



*When girl meets geek,
the fur's gonna fly!*

bleacke
Moments

Bleacke Shifters 8

lesli richardson

CONTENTS

[When you're a Bleackie, every moment is a Bleackie moment...](#)

[Also By the Author](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[About the Bleacke Shifters Series](#)

[Other Titles](#)

[About the Author](#)

BLEACKE MOMENTS

BLEACKE SHIFTERS

BOOK 8

LESLI RICHARDSON

©2023, LESLI RICHARDSON

WHEN YOU'RE A BLEACKE, EVERY MOMENT IS A BLEACKE MOMENT...

Dewi Bleacke is poised to become an aunt several times over, in addition to her own impending first-time motherhood. Between worrying about her job as Head Enforcer for the Targhee Pack, and her responsibilities as the head of the expanded pack council, she's feeling stretched a little...thin.

Metaphorically, that is.

Feels like she's about to give birth to a baby elephant, not a wolf.

Plus, there's still a psychotic corgi shifter on the run.

And a Mexican drug cartel looking for revenge.

Oh, and there might be a lone-wolf trying to sell out shifters.

Dewi knows one thing for certain—their lives are about to change forever.

Whether they're all alive on the other side remains to be seen. Easy peasy.

Bleacke Moments

Bleacke Shifters Book 8

Copyright © August 2023, by Lesli Richardson

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Excluding short, selected passages quoted for review or educational purposes, this work may not be reproduced, transmitted, or illegally distributed in any form or by any means currently available or available in the future, including but not limited to electronic, photographic, audio, and video reproduction, in whole or in part, for free or for sale, without express written permission from the publisher and author.

AI RESTRICTION: The author expressly prohibits any entity from using any part of this publication, including text and graphics, for purposes of training artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text or graphics, including without limitation technologies that are capable of generating works in the same style or genre as this publication.

The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

Unauthorized duplication and distribution of this book to others infringes the rights of the legal copyright holder and is strictly forbidden and a violation of international copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real people, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This is my livelihood. PLEASE do NOT illegally reproduce and distribute this book. When people buy my books, it pays my bills. Please don't steal from me. If you want me to keep bringing you stories, I need to be able to pay my bills, so I ask that you please legally obtain my books. If you want to give the e-book file version to someone, please purchase and gift it from a legal retailer. The links are on my website. Thank you.

www.LesliRichardson.com

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Sign up for my author newsletter, where I post info about both my Lesli Richardson and Tymber Dalton pen names, and never miss a new release or update:

<https://tymberdalton.com/newsletter/>

Writing as Lesli Richardson:

The Bleacke Shifter Series:

- 1) *Bleacke's Geek*
- 2) *Geek Chic*
- 3) *A Bleacke Wind*
- 4) *Bleacke Spirit*
- 5) *A Bleacke Christmas*
- 6) *Geek-Speak*
- 7) *Bleacke Expectations*
- 8) *Bleacke Moments*

A Bleacke Meeting: A Bleacke Shifters Story.

The Great Turning Series:

- 1) *The Great Turning*
- 2) *The Great Turning: Into the Turn*
- 3) *The Great Turning: Future Ages*

Governor Trilogy:

- 1) *Governor*
- 2) *Lieutenant*
- 3) *Chief*
- 4) *Yes, Governor*
- 5) *Pet*

Determination Trilogy:

(Set in the world of the Governor Trilogy.)

- 1) *Dignity*
- 2) *Diligence*
- 3) *Desire*

Devastation Trilogy:

(Set in the world of the Governor Trilogy.)

- 1) *Dirge*
- 2) *Solace*
- 3) *Release*

Inequitable Trilogy:

(Set in the world of the Governor Trilogy.)

- 1) *Indiscretion*
- 2) *Innocent*

3) *Incisive*

Devout Trilogy:

(Set in the world of the Governor Trilogy.)

1) *Sacred*

2) *Profane*

3) *Penance*

Maxim Colonies:

1) *Jailmates*

2) *Farborn*

3) *Saudade*

- *Of Boardwalks and Bison*
- *Cross Country Chaos*
- *Poly*
- *Her Vampire Obsession* (Midnight Doms Series)
- *“His Vampire Morsel”* (*All Souls’ Night: A Midnight Doms Anthology*)
- *How Many Times Do I Have to Say I’m Sorry?* (Maudlin Falls 1)
- *Fierce Radiance* (Space Confederation 1)
- *Acquainted With the Night*
- *Whip Me, Beat Me, Make Me Write Hot Sex* (non-fiction)
- *Blow Sh*t Up!* (non-fiction)

[Click Here to Check Out My Coming Soon Page!](#)

[Click Here For All My Tymber Dalton Titles!](#)

Lesli Richardson is better known by her more prolific *USA Today* Bestselling Author Tymber Dalton pen name. Please visit her website for more info on all her titles under both her pen names, including full book and series listings, trivia, character information, and more.

<http://www.tymberdalton.com>

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For starters, I apologize for free-range typos that made it into this text. This book has been a long time coming, went sideways on me, ended up getting split into three books, and in general, to use a technical writing term, it fucked me up the ass with a sandpaper dildo.

But, it's done. Yay!

This book takes place immediately following the events of *Bleacke Expectations* (Bleacke Shifters 7). It is strongly recommended the books in the Bleacke Shifters series be read in order:

- 1) *Bleacke's Geek*
- 2) *Geek Chic*
- 3) *A Bleacke Wind*
- 4) *Bleacke Spirit*
- 5) *A Bleacke Christmas*
- 6) *Geek-Speak*
- 7) *Bleacke Expectations*
- 8) *Bleacke Moments*

Also, there is a standalone story, *A Bleacke Meeting*, that focuses on Aaron, one of Dewi's Enforcers, and introduces the events that lead up to Duncan meeting Tully. It can be read independently of the other books in the series, although chronologically it takes place right before the earlier events in *Bleacke Moments*.

There will be more books in this series coming soon!
[Please visit the series page on my website for the most up-to-date information.](#)

Note: Aisling is commonly pronounced “Ash-ling.”

DEDICATION

For My Viking, Russ, who heard a lot about the whole Bleacke Shifters series but didn't live to see this book published. Rest in Paradise, baby. Miss you, and sweet dreams.

Also for my Bard, who knows why.

And a hearty shout-out to my readers who've been waiting for this installment in the Bleacke Shifters series! Thank you for embracing Dewi and her ragtag pack throughout all these years.

CHAPTER ONE

KEN

KEN STOOD in the kitchen next to the fridge, silent and frozen in place, watching, praying he wasn't noticed.

When cornered in a room with one of the most terrifying predators on the face of the planet, freezing and praying not to be noticed was usually the wisest choice.

Especially when she was one's wife.

And a very, *very* pregnant wolf shifter, a Prime Alpha wolf, as well as Head Enforcer for their pack.

Dewi currently wore one of Ken's T-shirts stretched tight over her swelling belly, and a pair of oversized PJ pants slung low on her hips, under her baby bulge. She was barefoot and stray strands of long, brown hair freely floated around her face, escapees from the haphazard and unintentionally messy bun twisted low on the back of her head and held in place with a slightly chewed ball-point pen.

Dewi waddled over to the coffee maker—the larger one with a carafe, not their single-serving pod machine—that'd they'd started keeping full for her. There, she picked up the full glass carafe from where it sat on the warming plate. Then, while still holding the carafe of hot coffee, she rummaged around in the pantry and retrieved a box from its depths.

Leaving the pantry door standing wide open, she shuffled over to the center island and set the box there, grabbing a large mixing bowl from the sink drainer, where Ken had literally just left it minutes ago after hand-washing it.

Still holding the full carafe of hot coffee, Dewi one-handedly dug her fingers into the top of the box, tore it open, and shook out the bag holding its contents.

Yellow cake mix.

Which normally Badger would have balked at buying, preferring to cook from scratch, but one never denies a pregnant Prime Alpha wolf shifter Enforcer with several dozen kills under her belt any damn thing she wants.

Especially when she scribbles it in ALL CAPS on the shopping list and underlines it several times.

In red marker.

With her teeth she ripped the corner of the cake mix bag open, spilling a little on the counter and down the front of her shirt but dumping most of it into the bowl.

Into which she then poured the entire carafe's contents, finally setting it in the sink.

She pinched a freshly washed wooden spoon out of the sink drainer and that's when Badger walked into the kitchen and pulled up short just as Dewi shoveled a heaping spoonful of the mixture into her mouth without even stirring it first.

“What the feckin' hell are ye eatin, Dew?”

She stared at him for a moment, not chewing or swallowing, her cheeks filled with the mix. “Food,” she mumbled, a puff of dry cake mix billowing from her mouth.

Badger rolled his eyes and turned to Ken. “And ye just let her do it?”

“The *fuck*, Badger!” Ken pointed at Dewi. “*Let* her? You *honestly* think I'm saying a damned thing to her about what she eats then you haven't been paying attention the past two weeks.”

Ken believed *ravenous Tasmanian Devil* would possibly come close to describing Dewi's current mood. She glared at Ken but didn't say anything as she finally chewed and then swallowed her mouthful of coffee-soaked cake mix. She scooped up the mixing bowl into the crook of her left arm,

propped on her rounded belly, and started mixing it, glowering at both of them before stalking out of the kitchen with the wooden spoon on its way back to her mouth.

Slowly shaking his head, Badger walked over to the counter. “I’d wondered why the cake mix was disappearin’ so fast without any cakes bein’ baked.” Deeper in the house, they heard the office door slam shut.

Ken finally dared to walk over to the sink and grabbed the sponge to wipe down the counter. “Yeah, well, that’s her second bowlful of the morning. I’d just finished washing the bowl and spoon from earlier.”

“Ye need to talk her into healthier eating choices.”

“And when will you be ordering me my stainless-steel cup, huh?” Ken shot back. He tossed the bag and cake mix box into the garbage. “You want to criticize her? Be my guest. Me? I’d like to be able to sleep next to her without fearing for my life.”

Badger’s scowl softened. “She loves ye, lad. Yer her mate, the love of her life. She’d never hurt ye. It’s just her hormones makin’ her tetchy.” He turned. “Where the hell’s the coffee? I just set a fresh pot to brew ten minutes ago.”

Ken now spotted the empty mug in Badger’s hand and he pointed to the carafe in the sink. “She dumped it all into the bowl. That’s her latest craving.”

They both froze when they heard her office door open. Seconds later, Dewi stalked back into the kitchen, the mixing bowl still cradled in her arm. Silently glaring at them, she wrenched the fridge open and grabbed a can of whipped cream out of it. Kicking the door closed with a foot, she used her thumb to pop the top off the whipped cream and sent it flying, shook the can, and tipped back her head, squirting a large dollop of it into her mouth.

Shooting them a defiant glare, she swallowed and then departed, the can of whipped cream still in her hand, slamming her office door shut behind her.

Only then did they breathe easily once more.

While Ken grabbed the discarded whipped cream cap, Badger walked over to the coffee maker and removed the basket holding the grounds. “Well, at least she’s not *pickles-and-ice-creaming* us.”

“Oh, yeah, that reminds me,” Ken said. “Please add *bread and butter pickles* to the grocery list. She polished those off earlier this morning during her pre-dawn snack attack.”

“Bloody hell, that was a brand new jar!”

“And we’re out of cheese slices. Apparently she’s using the cheese instead of bread to make pickle sandwiches.”

Badger reached for the notepad holding the shopping list and added the items.

“I’d suggest getting three of the large family packs of sliced cheese from now on instead of just one,” Ken added. “And larger jars of pickles. Or more of them.”

“I don’t think they sell larger jars.”

“Then *buy. More.*”

Badger snorted. “At this rate I’ll need to buy out a whole warehouse store.”



KEN LEFT Badger in the kitchen and returned upstairs to their bedroom.

With everything currently going on, Ken wasn’t too proud to admit he couldn’t summon the courage, much less the will, to confront Dewi about her dietary selections. He’d spoken privately to her doctor the week before and he insisted that as long as Dewi was healthy, and their baby was thriving, and she wasn’t consuming anything like cocaine cupcakes or meth macaroons, then she could eat whatever she damned well pleased.

If that meant coffee and cake batter right out of the bowl? Or “sandwiches” made of cheese slices and pickles? Or mouthfuls of whipped cream?

Or entire sticks of salted butter?

Then Ken *damned* sure wasn't going to say a word to her about it, other than to ask if she wanted him to go to the store for her to buy more.

Especially since he knew the ice was extra thin under him after confessing to her last night that he'd asked Peyton to recall her to Idaho for a couple of weeks because Ken was terrified for her safety.

She'd been increasingly clumsy, including tripping and smacking her head against the bathroom counter, which had completely freaked him out.

And Peyton had done it for Ken, taken the burst of her wrath for him, but Ken had to confess the truth to her when she'd started ranting about it.

Now... In the light of day, Ken was wondering if maybe he had overreacted a little.

Ken was gathering clothes to do a load of laundry when he heard a soft tap on the open bedroom door.

He turned and spotted Duncan standing there, leaning against the jamb and wearing a smirk.

"Yeah?" Ken asked.

"You are handling this far better than Badger."

Ken knew exactly what he meant. "I'm not about to get between her and food. Do I *look* stupid? I'm already on her shit-list for going behind her back and calling Peyton."

The older shifter slid his hands deep into the pockets of his khaki cargo shorts. Dewi's maternal grandfather looked more like a man close to retirement age than a powerful Prime Alpha wolf shifter over 445 years old. "Louisa craved pie crusts."

"Raw?"

"Baked. Not filled, just baked crusts. From a specific recipe one of her cousins had given to her. And for three of the

girls, she craved hot peppers dipped in peanut butter. Then there was her raw salmon phase.”

“Sushi? I didn’t think that was good for pregnant women.”

“No, not sushi. Whole, raw salmon. I felt like one of those handlers of wild animals, tossing them to her so I didn’t lose fingers.” He mimed it, making Ken smile. “I had all the butchers and fishmongers from the pack compound all the way into Spokane on retainer to keep me well-stocked. Paid one of my cousins to drive to Spokane and back nearly every day to resupply us.”

Ken laughed and sat on the end of their bed. “You’re saying I should consider myself lucky?”

“I’m saying that I think you’re doing an amazing job as her mate, her husband, and as a father-to-be. I know this is stressful, but you’re handling it well.”

“I don’t feel like I am. I’m a wreck.”

“Son, I’d be worried about you if you weren’t.”

Other than Badger, Duncan Lister was the closest thing Ken’d had to a father since his own had died when he was a kid.

Everyone had thought the old shifter died nearly fifty years prior, suspected of killing himself after his mate—Dewi’s maternal grandmother—died in a logging truck accident.

Until Ken and Nami discovered the former pack Alpha, shifted and practically feral, living in the Idaho woods. Duncan had saved them from the Mexican drug cartel members hunting them.

Duncan had missed the birth of Dewi, and other grand- and great-grandchildren...and the vicious murders of Dewi’s parents.

But he was here now, and Ken had never been so glad for the Prime Alpha’s soothing presence.

Ken dropped his voice. “Promise to tell me if you think I’m screwing up.”

Duncan stepped inside the bedroom and gently nudged the door shut with his foot. “I think you’re doing an amazing job, Ken. In all areas. I know you’re terrified. The truth is, so was I, so was Charles, so is every new father. Unless he’s some sort of psychopath. Anyone who tells you that the birth of their children, especially the first one, doesn’t fill them with fear is either lying or extremely dangerous. Or delusional. It doesn’t matter if you have an only child or a dozen or more pups—it’s normal and natural to feel that way.”

“You’re not lying to me or Priming me now, are you?”

“I respect you too much to do that to you. About this, anyway.” The playful gleam in the shifter’s eyes finally relaxed Ken.

“If she’s like this now, I might be begging you to Prime me closer to her due date.”

Duncan snorted, sounding every bit like the lethal wolf he was. “Do you honestly think I’m going to give you the easy way out, son?”

CHAPTER TWO

DEWI

DEWI TRIED to focus on her laptop screen, on the report awaiting her response, all while fighting the urge to grab the laptop and heave it into the nearest wall.

Or rather, heave it *through* the wall.

How am I supposed to get any fricking work done feeling like this?

Her moods now revolved around easily enraged, exhausted, hungry, horny, and having to pee.

Or sound asleep. As in naps, which wasn't exactly an activity she'd partaken of for most of her life, unless it followed sex.

Now?

If she sat in one place too long and closed her eyes, she could easily nod off.

Which the doctor assured her was completely normal and nothing more than her hormones playing a number on her. To think of it in terms of a human's experience multiplied by ten.

Especially since she was a Prime Alpha, which was, literally, unheard of. Even female Alphas were rare. Dewi would be expanding the knowledge of shifter biology in this way.

Terrific. I'm a science experiment.

She sat back, grabbed the bowl, and shoveled another spoonful of the coffeefied cake batter into her mouth.

