more about the primal thing that happened to Ty and-

"I don't need to hear it, Ivy. It doesn't affect me. If you're over it, which; I don't get, I guess you're over it." I shrug. "I'm not going to drag you away from here against your will the way he dragged you *back* against your will. But if you wise up and decide that you're done with him and you need my help finding a way to get away from him, I'll do everything in my power to help you."

"What about you?"

"I'm outta here."

She shakes her head. "Talk to him. Hear him out."

"Nobody told me any of this. Not you. Not him. Not anyone else who's been around me pretending I matter."

“You *do* matter.”

“Yeah, well I’ve been walking around in a state of idiocy thinking I finally found my happily ever after. Going against my gut instinct which told me to keep my guard up. So I get how you got fooled too, Ivy...”

“I haven’t been fooled. I got to know him. I fell in love with him for who he is. He’s sorry for what happened. He’s proven to me again and again that he is worthy of my love. His primal instinct kicked in. That’s all. He was so sorry for hurting me. I’m not afraid of him. I’m fine.”

I take another sip of my coffee and set it down. I flop down to the bed and close my eyes with a heavy sigh.

“Talk to Mason.”

“I don’t need to hear Mason defend himself. He did that already, and it doesn’t matter.”

There’s a knock on the door.

And then it slides open and Bailey comes in. “I’m so sorry to barge in, but I have really good hearing and thought I might be able to give you some insight.”

I say nothing.

“Our pack mates in birth order. Because you guys are in the same family, we think nature with the help of witches whose job it is to help keep the balance – well, they made sure the right matches happened by interfering. When Mason got back to town, he went missing and we’re guessing he went into limbo so he’d be out of the way while nature took its course and matched Tyson with Ivy. It’s not necessarily that he thought Ivy was who he wanted, he probably just got discombobulated because of the birth order thing put in place when our pack was formed with the help of the witches who created the hierarchy, the tethering bonds, and so forth.”

“None of this matters,” I say.

Bailey moves closer. “Let me explain though. It makes sense when you think about it. Joel helped me compile some data

and I checked genealogy records and there have been two other cases in our pack of alpha council members mating with siblings. They aligned in birth order both times. Though they were all shifters. But that doesn't matter. Obviously, the witches knew somehow that it made more sense for Tyson to be with Ivy and for Mason to mate with you. So they interfered to help things along. Tyson thought we hurt his family so he wanted nothing to do with us. But when Ivy got bit by a snake, our antivenom brought him back to us, that opened the door for him to complete the council. Everything seems like it's happening for a reason."

"Oh, my sister being publicly raped was a good thing?"

Bailey gulps. "I hate that it happened. I saw it and I was devastated for your sister."

"But yet you did nothing."

"Amie..." Ivy whispers. "Let her finish."

Bailey gulps again. "Ivy has gone through some awful ordeals. And no, that's not fair. And it sounds like you have, too. But you're both getting your happy endings with great men. Amazing men. Maybe that makes it worth it."

She stops.

I sigh.

She starts again, "It was awful that it happened but a lot of things happened so other things could happen. Mason going missing might have been a bit like that. It happened so that Tyson and Ivy could mate without any interference and put things on pause with Mase until you had an opportunity to get in his sights. Which you did when your sister went missing. You came to find her. And Mason found you."

I say nothing as Bailey takes a big breath and then keeps going.

"And again, it was awful that Ivy was in danger because of that snake bite, but because all those things happened, it meant that we got to be part of his life again. It meant that his family

now knew that branch of the Savage family line, that the next generation of Savage first alphas might actually happen, and-

“Yeah,” I interrupt, “And it makes way more sense for your biggest, most important long-lost alpha to be with someone who can help further that family line. Because the first-born Brennan girl is barren, so heaven forbid *she* get matched with Tyson and that section of the Savage family line dies right there.”

God, my heart feels like it’s been ripped from my chest. It keeps coming back to this, doesn’t it?

My sister’s head has jerked back. Her eyes are wide with shock.

“Poor Mason Quinn,” I say, “Drew the short straw in the fated mate department, didn’t he? Guess the Quinn line can die, but the Savage line can’t.” An ugly sound of agony comes from me.

Something Skye said to me occurs to me now, too. She said something when we first met about something unfortunate happening and me looking like my sister.

Neither my sister nor Bailey say a word. I’ve never told Ivy I can’t have kids. She’s staring at me with shock.

“And Rick didn’t love me!” I shout. “I just found out that not only was he cheating on me with the cuntty Sheila, the only reason he pushed me to have that wedding was because a) he had everything booked from his last fiancée and didn’t want to lose his deposits, he even gave me *her* ring, some cursed thing. No wonder it’s so butt ugly and...” I take in a big breath and dash the tears off my face, “B) the only reason he even proposed was because he had to marry me before he turned thirty to get an inheritance early, an inheritance he badly needs for some reason. So yeah, second choice. Consolation prize. Whatever. At least Mason helped his pack, took one for the team and fulfilled the fucking prophecy so the rest of the alphas can find their loves of their life and make big, beautiful

families, even if Mason wound up with me instead of the perfect princess, the non-evil Brennan girl he should've had."

Mason angrily bursts in, eyes landing on me and filled with fire. "Go. Both of you. Now."

He rushes to me and pulls me into his arms.

I shove but it's no use. He starts purring.

"I'll call you later," Ivy whispers, crying. "I love you, Amie. I'm so sorry." She leaves, pulling a stunned-silent Bailey with her.

I hear voices, only barely over the sound of his purring, including a male voice. The purring stops when I hear what I'm assuming is the front door closing before I hear an engine start up outside.

I try to pull away. He doesn't let me.

"I did not draw the short fucking straw," he grinds out, mouth buried in my still-wet hair.

I say nothing.

"I didn't, baby."

I shudder out a couple stuttered breaths and close my eyes tight.

He pulls the covers over us and holds me close.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I... it's only been a couple days since you opened up to me. And so much is going on, and... shit, I know it's excuses. But I guess I knew it'd be a tough conversation and I put it off. I didn't think for a second someone would tell you that shit last night at your sister's wedding, or I would've made sure I told you first. My part in it. But it was also complicated because of what Ivy went through. I told you alphas can go into The Rut..."

My body tightens.

"It can and does happen and it's primal and there's nothing anyone can do to get in the middle of it. Ty knew I had

confused feelings about his mate. I didn't know what was going on, but I was fucked in the head over the disconnected way I was feeling and he read that and went primal. The pack couldn't stop it. Wouldn't stop it. But they stopped us from battling until the death."

Gross. I can't imagine standing there and doing nothing if someone was violating a woman in front of me. The whole idea of it makes me sick.

He continues, "There are laws that are as innate as breathing for us. An alpha and his mate... you don't interfere unless you're goin' rogue and ready for your pack to splinter apart and our pack finally had our missing piece back."

I scoff.

"That's not to say your sister was expendable to us. But that's not the first time and won't be the last time an alpha ruts his mate in public. And maybe ... maybe I was preparing you for that truth when I made that threat after you flirted with Cade. I knew, knowing what I know about you so far that when you got that news that your sister went through it, that you'd have something to say about it and honest to fuck, wildberry, I never envisioned it'd go down the way it did last night and I never imagined for a second you'd be left feeling like you're second choice. Because I swear to you, I knew the second I laid eyes on you in front of the gas station that you were mine. There wasn't a shred of confusion in me. The opposite. After walking around feeling like I wasn't myself for over a week, I was me again. Because I knew it was you. You're mine. You're meant to be mine. You're the one for me. The *only* one for me."

Mason

I lay in bed with her for a long time. She doesn't speak to me. The pain she's feeling keeps piercing me like painful bee stings. Or like when porcupine quills are pulled. I've had plenty of both those types of pain as a young wolf painting myself into corners. As much as it smarts, I'd endure it forever if it meant it'd take these emotions away from her.

I've whispered to her about how much I love her. I've told her the things I love about her. How caring she is. How fierce she can be. How good she feels in my arms. How right. I've talked about how our lives are gonna be. How if she wants babies, we'll get babies. How I'll give her whatever she wants. How no woman is more perfect for me than she is.

She says nothing. She just keeps hurting. My words make the hurt increase and it's making me want to rip the room apart with my teeth. It's making my wolf pace, wanting to rip apart whatever is hurting our mate.

I've hurt her. By omission.

And I don't know how to fix it.

Tyson came by this morning with Ivy and Bailey, and he tried to lend comfort. And I could feel his distress, too. All this shit brought his difficulties with his mate back to the surface, I'm sure.

I'd like to get my hands around Sherry Creed's throat. Jase stopped by late last night with Bailey when Bailey dropped by with Amelia's bag and shoes which were found near the gas station. And I was livid. I told him I want his sister exiled from our pack. That her getting her nose busted in front of the whole pack by Bailey wasn't enough. I told him I want it put up for a vote.

Nobody needed to say that it wasn't a good idea to bring up what happened at the strawberry moon dance to Amelia. It's common fucking sense.

But Sherry Creed somehow got the notion that Amie didn't know and wanted to stir shit by being the one to tell her. That fucking bitch has spent most of her life doing whatever she can do to make people miserable. She gets high off it. She's got a long history of causing shit and wreaking havoc and I'm done with her bullshit. If I see her face again, I'll have to fight the urge to rip her throat apart. Shred it. She's evil.

I haven't slept and I'm feeling like garbage. Garbage being assaulted with regret. Garbage feeling the pain I've caused my beautiful mate. My beautiful mate who's broken because I allowed this to happen.

Amelia drifts off and eventually, I do, too.

I wake up alone and *fuck!* I rush downstairs and outside in time to find her opening the driver's side door to my truck. It's blocking her car, so I don't know if she's planning to take it or move it so she can back out, but I give no fucks. I slam it shut and keep it shut by holding my weight against it.

She looks me in the eyes and her face looks ravaged. Grief-stricken. It's like she's enduring a war. And I'm not fucking letting her walk away.

"Where are you going?" I demand.

"I don't know," she whimpers brokenly.

"Not happening, Amelia." My voice comes out gruff. I lift her up into my arms and press my lips against her forehead as I carry her back inside.

She pounds my chest with a fist just once and then buries her face in my throat and bawls her eyes out some more as I carry her to the living room and set her on the couch while pulling her bag off her shoulder and dropping it. I lay her on her side and facing her, I wrap my arms around her and purr for her.

She buries her face in my chest and holds onto my shirt. She's not crying now. She's just burying her face in my shirt.

I hold tight and we stay there like that for a long time.

It's at least an hour, maybe two, neither of us speaking. And I'm grateful my purr still comforts her. It's all I can do right now. And maybe that's why alphas have this ability. Because we can't help but fuck up with our mates, so at least there's this.

The doorbell ringing pulls us both out of our heads and our eyes meet.

"It's my parents," I say.

She winces.

"I'll get rid of them."

She lets go of my shirt.

She's upstairs after I've come back in from getting my parents to leave, obviously hiding in case Skye managed to push her way in like she wanted to do. It wasn't easy to call my mother off, she's rabid to get her hands on my mate, to convince her that she's wanted here, that she's loved, despite my bad judgement call in keeping things to myself that should've been said. She even pushed the door open and yelled around my body blocking her for Amelia to hear, that her mating with my father was without her consent. But that it was worth it. That Ivy knows it's worth it and that Amie has to stop and think about that.

My father told me not to beat myself up, that he'd have made that same call – wait to tell her the tricky stuff that went down until it feels like the right time.

I knew what I was doing. In hindsight I knew my mate wouldn't take well to the news of what Tyson did to Ivy. Ty and I made a joint decision to keep the girls apart until the wedding. But I didn't factor in her feeling like a consolation prize when she found out the truth. And while I know part of

that is because of the bullshit she just went through with her ex and all the things that came to light; I don't know how I can make her realize that I feel like the luckiest fucker around here that she's mine.

"Give her time. It's been a blow. It'll take time for her to process," Dad said.

"He's right. We're here if you need anything. I brought food. And the wine Amie likes," Mom advised as Dad passed me a cardboard box with covered casserole dishes as well as four bottles of wine.

I thank them and ask them to spread the word that I don't want any visitors for a couple days. In fact, not until we start showing our faces.

I find her upstairs in bed, under the covers hiding from me, so I go down to the second-floor loft and unplug the television and the streaming box, and carry them upstairs and set them up over the fireplace. I then move the bed on an angle so she can see the television if she wants to. I put on *Schitt's Creek*. She said it was a favorite show, a comfort show, so I leave the remote on top of the blanket and go back downstairs to put the food away.