Actually, the doctor—who'd promised not to tell anyone else this as long as Dewi managed it on her own—was worried she wasn't gaining *enough* weight. That her normally fast metabolism had kicked into overdrive thanks to her pregnancy hormones. A common issue with "normal" wolf shifter women but one the doctor guessed was accelerated by her Prime Alpha situation.

And since she was the only known Prime Alpha female, making her obviously the very first known pregnant Prime Alpha female, there were no baselines.

Dewi *was* the baseline.

Hence why he encouraged her to pursue any dietary craving that struck her fancy as long as she was getting calories and it wasn't harmful, like alcohol or drugs.

Or dirt.

Hence the combination of coffee and cake batter.

Two birds, one stone. Technically three, because the coffee helped keep her awake.

Ken was already freaked out enough about her pregnancy and his impending fatherhood for her to dump this on him, too.

And, truth be told, she was having trouble not snapping at everyone more than she already was. If Ken and Badger started hovering around her while trying to get her to eat more, she'd be sorely tempted to take heads off, loved ones or not.

Dewi's free hand settled over her baby bump, which felt more like a mountain already.

It's only March. How horrible am I going to be by July? If you want to come early, I won't complain, as long as you're healthy.

A Summer Solstice baby would be kind of cool. Also, according to the doctor, it wasn't uncommon for shifter babies to be born early without any issues, because their development was frequently accelerated. In fact, it was common for shifter babies to be born three or more weeks early with zero problems. He'd experienced several cases where the babies

came six weeks early and they were in all ways completely healthy, as if they'd gestated to their full forty-week term. Nonshifter babies born to shifters sometimes came earlier with no issues, while nonshifting babies born to nonshifters usually followed normal human patterns.

While the timing of and circumstances surrounding her pregnancy weren't anticipated, Dewi would be lying if she said she wasn't looking forward to becoming a mom.

Ideally, she would have held off longer. This hadn't been in her plan. Beck's mate, Nami, was due a few weeks before Dewi. And both of Dewi's sisters-in-law, Asia and Gillian, were also due in July.

Thank you, post-Muster Madness baby fever.

Her current situation was due to her and Ken stupidly not considering sexual logistics during some frantic, welcome-home nookie rather than succumbing to post-Muster Madness.

Not helping Dewi's mood was the fact that Peyton wanted her and Ken and Duncan back in Idaho this weekend for an extended stay of indeterminate length because Ken had asked her older brother to recall her.

All because Ken had freaked out about her clumsy spells. He'd admitted that to her the other night after she got off the phone with Peyton and, admittedly, threw what amounted to a temper tantrum about her brother's orders to return to Idaho.

Which prompted her mate to come clean and admit he'd asked Peyton to issue the edict.

I've got to have this out with Peyton.

Yes, she could see where Ken was coming from. But she had absolutely no intention of spending more than a few days in Idaho. Not when Tamsin would be giving birth soon. The corgi shifter their pack was providing protective sanctuary to was herself due in a few weeks.

The last thing Dewi wanted was for her and Da—also a Prime—to be fucking off in Idaho doing family shit and

unable to help protect Tamsin. The corgi shifter had been through enough already.

Not to mention Tamsin needed to be surrounded by friendly, trusted faces at this most physically and emotionally vulnerable time of her life. And since Dewi was a Prime, she felt she should be available to be present for the birth of Tamsin's baby, so she could help Tamsin through the process. Sure, Badger was a Prime, as were two other enforcers now in Dewi's region, but even Dewi didn't fail to recognize a female presence would likely be more welcomed during the birth than a male.

Adding to the "fun," they were in the process of resettling dozens of pack families from Central and South America to the US, many of them in and around the Tampa Bay area.

Let's not forget the two new Enforcers, both of them Prime Alphas, who Dewi needed to get to know.

All of that combined meant this wasn't the absolute worst time for her to be jetting off to Idaho, but it dang sure wasn't in the top 100 best times, either.

Dewi sat back and propped the bowl on her tummy, another spoonful of mix going in her mouth.

Mostly.

She used a finger to swipe at the drop of batter that had dripped onto the T-shirt and licked it clean.

Right now, it felt like she'd been pregnant for several years instead of a few months.

Time's funny like that, isn't it?

There was just too damned much going on right now for her and Da to not have paws on the ground in Florida.

When she heard a knock on the door about an hour later, she didn't look up from her computer. "Yeah."

The door slowly opened and Ken peeked through. "Sorry, honey. Can I bring you anything?"

Fighting the urge to slam the laptop lid, she instead waved him in. “Close the door, please.”

He stepped inside, looking nervous, and now she felt horrible she’d been snapping at him.

“Sit. Please?”

He took one of the chairs in front of the desk.

She sat the bowl of batter on her desk and leaned back in her chair, lacing her fingers together on top of her head. She forced herself to keep her tone soft, gentle.

Not easy in her current mood. “*Please* call Peyton and have another talk with him and tell him not to keep us there longer than a weekend. I won’t Prime you to do it. I won’t order you to do it. But if we show up there with you still feeling wiggled out, he’s not going to listen to a damned word I say because I’m his baby sister. I’m the Head Enforcer with too much on my plate already. I *cannot* be out of pocket in Idaho for that long. Not right now. I understand you’re feeling anxious about everything, but you also have to trust me to know my own body and not infantilize me.” She didn’t want to play that card, reminding him about how controlling his step-father had been to his mother, but it was still in her bag of tricks.

Ken stared at his hands, which lay in his lap. “I’m worried, okay?” he finally said. “About everything. You, this shit with Faegan Lewis, the cartel bullshit—*everything*.”

“Trying to keep me hidden in Idaho won’t solve any of that. It will just—” Someone else knocked on the office door, irritating Dewi. “Yeah?” she called out.

Duncan opened the door, looking grim. “I’m flying to Knoxville. I don’t know when I’ll return. I’ll call Peyton on my way to the airport to update him.”

Dewi slumped in her chair. “Did she pass?”

“Not yet, but soon. Just got off the phone with Aaron. She’s still conscious but it won’t be long now. Days, at the most. I want to stay there until after she passes.”

“Okay. Safe trip, Da. Please send them our love and condolences for what they’re going through.”

He nodded and closed the door behind him.

One of her Enforcers, Aaron, worked out of Charleston. A few weeks earlier, he’d pinged on Lowri Thompson as his mate when her family had summoned him to help them out with what turned out to be a life-or-death issue. Dewi wasn’t entirely sure Da had revealed all the details about the situation to her, but she trusted the Prime Alpha, their former pack Alpha, to be able to handle it on his own and loop her in if or when her attention was needed regarding the matter.

Tied up in all that confusion was “Aunt Tully,” a widow who was a clueless human, but a dear family friend to the Thompsons, and who was dying of cancer.

Da had made it his mission to fly up every few days to visit with her, providing her company and a little respite from her pain with his Prime powers.

Dewi stood and rounded the desk to settle in Ken’s lap, draping her arms around his neck. Neither of them had met Aunt Tully but they both knew from Da’s reactions to the situation that it was taking an emotional toll on him.

Ken nuzzled the top of Dewi’s head, his breath warm across her scalp. “I’ll call Peyton in a couple of hours,” he said, sounding as subdued as Dewi felt. “I’ll ask him to rescind the request.”

She lifted her head, cupping his cheek to kiss him. She also wanted to give a little in return. “Weekend visit, huh? *After* Da gets back. Or even a couple of days in the middle of a week. I mean, this is the perfect reason to delay our trip. Right?”

“Yeah.” He stared into her eyes. “I’m *really* scared, Dewi,” he quietly admitted.

“I know.” She did, too. It pulsed from him through her in waves that nearly made her nauseous.

And it wasn’t even morning sickness. “I need you to learn to trust me, though,” she added.

“I do trust you.”

“No, right now you trust your fear. That’s only worked for you when you *felt* danger. Endquist. The car chase in Idaho. Those were absolutely legit fear reactions. Except you can’t live life letting fear control you. It’ll eat you alive. Threats have always been out there. Always will be. If not them, then something. The things the average human never knows about—and I’m not even talking shifters and stuff—would make most people curl up in a ball and suck their thumbs. There’s *always* going to be a looming ‘what-if’ situation off in the wings that we have to deal with, or at least keep in the front of our mind and monitor.”

“But at least if Peyton and Trent and them are around—”

“They were around when a cartel *literally* attacked our pack compound and nearly killed you and Nami. We had a Muster with something like three times the number of people in the compound than are normally there. That didn’t keep any of us safer.” She gently tapped his chest. “*You* kept you and Nami safe. *You* saved me—and you—from Endquist. That was all you, not me, not Peyton, not Trent. *You*.”

“Well, Duncan helped me and Nami.”

She smiled. “You know what I mean. You did the hard part, getting away from them. And while you don’t think you would have survived the night without him, I think you would have, and we would have found you and got you out of there. But your instincts about approaching Duncan? That pretty much guaranteed your survival. And that was all you because even Nami told me she had no idea he was a shifter.”

He took her hand and kissed it, pressing it against his chest. She felt his pulse racing and knew this fear was older and ran far deeper than their current circumstances.

But Ken had to realize that and speak it, name it, face it. Dewi would do any- and everything for him, but she couldn’t do this for him.

He had to. Only he could.

Surviving a childhood full of fear and grief had locked him into a fixed set of responses he was trying to learn his way out of, and she gave him all due credit for that. No amount of Prime powers on her part could force him to adjust those behavioral and thinking patterns. Not in a healthy way. It would still be there, simmering below the surface and coming out again at the worst possible times.

He didn't speak for several minutes, staring at their hands. Dewi felt him turning things over in his mind, trying to find the words to put to his thoughts and emotions, and she didn't rush him.

"I couldn't save Mom," he finally said. "I should have been there and I wasn't. He killed her because she was going to leave him. And she stayed with him as long as she did because she didn't think she could support me on her own."

Dewi still didn't speak, knowing this was a start for him.

"All those years he browbeat me, and Dave literally beat me. And I couldn't stand up for myself. Even once I was living on my own." He tipped his head back so he could look her in the eyes. "The sum of my life points more toward me being a pussy than a badass."

Dewi smiled. "Hey, cat shifters are pretty damned tough."

He gave her "a look."

"I know what you meant," she added. "But real vaginas are pretty fricking tough, too." She pointed at her stomach. "Case in point, I'll be shooting a baby out of mine in a few months."

That finally earned her a soft snort.

Finally. A breakthrough.

She laid her head on his shoulder with her face pressed against the crook of his neck and deeply inhaled. "Am I concerned? Yeah. It's literally my *job* to be concerned. About *everything*. But I've had more practice than you at filtering out the unimportant and less-important static to focus on the actual signals and direct threats that require my attention. I won't lie to you and say everything's always going to be hunky-dory. I don't know.

“But I want to spend my life living and enjoying it instead of worried about all the things that will probably never happen. I mean, honestly? A meteorite could plunge from the sky, land on the house, and kill us. An airplane could fall on top of us. The Skyway Bridge could collapse under us as we drive somewhere. It’s possible, sure. But is it likely?” She left that hanging in the air.

“No,” Ken softly admitted. “It’s not likely.”

“Exactly. And you did stand up to Dave. I didn’t do that—you did. You beat the crap out of him and I wish like hell I’d been there to see it. Hey, you stood up to *me*. Multiple times now. You stood up to Endquist, a *Prime Alpha*, and in the process defied my direct *Prime Alpha* order. That’s damned impressive.”

He finally smiled. Barely, but it was a start.

She played with his shirt collar. “I know this feels like a lot to deal with all at once. That’s because it is. I’m feeling it, too, but I can’t let it overwhelm me. I’ve had years’ more practice at prioritizing and compartmentalizing this than you have. I promise you, if I felt worried, I would tell you.”

“You brought a drug kingpin home to run through the woodchipper.”

She let herself take a breath to consider her answer. “But it was *safe*. Was it poor judgment? Yes. Because I wasn’t thinking about it in terms of how it would upset you. And I admitted you were right, too. And, from that point on, I have adjusted my thinking so that I take your concerns into consideration. Not to mention, hopefully nothing like that will ever happen again.”

“Can’t we just, I don’t know, *buy* Idaho and kick everyone else out and move only our pack there?”

She laughed. “If only our pack was *that* rich and well-connected. But we’re not. That would be pushing things, even for us.”

CHAPTER THREE

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Dewi was still working in the office when Peyton called her.

“So I just got off the phone with Ken,” he said by way of greeting.

She sat back. “And he told you I didn’t Prime him, right?”

He chuckled. “He did. I also talked to Da earlier.”

“So...are we good?”

“Yeah. You’re off the hook for showing up this weekend. I would like to see you sometime soon, though. Even if just for a weekend.”

She relaxed. “I want that, too. But Tamsin’s due to have her baby in the next few weeks. And Nami. I want to be here for them, and we’ve got all the resettlements to deal with.”

“I get it. He’s really freaked out, isn’t he?”

“Ken? Uh, yeah, ya *think*?”

“Actually, I do want to talk to you about something.”

An unsettled feeling washed through her. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. More an FYI. I’ll be making frequent trips overseas throughout the next couple of months.”

“Searching for Faegan Lewis?”

“Yeah. Among other things.”

She wished they were face-to-face so she could figure out what he wasn't telling her. "Why aren't you sending other Primes?"

"Because I need to be there."

She snagged the nearly empty bowl of cake batter from her desk and sat back in her chair. "You're not letting me go, are you?" She shoved a spoonful in her mouth.

"What do you think?"

She tamped down on the rage washing through her. "This isn't just because I'm pregnant, isn't it?"

"No, it's for several reasons. Dew, I'm *not* risking your safety. I'm also not risking a rogue shifter selling you out and you get captured. We don't have concrete details about that situation. We don't know what or who they know, or what intel they might have passed along already. We don't even know who it is."

"Or if it's happening at all," she said. "For all we know, it might be nothing more than rumors started by Faegan Lewis to do exactly this, keep us acting cautious and not trusting anyone so it gives him more room to escape."

"You don't think I've already considered that possibility? Unfortunately, there's too much cumulative evidence to suggest it's more than a rumor."

"Why do I feel like you're not telling me everything?"

He sighed. "Because I'm not, okay? You don't need to know everything. If you need to know it, you'll know it. For now, it's something I'm dealing with. If it was information you needed to do your job right now I would tell you. There are plenty of items that I never tell you about. Or do you want me to start running every expense item and tax return past you, too?"

"Okay, fine," she muttered. "You don't have to get testy with me."

"I *get* it, Dew, okay? You feel vulnerable and like you're being sidelined. And it doesn't help that your mate is worried.

But I promise you, as your big brother and as Pack Alpha, I *know* how tough you are. I wouldn't have named you Head Enforcer if I didn't have confidence in you. You wouldn't still be Head Enforcer and head of the expanded pack council if I didn't have confidence in you. So stop trying to second-guess and catastrophize everything, huh? Jumping to conclusions isn't an Olympic sport. Although if it were you could win gold."

That finally made her laugh. "Fine."

"Now, we good?" he asked.

"Yeah." Dewi hesitated, then plunged forward. "This is going to sound like an off-the-wall question," she started, "but have you decided on baby names yet?"

"Nice tangent." Peyton chuckled, and even with her eyes closed and him on the other side of a phone connection literally on the opposite end of the country, Dewi knew he was smiling that big-brother smile he reserved only for her. "Not yet. Why?"

"Because I'm still trying to decide and I don't want to name my baby the same thing you are." She already knew what Trent and Asia had settled on for their little girl.

"Why? What were you thinking?"

"I can't decide. But I'm torn between Louisa and Lyssa."

He went quiet for a moment. "If you want to name her Louisa, I think that'd be beautiful. Who's Lyssa?"

"Ken's mom."

"Ah." A pause. "Lyssa Louisa? Or Louisa Lyssa?"

"Think for a moment, bro. Try saying those names out loud together."

"Lou—oh. Gotcha." He chuckled. "Lyssa Louise? Call her LeeLou for short."

Dewi started to object when she thought about it. "That's... That has potential. Let me ponder that."

"And ask your mate, perhaps?"

“Ken genuinely has no preference.” And he didn’t. He’d already told Dewi if he hated a name she came up with that he would speak up, but unless she directly ordered him to pick a name he was fine letting her decide since she was the one literally doing all the work carrying their baby.

The nice thing about her Prime power was that she could tell he meant it.

He was so adorably happy to become a dad that he honestly didn’t give a crap what they named their daughter. Only that she, and Dewi, were both healthy once she was born.

“It really doesn’t matter if her name is the same as someone else’s, Dew. She’ll have a nickname growing up. You can even name her Chelsea after Mom. We’ll know who we’re talking about.”

“Trent and Asia might take umbrage at that. Not to mention Chelsea.” Trent and Asia had named their only daughter and soon-to-be formerly-youngest child after Dewi’s mother. Their eldest son was named after her father.