I decide I should make Amelia something to eat.

Just as I'm finishing up making eggs and toast, there's the doorbell again. I was distracted so didn't realize someone had pulled up. I inhale deep to figure out the fragrance.

I open the door and the look on Kathleen Brennan's face hits me like a fist in the throat.

"Where's my daughter?" she demands.

"She's upstairs. But-"

She gives me *the hand* and sweeps past me to go up there herself.

My eyes drift shut and I blow out a breath. Another Brennan woman mad at me. Fucking great.

Is she planning to leave with Amie? Go up there and rescue her daughter from the big bad wolf?

I don't want to upset Kathleen and I certainly don't want to upset my mate any further, but I won't allow that. No goddamn way.

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Amelia

“Amie.”

My mom hits the *mute* button on the remote and then cups my jaw.

“Hi,” I whisper.

“Stop this right now.”

I blink a couple times, and then ask, “Huh?”

She looks angry with me. What the fuck?

“Stop it. Stop it right now!” She’s pissed. Even more pissed than when I dented her new van by backing into the newspaper box when I was seventeen and that was the angriest I’d ever seen her.

“Stop what?” I cry out defensively.

“Stop sabotaging your happiness.”

“What?” Is she delusional?

“Talking nonsense about you being second best. About you thinking that you don’t deserve the very best in life. That’s nonsense. And why the hell didn’t you tell me you can’t have children? And why didn’t you tell me how things ended with Rick? I don’t think I even understand all of what happened. Your sister doesn’t even know the whole thing, says you gave some cryptic but disturbing details, but what we know has us both concerned.”

Mom takes a big breath and then her eyes go even angrier.

“He’s a snake, Amelia. And you were better off learning that now.”

I gulp down a painful swallow. “Tell Ivy I said she has a big mouth.”

“When did you find out you can’t have babies? What did the doctor say? Have you sought a second opinion? Gone for treatments or procedures?”

I raise my hand. “I didn’t tell you two because it hurt too much.”

“Oh, honey…” Mom’s expression softens.

She knows I’ve always wanted to be a mother. Always.

“It’s why Blake and I ended. He wanted to be a father more than he wanted to be with me. He wanted me to decide immediately to let him hire a surrogate so he could have a baby that was part of him, part his parents. He didn’t care that the baby wasn’t going to be part of me, only that it be part his side because of all he lost when his parents died. He was so broken from losing them. We couldn’t survive it.”

“Oh sweetie.”

“And I haven’t been for a second opinion because Dr. Conklin isn’t a quack. He knows what he’s doing. He’s been our family doctor since I was eight. I have an ovulation disorder. I wasn’t on the pill with Blake. I wasn’t on the pill with Rick. I never got pregnant. I should’ve been a teen mom with how many oopses I had as a teenager and it never ever happened, Mom.”

“Okay,” she says softly. “But that doesn’t mean that you aren’t deserving of your happy ending. All that happened doesn’t mean Mason doesn’t want you for you.”

“Mason drew the short straw in the fated mate lottery. I think we both know that.” I throw the blanket back and reach for the coffee cup from earlier. There’s still three quarters of a cup. The coffee is cold. And I don’t care. I rarely get a hot coffee at work, so I drink it.

“I don’t think that at all. I think your sister found the right person for her and you found the right person for you. It’s all non-traditional, yeah, but from what I’ve seen so far, it’s also pretty amazing. The small town living we were missing when we had to leave the area for Dad’s job. The close-knit community. It’s wonderful, isn’t it?”

“Wonderful? Well, Ivy got the short straw, too, then, because I’m not a big mouth like my sister is, but your new son-in-law isn’t the bee’s knees, Mom. Ask *her* what I mean by that...” It’s a catty comment and I know it. But I can’t wrap my head around what Ivy has let him get away with.

If Mom can come here and deliver hard truths to me, she can do it to Ivy next.

“I know why you’d say that. Your sister told me everything this morning. Just before I came here.”

I jolt in surprise. “I guess she had to since I found out. How are you defending these people? They watched that happen to her. And how could she forgive him?”

“Tyson was there when she told me. He told me his side of things, too. He’s very sorry he’s hurt her. He’s reliving that pain now because of what you think of him now, too.”

“I don’t give a fuck what Tyson Savage thinks.”

“He’s led a very non-traditional life, Amie. Above and beyond the wolf shifter supernatural thing. His upbringing... he was kidnapped as a baby, taken from his loved ones and raised by someone who was delusional and hell-bent on revenge. He was turned into a weapon. He was robbed of a childhood, neglected. It’s a terrible story.”

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t justify what he did to Ivy.”

“No, but we don’t understand this world completely, sweetie. We have a lot to learn.”

I huff out my exasperation with this topic.

“Your sister is moving on from it,” Mom says, finger-combing my hair.

I roll my eyes.

“She needs you to support that.”

I say nothing.

Mom scoots over and I put my head in her lap. She keeps playing with my hair.

“Where are things at with you and Mason?” she asks.

And I go stiff.

“He looks like hell,” she mutters.

“Aw, poor Mason. Cry me a river,” I mumble. And feel immediately awful after saying it.

“Baby girl, listen to your mom. Okay? Take today to consider all that you’ve got downstairs. All that you’ve got going for you in this place. Think about the beautiful gift you and your sister have been given with becoming a part of this wonderful community. And pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and be the strong woman you are. Let yourself have the happiness you so desperately want and deserve.”

I say nothing.

“You deserve happiness, sweetheart.”

I still stay silent.

“Amelia Penelope Brennan, listen to your mother...”

“I need to be alone. Can you close the door on your way out?” I roll off Mom’s lap and point my gaze the other way.

“So at least you’re staying...” she says.

“I haven’t got much choice for the moment. He won’t let me leave!” I cry out.

“Good. Leaving is the last thing you need to do.” She leans over and kisses my forehead. “I love you sweet girl. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Did you pick your shapeshifter yet?” I call out, turning to watch her go.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she taunts. “It turns out, I spent a lot of time with one of them last night. Went home with him in fact.” She smiles.

My mouth drops open. “Who?”

“Take today for you. We’ll talk tomorrow. I get to have the occasional secret, too, you know.” She closes the door and leaves me alone.

I get up and put my ear to the door.

“Give her a little bit of space. Okay?” Mom says, voice trailing off as if she’s walking farther away, most likely toward the front door. “She’s had a lot happen in a short time and she needs processing time.”

I can’t make out what Mason says in response, but his voice sounds frustrated.

I walk back to the bed and lift the remote control, letting out a heavy sigh.

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Mason

I wake at dawn, on the couch. I went into the bedroom a few times yesterday after Kathleen left, but I have given her space. First, to bring her a sandwich and another coffee after those eggs went cold. Then I went back and the sandwich was untouched, but the coffee had been drank. I brought her a bottle of water. She didn't take her eyes off the television while I was there.

The third time, I brought her dinner and informed her that she really needed to eat.

I came back half an hour later and it was untouched. Again, she wouldn't look at me, just stared at the television. I called the restaurant and Roxy ran over an order of chili fries and a smash burger, ringing the bell and leaving it. I waved as she pulled away and then brought it upstairs with a bottle of Coke.

"Sit up," I ordered.

Amie's response was to turn the volume up on the television.

I sat down and unwrapped, then set up the food on the table beside the bed. And then I lifted her into an upright position and she tried to shove me, refusing to look at me. "Either you eat some food, or I feed you. Choose."

She leveled me with a dirty look, a look so dirty I got a sinking sensation in my chest. But she reached over and nabbed a chili and cheese coated fry and shoved it into her mouth.

She chewed with her mouth open in an exaggerated way, as if to disgust me, but instead of reacting, I just stayed still and watched.

She grabbed the burger and took a big bite.

“Baby...” I whispered. “I’m sorry you’re hurting. What can I do?”

“Let me go,” she said around a mouthful of food.

“Not doin’ that,” was my answer.

“Leave me alone.”

“I’ll give you space, but we’ll be talking this out. We’ll be working this out, wildberry.”

“Whatever,” she replied and took a sip of Coke.

Despite the painted-on angry attitude, I know she’s hurting inside. I feel it. And I fucking loathe it.

I left her alone for the rest of the night. As difficult as it was.

It’s now approaching five in the morning, and I’m going for a quick run. Not with the council alphas today. When I talked to Tyson yesterday morning, he said some of the alphas that came for the wedding are still here and would probably be running with them. I need to be alone. My wolf needs to run. I need to clear my head and do it before the sun comes up and Amelia wakes up and tries to leave me again.

I’ve run, I’ve run hard. I’ve swum, and I’m just about home, just about exhausted when I approach the four corners and squat to grab my clothes. With our code orange, morning runs are done much more carefully, shifting hidden, and making sure we shift back and get dressed under cover so that if anyone is poking around, they won’t see anything unusual, whether that’s a naked person or a wolf prowling near civilization.

Internal panic spikes and my back goes rod straight. Joel is coming and something’s wrong.

“Hey,” he greets, winded, “Tryin’ to find you. Gus was doing surveillance on night shift. Couldn’t reach you so called me. Your mate’s ex passed through the village.”

“Fuck. What the fuck does he want at five thirty in the morning?”

Joel’s brows jut up. “Take my car so you can get there fast without shifting. If I hadn’t caught your scent I would’ve rushed to your house to make sure all was all right.”

Yeah, shifting wouldn’t work to greet that asshole since I’d shift back without clothing.

Joel’s house is close, so we run back and he tells me he’s heading to meet with the other guys, to leave his car at my place and he’ll run there later to pick it up. The minute I get into his car, I feel a spike of internal panic. It’s from Amelia. I peel out of Joel’s driveway at full speed.

When I pull in, the asshole’s Mercedes is out front and he’s dragging my mate out of my house. I left my fucking door unlocked. Fuck. And this fucker has a gun in his hand. Amie’s face is pale when she watches me get out of the car.

“Let her fucking go!” I shout.

“No!” she screams as the fucker points the gun at me. His eyes are wild and he smells like fear and desperation.

“We’ve got to get to the city hall. I booked us an appointment. We’re gettin’ married. You can have her back afterwards.”

“I won’t do it,” she screams and tries to get out of his grip.

“Stop fightin’ me or I’ll shoot your fuckin’ boyfriend.”

Amelia rips out of his grip and gets between us. Blocking me.

“You will not!”

She’s trying to protect me.

Fuck this shit. Rage floods my system as I see that barrel pointed at my mate.

I rip my button-down shirt off, breaking buttons as I kick my sneakers off my feet and drop the jeans, getting a confused look from the asshole. When my wolf bursts forward, Rick

Bullock's eyes go wide. His jaw drops and I pounce, taking Amelia to the ground and covering her with my body. I'm down on all fours, covering her, and baring my teeth, viciously snarling at the motherfucker before stretching a front paw out and swiping the gun from his outstretched hand with my claws out. It clatters to the ground and blood gushes from his hand. He lets out a howl of pain.

I snarl and snap at him, covering my mate. My mate. Mine!

I'm about to lunge and rip his fucking throat out when scents assault me along with the thundering sound of running wolves.

This is how the rest of the council finds us. Me on the ground on all fours in wolf form, Amelia underneath me as her ex stands there pissing his pants, his hand bleeding, tears falling down his cheeks.

Eight wolves circle him, so he can't run. The two smaller ones are ones I met before. One of them from a pack in Washington State. The other from Scotland.

Riley's wolf looks over his shoulder at me and the exchange has me shifting. I shift and get off my trembling mate. I scoop her up into my arms and cradling her close, I carry her into the house.

"Wh..wha..what was... oh my God," she whimpers. "Oh my God."

"It's okay. You're okay," I say, rocking her in my arms on the couch, still trembling with fury, but finding a way to get a lock on it so I can purr for her. As she melts into me, it soothes me, too. As much as the purr soothes her, feeling her heartrate slow to normal, feeling her arms tight around me, that helps me.

Riley steps inside with Joel.

"Sorry about the nudity, Amelia. Mase, we're taking him to holding. Meet us there when you're able."

"Yeah," I say.

She looks up at me. "What does that mean?"

“They felt my spike of rage so they ran here to help. They’re taking him to a holding cell in the basement of the town hall while we figure this out.”

“Figure this out?” she asks.

I fill my lungs with oxygen and let it out slow. I’m fucked. Royally fucked.

“Are you okay, baby?” I ask, caressing her face.

Her eyes still look hollow to me. She’s pale. Her face is swollen from the crying. And she’s still trembling.

“I don’t know,” she whispers.

Tyson comes into my house as I say, “I need to get dressed and go to the town hall. I’ll get someone to come sit with you. I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll stay with her,” Tyson says. “Go. Do what you need to do.”

Ty knows I don’t want her unattended. That I’m worried she’ll run. Now more than ever.

“Thanks, Ty.” I slap his back. “There are spare clothes downstairs behind the bar. Go grab something.” There are always a few sets of the guys’ clothes there as we frequently end our morning runs here.

He jerks his chin, “Flashback to that peach schnapps.” He shudders and heads down to the basement.

Amelia eyes him with distaste.

“He drank too much of it the night before the wedding,” I explain.

She says nothing.

I kiss her. “I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

“Wait. What’s gonna happen? He saw you. He saw you... as both,” she says unnecessarily, but I get the impression she’s processing the whirlwind that just happened.

Yeah. This is complicated. It's especially complicated that outsiders witnessed it. The guy from Scotland is tight with Cat, a doctor, also a wolf shifter who sits on the supernatural collective council that oversees all supernaturals. This is very fucking not good.

"I don't know yet, baby. I'm gonna go talk with the guys and figure it out. Love you." I kiss her and grab my phone.

She doesn't kiss me back. She doesn't say anything.

When I head outside, I see they're gone and so is the Mercedes as well as Joel's car. My clothes and shoes are on the walkway, so I put them on, go back in for my keys, and crane my neck to look up to the top floor. Amelia has gone back up and shut the doors.

Tyson sits on my couch with the remote control, wearing a pair of sweatpants.

"Just need my key," I say.

He nods. "I won't let her leave. And Mase..."

I look him in the eyes.

"If there's any vote called on what to do about this... my vote is with you. Whatever you choose, I'm with you."

I thump my fist against my chest.

He returns the gesture.

When I get to the town hall, the rest of the council is there in a huddle. And Eddy from Washington and Mitch from Scotland are there, too. Along with Lorenzo, Rob, David, Bruce, Graydon, and Garrett. In other words, the retired council.

All eyes swing to me.

And I know by their faces, not to mention what I'm feeling through the bond with most of the men in the room, that I'm well and truly fucked.

"His gun wasn't loaded," Mitch says.

Amelia

I'm pacing Mason's room, feeling completely stressed. I came up here and vomited. That's how stressed I am.

One minute, I'm asleep, having a terrible dream, and the next, Rick is shouting at me, then pulling me out of Mason's bed, hollering I should get dressed and pointing a fucking gun at me.

I thought I wasn't awake. I thought the nightmare had changed. It was a nightmare come true!

"What the hell?" I cried out.

"Get dressed and let's go. You're solving my problem today."

"What are you talking about? What are you doing here? Mason!"

"You can wear that. We'll get clothes on the way. Let's go." I was still in Mason's University of Boston sweatshirt and my yoga pants.

Then he pulled me, and I fought, but he was way stronger. He got me down the stairs; we actually tripped and fell down in a tangle down the last half a flight.

And then Rick hauled me kicking and fighting outside. I knew he had a gun, but I was just freaking the heck out. I didn't even have shoes on.

He got me outside and all the while I was thinking, *Mason, where are you?* But I was also terrified, because of that gun. I knew he had to be gone on a morning run. I knew he had to be gone and that he'd come back and think I took off. He'd look for me. Would he find me? I know he talked about tracking abilities and he'd found me that day I got away and walked down the road, but what about if I was in a car? And if he

caught up with us, would Rick kill him? I was terrified. Rick with a gun completely shocked me.

“Why are you doing this?” I screeched.

“I need to replace money immediately or I’m fucked. Like... prison fucked. I asked you to help me.” He pointed the gun with accusation, “Made you a generous offer and you acted like the bitch you are and refused and now... you’re gonna help me. You’re gonna help me, Amelia, and then you’re gonna keep your bitch mouth shut about it or else I’ll come back and shoot your boyfriend. Maybe other people in your family, too. You hear me? Just marry me and we’ll get an annulment as soon as my money comes in.”

He got his car door open and tried to get me in, but everything in me told me to fight getting inside that car. And that’s when Mason pulled in. Mason pulled in driving a car I’ve never seen and then without any fear – no not just fearless, absolutely enraged, he shifted into a wolf and covered my body with his to protect me from Rick who was threatening to shoot.

Mason put himself in the path of bullets for me!

Well, I guess I got in the path first because the second Rick pointed that gun at Mason, something came over me. Fear. Blood-curdling, genuine fear. No way could I let Rick hurt Mason and for a split second I was terrified he would shoot him until I saw the gun fall.

I don’t think I’ll forget that feeling of being under his fur, the fear that Rick would shoot Mason as a wolf, I won’t forget the fear of that for the rest of my life. I also won’t forget the sounds Mason made, the growling and snarling, the snapping of his jaw. I could sort of see Rick from under Mason’s wolf’s body and Rick was truly terrified.

I’ve been pacing for the longest time, not sure what to do. I’m absolutely not going downstairs and being in the same space as Tyson. Fuck that. So I guess I’ll just pace instead.

It's been a while. A long while, actually, and I need my magic bean water, so I go down to the kitchen and from my periphery see him straighten.

"Don't try to leave. I'll stop you."

I pretend he doesn't exist. I make coffee. Ignoring the big jerk sitting on the couch watching television. I stare at the dripping coffee, willing it to brew faster.

I feel him at my back. I cringe.

"I didn't mean to hurt my Ivy."

I say nothing.

"I love her," he adds. "She's everything to me. I'll spend my life trying to make that pain up to her."

I spin and glare at him. I give him my absolute maximum glare. His eyes exude sadness. His posture exudes shame.

"Mason is distraught. The whole council feels it. We've felt it for the last two days. He regrets hurting you," Tyson says.

I spin around again to watch the coffee brew.

He keeps talking. "As soon as I saw him once he had you, he was the Mason he was supposed to be. Not the Mason I met at the dance. That wasn't your Mason. *This* is your Mason. The man who threw his body on yours today to protect you, the man who revealed his wolf despite how dangerous it was, because he needed to protect you and that was his priority."

My body is ready to buck with sobs, with more vomiting, but I beat it back and stone-faced, I wait for enough coffee to drip in the coffee pot to get my fix. Once it surpasses the 2 mark on the side, I take it out, pour my mug, nab a sponge to wipe the sizzling mess off the burner, and stick the pot back on. He's still standing behind me.

I see my bag on the kitchen table, so I take it upstairs with the cup, continuing to ignore him. I close the doors and fish my phone out of my bag. It's dead, so I charge it and pace some more.

When there's sufficient charge for it to turn on, I send a text message to Bailey.

Can you find out for me what's happening at the town hall?

She phones me.

I answer. "Hey."

"What do you mean?"

I bite my lip. "I'm not sure if I should tell you so maybe you can poke around and see what you can find out."

"Okay. I'll do that."

"Call me back."

"Okay."

"Bailey?"

"Yeah?"

"Did it feel really, really good to punch her?"

There's silence for a beat and then she lets out a long breath.

"So good you don't even know, girl. I heard her bones crack."

I snicker.

"I'll call you back," she says.

Half an hour later, she calls me back and says, "It's locked down tight as a drum. There's a council meeting and they won't let me in. And Tyson's not there. What's happening?"

I hold the phone.

"Amelia, tell me!" she exclaims. "I've got a very not-happy feeling coming from there."

I sigh. "I'm swearing you to secrecy."

"Okay. Consider me sworn."

"I mean it. I don't know you very well and I'm having a couple issues with trust at the moment. But you need to know,

if you break my trust on this I'll never trust you again. Never ever."

"Got it. Tell me!"

"Mason shifted in front of my ex-fiancé to protect me because he was waving a gun around, trying to drag me off to marry him because of a stupid clause in a will that would make him very rich. It's all really weird but yeah... that's what happened."

"What happened exactly?"

I recount the story.

"All seven of them were there?"

"I don't know. I think there were more than seven," I say.

"Shit. The out-of-towners saw?"

"I don't know. There were all sorts of wolves when Mason carried me inside, but it happened so fast. I don't know how many were here."

"Shit."

"What's gonna happen?"

"Your ex is likely in a holding cell. We've got three of them downstairs in the emergency bunkers under the town hall. They'll have to decide what to do."

"What would they do?" I ask.

"Mase broke a fundamental law, Amelia. He might have to go in front of a tribunal. Especially if Mitchell was one of the ones that saw."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning they'll decide on everything, including what happens to your ex as well as a punishment for Mase."

I blink a couple times and feel panic setting in.

"Especially if those were who I think they were with them. If it was Mitchell, he sits on the supernatural council which

oversees all supernaturals in the alliance and even if they find a way to do damage control so that it doesn't get out, there probably will be punishment. If it was just our guys, we might have been able to find a way to cover it up. But... I don't know."

"Oh God," I whisper.

"Thank you for telling me. I won't tell anyone anything and I'll keep you posted based on what I hear."

"Okay. I'll do the same. I mean... if I hear anything."

"Talk soon. Hang in there."

"Thanks."

I hang up.

I phone my sister.

She doesn't answer.

I phone Mom.

It goes straight to voicemail.

Hours go by in slow motion and I'm feeling absolutely sick about what's happened. So many thoughts cross my mind. Thoughts about what might happen to Mason. What they might do. Is there a supernatural prison? Would Mason go to prison for this? And what will they do to Rick for seeing what he saw? I shouldn't care about Rick, but I don't want to think about someone getting murdered because of me. Would they go that far?

It's early evening. I'm sitting in the bed, eyes on my phone as I try to get lost in an e-book. It's not working, and I've read the same line over and over multiple times. The TV is playing Schitt's Creek and not even the Rose family can help get my mind off everything.

The bedroom doors open and Mason comes in. His eyes sweep over me.

“Have you eaten anything today?” he asks.

I blink in surprise.

“I’m just gonna take a shower and then I’ll make you something. Please don’t make me chase you down right now. Please.” His voice doesn’t sound right. It sounds very wrong, in fact. He goes into the bathroom and closes the door.

I stare at the door for a long time.

Food is usually my go-to when I’m stressed. And I’m feeling more stress than I’ve ever felt. But food is the last thing on my mind with all that’s happening this past forty-eight hours.

All I can think about right now is what might happen to Mason. And how he looks and sounds wrong. I hate it.

He comes out of the bathroom in a towel and goes into the closet. Then he leaves the room dressed, closing the doors on his way out. And I sit still, thinking I should do something. Say something. But I’m frozen, glued to my spot. Paralyzed with fear.

“What now, Auntie Nelle?” I ask softly.

There’s no answer from the universe. None at all.

It’s late. It’s after midnight and I’m tossing and turning. He hasn’t come up. Bailey texted me and told me she talked to her brother. Things are on hold. Whatever that means. She doesn’t know.

Ivy sent a text a few hours ago and said she was home, back from our old house where she went with Mom to do a little more packing and to take some furniture from Mom’s to hers and Tyson’s place. I replied to say I was tired and I’d call her tomorrow. She messaged back that she heard from Tyson about this morning and said nobody knows what’s going to happen, but if I want to talk to call her, day or night.

The last message I got from her said,

**Try not to worry. All of this will work out somehow. If there's anything I can do – anything at all, tell me.
Love you.**

Mason brought in a tray with more of the lasagna he tried to give me last night, leveling me with a dark gaze.

“Please eat,” he requested. And then he left, closing the doors. He didn't try to kiss me. Touch me. He barely looked at me other than to give me that dark look.

And it made me hate these doors. Because I feel so, *so* closed off from him right now. And yet I can't seem to make myself do anything about it.

He came back half an hour later to make sure I ate. He didn't say anything, just took the tray away. I had managed only half of it but that seemed to satisfy him. And I'm feeling like maybe I shouldn't have eaten so that he'd then sit and spoon-feed me. And I could then connect with him. Talk to him. Ask him questions. Have him purr for me and make me feel like maybe everything will be okay. But maybe it won't be okay.

And now I'm lying here alone in the dark, thinking over all of it. Feeling fear. Real fear that the thing that was offered to me, the thing that was in my grasp... the happiness ... that it's slipping through my fingers like water and I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to stop it from evaporating before my very eyes.

But I feel powerless to do anything. And it's a feeling I detest. It's the opposite of my nature to just sit back and do nothing. I just don't know what I *can* do.

I bolt awake. Alone. Panicked.

It's almost five o'clock in the morning again.

I go to the bathroom and then I try to go back to sleep. But I'm wide awake.

I need clean clothes. So does Mason. His laundry basket is overflowing. My bag is full of dirty clothes. I squish my

clothes on top of his clothes in the basket and carry it out of the bedroom, opening the door slowly and peering over the banister. It's all dark downstairs.