“Chelsea isn’t exactly an uncommon name, sis. We have several of them in our pack. Most of them older than our Chelsea, because they named their daughters after Mom. Lots of Charleses, too. In the two years after it happened, we had a bunch of kids born with those names. Name your baby whatever *you* want. You don’t even have to name her after someone else, you know. You and Ken pick a name you both agree on and want.”

Her hand came to rest on the swell of her belly. “This sounds stupid, I know, but I hope in some way they’re able to see what’s happening. That they’d be proud of us all.”

“Who? Mom and Dad?”

“Yeah. And Grandma Louisa.”

Peyton had a way of sighing that Dewi knew meant that the still waters few ever saw ripple at the surface were currently concealing violent rip currents at depth. “I don’t know, Dew. We talk about the Goddess but I’m not sure how much I truly believe,” he said. “I do know they would want us

to be happy. Which is why I circle back to you pick a name you're happy with and don't worry about anyone else. You and Ken are the only ones with valid input here."

"And we'll be the ones she hates about her name when she's older?" she snarked.

He laughed. "Well yeah, that, too."

When she got off the phone with Peyton she went in search of Ken and found him upstairs putting away clean laundry.

She slipped her arms around him from behind. "Thank you," she mumbled against his back. "For calling Peyton. I really appreciate it."

His hands came to rest over hers. "I'm still terrified, babe."

It practically radiated off him.

"I know. That's why I appreciate it even more, because I know you're trying because of me."

He turned in her arms, wrapping his around her. "Can you *please* make a point of slowing down? I know that's a foreign concept to you, but maybe if you slow down you'll be less clumsy, and I'll feel less nervous."

"I'll try. How's that?" She looked up into his brown gaze, his love once again washing through her.

He nodded.

He was her perfect mate. Maybe outsiders saw Ken as nothing more than a grazer geek, but he was *her* grazer geek and she loved everything about him.

Even his sometimes restrictively overprotective nature.

"We need open communication," she added. "I will try to slow down but you can't make end-runs around me to Peyton about stuff. I mean, go to Badger or Da if you honestly think I'm not listening to you and ask them to talk to me before you run to Peyton. Please?"

He nodded, smiling. "Deal."

Then he slanted his lips over hers and if she didn't have a ton of work still to do that afternoon she would have tackled him onto the bed.

He wore an adorable smirk when he ended their kiss. "Tackle me, *hmm?*"

She nuzzled her nose against him. "Tonight, definitely. I *can* be a responsible adult when I try, you know."



DEWI WAS BACK in the office when Badger, Beck, and Joaquin returned from an errand to help one of the newly resettled families.

"Looks like Ken and I won't be traveling this weekend after all." She leaned back in her chair. "I talked to Peyton and he saw reason."

"Did you Prime Ken?" Beck snarked.

"No, I didn't Prime Ken," she shot back, resisting the urge to sling the pen in her hand at him. "I asked Ken, *nicely*, to *please* talk to Peyton. And he did. We have too much going on right now for me *and* Da to not be here."

"Well, if you're going to be here this weekend, come to Reggie's birthday party on Sunday," Beck said. "You were all invited anyway."

"Oh! That's right. I forgot about that. Cool!"

"Not just 'cool,'" Badger noted. "That cousin o' Reggie's, the one with the little girl actin' a might feisty and bitey? They'll be there, too. We need to evaluate that situation. Glad I won't be the only Prime there after all."

"Good point," Dewi said. "I don't know if Duncan will be home before then."

"Well, two Primes are better than one," Badger said.

"Besides," Beck added, "We don't know how many of Reggie's relatives we might still need to 'tweak' their

memories with a little Prime bump so they don't ask questions about the timelines of meetings and matings." He hooked a thumb at Joaquin. "Especially him and Malyah, and Da'von and Brianna."

Joaquin looked at him. "What about you and Nami?"

"We're older. It doesn't look as odd with us. It's no secret in that family how overprotective Nami is. That she seemingly let that happen overnight with Malyah and Da'von might raise questions."

"Carl and Mateo and Tamsin going, too?" Dewi asked.

Beck nodded. "Yep. Lu'ana invited the whole kit and caboodle of us. They have a family reunion every year, and this year they're combining it with Reggie's birthday."

"Lucky him," Dewi snarked.

"No, he's okay with it," Joaquin said. "He didn't want a big party for himself. This was the only way he agreed to having one. He's turning thirty. The pressure's off him this way if everyone's there and catching up with each other and keeping his parents busy playing with the grandkids." Joaquin grinned. "He said he won't feel so bad about ducking out early if it's too much because people won't be there specifically for him. Malyah already told him she'd drive him home if so, that way Lu'ana can stay later if she wants."

"Then I guess we have a plan, gentlemen," Dewi said. "Anything else for me?"

"Nope," Beck said.

She waggled her fingers at them, shooing them out. "See you later, then. I have work to do."

Badger held back and waited until Beck and Joaquin had left. "Ye *really* didn't Prime Ken?"

"Why is it so hard to believe I didn't Prime him?"

He smirked, his one blue eye glittering with amusement. "Because I know ye—I *raised* ye."

She held out a hand. "Fine. Then see if I'm lying."

He snorted. “Nah. I can tell ye aren’t. Just can’t believe it, that’s all. What’s Peyton sayin’ then about ye not comin’ out to Idaho?”

She ticked the points off on her fingers. “The resettlements. *More* resettlements. Da’s out of town indefinitely. Tamsin’s due to pop soon. Nami’s not far behind her. I have not one but *two* new Enforcers who I want to closely supervise for a little while.”

Badger’s nose wrinkled. He motioned to her with his hand to continue. “Spill the rest.”

“There’s not a lot *to* spill. Peyton said he’ll be traveling frequently to Europe looking for Faegan Lewis. And remember, this is close knowledge, but there’s also the rumors about that rogue shifter and the possibility he’s shopping shifter info around. Or maybe even teaming up with Faegan.”

Badger grunted. “I know I need to stay here, but part of me wishes I was over there helpin’ hunt that bloody bastard.”

“You and me, both,” she muttered.

“When ye goin’ out, then? To Idaho, I mean.”

“I’ll fit a weekend trip in somewhere before I’m due. I’m hoping maybe I can time it just right when Asia and Gillian deliver, drop in for a weekend, and come home.”

“Imma go start dinner, then.” He arched his undamaged eyebrow at her and pointed at the nearly empty bowl next to her laptop. “Unless ye filled up on cake batter and pickles already?”

She shot him a bird and the sound of his cackles followed him out the door and down the hall.

CHAPTER FOUR

PEYTON

PEYTON DROPPED his cell onto his desk and swiveled his chair around so he could stare out the window at the large, sloping backyard.

A view their father had no doubt taken in countless times over the years.

Maybe even the night he and their mom were murdered, and Dewi nearly died.

I wish I could say fuck it and walk away.

But he couldn't. Not when so many lives counted on him.

The safety of everyone in their pack counted on him.

The livelihood of the pack and those who were dependent upon pack income counted on him.

There were secrets aplenty he wasn't revealing to Dewi.

Like his growing suspicion, echoed by other pack Alphas, that there was at least one traitor in their ranks.

That not all of his trips overseas would involve him searching for Faegan Lewis, because Peyton was actually in discussions with an exclusive and secretive group trying to figure this shit out.

A group that included himself, Trevor Clarke, five other pack Alphas from around the world, the prime minister of a western EU country, and the Indian ambassador to yet another western EU country.

The last two of those individuals who were also shifters and had vested interests in keeping that fact a secret.

Since Trevor wasn't a Prime Alpha, the responsibility fell on Peyton to work his way through the Staffordshire Pack looking for any possible traitors in their midst. Because now that the Staffordshire Pack had pledged themselves to the Targhee Pack, it meant this task fell on Peyton's shoulders.

The visits Peyton made to Staffordshire Pack members with Trevor were, presumably, so he could introduce himself and say hello to everyone in person. A courtesy.

The truth was Peyton needed to speak with people, in person, and use his Prime powers on them to make sure they weren't part of the problem.

At least the few Primes Trevor did have in his pack—all far older men, and close relatives of Trevor's who had no desire to lead packs of their own at this stage in their lives—had proven loyal. Because all of them had been at the top of Peyton's list for his very first visit.

Peyton still had to visit the remainder of the pack, but it was one relief to have that checked off the list.

It also meant those Primes could be trusted by the Alphas of the other packs, and their participation in the hunt for Faegan Lewis wouldn't be shadowed by doubts regarding their loyalties. They could also be counted on to help root out any traitors.

Yet it put them no closer to finding the man or figuring out who the traitor was. While narrowing the possibilities, it was starting to feel like a Sisyphean task.

The latest intel was that the traitor had reached out to organized crime gangs working inside former Soviet countries and with close ties to Russian mafia.

But with some of those same mafia leaders also holding high ranks in the Russian military and FSB, it might as well be the government showing interest in the intel.

The pack Alphas were taking censuses in their packs, looking for members who might have suspiciously

disappeared or dropped off the radar without warning or just cause. Presumably as part of the search for Faegan Lewis, but more to see what they were up to.

Or if they'd been unexpectedly disappeared against their will.

Also, if any of their pack members had suddenly come into suspicious amounts of money without a logical explanation or, likewise, a noticeable lifestyle upgrade.

Another reason Peyton wanted all of their pack moved from South and Central America and relocated to the States and Canada. Not only for their safety but to keep better tabs on them and see if any of them had suddenly become wealthy.

None of the pack Alphas wanted to worry people, or alert the guilty parties. But even more, they didn't want to foster distrust in their packs and have people start turning on one another in a modern-day witch trials situation.

Goddammit, I wish Badger had taken over as pack Alpha.

His father had known Peyton didn't have aspirations to be pack Alpha at this age, if ever. They'd talked about it. Several times.

Peyton had wanted to live, travel, have experiences. Maybe run the Florida operations, or hell, even South America. He hadn't even met Gillian at that point and was still looking forward to exploring the world.

To be fair, their father hadn't intended to be murdered at the ripe old age of 175, either. Their mom had only been 53.

Not much older than Trent was now.

It should have been him in Florida supervising their operations, not Dewi. And not his baby sister forced to step up as Head Enforcer.

Fucking Endquist.

So much useless death, so much grief all because Endquist was pissed off their mother had told him *no*, and the fucker had aspirations of taking over the pack.

Like he wouldn't have been killed inside of a week by someone else in revenge.

Peyton hated sending Dewi away but they could all see her Prime Alpha nature starting to take over, wanting control in a way she was nowhere ready for. Rage, even.

In a way he certainly hadn't felt at her age, and other Primes hadn't reported feeling, but everyone counseled him to take precautions. Preventative measures.

Their family had experienced enough tragedy already.

Badger had been cautioning him over the previous weeks and months, hinting around that a drastic change might be necessary, set up in a way to hopefully persuade Dewi to fight to maintain control of herself.

How Peyton actually cried for one of the few times in his life that night when Gillian laid it all out to him, crying with him, reminding him how it'd nearly destroyed the pack losing their parents the way they had. That to lose Dewi if she lost control and came after him—to be forced to kill her himself—would likely destroy his own sanity, and Trent's.

Or might even destroy Trent's life if he couldn't control himself and he stepped in to help or protect Dewi. Or anyone else who tried to step in to protect Dewi.

Because in a perfect world their father would have taken Dewi in hand early on, the way he had Peyton. But Badger could only do so much despite being a powerful Prime Alpha, because he wasn't her direct blood relation.

And Dewi was a more powerful Prime than even him.

No one knew what the attack had done to Dewi, what imprinted on her impressionable brain as a result.

If only Badger had stepped in to take over the pack. Then he could have raised Dewi himself...

In the end, it worked out, albeit imperfectly but with their lives and relationships intact. Badger and Beck had taught Dewi well, trained self-control into her, and averted a potential tragedy. Only Peyton knew his threat to kill Badger and Beck

if she lost control and challenged him for the pack had been an idle one. He'd hoped her love for both men would provide the extra incentive she needed to master her powers.

And then Dewi met Ken and was now expecting her first pup.

But Peyton couldn't even give her *that* bit of normalcy with this Faegan Lewis bullshit swirling around them.

Dewi had been a miracle, the little girl their mom had always wanted, another baby they'd told her she could never have. He remembered him and Trent getting to hold Dewi not long after her birth, how joyful their parents had felt.

How tiny and frail she'd felt in his arms.

"You boys have to help protect her," their father had cautioned. *"I know she's young enough to be your daughter, but it's even more important you build that bond with her now. The three of you are the future of this pack."*

And then...

And then.

If he closed his eyes too long he knew he'd see the nightmarish images of that horrible scene, hear Dewi's tiny, choked cries.

Everyone talking to him later in the hospital when all he'd wanted to do was sit next to her bassinet and stare at her, will her to live, to survive.

To thrive.

How he'd held her tiny hand all night while pouring every ounce of his Prime powers that he could into her, willing her to be okay, willing her to fight, to live. He'd sensed even then she was an Alpha, but she was a *baby*, barely six months old.

Finally, it was Trent and Badger and Beck, all of them looking haggard, horrible, telling him he had to assume control of the pack immediately, publicly. That they had to take knees to him and name him the pack Alpha before fear replaced the rage currently surging through everyone even as the hunt was underway for the fucker who'd done this.

How, the next morning, he'd numbly let them drive him back to the compound while Aunt Collette and her mate sat with Dewi, promising not to leave her, armed guards also standing watch.

He barely remembered the somber public meeting in the great hall where Trent took over, announced what happened—in case there were people who somehow hadn't already known—and then formally announced he was taking a knee to Peyton and passing control of the pack to him.

How Badger, their father's second, also pledged his support for Peyton and did likewise, as did Beck, and the other enforcers.

Those dark times.

He'd barely wanted to let Dewi out of his arms over the next several weeks, even when they knew the worst was past and she'd survive.

He'd never voiced it, but he wondered if the reason Dewi became a Prime Alpha was all the countless hours he prayed to the Goddess that he'd give Dewi every last ounce of strength in his body if she'd just survive. The grief and rage that had filled him, warring for control. All the nights he sat next to her while she slept in her crib and he held her hand, terrified for her safety.

Maybe it'd worn off on her, somehow, even though that wasn't how it worked. You were born a Prime, or you weren't.

At least, that's what everyone said.

Except there'd never been a known female Prime Alpha before.

Still, Dewi had been the latest in a long, direct line of Prime Alpha males. Their mom had been an Alpha, the only one of Duncan's daughters born an Alpha. Their father's father had been a Prime Alpha.

And Duncan was a Prime, Grandmother Louisa an Alpha.

And Peyton remembered how, the day after Dewi's birth, their father had admitted to him that after Peyton's own

difficult birth he'd sat there, holding him and with a hand on their mom, sending his Prime energy to them both, willing them to survive. And then during Dewi's birth and immediately after.

It was... impossible.

Ridiculous, even.

And yet...

Had first his father, and then him, unwittingly worked together and created one of the most powerful Prime Alphas ever known? The first known Prime Alpha female?

Peyton poured himself a drink and returned to the window to stare out it at their backyard. It wouldn't be long now before their own child was born, a little girl.

Now he understood how his father could, without hesitation, claim he'd readily kill or die for any of them, to protect them, to take out anyone who'd do them harm.

Because Peyton now felt that coursing through his own veins, a nearly desperate, cut-throat need to sweep all the pieces off the board and take complete and utter control.

To stop at nothing to wipe out any and all threats.

To take no prisoners, no matter the cost.

He only hoped if Dewi currently felt that same need that she could also control it.

Because whatever was out there and coming for them... Peyton sensed it literally could end their entire existence as they knew it.

And the only way they would beat it in today's technologically advanced world was to out-think it and remain two steps ahead of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

KEN

KEN HAD RETREATED to their bedroom later that evening while Dewi was still on a video call involving pack mates out in California. Badger had confided in Ken that, in the past, Dewi likely would have already been on a plane and flying out to immediately settle things in person.

Meaning that she was making an attempt not to immediately jump into a situation like that as part of her obscure and frequently inscrutable love language.

That she was *trying*, in other words. Because she wanted Ken to feel comfortable.

Meanwhile, he sat up in bed and read on his tablet because he suspected long stretches of pleasure reading would soon be a thing of the past once the baby arrived, between taking care of her and working.

At least I can take care of her while working.

Which...he didn't mind at all, come to think of it.

He still preferred the idea of being safely tucked in the middle of the Idaho pack compound instead of there in Florida, but Dewi was right. Everything had hit him all at once, a tsunami of life-changing life...changes.

His nervous system was still trying to adapt to everything, in addition to impending new-dad jitters.

Add in Badger, and Duncan, and if none of the three of those Primes were seriously worried beyond the larger-picture,

nebulous stuff they were all rightfully concerned about, then he wouldn't, either.

Or, at least he'd try.

About an hour later, Ken heard Dewi's darkly aggravated mumbles and her heavy footsteps on the stairs as she slowly and no doubt frustratedly stomped up them, giving him just enough time to set his tablet aside before she shoved the bedroom door open, thundered through it, and slammed it behind her.

Then she walked over to their bed and he was certain she would have face-planted next to him if it wasn't for her baby belly. Instead, she sort of flopped down on her side and immediately scooped over to snuggle against him.

He also struggled not to laugh because even in irritated-as-fuck mode she was still adorable.

"You all right, sweetheart?" he asked.

"Yes," she grumbled against his side, her voice muffled. "Except I *reeeally* want a drink and know I can't have one. I mean, I *can*, but I shouldn't."

He changed positions to tuck her against him so she could lay her head on his chest, which was what he knew she wanted. She ended up with a leg draped over him, and an arm. "Fucking twatwaffles," she mumbled against his T-shirt.

Dewi had many moods, and while this was similar to the aggravated venting she frequently engaged in with him, there was a different aspect to it now that she couldn't just wade in and *handle* it.

Frustration.

He nuzzled the top of her head. "Feel like talking about it?"

Another grumble. "There aren't any strangely whackadoodle religious nuts that will shake out of your family tree, are there?"

He laughed. "No. Even if they did they can go screw themselves. What happened?"

She shifted position enough she could speak without mumbling against him. “Long-story-short, Melpomeni Argyros—Mel for short—is a gamma shifter. She turned twenty-seven two weeks ago. While on a belated birthday trip with some of her cousins and sister this past weekend, she met a guy. A clueless human. Mate bond.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Oh, it gets better. This happened at a resort. There was also a wedding happening there. That’s where she stumbled across the guy. Scented him in the lobby on her way to the pool with everyone. So she tracks him down, coaxes him outside alone, and boinks him in the bushes behind the ballroom during the wedding reception of Calvin’s older brother. He’s twenty-two.”

“Calvin’s brother’s twenty-two?”

“Calvin’s twenty-two. No clue how old his brother is. And she didn’t know it was his brother getting married. Anyway, she bit and claimed Calvin, but before she could do anything else, like tell him her name, get his name, much less, ‘*Oh, hi, shifters are real and I am one, ’—*”

“Sounds familiar,” he snarked.

“—his *grandmother* walks outside looking for him and caught them still tucking everything away into non-public-nudity-charges territory.”

“Fuuuuck.”

“Gets better still. Grandma *literally* starts *screaming* at them, grabs Calvin by the *ear*, and *drags* him back into the wedding reception while Mel’s cousins and sister are trying to run interference for her with the mother and father.”

“Calvin’s?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

Ken was trying to follow along. “Question, how’d she know his name was Calvin?”

“I guess Grandma has the lungs of an opera signer with a megaphone and screamed it when she caught them getting

tidied up in the bushes. He was in a tux and she was in a bikini.”

“Grandma?”

“Mel.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

Dewi snorted. “Grandma in a bikini would be funny as hell, though.”

“Not a visual image I want, but please continue.”

“I should add that, apparently, Calvin’s family is uber-Evangelical cultish religious. Like, they’re one sperm-fertilized-egg away from having their own ‘My Vagina Doubles as a Clown Car’ TV series. The whole parental-arranged courtship bullshit.”

He snorted. “Fuuuck.”

“Still gets better. Calvin’s parents apparently were in the process of ‘arranging’ a courtship for him with the daughter of friends of theirs. He’d never even *met* the girl before, so it’s not like they were for-real engaged. Apparently he didn’t even want to do it, but there’s no saying no in that family. The girl’s father is a pastor with a fairly large local-access cable TV show. And she is only sixteen.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Uh-huh.” Dewi sat up. “So, for those keeping track at home, we now have a claimed clueless human mate, and a wolf shifter who is about one ‘you godless whore’ taunt from her new mate’s family away from shifting and ripping out their throats and solving her own problem even while causing a multitude of others.”

Ken nodded. “That would be inconvenient.”

“Ooooh, yes. Her cousins and sister dragged Mel away to her room. One changes really fast and—”

“Shifts?”

“Clothes. He writes down all of Mel’s contact info, and her room number, sneaks into the reception, and follows the guy.

Literally ducks into a men's room and hands him the paper and then beats paws without getting caught. Meanwhile, it's taking all of the rest of them *literally* sitting on Mel to keep her from trying to chase this guy down. Because they rightly suspected she'd likely get arrested for assault if the family intervened again. And, I *get* it, I do."

"Not ideal circumstances," Ken said. "Like running into him in a crowded sports bar when she was there to shoot a fucker who sold out his daughters to be sex slaves to a drug dealer."

Dewi playfully snorted and poked him in the stomach. "No, that would have been easy." She pulled the elastic band from her long, auburn hair and started finger-combing out her messy bun. "Anyway. Here are Mel and the others thinking the guy's going to come up to her room, right?"

"Except, problem?"

She nodded. "Problem, one of Calvin's older thirty-dozen brothers apparently received the assignment to drag him the fuck out of there. Mel's cousin saw it happen. He definitely didn't want to leave, either. Calvin, I mean. Took another two brothers to help herd him into the car. I guess his family wasn't staying there. Two days later, Mel *still* hasn't found Calvin or heard from him and is just about going out of her *fucking* mind, understandably. Doesn't even know the guy's last name. That's when she misses a call from a strange phone number."

"It was Calvin?"

"Yup. He got as far as leaving her his full name and address when someone started screaming at him and apparently snatched the phone away from him. Call ended."

Ken loved listening to Dewi tell stories like this and had to actually focus on her words because it was nearly hypnotic watching her play with her hair. "And?"

"They lived six hours away. Mel's parents are still at work. She grabs her two brothers, sister, and three of the cousins

from that weekend, and they immediately head off on a caravan road-trip without telling anyone.”

Dewi sighed. “It’s sweetly romantic, in a way. If not for the batshit crazy humans. Mel and her posse roll up to the address at about one in the morning. Middle of nowhere, dusty, shitsville, busted-ass ex-farm town that’s starting to become an escape haven for obscenely rich Silicon Valley tech bros. These assholes are living in what looks to be a mansion. I mean, a *literal* mansion. Instead of hitting the button on the gate, Mel and her two brothers jump the fence. She sniffs around, finds the guy’s scent, one of her brothers boosts her up to a second-floor bedroom window, and Calvin lets her in. The admittedly sound plan was for her to grab Calvin and immediately get the hell out of there with him.”

“That’s not what happened?” Ken asked.

“Not even close. Some desperate *‘oh my god I missed you’* reunion sex starts happening. And I guess they were too busy to remember to lock the bedroom door. So now the brothers hear people yelling. One of her brothers runs around the other side of the house and starts throwing rocks at windows on the lower floor and howling, trying to cause a distraction.”

“Jeezus!”

“Two of Mel’s male cousins hear this shit and come running, leaving the sister and other cousin, a girl, behind the wheels of their two vehicles with the engines running. They help boost Mel’s oldest brother into the window and he literally shoves people out of the bedroom and locks the door while Mel and Calvin grab his shit and start tossing it out the window. Mel and Calvin jump out the window and meanwhile, at the back of the house, they hear a gunshot.”

“Oh...fuck!”

“So while the cousins are helping Mel and Calvin grab his shit and run to the vehicles, Mel’s other brother runs around the house to see what happened. Meanwhile, the lights go out.”

“What?”

“The shot came nowhere near the first brother and he’d already made his way to the breaker box and yanked the main.”

“*Whew!*”

“Yeah. Miracle of miracles, they all make it safely into the vehicles and cue happy ending, right?”

“Except?”

“Except one of Calvin’s older brothers managed to get in a vehicle and follow them, and he cut them off at a nearby stop sign and confronted them. Mel apparently had a knife on her.”

Ken gasped. “She *stabbed* him?”

“No, she flattened all four of his tires. However, one of the cousins was thinking and started filming Calvin’s brother acting like an insane asshole, threatening to kill them, etc. So Mel jumps back in the car and they take off.”

“And then?”

“The cops surround them ten minutes later at a gas station where they were filling up ahead of getting on the freeway. They *cannot* catch a fucking break. Calvin *still* has no clue she’s a wolf shifter. That any of them are wolf shifters. But Mel’s oldest brother takes over and they show the cops the video they just took. Looks pretty cut-and-dry to the clueless human cops that Calvin’s brother was lucky all they did was flatten his tires, because by all rights he was threatening them and trying to prevent them from leaving, and they showed remarkable restraint. Had they cleaned his clock it would have been self-defense.”

“Then?”

She smiled. “You’re getting good at this. Just as they think they’re in the clear and are about to get in their cars, up rolls two cars full of Calvin’s brothers and his father.”

“Fuuuuck.”

“Cue round two. Mel’s oldest brother and Calvin tell the cops the others are crazy, that Calvin is a grown-assed adult who was basically being held hostage by his family, and he

wants to go with Mel and everyone. Then Calvin's father calls Mel a whore and Calvin tells his father, and I quote, 'Go fuck yourself, you greedy old fucking pervert.' And I guess after Dad and the brothers stroked out over witnessing Calvin's impromptu metaphorical spinal replacement, when the father tried to go after Calvin, Mel launched herself at the dude and it took her brothers *and* three cops to pull her off him while the cousins, sister, and other cops formed a ring around Calvin to protect him from his brothers, who were trying to drag him back to one of their cars despite him already screaming he wasn't going with them."

Ken's eyes widened. "Holy shit!"

"Needless to say, the chaos that ensued precipitated the calling of several more cops. After they get everyone separated, the cops finally send Mel, Calvin, and the others on their way. But about an hour from home, they realize they're being followed by a car, so cue a chase and they finally pull into a CHP station for help. Calvin's father and two brothers pour out of the chase car and once again try to drag Calvin into their car while Mel and her brothers are fighting them and someone else runs in to get the cops. By this time it's like ten in the morning, no one's had any fucking sleep, and everyone is absolutely done with everyone else's bullshit."

She stretched. "Frankly, I wouldn't have blamed any of our people for shifting and ripping out throats at this point. Wouldn't have approved of it, but wouldn't have blamed them, either. So now the father and Calvin's brothers are arrested and *still* no one's thought to call me or their local enforcer yet. They finally make it home, where Mel and her siblings live with their parents."

"That sounds too easy."

"It was. Calvin's father and brothers either made bail in record fucking time, or somehow bribed or talked their way out of jail, and apparently got Mel's address from one of the police reports. So the same two brothers show up at Mel's house like two hours after Mel and them arrived home. By this time, Mel's father Karolos has been read into the situation and called their local enforcer, Tyrone Cobbe. But Tyrone's an

Alpha, not a Prime. Tyrone's already got Carbry Deverelle, the main Prime for that area, inbound on a flight from LA, but he won't arrive for another hour yet. And, oh yeah, Calvin is now freaking the absolute *fuck* out having just learned that wolf shifters are not only a *thing*, but also that the woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with his no-longer-virginal dick buried inside of is also one."

"He was a virgin when she claimed him?"

"Yup."

"Oy."

Dewi laughed. "Somehow, the cops do not get called before Carbry arrives and settles shit down. He orders the brothers away. Tyrone had already purchased plane tickets for Mel and Calvin to ship them to Idaho via Spokane so she can take him to the compound and formally present him to Peyton for recognition. Carbry thinks everything's hunky dory. Leaves. He's *just* stepped off the plane back in LA when he gets a frantic call from Tyrone, who'd hung out to drive Mel and Calvin to the airport."

Ken had hoped for sex but at this point he was too invested in the story to not hear the end of it. "And?"

"It was Calvin's father, mother, grandmother, *and* the uncle of the girl they wanted Calvin to marry—her father apparently paid Calvin's father a considerable dowry already and Calvin didn't know it—and a few other random relations from both human sides of the conflict. They sit down around Tyrone's car and now they can't leave for the airport. Cue *another* call to the cops to remove them. Well, again, Tyrone isn't a Prime. So after the cops arrive and drag them out of the way, Tyrone finally gets Mel and Calvin out of there and to the airport. There, *another* group of assorted relatives from Calvin's and the girl's families roll up trying to stop them. I guess they breed like rabbits or something.

"Mel and Calvin miss their flight in the process of Tyrone having to call airport security to help out. Meanwhile, Carbry turns around, Primes the gate agent in LA to book him a return ticket, getting someone else bumped in the process, and

literally steps back on the same damned plane he just stepped off of. Tells Tyrone to stay there at the airport with them while they wait for a rebooked flight to Seattle, because there aren't any others to Spokane tonight. Carbry lands—again—meets up with Tyrone, Mel, and Calvin, and here's where I was finally brought into the fray, because the flight to Seattle got cancelled.”

“Why?”

“Oh, someone called in a bomb threat. For *every* plane departing for Seattle for the rest of the day. Meaning *every* flight got cancelled. Not just all the ones to Seattle—*all* the flights.”

“Are you *shitting* me?” Come to think of it, he had heard something about a disturbance at an airport out there.

“I shit you not.” She smiled. “So I just gave Carbry and Tyrone carte blanche authorization to take any and all steps necessary to shut this shit down.” Her smile faded. “Including and up to taking out any of Calvin's relatives, if needed.”

“What?”

“Yeah.” She played with the hairband. “Not my preferred method of handling situations involving clueless humans. Usually, I prefer the enforcers to be as subtle as possible, using just enough *oomph* to get the job done, and if it looks bad to call me or Badger. If we're heavy-handed, we take the responsibility. Badger and Da are, obviously, way older than me with a lot more experience. If Da wasn't out of the area I would have already put Badger on a flight.

“But this is a unique situation and now the girl's father is pissed off and threatening legal action. Which is bullshit, because while I guess you *can* sue for selling off your underaged daughter, obviously he's not going to win. Except he has a lot of money and contacts, and apparently has Calvin's dad's nuts in his back pocket. So step one is safely transporting Mel and Calvin to the pack compound tomorrow. Meanwhile, Carbry can take care of some of Calvin's family members, but there are so many of them, and as the story gets spread around, more of these assholes keep inserting

themselves into the situation. I guess the church Calvin's father helps run is controlled by a bunch of these uptight fuckers who are apparently also doing a bit of money laundering. And marketing underaged girls to each others' sons. And they run some sort of homeschooling scam curriculum bullshit."

"Oh...wow."

"I know. So that's where we're at. I've got the Enforcer in Seattle, Bob Axelrod, meeting their early flight in Seattle in the morning and driving them to the compound. Meanwhile, once Calvin and Mel are on the flight and in the air, Carbry and Tyrone will start working their way through all this other bullshit. And help the Argyros family find a new place to live ASAP and help them move on the pack's dime. Priority case. Karolos and Bethany were due to move soon anyway, because they're nearly aged out of that area. Right now, Mel, Calvin, Tyrone, and Carbry are in a high-end suite at a hotel by the airport and Carbry Primed the hotel manager to station security in the lobby and on their floor, just in case."

She hooked the elastic band around her left index finger and used her right hand to pull it back and launch it through the bathroom door. "So my tomorrow just got *fun*. I'll be monitoring this situation and coordinating as needed. I'll have to stay close to my laptop. I really don't want to have to bring Peyton into this with everything he's already got going on."

Ken pulled her into his arms, kissing her. "Sounds like someone needs a distraction."

He felt her already starting to relax as a happy sigh escaped her. "I do." She played with the collar of his T-shirt. "Ladies' bathroom in a sports pub is sounding pretty good now, isn't it, huh?" The right corner of her mouth crept up in the adorable smirk he loved.

"Hey, I have declared, many times, that I have no regrets whatsoever about how things turned out." He slanted his lips over hers again, slowly teasing her with his kiss, loving how her hand slipped up, hooked around the back of his neck, and pulled him against her to deepen their kiss.

No, zero regrets about how things turned out. It was a culture shock, to be sure. But once he understood and *knew* at a cellular level that Dewi loved him as much as he loved her, he didn't want to look back, only forward.

To build their future, their *family*, together.

Her eyes dropped closed as she pressed her body tighter against his, trying to grind against him, except her tummy was in the way. He shifted position slightly, so he could wedge his thigh between hers, and her happy moan vibrated through their kiss. Making her make *those* noises was one of the things he lived for. To know he could make her feel good, drive her out of her mind for little breaths of time, and give her a mental respite from the pendulous weight of her responsibilities.

She was a dream come true and he knew he'd live and die for her, to make her happy.

To protect her.

In whatever ways that required.

CHAPTER SIX

Dewi

DEWI KNEW EXACTLY what Ken was trying to do for her and she loved the hell out of him for it. He absolutely was her safe harbor.

Aaannnd that's when the hormone-fueled flashover from exhausted to horny finally slammed into her.

Thankfully.

She didn't want to think about work, didn't want to stress out over the new situation on the other end of the country, or stress out about the unsuccessful Faegan Lewis hunt, and definitely didn't want to stress out over becoming a mom—all she wanted to do was *feel*.

To bask in her mate's love and adoration and make a concerted effort to see herself through his eyes.

Because the Goddess knew she damned well had spent her entire adult life unable to see that aspect of herself.