I know he has multiple bedrooms, but I don't know which one he's asleep in. The bedrooms on the second floor are unfurnished so he wouldn't be in there. He's not on the couch. I don't find him in the basement, either. I start the coffee and then grab the basket of clothes from the kitchen and head down to the laundry room and dump the basket upside down.

First, I'll do a dark load. Jeans.

I sift through the pockets before dropping them into the washing machine. It's a habit because Rick often left Kleenex in his pockets and it'd go through the whole wash and make a mess.

I find some coins and a couple nuts and bolts as well as a half pencil in one of the pairs of Mason's jeans. The next pair is empty. The third pair I come across has a business card in the pocket.

Vivica Young, Enchanting Enterprises.

I stare at it for a second. And something comes over me. Something very strong. Something very sure. Maybe an answer to the problems we have right now.

I take the business card upstairs to the master bedroom and lift my phone from the bedside table.

She answers on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Hi. Um... this is Amelia Brennan and I'm really, really sorry to call so early, but I think..." I'm at a loss for how to even begin.

"You need my help," she says.

"Yeah." God, my heart is racing. And I'm sweating. "I don't know if you can help me. But... I'm wondering if it's... gosh I feel stupid for asking, but is it possible to turn back time?"

"That's not possible, Amelia."

“Didn’t think so, but I had to try.”

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“If I could turn back time I stop someone from seeing something. Never mind, it’s stupid. I just wish I could make someone forget something they saw,” I say.

“That’s something we might be able to do.”

I blow out a breath. “You might be able to erase a memory?”

“Maybe. Give me the details.”

I walk over to the window and look outside. A robin sits on the deck chair, looking at me. I think it’s one of the babies from the nest below the deck.

The bird tweets. And something comes over me. Another something strong and sure. Because maybe this can be fixed.

“But...” she says, “If it’s something we’re able to do, there’s always a cost.”

“A cost?” My heart drops.

“It’s how it works. It’s a matter of what the cost will be.”

I stare out at the lake, beyond the broken deck that he still hasn’t fixed, because I wouldn’t let him because of the baby birds. There’s a mess of stuff around the boats, including a bicycle that I hadn’t noticed.

“You can trust me,” she says. “It feels like... like you were meant to call me today.”

“Maybe I was. I’m having a major, *major* issue and I just found your business card in Mason’s jeans pocket.”

“Talk to me. I gave him my card because I suspected my help might be needed. I just didn’t know what it’d be needed for, but my instincts are rarely wrong. So maybe you’re meant to call me.”

“Hm. You see, my ex is a psycho and was about to hurt me and Mason kind of um... showed who he really is.”

“Oh,” she says softly.

“And I don’t want him to get in trouble for it. And he could. Big trouble. Someone saw it happen that could mean big problems. So, if we can’t turn back time, but we can make the person that saw it forget they saw it I’m wondering if that might make the big wig that witnessed it let it go.”

“That’s entirely possible. I can’t promise. But again, there’s always a cost.”

Something hits me. Something Mason told me. My eyes drop to the patio door track.

I peer down in between the silver tracks and there it sits. The ugly, cursed engagement ring.

I lift it up and look at it. And a shiver runs up my spine.

“What about a very expensive diamond ring?”

Rick lost the money I invested from the sale of my condo. That’s how I’m justifying this. Rick got us into this mess. He can give up this cursed thing to get us out of it.

“Um, I’m not sure that’s enough,” she says.

“It’s apparently very valuable. But it supposedly has a curse attached to it. Or some bad juju. There’s a long history of ugliness attached to it so full disclosure on that but it’s an heirloom and I’m told it’s worth a lot of money. Even if it is kind of gaudy.”

“A curse?” she asks.

“So I’m told.”

“Bring it to me,” she says excitedly.

This is a surprise. I was sort of just throwing that idea out there. I figured it was at least a start to the negotiations. But could this be the answer?

“Where are you?” I ask.

“Marblehead. The outskirts. Right on the ocean. Call again when you’re in the city and we’ll go from there, I’ll give you directions. Are you bringing any wolf shifters with you?”

“No. Um...” I look outside and see a bicycle down by the boats. An idea hits me. “I might bring my sister. If we can sneak away.”

“I see. But it’d actually be really good if you did,” Vivica says. “Not all my sisters are here and if we have to get things going, you and your sister could help with that. Believe it or not, your lineage has some magical abilities in it.”

“I think we can be there in about four or five hours. I’ll try, at least. If... um... if you don’t see me in six, can you come here and try to find me? I know you don’t know me, but it’s really, really important and I’d find a way to make it up to you.”

“I know it’s important. I feel that. And no problem. But try to get here if you can.”

“Will do. But... do we need to bring the person we want to forget?”

“No. We don’t need them here for that. Even better if you can bring something that belonged to them.”

“The ring did. He gave it to me, but he also gave it to someone else first.”

“Perfect. Bring that ring.”

“Gotcha. Thank you so much.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Just get here. And be safe.”

“Okay.”

I stick the ring into the change purse of my wallet and decide to hustle. Mason will probably be back soon. The sun is already coming up.

He’s got to be gone for his run. And I probably don’t have much time. So I hunt for my keys. I can’t find them. I hunt for Mason’s keys. I can’t find them, either.

So, I rush to the waterfront and grab the bicycle I saw from the window. It’s a bit of a mess back here. Leftover from the bachelor party, I guess. There’s poi balls, the bicycle, some lacrosse equipment, some dishes covered in bugs, and a whole

bunch of empty beer bottles by the fire pit along with an empty bottle of peach schnapps and some sneakers. Strange booze choice for a manly man like Tyson Savage, but okay, then...

And then I pedal like crazy and miraculously find my way to Ivy and Tyson's house. And I think I've done it undetected, because Mason told me there's cameras at the intersection where the town hall and gas station are, so I didn't go through the intersection. Instead, I wound my way through the back parking lot of the town hall and cut through a couple back yards of local homes. And... I think I managed to avoid the cameras.

I've phoned my sister, but it just rang so I'm thinking she's still asleep.

When I get to Tyson's house, Mom's van is parked outside. Good. We'll get Mom to come too. I ring the doorbell and then try the knob. It's unlocked.

I tiptoe through the still dim space and find my way to the master bedroom on the second floor.

Ivy's sound asleep. Alone.

Tyson must be gone for a run, too.

I say a silent *hooray* with a pump of my fist and then wake up my sister.

"Just because I'm with an alpha doesn't suddenly make me someone else. I'm still me. And I'm on a mission here, whether Mason and Tyson like it or not," I state.

"You're gonna get me in so much trouble," Ivy says, direly. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this. Ty is gonna flip his lid."

My eyes roll as I hit the gas and accelerate. Since there was no way to leave Arcana Falls without going through that intersection, I'm boogeying – trying to make sure we make good time.

“You said anything...” I remind her.

She smiles. “I meant it. But we’re both gonna be in trouble for it.”

Hopefully they don’t get a good look at us in their camera room – wherever that is – and just figure it’s Mom passing through.

It didn’t take all that much convincing to get my sister to come with me. She knew I was desperate. She knows I’m doing this to save Mason from this catastrophe. That I’m doing it without telling him first because he might stop me. And because he needs to learn a little bit more about me. That when I’m determined to help someone I love, I’ll do it come hell, come high water, come stubborn alpha shifters.

She insisted on leaving Tyson a note.

I read it over her shoulder while I implored her to hurry the fuck up before they got back.

I’m helping Amelia. I’ll be back later. Or maybe tomorrow. Don’t worry. Don’t be mad. Love you.

“I don’t know if you *get* this,” Ivy continues, “But, I won’t be able to walk for a week after I get home. Ty is gonna flip his lid. And Mason probably too. He doesn’t seem like he has a temper like Tyson, but we’re *seriously* poking two big, bad wolves here. When we get home, those guys are probably gonna do their best at teaching us a lesson.”

“So, let them,” I scoff. “How bad could it be?”

Ivy shudders. “I mean, bad.”

My eyes change and cold pierces my veins. “You said you’re not afraid of your husband. You swore you were okay, and-”

“Chill, Amie. I’m *not* afraid of him,” she interrupts. “But... have you ever come so hard and so many times that you thought you were gonna pass out from it?”

I can’t help but laugh. That doesn’t sound so bad.

Ivy continues. “Because I have and though it sounds like fun, it’s very, very exhausting. And I don’t know about your guy, but mine will be growling the whole entire time.”

“Ooh,” I muse. “I do like it when Mason growls.”

“You’re playin’ with fire, big sister,” she warns.

“So what if I am? Are you saying I should only do what I’m told because my big bad wolf of a guy thinks he’s the boss of me?”

“No, but you’re gonna get us both burnt.”

“You want me to drop you back at home?” I ask.

“No. Of course not. I’m your ride or die, Amie.”

I smile.

She adds, “I just might die after this ride because I’ve been knotted to death.”

I laugh. It feels good to laugh. Having a mission, a mission to save my man, it’s pulled me out of my funk I guess.

“Since you’re determined to get us both in big trouble, I’m controlling the playlist for the whole road trip,” she says, reaching for the radio. “No bitching, no matter what I play.”

“Fine,” I mumble. “Have at it.” She probably won’t even play any eighties *music at all*. Boo. *Except maybe I’ll be able to talk her into Duran Duran’s Hungry Like the Wolf*.

We’re in Mom’s van because Ivy switched vehicles with her last night when she brought home all the Christmas decorations and some art pieces and special occasion dishes. She told me we could divvy them up.

Mom wanted us to have them. She says she’s going to get all new ones.

I asked Ivy which shapeshifter Mom went home with after her wedding. She told me she had no idea. She didn’t even know Mom did that.

When this is over with, when I've figured out how to save Mason – it'll be time to solve the Mom mystery.

We're over halfway there and we've stopped for coffee, snacks, and a pee break. We've just gotten back into the van when my sister pipes up.

"Amie," Ivy says tentatively, like she's nervous about something.

"What?" I ask, peeling the lid back on my coffee.

"I already talked it over with Ty yesterday. He wants us to have a baby as soon as possible."

"Good," I say. "If that's what you want."

She's silent.

"Don't be afraid to talk babies just because of my defective ovaries, Ivy. Seriously."

"I know you're not Team Ty right now, but..."

"It's none of my business," I say. "I can't say I get it. I can't say I'll ever be okay with it, but it's your life, Ives."

"Well... I talked to him about things and..."

"And?" I prompt after a long silence.

"I want to help you have a baby."

My body locks tight. I put my coffee into the cupholder shakily, before I spill it all over myself. I grip the steering wheel, like it'll steady my heart.

She continues, "So, we're gonna try to get pregnant as soon as possible. I mean, we're already trying considering I can't be on the pill and he likes to have sex at least twice a day, if not more."

I snort-laugh. "Sounds familiar."

"And then..." she continues, "as soon as I can after we have one, we'll find a way. Before I went to Mom's to help

yesterday I stopped in to talk to Cat. I hope you don't mind, but I confided in her, hoping she might be able to help. And Cat says that it might not even have to be my egg. She said she knows a specialist and they can do an exam on you and find out if they can get any of your eggs out and if so, let your man's seed to its thing with your egg in a Petri dish and then bing bang, boom, turkey baster. She said just because you can't ovulate doesn't mean you can't carry the baby. But if you can't, I can. Whether it's your egg or if you can't produce any... *my* egg."

I stare at the windshield in shock.

"I'll have a baby for you," she says softly. "Or give you one of my eggs, if you can carry. But either way, the baby will be part Mason *and* part you. Because the *part you* part is important. Because you're amazing. Even if it's not your egg, if it's mine, it's still part *you*, right? Because I'm part you."

I nod, eyes swimming with tears. And then I turn to my sister and pull her close for a hug. She hugs me. I hug her back. Hard. So hard she complains I'm about to crack some ribs.

I fucking love my sister.

"We need to get back on the road. Let's go," she says.

I wipe my eyes and nod, then start up the van.

Both our phones are off. No point arguing on the phone with our alphas. We'll be in Marblehead by lunchtime.

Erica Young

My phone rings.

I'm in a lounge chair outside my bus, a cup of Twinings Honeybush, Mandarin, and Orange herbal tea in my hands and a cat sleeping on my lap. I stretch to the side to fetch the phone from the stairs that lead into the bus.

Vivi calling.

I grab it. The kitty skedaddles, shooting me a dirty look as she lands on the grass.

I give her a heavy blink in apology.

"Hey," I speak into the phone.