She ground against him, further deepening their kiss. Her baby bump made it tricky for her to stretch out against him the way she liked, and he couldn't lay his body on top of hers the way she loved, but as her body changed they'd adjusted their technique and made do.

One thing Dewi had learned about being pregnant: when her desire hit, it slammed into her like a runaway train. It felt like every nerve ending in her body lit up, amplifying Ken's touch, his scent.

He slowly worked his way down her jaw, trailing kisses along her neck and shoulder as his hand slipped down and hooked the hem of her T-shirt, easing it up. She'd ditched her bra in irritation over an hour earlier, which left him unhampered access to her.

Still working his way south, he slowly kissed his way down the valley between her breasts, ignoring her needy

whines and her attempts to nudge him into heading to one side or the other.

He softly chuckled. “What’s wrong, baby?”

She fought the urge to growl at him. “You know what’s wrong. Please don’t make me beg because it’s been a long damned day.”

Another chuckle. “Well, since you asked so sweetly.” He nuzzled her left breast, lightly grazing his teeth across her nipple and drawing a hiss of pleasure from her.

“Yes!”

He cupped both breasts in his hands and pressed them together, working his way back and forth between her nipples. Each lick, each suck, each gentle nip sent another pulse of need straight between her thighs.

Somehow, Dewi managed to peel her shirt up and off and discarded it to the floor. Then she plunged her hands into his hair and held on, forcing herself not to immediately shove him down between her thighs.

In times like these it felt like she’d never felt pleasure before she’d met Ken. Like her previous life had been in black and white and now she saw everything in brilliant colors.

After a few minutes, he slowly kissed his way lower, over her tummy, sliding off her shorts and panties and then settling between her thighs, where he shouldered them apart and dove in like a starving man.

Dewi bit back the gasp of pleasure that wanted to roar free as a jubilant howl.

Yes, *this*.

All of this.

All of *him*.

She’d long ago quit feeling guilty that she’d had more sexual experiences than Ken, because all that mattered was them, *now*, and their life together.

Although she still smugly celebrated the fact that there were many things he got to experience with her for the first time and had never done with another partner.

While Ken's mouth did magical things to her body, Dewi's mind finally unhinged and detached from her consciousness, allowing her to sink into and savor the pleasure he was bringing her. Tonight, he drew it out, building her up and letting her simmer, turning her into a boneless puddle of need and sensations, pliant in his arms and focused only on him.

She had a few regrets in her life, sure.

Mating and marrying Ken was not one of them. He was so much more than this right here, and he was growing more confident and instinctively taking control of her when she wanted and needed him to.

It was the thought that they'd get to spend the rest of their lives together celebrating their love that kicked her over the edge. He persistently kept her pleasure rolling through her, even grabbing her wrists and trapping her there so she couldn't squirm free as he took advantage of her helplessness to get her over a second time.

Then, and only then, did he sit up, smiling down at her as she lay there catching her breath. "Better?"

"Almost." She sat up, kissing him, tasting herself on him and licking her juices from him, finally pushing him back onto the bed and straddling him. "*This* will make it better." She notched him and then lowered herself onto him, both of them sighing.

"Oooh, yeah, baby," he whispered. "That is better."

She smiled down at him, lacing fingers with him as she started riding him. "Buuut wait! There's more!"

He burst out laughing, which she knew he would because she'd pulled this on him before and loved hearing his laughter.

Like her, he hadn't had much to laugh about before they'd met.

Squeezing her hands, he bumped his hips up against her. “I see what you did there.”

Dewi leaned forward, caging him with her body as she kissed him and his hands roamed her back, her arms, cupping her breasts and playing with her. And like that, it didn’t take her long to find joy again, with Ken’s release closely following hers.

She fell still, her forehead resting against his, deeply inhaling the scent of their lovemaking and savoring the warmth of his flesh pressed against hers. “I love you so much,” she whispered. “You’re not allowed to die on me. Understand?”

He rolled them to their sides so he could cradle her in his arms. “I’ll do my best, baby,” he said, tucking her head under his chin. “I don’t want to make you a promise I might have no say in being able to keep.”

Her fingers played with the light dusting of hair across his pecs and the words sprang forth. “If something changes in the overall situation,” she said, “I promise we’ll move to Idaho until it’s safe.”

He tipped her head back to look her in the eyes. “And I promise I’ll try to chill out and trust your judgment. But if I’m freaking out, I need to know I can talk to you about it and be heard.”

She nodded. “I will. I know this is tough on you.”

His thumb stroked her chin, her lips. “No one thinks you’re fragile, I swear. Not a single damned person. If anything, everyone’s happy for you, for us. Especially the people who’ve known you all your life. They all say exactly the same thing to me—that they see such a positive change in you from before we met. And I *want* you to be able to work. I just ask that in times like this, when there’s more risk to you, and to our baby, that you downshift. I won’t even overrule you about when you return to fieldwork—that’s up to you.”

“Thank you.” She studied his gaze, loving the myriad flecks of color in his brown eyes. Chocolate and amber and

mahogany. “And I want more kids. I want us to have our children now, so they’re close in age to Peyton’s and Trent’s.”

“And Beck’s.” He smiled, pulling one from her.

“And Beck’s,” she agreed as she nuzzled his nose. “I knew you two would become friends.”



Ken

More than friends—adopted family.

Not just Beck, but Nami and her family by default as well.

“If you’d told me that morning in the kitchen when he was pinning me against the fridge and choking me to death that he’d soon be my best friend, I think *that* would have been more difficult to believe and accept than the memo that wolf shifters were not only real, but I’d be marrying one.”

She giggled. “Funny how life works, isn’t it?”

“True.” She snuggled in the crook of his arm and, in minutes, she was sound asleep.

Good. She needed the rest.

He closed his eyes but sleep wasn’t forthcoming to him.

His earlier phone call with Peyton had been about more than asking him to rescind the order for them to come to Idaho.

Peyton had told him he’d be making more trips to Europe over the next several weeks and months, trying to time them so he wouldn’t miss the birth of his first child.

Which, as Peyton had joked, would probably by default be his only child when Gillan neutered him upon his return.

Ken had in a way become a sounding board for Peyton, running “hypotheticals” past Ken that Ken realized were *not*.

Hypotheticals, that is.

Things like looking for ideas about tracking where inquiries were coming from, how they might set cyber traps for people so they could hack into their computer system—the usual brotherly stuff.

Not.

What also worried Ken was what Peyton wasn’t telling him. Not because Peyton didn’t know—

But because he *did*.

If there were still inquiries seeping in from the Segura affair, someone sniffing around, that could prove very dangerous.

If those inquiries were somehow tied in with the rogue and the potential of someone wanting to capture a shifter for research?

That would be a fucking disaster all the way across the board.

A key part of the Targhee Pack's success throughout the decades was their secrecy, their ability to blend in with the general population, shell company after shell company that shuffled assets around in a timely fashion to prevent suspicion from falling on them.

Lower-level government officials who were either part of the pack or beholden to it that could help set up new identities for people as they aged out. Or, in Joaquin's case, needed to disappear from the face of the earth and pop up with a new name and identity.

There was a whole shadow world of commerce related to helping shifters stay hidden.

If their existence was revealed to the world at large, they would be hunted, dissected, incarcerated.

The only reason Ken could comfortably rescind his request to Peyton about going to Idaho indefinitely was that Peyton had assured Ken he believed they were safe in Florida.

For now.

But he'd also promised that if he had even the remotest hint that situation changed, he would immediately order them all—including Beck, Nami's family, and everyone else—to Idaho.

It was a reasonable accommodation Ken was willing to live with.

Still, he would continue his firearms and fight training with Badger, Duncan, Beck, and the others. He'd never be a

warrior like those men, but he at least wanted to feel reasonably competent.

Because as life had proven to him several times already, he never knew when he would need those skills.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DUNCAN

DUNCAN HAD MADE this trip to Gatlinburg nearly a dozen times so far over the past few weeks. So often, in fact, he'd come to know some of the cabin crew on a first-name basis. Fly from Tampa to Knoxville, rent a car, drive to Gatlinburg to visit with Tully for a day or two, reverse the process and return home to Tampa.

Repeat.

Although it looked like this time would be the last. Tully was a human dying of cancer, and while he couldn't do anything for her to cure her, he could provide her temporary mental respite from the pain with his Prime powers.

As he settled into his seat to ignore the pre-flight safety demo, he closed his eyes and let his mind drift. He'd spent nearly fifty years wandering the Idaho wilderness and sometimes he had to remind himself he was back in civilization and not on an entirely different planet.

The world had flown on without him and drastically changed in a short amount of time, even more so than during the nearly 400 years between his birth in Scotland until that fateful day he sat behind the wheel of his car on a mountain road in Idaho and stared down at the river in the valley several hundred feet below him.

What was it all for?

At the time, the constant pain knifing through his soul over Louisa's death six years prior had been the only thing he could feel or think about.

That, and the warning from that dying woman from so long ago. About the stranger and making sure Chelsea married Charlie.

He'd already turned the pack over to Charlie. And then he and Chelsea had Trent, just an Alpha, but then she gave birth to Peyton. And they said she'd never have another baby due to the difficulties she'd had with him.

But he was a Prime Alpha.

An heir for Charlie.

An heir to their legacy. And since Chelsea couldn't have more pups, there wouldn't be any need for Duncan to hang around, torturing himself.

It had, at the time, seemed the answer to his unholy prayers when he shifted the car into drive, jammed his foot to the floor, and took his hands off the wheel, the road rumbling under his tires and then free-falling, much like the feel of the plane lifting into the air...

Love abides where cowardice fails

Blood is thicker than treachery

Greater love than even father for child

Giving up, selfless sacrifice, will ensure future
victory

Duncan's eyes opened at the soft *thump* of the landing gear folding up into the plane's belly. The flight should take under two hours, because he always purchased direct flights.

At least during the decades Duncan was gone his trust in Charlie and Badger hadn't been misplaced. And Charlie had taught his two sons well. They'd carried on his legacy even after Charlie's murder.

The Targhee Pack was stronger—and wealthier—than even Duncan had ever imagined possible.

Although he'd never fathomed the horrific tragedy that would play out in the wake of his departure.



A FEW HOURS LATER, Duncan settled into his usual chair next to Tully's bed. "How do you feel today, beautiful?" He rested his arm on the bed and gently clasped her achingly fragile hand, steeling himself against the wash of pain and emotions he knew would slam into him at the contact.

Aaron stood in the far corner of the room, watching, arms crossed over his chest and wearing a resolutely grim expression. His mate, Lowri, sat on the far side of the bed and held Tully's other hand.

Tully's eyes were slightly glazed and he could tell they'd upped her morphine dosage. "You're a flirt, Duncan." Her voice sounded weak, barely more than a papery whisper. Her body had become a sunken husk who looked closer to 93 than her actual 63 years.

He managed a smile for her. "Only with you. You're special."

He'd told her his wife had died years ago in a car accident, but she didn't know anything about wolves or mates or the fact that he wasn't 62, but 445.

Lowri's mother, Efa, entered the room and Duncan sensed Efa's relief upon seeing his presence. She had tearfully expressed her gratitude to him countless times over the past few weeks. She hadn't been there earlier at his arrival because she'd ducked out to the store to buy more supplies for their deathwatch.

Which was what this now was, and they knew it.

Efa walked around the end of the bed to perch on the edge, next to where Lowri sat, where she could touch her friend's arm. She was a non-shifter born to wolf shifter parents. Lowri was her eldest child, 39 but looking far younger, an Alpha wolf shifter.

Tully's son Dale appeared in the doorway, his eyes red from having gone to his bedroom to have a private cry where his mother wouldn't see or hear him. He was also a clueless human, as was his wife, Raina, who Duncan suspected was still having her own private cry.

Tully had entered Efa Thompson's life over twenty years earlier while on a movie set, where they both worked for the costume department. They'd been good friends ever since, as close as sisters. When Tully, then widowed, left New Mexico to live with her son and daughter-in-law several years earlier, Amstel "retired" and he and Efa moved their family to live nearby.

This wasn't Tully's first bout with cancer but it would, unfortunately, be her last.

And Duncan was glad he hadn't delayed and taken a later flight, because if she was still alive come morning he'd be the most surprised of all.

Downstairs was Efa's husband, Amstel, a wolf shifter. With him were their other two children, Megan, 26, and Gareth, 19. Gareth wasn't a shifter and had only just recently learned about their existence after he'd unwittingly put his family at risk over their small pot-growing business.

Which they'd only engaged in to help mitigate Tully's cancer symptoms.

Duncan hadn't told Peyton and Dewi all the details of the messy situation, because once Tully passed the Thompsons would dismantle their tiny grow operation and it would no longer be an issue. They hadn't been selling it, and they couldn't lie to Duncan about that, so he was willing to give them some latitude considering the extenuating circumstances.

And since as of a couple of weeks ago Lowri was now mated and married to Aaron, one of Dewi's enforcers, Duncan knew the family would resume their previous law-abiding ways.

Besides, it would have made him a hypocrite had he held them accountable for it, even if he was the only one who knew

that.

As the hours agonizingly drifted past, everyone rotating in and out of the room to visit with Tully except Duncan, who only left her side to use the bathroom, he kept his focus on Tully and on easing her transition. Her periods of lucidity were growing shorter as she struggled to hold on.

He didn't have the heart to coax her to let go. She felt she still had things to say to her loved ones.

Thus he maintained his vigil, people bringing him food and water and coffee as he needed them, sometimes changing places with him as he moved to the other side of the bed, or even sat on the edge of it.

Somewhere just after midnight, when he was alone in the room with Tully, she looked at him. "Chelsea was a lucky woman to have met you when she did."

He frowned, trying to remember if he'd ever mentioned Chelsea and Charlie, Dewi's parents, murdered more than 24 years ago when she was just a baby.

He didn't think he had.

And that was an odd way to phrase it—to have met his daughter?

He opted to play dumb. "Chelsea?"

"She says you should remember her. You thought about her earlier. On your flight up."

Gooseflesh rippled across his body as the mental connection snapped into place.

"She's in the corner," she said, slowly nodding toward where Aaron stood earlier in the evening. "She's been waiting there for a while now. Said she came with you and she'll walk with me when it's time so I'm not alone. She seems nice."

He slowly turned his head to look in the corner, but of course even his keen lupine senses couldn't see anything there.

He finally forced himself to tap deeper into Tully's mind despite the pain it caused him, to let him see what she was

seeing.

His throat went dry. Duncan struggled not to rip his hand from Tully's or break the connection he had with her. But faintly, despite her pain and the haze of morphine, he could make out a shape there was no way in hell Tully could have known about.

Much less the details.

"Did she say anything else?" he forced out.

"Thank you." She weakly smiled. "And that you still have that same shine. The light on the loch."

Dale and Raina walked in then, followed by Efa and Lowri.

Tully's breathing was starting to weaken. "Get everyone up here," he quietly told Lowri. "Now." He didn't need to clarify. She turned and darted from the room.

He leaned in. "It's been a pleasure knowing you, Tully," Duncan said

She smiled. "You, too. You old wolf." She managed what he suspected was supposed to be a wink and Efa's soft gasp was hopefully disguised by Raina's sob as she moved around to the other side of the bed with Dale to say their last good-byes.



AN HOUR LATER, Duncan sat outside in the backyard with Aaron and stared up at the dark sky. They both held tall glasses full of straight bourbon. With their Alpha wolf constitutions the alcohol wouldn't have much more effect on them than one or two beers would the average human.

Inside, the family was still gathered around her body, awaiting the undertaker to come for her.

Aaron and Duncan had literally known Tully exactly the same amount of time, met her together a few weeks earlier, on

the day Duncan had flown up to help sort out the trouble for the family once Aaron had neutralized the immediate threat.

“Thanks,” Aaron hoarsely said. “I cannot thank you enough.”

Duncan slowly nodded. “No memorial, then?”

“She didn’t want one. Dale wants to keep her ashes.”

“And the other thing?”

“I’ll run over to their place in the morning with Amstel and help him deal with it. It’ll be completely destroyed before dark.”

“Before I leave, I’ll make sure I tell Gareth to forget everything about the grow operation. So there’s no issues.”

“Thanks. *Again.*” Aaron heavily sighed. “I appreciate everything you’ve done, Sir. I mean it. I know you would have been perfectly within your rights to evict them from the property, and...” Another sigh. “Thank you.”

Duncan nodded, sipping his bourbon. Then he held up his glass as he finally placed that melancholy humming he’d first heard so long ago.

Aaron held his glass up, too.

Duncan softly sang. “*But since it falls unto my lot, That I should rise and you should not.*”

Aaron joined him for the rest. “*I gently rise and softly call, Good night and joy be to you all.*”

They clinked glasses, sipped, and then each poured a little out onto the ground for Tully.

“I remember my mom singing that,” Aaron said. “I haven’t heard it in years.”

Duncan stared up at the stars and sighed. “Neither have I.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

DUNCAN

UPON HIS ARRIVAL and knowing time was of the essence, Duncan had driven straight to see Tully without getting a hotel room first.

Now he went to the place he always used and checked in, dropping everything on the bed closest to the door before stepping into the shower.

He leaned against the tile and let the hot water sting his skin.

Such a simple, modern pleasure.

During his time in the wilderness he'd remained a wolf, rarely bathed, other than jumping into the river on hot days to cool off, or getting wet from rain.

And now here he was, still learning about the world.

Tonight, that meant learning there was apparently far more to it than he'd ever witnessed before or even dreamed possible.

I never mentioned Chelsea to her.

Either one of them. He *knew* it. And he knew he hadn't let it leak to Tully through their mental connection, either.

While perhaps Efa or Amstel might have mentioned Charlie and Chelsea, no one else knew about the old woman and her connection to him.

Duncan wasn't one to waste time arguing about hypotheticals.

He also knew what he'd witnessed for himself through Tully's gaze. It wasn't an artifact from his own brain, something Tully could pluck from his dusty memories.

I wonder how much else there is, ancient knowledge, that I don't even know that I don't know?

Duncan recalled that night so long ago. How he'd sought the old woman after Charlie and Badger thought he'd headed home.

The mysterious old woman who'd approached them in the pub and offered to read for them in exchange for coins. No doubt to immediately turn around and buy drink.

How Duncan knew Charlie and Badger had been ready to laugh and shoo her away, but there'd been...something about her.

And Duncan had dug out a couple of coins for her.

When she'd touched his hand, clasping it when he gave her the coins, he saw the truth.

The drinking was the only thing that quieted the voices in her mind.

Voices that were usually right.

And drinking was the only thing that helped her forget about her agonizing pain for a little while.

How after parting for the evening with Badger and Charlie, he'd double-backed to the pub and found her stumbling away from it, barely vertical.

"Yer gonna get yerself hurt," Duncan said, gently taking her arm.

She squinted up at him. "Yer the man from earlier."

"Aye. Which way we headin'?"

"I'm not gonna tup ye."

"Not lookin' for it. No offense intended, but I have a wife, thanks. Just want to help ye home. Doin' a good deed for an honest broker."

She stopped, wobbly on her feet. “Aye.” She poked him in the chest. “Only reason he’s still alive, the red-haired one, is that youngin’ beside him tonight. Hadn’t been for him makin’ him promise to carry on, becomin’ blood brothers, he’d be gone.”

Duncan fought back the chills. That wasn’t common knowledge.

In fact, it wasn’t knowledge anyone knew except the three of them. “What else do ye see?”

She smiled and held out her hand, although like her it was also a little unsteady.

He dropped another coin into it.

She ran a ragged nail across the coin. “Ye can see I’m tellin’ the truth, can’t ye, *Prime*?”

Gooseflesh rippled across his body. “What do ye know of that?” Again, in this town, no one except the three of them and his own Louisa knew that.

One of the reasons they’d moved here, away from other packs, wanting to avoid a wave of violence that had gripped too many, a frenzy to take over and kill to get what they wanted.

The three of them, all Primes, had already seen far too much violence and killing in their lives, their blood-lust long ago quenched under the weight of too many stones stacked into cairns on lonely battlefields.

All they wanted to do was live. Thrive. In his case, raise pups. In Charlie’s, get mated and hopefully have pups.

In Badger’s, trying to find a new reason to awaken every morning.

“I see enough.” She dropped the coin into a a ratty cloth bag hung from a cord around her neck and tucked it back inside her bodice. “What do ye want to know?”

“What do I need to know?”

She held out her hand again but this time to take his, not asking for more coin.

He let her.

The woman closed her eyes and Duncan felt...something. She definitely wasn't a Prime, not even a shifter, as far as he could tell, but there was certainly *something* odd about her.

Damned odd.

Her eyes remained closed as she talked. "Four girls," she softly said. "Yers. Ye never have sons with yer mate. Not by blood, anyway. Youngest of yers takes the younger t'were here tonight. True love. But send him away first before she's born, for a few years, to have him help build yer kingdom. To give it some time. It's for his benefit, too. For them all." She swayed a little on her feet. "Plenty o' years of joy for ye before the next tragedy. But heed well my words earlier and mark them."

She lightly hummed a melancholy tune he thought he should know but couldn't quite place right then. "There'll be one who impossibly *is* but shouldn't be," she continued. "Not yers, but of yer direct line." She cocked her head as if listening to voices he couldn't hear, accompanied by more humming. "Do the difficult, try not to listen to the wind, although that's hard enough, I gather."

She opened her eyes and stared into his. "At some point yer red-haired friend will have to step up, even though he won't like it much. More than once. Second time, the grazer will make him do it. Don't make it easy for yer friend to shirk his duty that time, either. Distant future. Long after I'm gone."

"Grazer?" That made absolutely no sense whatsoever.

"I see what I see." She motioned with her free hand at her abdomen. "Et up with it. Every bit o' me. From the inside out. But ye'll meet another one day far in the future who you'll show a similar kindness to, like me. Help wi' their transition." She cocked her head the other way. "Ye have a deep heart and even deeper soul in ye. It'll serve ye well." She squinted, slowly shaking her head. "The end is not—it's the beginning.

But the painful sacrifice will mark everyone. And it's the only way. But it's willingly made."

She released his hand and blinked twice, taking a deep breath. "So that's that, then."

He started to reach for another coin but she stopped him. "I have no use for that now. Pay me back by tellin' me what ye see in me? Ye know what I mean. It's a damned hungry beast, ain't it? How long until it's full, aye?"

He swallowed hard. "Maybe a few weeks, at most. I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "Nothin' to be done about it. I've known for a long time. Surprised I'm still vertical, frankly."

"Do you...have family?"

"Nah. Lost me husband in a mine years ago. Two bairns never made it out of infancy."

"What are ye, then?"

"Me?" She harshly snorted. "I's none but a humble washerwoman."

"Pull the other one."

She cannily smiled. "Guess it can't hurt to say now. I think I'm the last of an ancient line. Used to have sisters and cousins but lost track of 'em long ago. Spent a lot o' years hidin' this part o' me. Thanks fer obligin' me tonight. And fer the coin."

"Why now? Why me?"

"I saw a... A *shine* about the three o' ye. The very air around the three o' ye practically glitters, like golden sunlight bouncin' off the ripples on a loch on a rare fine day. Yer the first I openly read for since I was a girl in the before. Learned quick not to tell people I could see. Used it to my advantage, of course. But what are they gonna do now, burn me as a witch?"

She laughed, but it sounded pained. "Now I'll use yer coin to try to drink away as much of my last days as I can. It's the only thing that eases the pain."

“What if I can help?”

“Help how?”

“I can buy ye laudanum. And drink.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Can ye now? How much? It only lasts for so long.”

“More than enough to do the job for good.”

She looked dubious. “When?”

“Tonight. Right now, if ye’d like.”

She slowly nodded. “If ye can do that, I would be mighty obliged. I would give ye one last reading before. And I’ll even let ye help me home.” She slowly shook her head. “Guess that’s what the vision meant about ye helpin’ me.”

He walked her back to the shanty she resided in, which was barely four walls and a roof. The hearth was cold and he took a moment to lay and light a fire for her. Promising to return shortly, he hurried to find who and what he needed, which didn’t take long with his Prime powers to draw the immediate truth from people, as well as their compliance.

And ensure their silence.

He returned to her abode to find her lying on the pallet of straw and rags she called a bed.

She watched as he mixed the potion together and his hands trembled as he poured it into the larger bottle. He’d killed before. Too many times to remember. Even mercy killings, but never anything like this.

And this was definitely a mercy. She was full of pain, agony. It was a wonder she hadn’t hung herself, or slit her throat, or walked into the sea.

She’d lived a hard and harsh life and this was, to her, the ultimate kindness.

When it was ready, he filled a dented cup he’d found on the rickety shelf on her wall.

He had enough to fill it four times, and he'd been assured there was enough to kill ten people in the potion, mixed now with the sweet mead.

She motioned for his hand and he gave it, not speaking while he felt that...something again. Like a mental tickle.

He'd felt other Primes before, but this was nothing like that.

It was nothing like he'd ever experienced before.

She slowly nodded as she held his hand, humming that tune again for a few minutes before finally speaking. "There are two chapters to yer life. This is but the first, and it continues on for quite a while past now. I am not being vague on purpose, mind ye. I'm tellin' ye what I see as best I can put it into words. This voyage yer about to undertake is but not even midway through the first chapter. Ye make it safely, as does yer mate. And yer friends, once they follow along in the next two years."

She deeply sighed, her eyes closing. "Never lose the kindness in yer heart. Likewise, never hesitate to show or even use yer teeth when needed to protect yers. Though ye will have loss in the first chapter, ye will gain even more in the second. Love those from outside and welcome them as yers. They might not be yer blood but they are far closer, and they will willingly spill blood for ye, if need be."

More humming. "Set yer roots in the northwest and dig. Coal, oil, minerals. Mining. There will be the start of yer vast and long-lived fortune. But look ahead. Buy up land elsewhere. Cattle. Crops." She blew out a rancid breath. "War will come. Great war that crosses the sea. Then another soon after. Won't touch yer land, but ye prosper from it. Yer companies can build and sell things. Blood money still spends and will protect ye and yers. Don't feel guilty about it. And that's important. Because yer compound becomes a sanctuary over the years as it grows."

She swayed a little where she sat and he could see her eyes moving behind her lids, as if watching scenery pass her by. "Survival is important. Take the steps now. If ye don't, yer

kind will get wiped out. Not just yers, but all over. This land here is no longer safe for ye. Won't be safe for yer kind for too damned long. Not just from humans, but from yer own kind, and others similar."

Her voice changed, deepened, steadier now. "Buy politicians, lawmen, whoever you need. Counsel others like ye to do the same. Avoid hurtin' innocents if ye can, because ye can afford to be kind. Ye'll be loved more for that. Teach those lessons. Blendin' in will keep ye all alive. Viciously take blood when needed however, and keep yer blood and found family close. Set yer own rules, make yer own way. Learn from the wrongs of the past and make right the future. What ye start now will soon become the old ways and the things people remember, takin' nothin' from this place and the past. Ye can build the foundation of something better."

Her eyes opened. "I know this sounds like nonsense, but it's what I see. I get images, whispers. I can only tell ye as best I can."

"I understand." She still held his hand so he didn't pull away.

"The farther in the future I look, the vaguer it gets, ye ken? Because it also depends on what course you and others take."

He nodded.

She closed her eyes again. "There will come a darkly eager one. Ye'll feel it through the center of yer soul. Wanting to be let in. Close him out. Don't let him near yer youngest—he's not for her. He's a Prime and a danger." She took a shaky breath. "Tell yer friends and their young Primes to keep that knowledge close unless or until they're the pack Alpha. Except..."

She cocked her head, looking confused despite her closed eyes. "*Her*. The impossible one. She is, too. They'll protect her. A Prime Alpha. And after time away ye'll return because they'll need ye fierce. And if ye don't return, they all die."

She opened her eyes again. "All that's in the distant future."

“There are no female Prime Alphas, as far as I know.”

She still looked confused. “It’s a certainty but I don’t know why. Anyway, summon yer friends to ye in the new world once yer there even if yer not fully settled yet. Get them out o’ here within two years. No longer.” She went quiet for a moment. “The tapestry of life is full of threads, sometimes tangled. But yer future will be strong and withstand if ye heed my words.”

She finally released his hand. “Everythin’ else is muddy beyond that because yer still needing to take steps forward. I hope that’s all helpful.”

“Me, too. Thank ye.”

She reached for her coin purse and shook the coins out of it. “Here.” She dropped them into his hand, smiling. “I won’t need them now, will I?”

“I guess not.” He tucked them into his purse and held his hand out again. She looked at it before taking it.

He poured the full force of his Prime into her. “Doesn’t hurt so much now, does it?”

She slowly shook her head, her eyes going wide. “This feels... amazin’!”

It didn’t hurt to take a minute to try to read her, and she didn’t resist him even though he sensed in her younger, stronger days she likely could have. But whether because of her pain and illness, or some other reason, her early life looked hazy and muddy in her mind. Like a dream instead of lived experiences.

Which made absolutely no sense to him because he’d never run across anyone like this before where he couldn’t see their past in full clarity. There was a before and an after, when she was a child.

And it wasn’t anything she appeared to be doing on purpose to keep him out, either.

“I had two chapters, too,” she said, looking up at him. “I think we crossed a veil. There exactly was a before and after,

like we fled someplace to here. Everything was different once we were here. I think that's what yer seein'. I'd happily trade ye more answers for yer questions about it, if I had them to give, sorry."

"I understand."

He handed her the cup and she took a sip, suddenly smiling. "You name your youngest after me? That's so sweet!"

He smiled. "It's been an honor knowing you, even for this short time, Chelsea."

She saluted him with the cup. "The pleasure's all mine. Fer once." She quickly drank it and he didn't release her free hand while he refilled the cup for her. She savored this one a little more slowly, but held it out for a refill a moment later. "Thank ye for seein' more in me than a drunk, crazed hag."

This time he released her hand so he could steady the cup for her as he poured. "Drink up."

"I am, believe me. This is delicious!" Her voice was already slurring and he wondered if she'd even make it through the last cup.

"I'm glad it's helping."

She looked him in the eyes and the growing fuzziness there cleared for just a moment. "Dewi."

"What?"

Confusion washed in. "I...I don't know." She drained the cup and this last time he had to hold the cup to refill it and help her hold it so she didn't drop it as she took several deep swallows. "It's a name. An impossible...name... I... Dewy's grazer." She sighed and finished the cup. "Thank you," she whispered as he helped ease her back onto the bed. "Close my eyes after?"

He nodded, setting the cup aside and holding her hand again. "I will. I'll make sure ye get a decent burial."

"Thank ye." She took three more breaths before the last exhale and her chest fell still.

He waited for a moment, patting her hand before placing it on the bed. Then he reached up and closed her eyes.

After saying a short prayer over her, he departed, finding the vicar in the closest church and waking him up. He gave him more than enough coin to cover the expenses and Primed him to promise to provide her with a decent burial. With that completed, he made his way home to where Louisa lay sleeping.

He washed up and curled in bed with her in a house that they would soon leave behind. It was already sold, and they'd sold most everything they weren't taking with them on the ship. They had several crates and trunks already packed and ready to transport.

Badger and Charlie were slated to take a different ship in six months. They still had good-byes to say to others, a few things to do, and Badger wanted one more trip back to Tahlia's grave to say good-bye to her. Once Duncan and Louisa arrived in America, they would secure temporary housing, meet up with one of Badger's cousins, and send word back to Charlie and Badger where to find them. Meanwhile, Duncan planned to acquire whatever they'd need to make the next leg of their journey.

Which now looked like it'd take them farther west than he'd originally planned.

The things Duncan had seen inside the woman while trying to help ease her pain, he didn't know what to make of them.

Hell, he still didn't know what to make of *her*.

He remembered his mother telling him and his siblings stories of the fae. Maybe Chelsea was one of them. Perhaps a witch?

It didn't matter.

What mattered was how her words struck deep inside his soul, because she believed them in a way she only believed things that had come to pass as she'd seen them.

And now he felt more determined than ever to build his new pack in America.

Shaking himself from his memories in the shower, Duncan scrubbed his hands over his face, wiping the water from his eyes as he finally reached for the soap.

I need to spend time re-evaluating everything I believed.

Because, obviously, he'd been wrong.

And, as the old woman had unerringly proven time and again, she was *not*.

CHAPTER NINE

DUNCAN

AFTER A NAP DUNCAN checked out of the hotel, stopped for lunch, and then headed for the Thompson home.

Their large, self-sufficient and off-the-grid cabin was built on pack land, in the middle of two thousand heavily wooded and mountainous acres bordering the Great Smoky Mountains National Park that weren't open to hunting or public use.

When Duncan arrived he found Amstel and Aaron there, with most of the pot plants already destroyed. They were using a small woodchipper and directing it into a hole they'd dug that was about five feet deep.

"Not checking up on you," Duncan said. "I decided I wanted to go for a run myself while I'm up here to clear my head." He pointed at the hole. "Can I ask a stupid question?"

"No smoke," Amstel said, smiling. "We'll dump a couple of gallons of weedkiller in with it. I didn't want to attract any attention from Forestry, just in case. And this is far enough away from our garden and greenhouse and well that it shouldn't seep into anything to cause us issues."

"*Ah*. Smart plan. Anything I need to know about the property?"

"There's an old barbed-wire fence along most of the boundary between us and the national park," Amstel said, "but you'll also start seeing posted signs, as well as double orange paint rings around trees, with purple vertical stripes. That's a little overkill but we wanted to make sure people could see them. From that boundary, if you continue, then you're in the

national park and there's no hunting allowed in there. We've run patrols before in there and rarely do humans make it all the way to the boundary. Now, as you go, when you start seeing trees on the border with a single orange paint ring and purple stripe, those are borders against other properties but not the national park. There shouldn't be any hunting right now, but you never know. There are a few private preserves here and there in this region, so be careful. Gillian said it's on their list to buy more surrounding properties in the next couple of years."