"Hey," Vivi replies. "I think we need you here. Actually, I know we do."

"At home?" I ask.

"Yeah."

Shit.

"You know I can't show my face around there."

"Rikki, this is... Amelia and Ivy Brennan are here."

"Huh?" Why is she calling me Rikki? They know how I feel about that. I guess it's down to the fact that the Brennan sisters are there.

"Yeah," Vivi says. "It's all culminating. It's time."

My heart sinks. I'm not ready. I'm nowhere near ready to face him.

"We've got a rare gem here with a wicked dark and powerful curse on it that we need your help with. Converting this energy. Me and Ronnie are working on it, linking with Ivy and

Amelia, but it's not enough. Jess and Dani aren't here and can't get back today. I can't even get Jess on the phone as she's off grid. The Brennan girls are helping, but it's not enough. I can't seem to convert the energy on this, and Ronnie says we need you, for sure. If we don't have your help, the best we can do is temporary brain fog and that's not enough. We need amnesia to hit our target. To help the pack. And that might help us open the door with Greyson."

Vivi has clairvoyance and precognition. Veronica has psychometry down pat so would know everything about that gem by touching it including the originating spells and all the connections through that along with how to convert things. But my gift is spell-writing and I've certainly honed those skills in the past six and a half years since my first spell went incredibly, catastrophically wrong, but if I go to where the Brennan girls are, then there's a very good chance the Arcana Falls wolf shifter pack won't be far away. And that'll mean I have to face *him*.

"I can try remotely," I suggest.

"Time is of the essence," Vivi states.

"And this is a necessity, Erica," Ronnie (also known as Veronica) calls out in the background. "Get your ass home!"

Shit. Fuck.

"It's time," Vivi says. "And it's goodwill. Help Mason Quinn and therefore the Arcana Falls council. That goodwill might go a long way with Riley, too."

I don't know why they need what they need, not sure how the Brennan sisters wound up there, but I know it won't be enough. Nothing will be enough to make things up to Riley. I'm sure of it. And I've been suffering every day for my mistakes. I suffer for every spell I write that doesn't take, that goes wrong, and sometimes despite the fact that they go right.

My eyes close and I release a long breath. "I'll be there in two hours," I say.

And then I say a silent prayer that I won't have to face Riley yet. I'm not ready. I wasn't ready for him to find out the truth, but I had to release some energy for the spell to take with Holden and Isabella Holloway last Halloween. I thought he found out then, but my sister Dani told me he found out just a few weeks ago. I had no choice but to do what I had to do - to protect the Holloways' unborn child for the second time. With magic, sometimes I have to accumulate good will before I've earned it. But I always have to pay the price eventually. With a very heavy heart, I quickly pack up my campsite, fetch my cat Penny, and head home.

Mason

It hasn't been a real pleasant drive to find our runaway mates. Well, mine is obviously a runaway. His just went along for the ride, leaving him a note with a heart on it.

Tyson and me are in his classic truck and we've been practically flyin', both of us pissed off. In fact, we nearly got pulled over for it, but once I convinced him he had to pull over with the lights spinning behind us, the cop kept going, clearly chasing someone else.

I got home from my run to an empty house and lost my shit. My mate was gone. I hoped I'd be home before she woke up but not the case today and I've been kicking myself for pushing my luck. I had to run this morning. My wolf was keening in my head and the only thing that made it stop was the run.

I figured she was on foot, and as I was about to shift and start tracking her, Cade called and said he saw her through his window on a bicycle. That bike got left behind last summer after a party and wound up being ridden around the yard by a drunk Jase the night before Ty's wedding.

I ran to Ty's, and he was already phoning me, in a supremely pissy mood because his mate was gone, too, but of course I had no phone on me. He lent me something to wear and we got in his truck to chase them down, making calls to them and then their mother and the other women they'd been friendly with in the pack. Nobody knew where they were.

Bailey hesitantly admitted she'd had a text from Amie yesterday asking questions about what was going down with her ex.

Her ex is still in holding. And tomorrow morning, our guests all head out, including Mitch who's going back overseas,

Mitch who feels compelled to bring the matter at hand to the supernatural collective council to discuss what to do about it. I'm expecting that I'll be called before a tribunal. What'll happen after that is anyone's guess. Until we know what's what, we're keeping Rick Bullock in holding.

Mitch is a good guy but he's also a *by the book* guy. Though he can't tell me what kinds of sanctions might happen if it's decided that we have to neutralize Rick Bullock as a threat, the supernatural council will do whatever they need to do. They don't take kindly to having to exterminate eyewitnesses and their ire will probably hurt.

If he weren't here, we would've been in a position to decide for ourselves.

Rick Bullock is scared shitless in that holding cell. Cat Savage cleaned and stitched up his hand, and he's not talkin' about what he'll do about the knowledge of what we are. And I don't fuckin' trust him as far as I can throw him to back down because of a threat. We've parked his car and cell phone in Drowsy Hollow for now so that it looks like that's the last place he's been.

Right now, I couldn't care less about Bullock or facing a hearing for my crime because all I can think about is how furious I am at my mate leaving me. She didn't even take her clothes. Just abandoned the house and left with the clothes on her back on a goddamn bicycle. She despises me that much.

Despite that, I can't just let her go. I won't. I have to bring her home and find a way to get her to forgive me.

So, first stop: her mother's old house. If she's not there, we'll check Ivy's old apartment. But if we don't find fresh signs of their scents there, I don't know what I'll do.

Tyson's phone rings, and I see Greyson's name on the screen. Grey, Linc, and Joel are working together to try to track them down electronically through bank or credit cards, cellular phone movement, if we can. Thankfully Joel has technology skills and Linc has skip-tracing knowledge, but it's been a

couple hours and they've picked up nothing so far. They've been trying to get ahold of the private eye lone wolf Jared who also has these skills.

I answer.

"Coffees just bought at a Starbucks with Ivy's debit card."

"Where?"

"Marblehead, Massachusetts."

My gut clenches. "What the fuck?"

"Yeah."

"Call the witches," I say. "Look 'em up. Uh... Enchanted Enterprises. They've got a website. Tell them this is not fuckin' on. If any of them helps my woman sever our bond..."

"I've already called. No answer."

"Find me their address."

"I have it. Jared got it for me, he knows them. You ready for it?"

He tells me where the Young sisters live and says it's within a couple miles of the Starbucks the girls were just at.

"Fuck. That's a good hour and a half from where we are now. Keep tryin' them, Grey."

"Absolutely."

"Faster, Tyson," I clip and let Grey go.

We pull up to a colorful Victorian mansion on the waterfront. There are wildflowers everywhere and it's painted like it's a dollhouse. There's an old-school VW hippie bus outside, parked beside the minivan I know belongs to Amelia's mother.

Another scent hits me. River and pain. *Fuck.*

"Rye's mate," I say.

"Shit," Ty mutters.

But there's only a weak sense of Amelia and Ivy, that makes it seem like they're no longer here. This sets my senses on high alert, because where did they go if the van they drove is still here?

Ty's phone rings. Greyson again. I don't answer it. Instead, I'm out of the truck before it's come to a complete stop. I stalk up to the front door and rip the screen door off its hinges. I toss it and pound my fist on the door once before I kick it in. About half a dozen cats run away from the porch, a couple of them hissing and spitting at me.

A redhead I've never seen before, but whose smell I recognize as Riley's mate answers. She's wearing a long dress and she's got big eyes. They're filled with fear. Stark fright, actually. She stretches out her neck and I look over my shoulder and see her eyes are on Tyson coming up behind me with his phone to his ear.

"What the fuck did you do?" I demand.

She blinks and keeps looking past Tyson and then her shoulders relax marginally.

"What the fuck did you do?" I move in. "Where is she? If you've fuckin' taken her away from me in any way, shape or form, I'll rip your fucking throat apart."

She backs up.

I say this but I know I can't do that. I can't rip Riley's mate apart. She doesn't need to know that.

As she backs away some more, I hear footsteps. Multiple sets of them coming up some stairs.

Amie and her sister. And Vivica. And another brunette. Amie's eyes land on me and go wide.

I see her. I can't smell her. And I can't fucking feel her.

I growl as I prowl over to her, haul her up over my shoulder and turn to leave.

"Mase!" she screeches.

“Mason,” Tyson calls out.

I feel the blood trickling down my cheek. “Find out,” I snap in Ty’s direction.

“It’s gonna be all right, brother,” he replies, but I keep going, stomping down the porch stairs and heading for the waterfront. There are no close neighbors and it’s all open space, so I head toward the hill that leads down to the water.

“Mason put me down!” she shouts from over my shoulder. “I need to talk to you.”

Once we’re down at the bottom of the hill, right near the water, I dash the blood off my cheek as I put her down in the grass and pin her.

“They took you from me?”

“Took me?” she asks.

“You took yourself from me? You fucking did, didn’t you?” I shout.

Fuck. Fuck!

“With dark magic!” I snarl.

She shakes her head. “No. It wasn’t... no... I was...”

But nothing feels right. She’s different. Everything is wrong. Very *very* fucking wrong.

I can’t wait a second longer. I grab her, grinding my hard-as-steel cock against her, ripping her black pants down fast. I need inside her. I need to show her. Show her. Feel her.

I can’t feel her in my head. Her emotions, her feelings aren’t there. I can’t believe she locked me out. I barely pull scent from her. It’s so faint, it’s like my nose isn’t working.

Fuck.

Fury, dark energy, they ooze from my pores as I manage to get my cock out and yank her underwear to the side, spearing into her with rage, knotting as soon as I’m inside, despite that she’s dry.

I roar out my rage as she screams at the intrusion. And then whether it's her body recognizing me, recognizing who is supposed to own her despite the fucking witches, or whether it's my immediate essence filling her, her body goes lax, and she starts to whimper around my vibrating knot.

But I still can't fucking feel her.

My mouth goes to her claiming mark, and I bite it. Too hard, though, because I draw blood.

And her body vibrates along with my knot as she cries out a climax.

She physically feels like my Amie. My wildberry. She tastes like her, but there's something blocking my connection to her.

My cum won't stop coming. My knot won't stop buzzing. It hurts even more than The Rut I went into after she flirted with Cade.

Rage fills my blood as I continue to fuck her into the grass.

"Mason, please..." she pleads, digging her nails into my back. "I need to talk to you, I... please stop."

My knot abates, but it's not enough. It's not e-fucking-nough. Because I can't feel inside her mind, her heart. Is she lost to me? No. Fuck no. I'll fucking kill every single one of these witches if they took her from me.

She's trying to get away from me, crying, battling me.

I flip her over and spear into her again. I bite the back of her neck and hold her there with my teeth as I fuck her some more.

She cries out in pain so I release her neck.

"Baby please. Let me back in. Let me back inside. Fuck. I can't... fucking... feel you."

She's crying into the grass.

"Why can't I fucking feel you!" I holler.

“Mason!” I hear a female voice. “Give it a few minutes. She just needs a few minutes. You’ll feel her again. I promise.”

I don’t know that fucking voice. I glare over my shoulder and see the redhead standing off to the side.

“What the fuck did you do?” I snarl. I growl, a low, enraged growl, baring my teeth. While I do this, I’m still fucking my mate.

I don’t know what I want to do more, fucking kill that bitch or keep fucking my mate, hoping to feel our connection again.

I’m knotting her again. That’s something at least. I think. I don’t fucking know.

I feel myself shifting, slowly. Amelia cries out harder, and I see her hand reach for mine. My hand that’s halfway between hand and razor-sharp claws. She reaches backwards at an awkward angle and her fingers sift through the fur on my throat.

“Mason get off her!” Ivy screams, running toward us. “Get the fuck off her! You’re hurting her!”

Tyson grabs her and pulls her backwards before she can descend the hill. They’re a good twenty feet away but they can all see what’s happening down here. Tyson’s free hand grips the arm of the redhead, and he pulls her back, too.

“Let him do what he needs to do.”

“Mason. She’s still yours. I swear she is,” The redhead shouts. “Just give her a couple minutes and you’ll feel it. I promise.”

My eyes meet Tyson’s.

He nods, as if agreeing with the witch, and he pulls the two of them away, out of sight.

My thrusts slow. The rage starts to seep out of my blood. My wolf recedes. My knot subsides.

And then I slide out of Amelia, turn her over and pull up her clothes to cover her. I put my cock away and move away from the puddle of fluids on the grass that we’re in.

I'm still growling. I can't seem to fucking stop.

She's limp in my arms as I gather her close on my lap and brush her hair away from her face.