"Noted. I'll probably be gone until nightfall. I'll leave my rental unlocked. Aaron, If I don't return by tomorrow morning notify Ken, and then you and Amstel and Lowri come look for me."

Aaron scowled. "Notify Ken?"

"I don't want Dewi bothered unless it is something serious. If it's something as simple as I pulled a muscle, no need to worry her."

He returned to his rental and started stripping, wanting—*needing* to run. He'd run a few times in Florida, and back in Idaho, with packmates after his return, but today...

Today he needed to be alone for a while.

He needed to think about Chelsea's prophecy.

And he wanted to mourn Tully in his own way.

They'd had a lot of happy years in Idaho after arriving and beginning to buy, build.

Mine.

Prosperous years.

He couldn't have accomplished it without Badger and Charlie.

All because he'd heeded Chelsea's advice, even if he hadn't credited her with it.



THEN

Badger stopped in the office doorway. “Ye asked to see me, Sir?”

Duncan waved him in to come sit. “No formalities,” he said. “Drink?” He held up a bottle of bourbon.

Badger settled his bulk into a chair in front of Duncan’s desk. “If yer pourin’, thank ye.”

Duncan poured them both a couple of fingers and handed Badger one of the glasses before returning to sit behind his desk. “I wanted to talk to you about something and would like to ask your discretion about it.”

“Sir?”

“Just Duncan and Badger today.”

“All right.” Badger sipped his bourbon.

“These past thirty years have seen us blessed and our pack prosper, haven’t they?”

“Aye,” Badger agreed.

“Charlie Bleacke. You’ve known him a long time. Longer than I have.”

“Aye. Decades longer. Since long before we came over. Ye know that. We’re blood brothers.” He swallowed back the lump in his throat. “He’s the only reason I’m still breathin’. He kept me goin’ after Tahlia...”

He fought the urge to reach up and touch the scar splitting his face.

Duncan nodded. “I know. And you feel we can completely trust him?”

“Aye. I’d stake me own honor on him.”

“I’ve been wanting to further expand the pack’s holdings. But Louisa doesn’t want me leaving her, especially now with her due in a couple of months. If I asked Charlie to travel and make acquisitions for us, maybe even sponsor some of the

pack who wish to go with him, do you think he'd be amenable to it?"

"Forming an expanded pack?"

"Not officially. But this country is growing fast. There's a lot of land out there to acquire. Especially in the southeast. Florida, Georgia, Texas. Lots of cattle ranching to be done there. Agriculture. And oil, in Texas. I'm looking long-term. We don't know how profitable the mining in this region will remain in future decades. I'd like to keep the pack based here, and I'm in the process of buying even more land. I want our main permanent compound located where we can hold Musters for centuries to come without fear of our people being discovered. Keep expanding it so people can move here, retire here, if they want. But there's money to be made elsewhere in the country right now, in other industries. And plenty of cheap land. I sent one of my cousins to Texas to look into oil operations and drilling rights."

Badger took another sip, no doubt wishing Duncan would get to the point. "What's really goin' on? Ye worried Charlie might challenge ye as pack Alpha?"

"Well, that's the thing," Duncan said. "I'd like to talk to you about arranging for you to one day take over from me."

Badger nearly choked on his bourbon. "Me?" he spluttered. "Pack Alpha? *Not* me." He set the glass on the desk as he coughed. "I don't want it. Never have, never do. Told ye that plenty o' times."

"You're a Prime."

"An' so's Charlie. I'd rather it be him than me. Besides, he's younger than me." He coughed again. "Why? Are ye thinkin' about steppin' down already, then?"

"I'm not. I'm looking ahead. Thinking about why we all left Scotland to start over here." In retrospect, it'd been a damned smart decision, because they'd avoided famine, war.

Fighting between shifter factions that had devastated their kind nearly as much as the larger wars.

Badger finally picked up his glass again to take another sip. “I know he’s young, but Charlie would make a good Pack Alpha one day. Smart. Thoughtful. Eager, but not stupidly so. He’s not mated yet, though. He’s not the only one who’d make a good choice.”

Duncan slowly nodded. “I’d like you to become my second, Badger.”

Fortunately, Badger was between sips. “What? *Me*? Why?”

“Because I trust you. You’re a Prime. People like you.”

“Not everyone,” he snarked.

“Well, those people fear you and that’s just as good, if not better. Right? Please?”

“What about Anderson? Isn’t yer current second gonna be fashed to be thrown over?”

“This isn’t for public consumption yet but he wants to move back to the UK.”

Badger’s jaw dropped open. “What the *bloody* hell for? Feckin’ idjit!”

“His mate’s homesick for her family. One of her older brothers nearly died in the war and they’re struggling.”

“Oh. Well then, I guess that’s a perfectly valid reason.”

“Her father’s offered him a job in Glasgow. He told me he’d stay on if I couldn’t find a replacement but I’d consider it a personal favor if you’d take it.”

Badger settled back in his chair. “Charlie and I, I always imagined one day if he started his own pack that I’d help him.”

“Well, you still can. You know me, I don’t like the old ways. They don’t belong in the modern age. Fight to the death for control? *Why*? Just go start a new pack. Or work your way up the chain of command. Like a business. *That’s* what I want the Targhee Pack to continue to be—a family *business* that can survive the test of time and stay profitable so it supports the future ages. Our pups and their pups. The elderly. Take in strays who’ll bend a knee and show their throat and work to

better our pack. We'll take care of those who help take care of the pack. Protect them. Help them prosper with us. No one needs to starve or be in danger.

“This is a big damned country. There's no reason people like Charlie who deserve to have their own pack can't have the chance to run a... A branch office. Sure, think of it as an expanded pack. If that area gets large enough, it can become its own entity if it's self-sufficient enough and they want to do that. Otherwise, it remains part of the larger pack, under its protection and guidance.”

“And financial support,” Badger noted. “Incentive to stay in line?”

“Exactly. They don't like the way the pack does things? Then they can leave, but the pack's assets don't leave with them. They'll receive a one-time payment, seed money to help them out, but if they don't want to work with the pack then that's all they'll get. This isn't an island with limited territory and resources. This is a relatively new country we can spread out in without having pissing contests about whose land is whose. Everyone will prosper if we just work together. And we can protect each other, stay outside of the humans' notice.”

Badger considered it. “That's a novel approach. And so far, it's kept our bellies full, I'll admit. Never hear anyone bitchin' about serious issues. Everyone's happy with ye. Especially the elders who came over from the old country.”

“Do you think Charlie will go for it? Like you said, he doesn't have a mate yet. Maybe he'll meet someone while he's out and about. It's not like he's banished—far from it. He'll still return for Musters and special meetings. Still check in. You can travel back and forth to visit with him and help him out. Hell, spend winters with him, if you'd like. This is me showing my faith in him, that I *trust* him to act in my stead for the pack. A very public show of faith and trust.”

“He's also the strongest Prime Alpha we have, excludin' the two of us,” Badger noted. “The only other Prime Alpha, besides us, that I know of, currently in our pack.”

Duncan slowly nodded. “There is that.”

“What are ye plannin’ on tellin’ him?”

“Exactly what I’ve told you,” he said. “I refuse to pit people against each other. That’s nonsense. Charlie’s still young. Younger than both of us. Not even half my age.”

“He made me promise to keep livin’,” Badger quietly said. “After I lost Tahlia. Told me he’d need me one day.”

“And nothing I’m asking of you breaks that promise. If you don’t want to be Pack Alpha, become my second and then become his one day. Continuity of power. I’m not ready to step aside yet but if we make it clear to him and to everyone else now that he’s already my chosen successor—”

“It’ll help discourage outsiders who come sniffin’ around thinkin’ they can institute a hostile takeover. Because he’ll already have loyalty amongst the pack.”

They’d already killed four such men over the years who’d refused to take a knee to Duncan and demanded he yield to them.

They’d sent their heads back to their families and former packs, with stern warnings not to fuck with the Targhee Pack. That you come in friendship or don’t come at all.

It’d been over fifteen years since the last one tried. Their pack was even larger now, with more shifters joining them and taking knees every year at their annual Muster as weak packs fell financially, or dissolved due to violence or even natural disasters.

Duncan nodded. “Exactly. Aren’t you tired of the rogues who are left causing trouble and killing people for bullshit reasons? Like that crazy corgi asshole, Faegan Lewis.”

Badger sighed. “Yeah. Ye can say that. Been there. Don’t recommend it.” He touched the scar on his face.

“Together, the three of us, we can build something that will stand strong. As strong as these damned mountains. For future generations. We can be a refuge for our kind and their kin as the world closes in on them. We’ll do things right. We’ve already got a damned good start. That’s why so many people have moved to join our pack, because they’re sick of the

bullshit elsewhere and they just want to live in peace.” He held out his hand. “Please?”

Badger studied his hand for a long time before finally reaching out and shaking with him. “Deal. But I don’t ever wanna be pack Alpha. I’m tellin’ ye that right now. Don’t want that responsibility.” He choked up. “I promised Charlie I’d keep livin’ but I can’t guarantee you that something might happen one day makes me renege on that.”

“Or maybe one day you’ll meet a woman who helps heal your heart. Did you ever think about that?”

Badger heavily sighed. “Hard for me to think about any other woman when the only one I’ve ever wanted is long since rotted away in a cairn on a moor in Scotland.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Badger tipped the glass up, draining it and setting it on Duncan’s desk before tapping the rim with his finger. “Another, if ye please.”

Duncan poured it and added more to his own glass. “Do you remember the old woman we ran into at that pub that night? Not long before Louisa and I left for America?”

Badger snorted. “Barmy ole twat, is what she was. Mind pickled by booze.” He pointed at Duncan. “And ye were daft enough to hand her coins!”

He shrugged. “I felt sorry for her.”

“She was off her nut. Claimin’ to be a soothsayer like she was one o’ the Weird Sisters from *Macbeth*.” He snorted. “God, what was it that she ‘predicted,’ now?”

Duncan leaned back in his chair, studying his glass. “I don’t remember, exactly.”

Badger laughed. “Wonder whatever happened to her. I saw her go straight to the bar and buy herself a bottle with what ye gave her.” He shook his head. “And ye *knew* she would do that. Why’d ye even pay her? Charlie and I were about to shoo her away.”

Duncan shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't miss the coins. Thought it was a gesture that might make someone's life a little better before I departed for good."

"Ye always were a softy." He cackled. "But then again, nothin' ye've done so far's been wrong, so I guess it's not fer me to say ye were wrong about any of it. Every move ye've made's been right."

"Can you bring Charlie here later today for the three of us to talk?"

"Aye. I will."

Once Badger departed Duncan thought again about that old woman, staring out his office window as he remembered the events of that night.

Dewi.

The child his mate was pregnant with now would be their second, a little girl. If Chelsea's predictions continued to bring him such good results...

Well, perhaps two more after this. *If* Louisa wanted them. The benefit of Louisa being a shifter was her ability to tell rather accurately when it was safe and when she was fertile. He had no desire to keep her pregnant all the time. But she loved being a mother and had already mentioned trying again at least one more time.

Only time would tell, he supposed.

Later that afternoon, when Badger and Charlie arrived, Duncan indicated for them to take a seat. "I've already talked to Badger about this, and now I'd like to talk to you." He told Charlie his idea and watched the younger man school his expression, the Prime intently listening, processing.

When he finished, Duncan sat back. "What do you think?"

Charlie glanced at Badger first, who nodded. "You're saying you'd like to make me your heir to inherit the pack? What if you have a Prime Alpha son?"

"If I did, he would still be, what, at least over a hundred years younger than you. He wouldn't be anywhere close to

being prepared to take over a pack of our size at that age. A pack even larger still by then. If I did, well, he could become your second with the understanding he'd eventually take over one day, should he want to. That would give him time to learn from all of us. And if you find a mate and have a Prime Alpha son, he can become his second, and so on. There's no reason we can't have bloodless transitions."

"Think about it," Badger said to Charlie. "No more fightin'. No more scrappin' for every bit o' land and respect the way they do still back in the old country. No more senseless bloodshed. A new way forward. Duncan ain't steered us wrong yet. Weren't we just talkin' the other day about how much easier life is now than before we came over? Never *dreamed* we'd have it so easy, or pockets and bellies so full, right?"

Charles Bleacke stood and walked over to Duncan's office window, staring out it. "That's a lot of responsibility."

"And I'm fine with you taking your time to give me an answer," Duncan assured him. "Or if you say yes now and later decide you don't want to do it, I won't hold it against you as long as you help me select someone to take your place and train them, teach them what you know. But you and Badger and I all know what it used to be like. We're old enough to remember those bad times. Not just fighting among our own kind, but having to keep our heads against the feckin' Brits."

One of the few times Duncan let his old accent seep through. He preferred people think he was an American and had worked hard in the immediate months after arriving to drop his native brogue.

"We're richer now than anything we could have ever dreamed of when we were pups, and we're *still* not even close to the upper echelons of what's possible," Duncan continued. "But I want us to be there. I want us to be able to buy politicians to help keep us safe in the future. Even put our own people into office. Can you imagine what we could do right out in the open without ever exposing ourselves if we have that kind of protection in place? How the pack's children could thrive without fear?"

Charlie drained his glass and turned to them. “When are you thinking about retiring? I don’t think I’m ready for that level of responsibility yet.”

“Not any time soon. But I don’t want to spend my whole life in command. I’ve damned well earned the right to enjoy the fruits of our labors. I want to raise my pups and not have to look over my shoulder at who might be trying to climb the ladder behind me. And, naturally, when it’s time for you to take over, I’ll happily take a knee to you in front of everyone so they see you’re my rightful successor. I’ll also be happy to be a private advisor to you, if you want me to.”

“As will I,” Badger said. “It can all be yours, Charlie.”

“Think about this as a new tradition,” Duncan said. “You can choose your successor, and so on. Meanwhile, you build something that you get to run and control with my blessings. You get to help grow our pack. And that gives you even more legitimacy when you later take over as pack Alpha. Why would anyone doubt your abilities by then? We point to your accomplishments, that you are largely responsible for what we have, and that you rightly deserve to lead because you’ve proven yourself.

“Another thing to think about—if we do this, when there are rumors about others who want to start a pack of their own? We quietly approach them, encourage them, give them seed money if they insist on leaving, provide advice, support. Help them grow. Tell them there’s no need to fight for it. Mentor them. Treat it not as competition but as insurance for all of us. Emphasize to other Primes who join or are born into our pack that if we work together we all prosper because it’s not a finite pie where the slices disappear. There is plenty of room for us all to grow. There doesn’t need to be a fight for control when this is a huge damned country. We pledge to band together to protect the pack at large from outsiders who think they can come in and take over.”

“But if they decide to oppose us?” Charlie asked.

“We crush ’em,” Badger said, sharply nodding. “Make a highly visible example out of ’em. like those others. Except I

think Duncan's right. We build loyalty and anyone causin' trouble will be run out by the pack members before they can even gain a foothold. Because it'll be no secret that if someone wants to go off and start a pack that we'll be happy to help them. Make it *profitable* to work with us, not against us."

"Exactly," Duncan said. "As our pack grows and prospers, so will their loyalty."

Charlie walked over to the desk and stuck out his hand to Duncan. "Deal."

Duncan stood and shook with him. "Good man."

Charles dropped to one knee and tipped his head back. "I pledge myself to you, the Targhee Pack Alpha. I serve you and this pack."

Badger rose from his chair and joined him. "As do I. I pledge myself to you, the Targhee Pack Alpha. I serve you and this pack."

Duncan rounded the desk and touched first Charlie's, then Badger's throats, motioning for them to stand. "Another round of drinks, gentlemen? To celebrate?"

Charlie smiled. "I'll drink to that."



Now

Duncan ran all day, only stopping to drink, not shifting back. He found the property's boundary and ran along it, circling the property multiple times, stretching his limbs and his tongue lolling in his mouth as he exhausted himself.

Sometimes, he felt more alive shifted than he did on two legs.

Now, anyways.

Since losing Louisa.

He hated remembering the sound of his own howls that horrible day as Charlie and Duncan pinned him to the dusty mountain road while others made their way down the slope to see if a miracle had happened.

If she'd managed to survive, to escape the wreckage.

And how it'd taken Charlie and Duncan both using the full force of their Prime powers, with other Alphas helping them, to keep him subdued and under their control, begging him to let them take him back to the pack compound so he didn't see.

If Duncan could have, he would have ended his life right then and there.

Sometimes he wished Badger and Charlie had given in to his mournful, howling pleas to kill him.

Dewi.

In those moments he hadn't been thinking about the old woman, much less her words.