She looks up at me with tears in her eyes. Her chin is trembling.

I pull her tight to my chest. I can't stop the growling coming from my body. I rock her, holding her too tight. Reaching in my mind. Reaching from inside my chest. Reaching for her but not finding her emotions at all.

"You left me. You fucking left me," I say, kissing her claiming mark, licking the blood away and feeling bad about the blood.

"I didn't."

I pull back enough to look into her eyes.

And they're so fucking blue, they're glowing so much. I think they were glowing like this when I first set eyes on her, but I was too in my rage to realize it.

She wraps her arms around me and holds on tight, bawling.

"Amie?" I'm confused at the way she's clinging to me.

"C-can you please purr for me, Mase? Please?" she asks.

I swallow down a lump of pain. A lump of regret. I've just hurt her.

I stare at the calm waters of the Atlantic Ocean in front of us. They're so eerily calm that nothing feels right. I can't feel her. The air feels strange. And I've hurt her.

"Can you please purr for me, Mase? Please, baby?" she requests, holding me tighter.

I've stopped growling. But I can't seem to find the purr.

She pulls back and cups my jaw with both hands and stares into my eyes.

"I didn't leave you, Doggo. I swear I didn't. I traded the cursed ring to buy a spell to help. To help with the Rick problem."

“I can’t feel you,” I rasp.

“Because we linked with the Young sisters. It wasn’t working so Erica came back. And then it was still touchy because the ring’s curse was so deep, but then Greyson called and helped over the phone. To make the spell. We linked up. Tethered. Like you guys do, Erica said. She explained it. It’ll fade soon. You’ll feel me again.”

I stare at her in confusion.

“We did a thing to... make Rick forget everything he saw,” she says. “It’ll just take a little while for that tether to loosen up. And then you’ll feel me again. You will, I promise I didn’t do anything to stop you from feeling me in order to hurt you. Only to help you.”

I frown.

She scrubs her nails along my jaw. “That thing you see in my eyes sometimes? The thing that makes you call me wildberry? That’s when I give myself a second, when I stop trying to stop myself from believing that you’re real, that you’re really for me. That you really do love me.”

She swallows and takes in a deep breath. “Because I love you, Mason. I love you so fucking much. Being yours is perfect. It’s a place I just couldn’t believe was permanent because nothing is ever this good for me for long. And I don’t know if I can trust that I’ll get to keep it forever because this is that elusive thing people chase, but somehow I actually have it. Me. And all of it. Not just that little bit for a grain in the hourglass of time that you will one day look back on as the perfect moment, but you’ve been suggesting I get to have it for the entire hourglass of my life? That’s unfathomable because of how completely blissful that thought is. Believing I get to be yours forever is so dangerous because if I believe it and I lose it, it’ll kill me. Does that make sense?”

I shake my head. “No.”

She laughs and puts her forehead to my chest.

I kiss the top of her head.

“Because you’ll never lose it. Believe it, Amelia. Believe that I love you. That I’d fuckin’ do anything to show you.”

“I do, Mason. I believe it. You showed it to me with what you did with Rick. I guess you maybe even showed me before that, but I was so damaged, I had trouble believing it.”

Amelia

The fierce way he says *believe it* – that look in the depths of his eyes? I will embrace this perfection for as long as I'm blessed enough to have it. I've never wept as deeply as I'm weeping right now. Because I know how much this man, this wolf, loves me. I know he wasn't trying to hurt me. I know he saw red when he couldn't feel me and that he went primal. It was like I could feel him, though, even if he couldn't feel me. He was in Mason-form but he was acting on his wolf instincts and I felt his agony. I felt it like I had a bird's eye view into his mind. I've never experienced anything like it, but I'm grateful to know what he's thinking. Because he loves me. He really does. He'd do anything for me.

No way would I believe anyone feels as strongly about someone as I do about my shapeshifter sex god. Especially now. Especially after actually feeling his distress at the idea of losing me.

All along, this little voice inside me has been saying that if only this could be not only real but permanent? I might do anything to have it. I didn't ever want to believe I'd part with my soul for anything or anyone, but the idea of the rest of my life with Mason Quinn might be just about that tempting. I'm tempted to do whatever it takes, even if I need to lie, cheat, steal, and auction off everything I have including my vital organs. And one of the best things about Mason? He wouldn't let me. He'd do it so I don't have to. But we'd fight about it first. Fight about it, fuck about it, and then laugh about it together under the moonlight, tied in a knot that nobody could ever untangle.

He can't feel me, so I do my best to show him what I'm feeling. By kissing him. By holding him tight.

And finally, *finally* he says,

“I feel you, baby. Fuck, I feel you.”

His bottomless eyes... I might be willing to drown in them. I didn't want to open up to let him in, but he busted the door down anyway. And I want him there behind that door now. Now and forever.

Finally, he starts purring. And it's the best sound I've ever heard.

When we get up over the hill, walking hand in hand, I see Tyson and Ivy sitting on the tailgate of his truck, feet dangling. Ivy has her head on his shoulder and he's smiling.

Her eyes land on me and I give her a smile. She returns it.

They hop down.

“She took off,” Tyson mutters. “Her sisters left in another car at the same time. I thought about stopping her, but I was settling Ivy down. I told her I could feel things were okay with you two. Ivy said to let her go.”

Mason thrusts his hand through his hair. “We had her in arms' reach and now she's gone? Riley is gonna lose it.”

“She knows she has to face him,” Ivy pipes up. “She gave us a message for him.”

“What message was that?” Mason asks.

“She didn't mean it. She didn't want to stay away, but she had no choice. It's haunted her every day for almost seven years.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” he asks.

“We don't know,” I reply, “But the look in her eyes... that girl looks like she's suffered. A lot.”

We're all quiet for a moment.

A little black cat with blue eyes winds its way around my legs and then around Ivy's. We both squat to pet it. It purrs nearly as loud as a wolf shifter as it blinks at us and continues winding around both of our legs.

“Mom’s van won’t start. Ty tried to give it a jump but it’s dead,” Ivy says.

“I’ll take a look,” Mason offers.

A few minutes after the tow truck pulls away with Mom’s van, Tyson pipes up.

“Didn’t think about the fact we’d have to get you two home. Gonna be a tight fit.”

“We’ll ride in the back,” Mason says with a shrug. He looks at me.

I’m not riding all the way back in the back. I declare, “Shotgun!”

“I’ll drive!” Ivy calls out.

Tyson flashes a grin at Mason.

“Guess it’s the doggos in the back,” my man says.

And then he kisses me. Tyson kisses Ivy, and then the guys both climb up into the bed of the pickup truck.

Ivy slams the tailgate and I get in the passenger side.

“I’m controlling the music on the way home,” I state.

My sister rolls her eyes but mutters, “Fuzz.”

Mason

I wake up alone. But I feel her.

It's ten o'clock in the morning.

And I hear her doing something downstairs. I fucked her until nearly dawn. I'm surprised she's up so early.

I smell food.

I get out of bed and find my mate making something.

She beams a beautiful smile at me. "Just in time. It's beautiful out. Let's go eat on the deck. Go. I'll be right out. Here. Take the coffees."

I lean over and press a lingering kiss on her mouth.

Something smells different on her skin. I lean into her claiming mark and sniff. A pang of regret hits me when my eyes land on the little scab on the back of her neck from when I bit her yesterday. I drop a kiss on that, too.

"You smell funny, baby," I say.

She swats at me playfully. "I haven't gotten a shower yet and you made quite a mess of me, so don't be so rude."

"No, it's not that kind of funny." I take a closer whiff. I smell her and I smell something else. What is that smell?

"Breakfast is gonna get cold. Go outside. Bad Doggo." She swats me again. "Take my coffee too."

"Bossy little mate. What did you make?" I ask, slapping her ass.

"Stuffed French toast. Stuffed with cream cheese and berries. And bacon on the side."

"Mm." I like the sound of that.

When we got back last night after stopping for a meal on the way, we left the girls at Ty and Ivy's and me and Tyson called a council meeting to fill them in on what happened. They already knew, because Greyson filled them in after his call with his cousins and our girls. Grey told us he knew what he had to do to implement the spell he'd worked on with the Young coven. He'd take Rick Bullock for a drive back to his car, utter some more words, and if all went well, he'd leave him there.

We ran it by Mitch and Eddy and could tell Eddy was already on our side, had no desire to drop the dime on us. Mitch stated that he'd still have to file a report but that he'd do it in a way that disclosed we'd fixed the breach with his recommendation that no further action was required provided that we kept an eye on Rick Bullock and informed them immediately if anything changed that would put things at risk. He wouldn't guarantee that the rest of the council would be on side but stated he was 95% confident that it'd be enough.

And that was good enough for us.

Grey is taking Rick Bullock for a drive this morning. After Linc drove Mitch and Eddy back to Roxy's last night, Grey told me he would end Rick Bullock if it didn't go our way and it wouldn't be a problem anyway.

"We're finally together, finally a full council of seven. This shit won't get in our way," Grey vowed.

Riley did not take it well that we'd seen his wayward mate and didn't drag her back with us. But given all that went down, he didn't seem like he was gonna hold it against us.

He was ready to take off and head there for her, but we told him she'd already taken off. That the girls told us she was in hiding and came back to help with the spell. Tyson gave Riley the message Erica wanted him to have.

He did not react, not outwardly anyway. We can all feel he's in turmoil inside, that he's still got shit to work through. And I

suspect that when he does catch up with her, it's gonna be beyond ugly for them to work their way through it.

Greyson is planning on driving up to Marblehead next weekend to meet some of his cousins and have a conversation with them about his biological mother. He's close with his father, but Graydon has been clammed up about the whole thing, telling him not to bother. To let sleeping witches lie. I don't blame Grey for wanting to know more. I know I'd want to know. And now that Greyson has had a taste of witchcraft, of his abilities, of course he wants to explore it further.

When I picked Amelia up from her sister's, their mother was there. So was Cat, Bailey, Cicely, and my mother. All of them sat on the back patio drinking wine. And Kathleen had a fresh claiming mark on her throat.

She and Lorenzo have mated. And Amie told me her mother confided that he'd knotted her too. So Lorenzo has found love again. Real love is the only way a widowed alpha will knot again.

The claiming scent wasn't in the air like with me or Tyson, but I suspect a second mating is a little lower key, though I'm sure it's equally as important for the alpha and his new mate.

Cade's walking around with a black eye that hasn't healed from a fist fight he and Lorenzo had, to do with Kathleen. He passed out shortly after that fight outside the diner in The Hollow after he stopped in for lunch. Lorenzo brought him to Cat. So that's a third case. All three cases of the strange illness so far have happened to alphas. No betas or omegas. All males. Cade's feeling better today, but he hasn't healed.

And the commonality across all three cases is food consumed at the diner during breakfast or lunch. They didn't all eat the same thing. Now, we need to narrow down between what it is that's doing it, or who it is that's doing this.

Amelia

They released Rick yesterday. He has amnesia. It worked. Hallelujah. Greyson took him out of the village, completed the spell, and quizzed him until he was satisfied before calling over a Drowsy Hollow cop walking the beat to tell him the guy was lost and seemed to need help.

Not only does Rick not remember what happened with Mason and me, he doesn't even remember me. And he has no idea who he is. If he doesn't get any of his memory back, maybe he won't be such a dick.

My Mom is mated to Lorenzo, which makes Cicely and her sisters our new stepsisters. And that's really cool, though Candy is probably going to give me the cold shoulder because of her friendship with that she-shifter named Renee who is prejudiced against humans and can't believe that a fine specimen like Mason Quinn is off the market because of a human. Cicely says not to take it too personally. She says Renee is a little offside since losing her mate. Maybe so. But I still look forward to flashing my claiming mark again next time I see her.

Mom confided that she really liked Cade a lot and said that they even fooled around a little, not going all the way, but Lorenzo burst in, and they had a fight about it that left Cade bloody. Lorenzo didn't forcefully take Mom or anything as dramatic as what happened with me and my sister, but they did it. And then when they did it a second time, he knotted and bit her.

She seems really happy. I just sort of wish she'd hide that mark on her neck. Thinking about it being on her and how I

know it feels for me makes me feel a little icky. I can't help it. She's my mother!

Mason is working on a basement renovation job for their company and I'm manning the clinic alone for a few hours while Cat is off collecting herbs.

No one has any appointments, but she didn't want to close shop with the code yellow and has her cell phone with her in case of any emergencies.

I've decided that while I'm here, I'll be calling to quit my job. And I'll send a letter of resignation. Technically, my two weeks' notice are covered by what was supposed to be my honeymoon, so I won't really be leaving them scrambling.

Right about now, if all this hadn't happened, I'd be on a cruise with Rick the Dick. I shudder at the thought.

I checked my phone earlier and there was a text message from Rick's sister. Gloria wrote that she was still in town and wanted to know if I wanted to go for sushi. I told her I couldn't make it. She also said her brother was in the hospital and they figure he must have hit his head because he can't remember anything. And he's in some sort of trouble, embezzling money from his clients-type trouble. She said she thinks he's faking the amnesia because of the trouble.

I replied that I hoped he'd be all right. That I have no ill will toward him. I told her that I sold the ring, that Rick told me it was okay for me to do since he admitted to me he'd lost the money I'd given him to invest.

Gloria told me 'good riddance' about the ring and said she'd be back in town again at Christmas and hoped we could do lunch or dinner then.

Rick said his 'problem' was "prison-serious." I guess he was borrowing from Peter to pay Paul while waiting for his inheritance, continuing to pretend he was the financial master of the universe. But really, I don't care all that much about the money I lost. I've gained something so much more important. Mason told me last night that Rick's gun wasn't even loaded,

which made me roll my eyes. He was desperate. And ridiculous. And an absolute DICK to try to pull that bullshit with me.

Good riddance to him.

Oh yeah, Gloria also mentioned that she got in touch with Tiara, Rick's ex, who hates her twin's guts. Tiara told Gloria that Sheila wasn't leaving her husband because he was very rich and has a terminal illness. So she, too, appears to be waiting for a pay day.

I wonder what sort of price I'd have to pay the Young sisters to do some sort of healing spell for Sheila's husband.

I'm gabbing with Bailey when the doors fly open and a very naked Joel and equally naked Lincoln rush in with a bleeding, unconscious massive black wolf in their arms.

It's Tyson.

"He's been shot!" Lincoln shouts.

I spring to my feet. "Call Cat!" I tell Bailey, then yell, "Get him on the exam table."

It's a little daunting trying to examine a bleeding, unconscious giant wolf and though he hasn't been my favorite person, he's my sister's husband. My sister's soulmate. She loves him and I need to save his life. He's family.

I find the bullet wound is on his side, above his hip. There's no exit wound, and he's definitely nicked a vein. It's bleeding profusely. His tongue is hanging out.

"Is he breathing?" Bailey shouts. "Cat's coming. She says to apply pressure and wait. She'll be here in a couple minutes."

"He's breathing," Lincoln shouts.

I douse the wound with saline solution since there's visible dirt on it, and then I apply pressure with clean gauze. A lot of pressure. As much pressure as I can manage.

“Find me a stethoscope. Now!” I shout.

The stethoscope gets put around my neck and plugged into my ears as both my hands are holding the dressing to the wound.

“Pressure, Lincoln.” I get Lincoln to take over.

I stare at the black, furry chest a second too long as I search, I guess, because Joel grabs the diaphragm and positions it. I hear his heart.

His heart rate is slow. But I don’t know what a normal supernatural wolf shifter’s heart rate is.

I need Cat.

I put my hands to the gauze with Lincoln, our hands covered in dark red blood.

Ivy rushes in and she’s red-faced, crying. She gasps as she takes in what’s happening.

“Ty! Tyson!” She rushes over and wraps both arms around his neck and hugs him, crying into his fur.

I’m worried about internal injuries, about his organs. About his intestines. If they’re punctured, he’ll be susceptible to infection.

“Ivy, back up. Give us room,” I say.

She ignores me.

“Tyson, please be okay,” Ivy cries out and it’s breaking my heart. Then she looks at me and screams at me, pointing,

“Amie, don’t let him die. Don’t fucking let him die!”

“Ivy, back up. Give us room!”

Where the fuck is Cat? I glare at a pale Bailey. “Call her again!”

“Help him!” Ivy screams at me.

The black wolf’s head lifts and his green eyes flash brightly on my sister, bounce to me, and then he shifts. He shifts and suddenly, my hands aren’t on the abdomen of a wolf, they’re on a man. And something pings. I look down.

There's a bloody bullet between my coral suede booties.

Ty wraps his arms around my sister. "I'm okay, Ivy. I'm okay."

"Wait, Tyson. I need to look. Give me some room, Lincoln."

Lincoln backs up and I lift the dressing away from Tyson's side. It's still a little bloody, there's a small wound there, but since there's a bullet on the floor, that's a good sign.

"Back up everyone. This fucking hurts," he says. He looks at me. "Two steps back, please, Amelia."

As I step back, colliding with Joel, a wolf bursts from him again. And then he shifts back. And then he does it again. I look at his hip and his skin is unmarked. There doesn't even seem to be a scar.

We collectively breathe out relief.

"Good thing he didn't eat in Drowsy Hollow," Joel mutters.

Truth.

He might not have been able to shift and that would've meant his body wouldn't have spit that bullet out.

I avert my eyes, because... naked wolf shifter with a giant schlong. Holy horses.

"Who did it? Who shot you?" Ivy demands.

He rolls to sitting and pulls her closer. Her body thankfully covers his nudity (I don't know if I'll ever get used to the nudity around here).

Cat rushes in and Bailey is filling her in, gesturing to the bullet on the floor as Tyson says, "We don't know. She's shifter but has no scent. I think she's taking cat grass. She shot me and then she shifted, leaving her gun and taking off."

"Grey and Jase are chasing her," Joel puts in.

"Where's Mason? Where's Riley?" Cat asks.

Cat takes the stethoscope from me and starts looking her son over. "Good work, Amie. There are scrubs in that closet," she says.

“They’re working on that basement reno today,” Lincoln says.

“Ty, let me examine you,” Cat says as Ty waves her off.

Ivy moves aside.

Tyson waves his hand again. “It’s fine. The bullet fell to the floor. I only got shot once.”

“Only once,” Ivy scoffs.

Tyson’s eyes move to me. I’m covered with blood. I’m still holding the bloody gauze.

His gaze softens. “You tried to save me.”

I work down a swallow.

“Maybe you don’t hate me anymore.”

“I saved you because my sister would’ve killed me if I didn’t,” I fire back.

He smiles.

I smile too, giving him a wink.

Ivy wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight.

She’s trembling.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “He’s fine. See? He’s fine.”

She nods, tears in her eyes. I grab a Kleenex and start dabbing at her eyes, ignoring that mine are leaking, too, ignoring that I’m trying to clean her face with blood on my hands.

“Come here,” Ty says. “One minute, mother.” He hugs my sister.

And then he catches my arm, too, and pulls me over and hugs us both.

“Naked man alert,” I joke. “You’d better let go of me before my mate gets here.”

Tyson laughs.

“We’re gonna go out and help Grey and Jase,” Linc says.

And then he and Joel are gone.

“Does anyone know who she is?” Bailey asks as Jase rushes in. Bailey runs for Jase and throws her arms around him.

“Thank God you’re okay.”

He pats her back awkwardly. “I’m fine. Pretty sure she was aiming for Ty.”

Mason

Riley and I have had a productive morning together on the job, but his head has been elsewhere. I know he's anxious to get back on the road to look for Erica. I've told him I'll ask Jase or Joel or even Atticus and my father to jump on with me tomorrow to finish it up so he can listen to his instincts. He needs to find her. He won't rest until he does. I just hope she's not as good of a hider as she is a spell-writer.

I'm anxious to get home to my woman, but don't bother pointing that out. I could spend my entire day and night inside her, beside her, watching her beautiful eyes on me. And tonight, hopefully my little mate decides to shave my face, because it's so itchy I'm ready to shave myself. And that's nowhere near as fun as when she does it, sitting on my cock, naked in our bathtub.

I'm switching out battery packs on a drill when panic spikes in me. Something's wrong.

Amelia.

Riley and I lock gazes. And something else. The rest of the council. What the fuck?

"Let's go find out what this is," Riley says, and we rush out of there, getting into my truck, Riley muttering to the customer who's outside weeding his lawn that we've got an emergency. We're thirty minutes from the village when I'm pulling my phone out to try to find out what's up. My phone starts ringing.

Jase. I answer on speaker.

"Hey! What is it?"

"Ty got shot. He's okay, he shifted and that spit the bullet out, he's fully healed, but your woman is a little shook. She

thought he wasn't gonna make it. She did good though. She's good under pressure."

"Shot by who?" Riley demands.

"Grey and I split. I ran back to check on Ty at the clinic and he's chasin' her down. She-shifter. We were runnin' late. Tyson messaged last night and suggested we meet at nine today, knowin' we'd miss you two since you had that job. He wanted to sleep late with his mate."

And with the code orange being demoted back to a code yellow what with Rick Bullock being out of the picture and us understanding last night that our health scares were connected to the diner, everyone must've let their guards down some.

"We didn't even catch her scent, so I don't know how hard it'll be for Grey to find her, but he's tryin'. Linc's heading out now and I'm gonna go too, wanted you two to know what's goin' on. Joel's hanging back with Ty and the girls at the clinic while Cat runs some extra tests.

"Ty's okay though?" Riley checks.

"He says he's fine, but all the girls are motherin' him."

"We'll head to the clinic. Keep us posted."

"I'm putting a phone holster on my leg before I shift," Jase says. "Amie Macgyvered one for me at the clinic with a sling so I can stay in touch with you guys if I shift back."

"My woman is a smart cookie," I say.

"Talk soon," Jase replies and ends the call.

When we get inside the clinic, Amie rushes into my arms and wraps them around me.

"You okay?" I ask.

She's wearing a pair of Cat's scrubs and has Crocs on her feet.

I look her over.

“My clothes got covered in wolf blood,” she says. “And my pretty suede booties.”

“I heard you did good.”

“I was a wreck. Didn’t know what to do and I was afraid I was gonna lose him. He lost a lot of blood. But the bullet was spit out when he woke up and shifted. My sister screamed her head off at me to save him and I think her shrill flip-out stopped him from going into the white light.” She shrugs.

“But I still heard you did good.”

She gives me a small smile.

Tyson’s sitting on the exam table, looking bored. He looks at me and rolls his eyes as his mother draws blood from his arm.

“I hate shopping for clothes,” Tyson mutters, eyes bouncing between me and Riley. And it seems like a random thing to say. But then he looks at my woman. “But right about now, I’d rather take you shoe shopping to replace the boots I bled on than sit here and keep getting treated like a what do you call it... sewing cushion.”

“Ah fuck!”

We hear and see Gus coming in, seeing the needle and the blood and doing an about-face and leaving.

I chuckle.

Riley and Joel head out behind him.

My eyes move back to Amie.

“You were wrong, though, wildberry.”

“About what?” she asks.

“You said your nurse’s uniform wasn’t sexy. Scrubs totally work for you.”

She rolls her eyes.

I put my mouth to her neck and taste her.

“Not in public, Mason Quinn,” she mutters.

“Whenever and wherever your mate wants, Amelia Quinn,” I return.

She looks into my eyes and hers flare darker blue. She likes that I just called her that.

“You wanna get married?” I ask.

“We’re already married,” she swats my arm.

“You don’t need a human wedding?”

“Nope. I have everything I need,” she says.

I kiss her.

“Get a room, you two,” Ivy teases.

“Let’s head home. If we hurry, we might be able to catch the sunset from the back deck,” Amie suggests.

“Good idea,” I say. But then I feel something in the air.

Jase is coming in, Riley and Gus behind him. “Grey’s got her,” Jase says. “He’s takin’ her to a cell. He’s gonna interrogate her.”

We all breathe out relief.

“She’s a waitress from the diner in Drowsy Hollow,” Riley adds.

“She’s the one that served me when I went in before I had problems,” Gus confirms. “Nametag says *Lily*. But she didn’t smell like a she-wolf. And that might not be her real name.”

Now there’s even more relief sweeping through the room. Because we don’t yet know why she shot Tyson, but clearly, she’s who’s been poisoning our pack members. And she’s obviously been disguising her scent.

“We’ll have to catch that sunset tomorrow, baby,” I mutter to Amie.

Me and Amie, Tyson and Ivy, Riley and Jase are almost to the town hall. Joel left with Gus earlier. We’re all on foot as it’s a

nice night and only a couple blocks. After we check in with Grey, we're all going to Roxy's for a drink.

Rye stops dead. As he does this, I spot Linc, Grey, and Joel standing outside in a huddle. Suddenly, I catch a familiar scent. And so does Tyson by the way he turns to the side. We both turn our gazes to Riley who is standing still. Eerily still.

I smell river and Riley's pain. Minus the river.

Parked in front of the gas station is the VW hippie bus.

And now Riley sprints in that direction.

She's here.

There's also some commotion in front of the town hall.

Grey rushes inside. Joel jogs over with shock on his face.

"That's Riley's mate," Tyson gestures across the street.

"Yeah," Joel says. And then he jerks his chin back toward the town hall. "Grey just said he smelled *his* mate."

"His mate? Where?" I ask.

He shakes his head looking perplexed. "He's been with her over an hour, just left her alone in that cell. She wouldn't talk, wouldn't say a word. She's done somethin' to disguise her scent, too, so don't know how he knows, but we came outside, plannin' to meet up with all of you to debrief and Grey spotted that VW pull in over there and was about to call over to Riley. But then we saw you comin' and as soon as Rye ran for her, Grey's body locked up tight and it was a weird, delayed reaction, 'cuz like I said... he was with her for the last hour. But he said, 'I smell my mate, too. And she's downstairs. She smells like gun powder'."

Epilogue

Amelia

“So, things are complicated, then.”

“Yeah. Understatement,” Mason replies. “Greyson’s takin’ her home now. She’s refusing to talk about why she’s tryin’ to hurt our pack. But as soon as he saw Riley run for Erica’s van, it came over him.”

And it’s definitely complicated. The guys got into a mini argument over whether or not Greyson should take her out of that holding cell. She’s clearly dangerous. He said he’d stay in there with her before he left without her. But Tyson and Mason both agreed and talked the other guys around to it, Mason stating that until they had mates of their own they wouldn’t fully get where Grey was at and that if they stopped him from taking her out of there, they’re interfering in the cardinal rule of getting between an alpha and his mate.

And we were all witnesses to some ugliness that happened when Riley ripped the door of that camper van open. The sound of Riley shouting. The sound of things crashing in there. And then things went quiet.

And when it went quiet, Mason and Ty took us out of there.

The phone just rang, and it was Lincoln, telling us that Riley just left. He left her there! And she’s still parked.

“What does that all mean?” I ask.

“They’ll work it out,” Mason tells me.

“How do you know?” I ask.

“Ty and Ivy worked it out. You and me did, too. Love conquers all.”

“But that can’t happen if they’re not in the same place.”

“God, you smell strange,” he says, again, taking a whiff of my throat.

“Gee thanks,” I mutter. “You sure know how to make a girl feel good.” I roll my eyes and sniff my pits.

“No, not bad... you don’t smell remotely bad. You smell like you’re mine. It’s just... I don’t know...” He inhales me at my hair. Then he inhales at my throat before his nose moves down to my chest.

“Ooh. Now we’re getting somewhere,” I quip.

Suddenly, Mason is squatting and running his nose down my torso.

I laugh.

And then I’m lifted by my hips and set on the kitchen counter.

He rises to standing and looks into my eyes.

He’s got a really weird look on his face.

“Wildberry,” he says softly.

“Hm?” I ask. My belly growls. “God, I’m starving.”

“Baby,” he says, and wraps his arms around me.

“What?” I whisper, smiling. He’s acting so odd.

He looks at me with a gentle expression. “I think you’re pregnant. I think I’m smelling our baby inside you.”

I stare at him for an eternity.

“No,” I finally whisper.

“It’d have to be early. Like... real early obviously, but I’m pretty sure that’s what it is.”

My throat clogs up. He’s got to be wrong. There’s no way. No way in the world...

God, this isn’t fair. This isn’t funny. I don’t think he’s trying to be funny. I think he’s wrong and it hurts because it just... hurts.

His mouth touches mine. “I think so, baby. Let’s call Cat. Let’s find out if we can get a test.”

“Mason, please stop this. This hurts too much.” I turn away from him.

“Amelia,” he says sternly. “Trust me. I know what I’m talking about.” He taps his nose. “The first to smell a baby coming is that baby’s father.”

“Maybe we should get a test,” I whisper.

We’re on our way to Drowsy Hollow. Stan’s drug store is open until midnight. Mase phoned Cat and she told him we can use a regular pregnancy test. She said to get an early test but also said hormone levels tend to spike sooner with shifters and those pregnant by shifters (case in point: when Carrie was pregnant with Bailey), so if Mason thinks he can smell it, we should take a test. If it’s negative, we should come see her at the clinic.

I took the phone off him.

“Ivy told you about my disorder though, right?” is how I greeted her.

“She did.”

“So you know this doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well...” Cat stated, “Maybe like with many other women I’ve known who have been claimed by alphas, you were only going to ovulate for your fated mate. You were meant to be his, Amelia, so it stands to reason no one else would get you pregnant. We’re already seeing pregnancies pop up from the strawberry moon’s end. I told you that this morning.”

She did tell me that. She told me that alphas and some betas can smell pregnancy on their mates within just days of conception. But I never thought in a million years...

I’ve been having unprotected sex since I lost my virginity at sixteen. And I’ve never gotten pregnant. The doctor ran tests.

A couple times. And said I have an ovulation disorder. Was I just not ovulating because I hadn't met Mason yet?

Don't hope, Amie. Don't let yourself hope.

Mason is in the bathroom with me. We're sitting on the floor, leaning against the cabinet. The test is on top of the vanity between the two raised sinks and there's a timer on my phone counting down.

I could swear my boobs are suddenly feeling heavy. But it could all be in my head.

My nerves feel absolutely shot.

Is this really happening? Is it really possible that I'm getting everything I want?

I can't wrap my brain around it.

I look into Mason's eyes. They're so soft, so full of love as he strokes my hand, holding it on his thigh.

"If this isn't... if it isn't..."

"It is," he whispers.

I squeeze his hand. "If it isn't, Ivy said she'd help. She'd give us an egg if I can carry it or carry it if I have eggs and can't carry it. Or do both if I can't."

"Your sister is a gem," he says, kissing my hand. "But this is it. You're carrying my baby, wildberry. And it's a boy."

I shake my head. "Don't get your hopes up about this. What I'm saying though is maybe we can get our hopes up for a solution if this isn't it."

"This is it, Amelia."

"Besides," I say, "It could be a girl. If it's happening, I mean. Which it probably isn't. But if it is... it could be a girl."

"You're so stubborn, my beautiful mate."

"You're stubborn too!" I snap.

And then my timer goes off.

Phew. Holy shit. It's time to look.

He reaches up to grab it. I squeeze his hand hard. And I close my eyes tight.

"I can't look. I'm too scared."

"Look, baby. Look," he says softly. So softly, that I already know before I look what it's going to say. His words are oozing with happiness.

I open my eyes and see a plus sign. And a gorgeous smile on my mate's face.

Two days after I get my positive pregnancy test, Ivy gets hers, too!

The End

(For now.)

Riley's book will be the next shifter book in this series! It'll be called Wicked.

Sign up for DD's newsletter to be notified when it releases.

<http://ddprince.com/newsletter-signup/>.

If you're on Facebook, join DD's Chickadees, (<http://facebook.com/groups/ddprincefangroup>) a closed private fan group, for teasers, the latest book news, sales, freebies, giveaways, and shenanigans.

End of Book Notes:

I hope you enjoyed Twisted!

Thanks for the love when Wild came out. It's because of that love that I toiled over this book for so many months. LOL. BIG pressure put on myself (by myself, haha) to continue a series when book one was so well-received and when that plot was so unique.

I knew this book would be a challenge. I knew that though it'd be different from book one, it would give me an opportunity to continue building a world I'd already fallen in love with. I'm so happy to finally have this story to you.

I hope you enjoyed Twisted. I loved getting to know more of the characters in the pack and have just scratched the surface so far. I have plans for stories for all seven council alphas.

Riley is next on the list and his cover is designed and the book has been listed on Goodreads. I don't know when I'll write it yet. I have some other series that readers are waiting for books for, but I don't think I can wait too long before I'm back in Arcana Falls. I mean, I know I left you hanging about Riley and about Grey, but I left myself hanging, too! HAHA.

After Riley, you'll eventually get books for Greyson, Jason, Lincoln, and Joel.

Huge, sincere thanks to my family, my beta and street team, DD's Chickadees, Hayley Rice, and the rest of my readers for helping me live my dream. Special thanks to Adriana and Peggy (You know why!).

If you enjoyed this book, a review is a huge help to me.

And if you liked it, and haven't read my work before now, I write romance with alpha males in several sub-genres.

I recommend my Beautiful Biker Series, a biker romance series that's got laughs, feels, a bit of darkness, and smokin'

hot alpha biker book boyfriends with great secondary characters.

If you're in the mood for more paranormal, you might want to check out my Nectar Trilogy (dark and taboo) as well as my Hollow Duet where you'll meet Erica Young and gain a little bit of insight about her as well as learn the story of Holden Holloway and Isabella Krane. Erica isn't one of the main characters, but she's important to the story, and there is a Riley spotting, though he isn't named, you'll know it's him, but that part takes place about six months after the end of this timeline, so you'll see them together but of course you won't know how they got that way.

Note: The Hollow Duet has a much darker feel than this book. Book one is an erotic thriller. Book 2 is an erotic horror. I wrote it as a twisted Headless Horseman retelling for an anthology.

My most popular series so far is my dark mafia series, The Dominator Series and that one has trigger warnings for some dark subject matter. It's an arranged marriage story with an antihero. Non/dub-con triggers.

For something light and fun, there's also my Hot Alpha Alien Husbands books with a Mars Needs Women trope (my aliens look like regular guys, but they're seven feet tall and have SERIOUS stamina).

I've also got Alphahole, a smokin' hot enemies-to-lovers roommate romance with sexual tension up the wazoo as well as some books for side characters and book three in that series, Bad Girl, is my own personal favourite of that series.

And recently, I released The Devious Games Duet (Kill Game and Dirty Stack) about the delicious Killian Coulter. That's a twisty, slow burn, psychological suspense with a debt flesh payment and a girl whose life is forever altered by a wager between two men.

I'm on social media and interact almost daily in my Facebook reader group. I'd love for you to join:

<http://facebook.com/groups/ddprincefangroup>

Fun, teasers, book chats, giveaways, the insider scoop, ARC/Beta reading opportunities, and most of all... shenanigans!

I've also got a free newsletter that goes out with new release info, sales, and freebies and I've got plans to cook up some exclusive content, so I hope you'll join-

<http://ddprince.com/newsletter-signup/>

DD Prince's Books:

This list might have been updated since publishing so check my website ddprince.com for the latest information.

Alphahole, an enemies-to-lovers contemporary and roommates romance. Yes. It's all those things. And more. Aiden Carmichael is absolutely infuriating. You're going to fucking love him.

MC Romance: Romantic suspense with comedy, angst, steamy scenes, and a little bit of gritty darkness.

This alpha-male is not an alpha-hole. You're going to FLOVE Deacon Valentine.

Detour (Beautiful Biker 1) Deacon & Ella

Joyride (Beautiful Biker 2) Rider & Jenna

Rider starts out as a little bit of an alpha-hole. Jenna resists, but resistance is futile when a Valentine brother has you in his sights.

Scenic Route (Beautiful Biker 3) Spencer & Pippa

Crossroads (Beautiful Biker 4) Fork & Jojo.

LOTS more biker books coming.

Dark Mafia Romance: dark romance with a debt flesh payment plot.

This one DD's most popular book, but it is dark. Non-consensual / rough sex. Tommy Ferrano is an anti-hero you

may love to hate and hate to love.

The Dominator

The Dominator 2. Truth or Dare

Sex slave rescue romance with dark themes. Dario Ferrano's story.

The Dominator 3. Unbound

More Tommy, More Dare; More Domination!

Saved

Spin off Dark Romance (maybe DD's darkest romance book yet). Lex isn't the hero in this story. Holly is.

TNT – 4th Anniversary Novella – Timeline is book 1.5 but best experienced after book 3.

The Devious Games Duet – Kill Game and Dirty Stack (connected to the Dominator series but can be read as standalone).

Nectar Trilogy (Includes Nectar, Ambrosia, and Essence)

Dark Paranormal Romance: Vampire dark romance / kidnapping. Capture romance with dark and taboo elements.

Dirty / fun / insta-love alien romance

Hot Alpha Alien Husbands: Book 1 – Daxx and Jetta

Hot Alpha Alien Husbands: Book 2 – Zane and Tanya

Book 3 coming!

The Hollow Duet: (Hollow and Holden)

A dark and erotic fairytale retelling. Erotic thriller/horror.

There's a quick list of all currently available books with universal links at http://ddprince.com/about-dd_prince/quick-info-buy-links-for-all-dd-prince-books/ .

Please note: book retailers and subscription program participation may change without notice.

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