He'd barely been thinking about anything except grief and dying.

Then a few short years later, the afternoon he'd sat in his car on the mountain road and stared down at the river, *then* he'd thought about her words in the pub that night.

Love abides where cowardice fails
Blood is thicker than treachery
Greater love than even father for child
Giving up, selfless sacrifice, will ensure future
victory

He'd been convinced taking that last drive would fulfill many other parts of her predictions to him that night.

Badger being forced to step up.

The only thing Duncan had wondered about as his foot stomped on the accelerator was never knowing what or who Dewi was, much less her grazer.

It'd only taken him 47 years to find out, in the first few sentences spoken to him after all those decades.

By their pack's only grazer.

The mate of Dewi.

The impossible daughter of his youngest, Chelsea, who'd been murdered years ago during his absence, two and a half decades after he'd tried to die.

Their fourth and youngest child they'd named after that old woman while, at the time, he hadn't been really thinking about her much. Not directly.

Back in the present, Duncan slowed to a walk as dusk crept through the forest and he neared the Thompson homestead. It was tempting to spend days or weeks here, but he should return to Florida now that Tully was gone.

Dewi needed him.

His pack needed him.

His family needed him.

Louisa, love, how I miss you mightily.

He threw back his head and howled his endless grief to the skies.

CHAPTER TEN

BADGER

BADGER WAS in the middle of fixing dinner that evening when Dewi walked into the kitchen.

“Any news from Da?” she asked.

Badger nodded. “He’s flying back tomorrow morning. Staying in Knoxville tonight.”

“Did she...” She didn’t finish.

Badger nodded again. “Aye. Early this morning. Before dawn. He didn’t get any sleep last night so he’s gonna be wantin’ a bit o’ sleep before he heads back.”

He felt more than heard Dewi’s weighted sigh as she climbed onto one of the stools in front of the counter. “Is he okay?”

“As well as anyone can be in that situation, I s’pose.”

She slowly nodded, reaching over to play with the pen they used for the grocery list, spinning it in front of her on the counter. He didn’t stop what he was doing, knowing damned well from her tell, one she’d had since she was a kid, that she would speak again when she was ready.

A few minutes later, she did. “You don’t think he’ll...”

She didn’t finish but she didn’t have to.

Badger gentled his tone. “I seriously doubt he will, lass. He loves you and yer brothers fiercely. He feels badly he wasn’t here for all those years. And he’s lookin’ forward to all

the new great-grands he's about to meet. I think it's safe and I'd be honest with ye if I didn't think it was."

She nodded but still looked worried.

"Don't fash yerself, Dew. Duncan's a strong man but what he went through, no man could have made it to the other side without risking his sanity. I should know. Had he been a human he might have turned to drink or drugs, or given up entirely, but he just...turned. He had a lot of time to come to grips with what happened while he roamed out there in the wild. And now, knowin' what he does, he's determined to hold on to life as strongly as he held on to the past."

She didn't speak for a few minutes. "How long before I should ask Aaron to come down with Lowri?"

"Whenever ye feel ye should. He's yer enforcer—he knows the rules. It's what he signed up for."

"You know what I mean."

"Well, he formally presented Lowri to Duncan. And he's on the expanded pack council. Depends on how strict ye want to be about it, given the circumstances."

"I don't want to interrupt their grieving."

"Then leave it up to Aaron. Ask him to keep ye posted. He's a reasonable sort. Always did like Aaron. Glad he found his mate." He smiled. "She sounds feisty. I think I'm gonna like her, too."

"I'd like to have a meeting soon," Dewi said. "Of everyone stationed in this region. Him, Carl and Mateo, Beck, Joaquin and Martin, Stig and Elliot. Drew and Jonathan. Ed and Floyd." She played with the pen, almost sending it off the counter but she snatched it back from the edge in time and resumed spinning it. "And you and Da, *duh*."

"An 'on the same page' kind of meetin'?"

"Yeah." Another weighty sigh. "Make sure there's no problems. Manage...expectations. Regarding my own...expecting." She looked down at her baby bump with a frustrated expression he also knew too damned well.

He finally stopped what he was doing and focused wholly on her. “Dew, ye know they’re behind ye a thousand percent, right? No one thinks yer gonna be slackin’.”

“But I need to meet with everyone before.” She met his gaze. “I also need to have in-person meetings with the others. Group them. Guys in the northeast, and the ones out west and the northwest. Maybe take a few days and fly out. Peyton wants me to visit, right? Make it a work trip. And have a video call with Alvarez and Ramirez. I’d like everything wrapped up down there no later than twelve months. Get them back in the States for good. Besides, people already know them. Having them working up here will go a long way to helping families with their resettlements.”

In essence, the North American continent had been divvied into four quarters decades ago in relation to the enforcers, with Canada falling into the northeast and northwest quarters. The two most populated areas were Florida and its immediate surroundings, and the northwest because of the pack compound. But most of the packmates in the northwest either lived inside of or within 100 miles of the pack compound, and a heavy enforcer presence really wasn’t needed there. Franco handled that end of Canada, Bob Axelrod handled along the coast and inland from Seattle all the way down to northern California, and Dan Cummings, who was in charge of the national forrest next to the pack compound, was also one of Dewi’s enforcers.

Because of Trent being located there, he or even Gillian frequently handled minor disputes that an Enforcer would normally deal with in one of the other territories. Rarely, things progressed a point that Peyton was called in.

Things rarely progressed to that point because no one wanted to be on the Pack Alpha’s radar for something negative.

Although with their pack steadily growing, Badger knew it was in Dewi’s five-year plan to add an additional full-time enforcer to the pack compound.

Just not right now.

Not with everything else going on.

She wouldn't have added Stig and Elliot had Peyton not mandated it, even though it made sense.

Admittedly, Dewi was gun-shy of trusting strange Prime Alphas in the wake of the Endquist attack and Badger didn't blame her.

He also tried not to step on her toes too much in terms of challenging her authority. She wasn't twelve anymore, when she ran nearly every decision she made past him and Beck first because she didn't trust herself or wasn't sure what course of action to take.

He tossed her a piece of raw carrot, which she deftly snagged out of the air with a smile and immediately started munching on it.

"Ye could two-birds and all that crap the meeting with Aaron and them," he said. "Have the crew from the northeast meet ye in Virginia or someplace. Save Aaron a special trip down, and save Floyd and the others having to come all the way to Florida."

This felt a lot like those early days with her, how she'd sit there in that very spot doing her homework while talking to him or Beck, whoever was home with her at the time, bouncing things off them.

She's not a little girl anymore, but she'll always be my little girl.

"I like that idea," she said, sliding off the stool. "I'll start in the southwest, hit Idaho, then the northeast, then home. Peyton will be happy, I'll get face time with the other Enforcers, and all before my water breaks. Thanks!"

She detoured around the counter to give him a peck on the cheek, stole another couple of pieces of carrot, and continue on toward the office where he heard the door shut a moment later.

Ah, Tahlia, I miss ye, love. I wish we coulda had a bunch of our own.

Then he shut down that line of thinking, because it always led him to darker thoughts.

Like how if it hadn't been for Charlie Bleacke all those years earlier, Badger might have followed Duncan's path.

Except he likely would have finished the job.



THE NEXT AFTERNOON, Dewi and Ken had gone to be with Tamsin for her latest ultrasound and checkup with the doctor, as well as for Dewi to get her own checkup and to be there for Nami's, leaving Badger alone at home.

Badger was in the kitchen when he heard the gate chime sound, and he glanced at his app to see it was Duncan's code.

"There ye are," Badger said when Duncan walked in a few minutes later. "Ye all right, then?"

Duncan slowly nodded. "I suppose." But his friend's dark and weighty mood told Badger otherwise.

"Spill it." Badger pulled two bottles of Guinness from the fridge, opened them, and handed one to Duncan, lightly tapping bottles with him.

Duncan set his overnight bag on the floor and settled onto one of the stools at the counter. "There's a lot I'm still sorting out," he finally said after taking a few long pulls from the bottle. "But of immediate concern is what the Thompson family told me one of the men who attacked them said. About having a cousin in a drug cartel in Mexico and them looking for 'strange people.'"

Badger slowly nodded. "Aye. That matches what Peyton's said he's learned. Did you call him?"

"This morning, before my flight." Duncan picked at the label on his bottle. "I keep going back to my gut tells me we aren't finished with them. That we might need to go on the offensive. That it's all related to the attack on the compound."

"The uncle? Abundio?"

“Or his daughter. The one who took over business operations.”

“Miranda,” Badger said. “She apparently poked around at Carl and Mateo’s old apartment.”

“That would also fit with someone making electronic queries, right? That it would be someone younger?”

“Unless Abundio hired someone to do it, or asked one of his people. On paper, that company’s squeaky clean. As clean as any mining and logging corporation of that size can be, I s’pose.”

“There wasn’t another brother, was there? Or a son who might take over the cartel?”

“Not so far’s I know.”

Duncan slowly shook his head. “It’s too neat. Too tidy.”

Badger arched a scruffy eyebrow at him. “An’ we’re not talking about this with Dewi...why?”

“Because I don’t *know*.” Duncan took another drink. “And I don’t want to add anything to her plate right now. I don’t like the way this *feels*, though. It doesn’t sound plausible that Manuel Segura disappears with two of Abundio’s best men and *no* one comes looking for them?”

“We don’t know they weren’t lookin’. We took out pretty much all his top guys in Idaho. He’s the only one who knew the truth about what he saw, besides whatever he told to Abundio and Miranda. We know for a fact that Carl and Mateo told us the truth. You and I and Dewi all checked—they’re not lyin’.”

“I’m not saying don’t trust them. But things could have developed in the interim. Or there may have been behind-the-scenes machinations they weren’t privy to.”

“But they knew Abundio’s men. And said like as not Abundio would replace them immediately with barely a gripe about the inconvenience.”

“*Hmm*.” Duncan slowly shook his head. “I know we’ve got a lot going on right now, but let’s definitely keep this

simmering on the back burner.”

“And outta Dewi’s hair?”

Duncan smirked. “For now.”

“Feels like the old days again, in a way,” Badger said. “Me an’ you.” He sighed. “I miss Charlie somethin’ fierce.”

“I know. Me, too. I’m sorry I wasn’t here.”

“*Ah*, we’re not doin’ *that* again, ye feckin’ twat,” Badger snorted, reaching over to tap bottles with him again. “Past is past and can’t change what happened. All that matters is yer back, and at the perfectly right time. As if the Goddess Herself planned it.”

Duncan slowly nodded. “Yeah. Like it was foretold.”

“Eh, what?”

“Nothing,” Duncan said, draining his bottle. He tossed it in the recycling bin and grabbed another one from the fridge. “I’m going to take a shower and unpack. Need any help with dinner?”

“Naw, I’ve got it.”

But as Duncan grabbed his bag and left the kitchen, Badger couldn’t help there was...something else. Something different about his friend from before.

Well, sitting through something like that will sour any man with a heart, I guess.

He went back to working on dinner prep, shoving those thoughts out of his mind.

Because if he didn’t, his thoughts would drag him into thinking about his own Tahlia.

And those were memories he didn’t want to relive right now.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MIRANDA

MIRANDA SEGURA TAPPED AN ELEGANTLY LACQUERED red nail against the paper currently sitting atop a file folder on the desk in her home office in her condo. Deep in thought, she let her eyes unfocus and the printed words blurred across the page, devolving into illegible nonsense.

Much like the various threads tangled in her mind at this moment.

Nothing made sense.

At all.

Not unless she was completely willing to suspend her belief in the world at large and entertain ideas that would normally be written off as insanely ludicrous fairy tales.

Ideas such as humans weren't the only intelligent race of beings populating the earth, and that those other...*things* freely walked among humans.

Masqueraded as humans.

But if this was true...

How could she best get her hands on one to start testing them? Or to sell them to the highest bidder so they could test them?

And how to accomplish all of that *without* her father finding out about it?

She had a couple of lower-level informants from Manuel's cartel operations keeping their ears to the ground. While not

well placed, a few of them had family in the States and were also making quiet inquiries.

Then again, most of the remaining cartel personnel were lower-level, because Manuel's best men died in Idaho.

Leaning back in her chair, she laced her fingers together and stared up at the ceiling for a long moment and pretended she was settled in her father's chair behind his desk at the his compound.

A place that she wished she could occupy as the rightful heir and owner and not just as a daughter being allowed to sit there by her father.

None of this other stuff was business she would ever dare conduct around him. She wanted him to know nothing of her thoughts about what was going on, no risk of any of his men rifling through her things and bringing it to his attention.

She loved her father fiercely but knew he would definitely snoop if he suspected she was up to something he didn't have a hand in controlling either directly or from the shadows.

And none of this was easily explained to him. If she told him about any of it he would—rightfully—strip her of all corporate power and appoint someone else to be his successor in the business. Or, worse, perhaps sell it outright. Because Manuel had failed so miserably in his quixotic quest that now any discussions of the reality of it were rightfully tainted by doubts and derision.

No, best to conduct this entire enterprise cautiously and keep it clandestine.

Only if it bore fruit she could pluck and sell would she consider talking to her father about it.

Even then, likely not. This could be *her* new empire. Certainly, the corporation her father had started and built would serve as the lynchpin in her personal success going forward, but this new thing...

This...*strange* thing...

This would be *all* hers.

Her future legacy.

She smiled as she thought about the potential power that might one day be hers. Not just monetary and political power—literal power.

Manuel was an idiot.

Past-tense, because of course she believed he was dead. Her cousins Manuel and Raul had both been wastes of flesh. Had she been in their positions, she would have a *literal* empire at her fingertips by now.

She also would have had them killed long ago.

But they'd been older than her, and men. So of course there were different standards. Allowances made that she as a woman never could have survived. They'd wasted their opportunity.

Certainly, she understood why her father walked away from the cartel and turned his back on his siblings when their father died. Building a life on the fringes of society with an illicit undertaking wasn't an easy way to earn a living no matter how lucrative it might be.

Still, the money was nice. Her father had mastered the art of bending people to his will commercially and financially and even legislatively sometimes, but without the worries of constantly looking over his shoulder to spot if law enforcement or competing cartels were bearing down on him.

She reached for her phone and tapped one of the contacts, waiting while the call connected. "Aunt Lucia? It's Miranda. I just wanted to call and check on you..."

Twenty minutes later, Miranda finally managed to get off the phone with the woman but she had answers.

Unfortunately, it left Miranda with still more questions.

Manuel was still out of contact, and Miranda now felt absolutely certain he was dead, even though she didn't share those thoughts with her aunt.

What she wasn't certain of, no matter what she'd told her father, was if Carl and Mateo, the two men who'd

accompanied Manuel on this useless little joyride, were also dead. Or if they'd had a hand in Manuel's "disappearance."

She had no proof of any of their fates.

But from what she could ascertain, Mateo's little sister, Brianna, was no longer attending university. In fact, she was apparently no longer in the country. And Carl and Mateo had been oddly agreeable about the entire venture. Not immediately deriding Manuel's ideas, like the average person might, but almost as if they held insider knowledge they didn't wish to reveal.

That posed a conundrum for Miranda.

Because to pique her father's interest in allowing further inquiries into this meant a delicate balancing act between posing reasonable questions he could swallow in terms of the answers possibly protecting their business, while herself not appearing overly eager to answer those questions. To defer to him totally and let him believe it was his decision.

Especially since she'd let him believe she was fine with ending that line of inquiry due to the risk of drawing unwanted attention upon them from any sector.

She needed a viable reason to resurrect the inquiries in such a way as to make sense to her father.

The way she'd left it, she'd told her father she didn't know much about the girl. The truth was, of course she did, and she'd known which university she'd attended.

Her father might not have cared about facts such as that, but Miranda did. She was fully aware that vulnerable points such as little sisters could easily be leveraged against people, and had Carl and Mateo ever needed prodding, or appeared to show signs of moving against them, Miranda wanted the advantage of knowing exactly who and where the girl was.

After thinking about it for a few minutes, she finally hit upon an idea and opened her personal laptop.

Twenty minutes later, she had a shiny new fake e-mail address with which she'd sent her public work e-mail address a message.

My name is Rocio Soto, and I am a cousin of Brianna and Mateo Soto. I have been attempting to contact them for months without success. I know Brianna once said that Mateo worked for your company. I apologize for this intrusion, but letters are returning unopened, and when I traveled to Mexico and visited their apartment not only were they not living there, but the manager said they had abandoned it. I am concerned about them, naturally. I need to discuss my father's estate with them because there was a sum left to them and I wish to make sure they receive it. If you have any information about them that you could give me, or if you could please contact them and ask them to call me or message me at this e-mail, I would be most grateful...

The number was an Internet phone number she created, located in Texas supposedly, but it forwarded to a burner phone her father wasn't aware she had. She'd purchased it over a year ago on a trip to the States, and she used it hooked to Wi-Fi, but the calls looked like they were from the US. She'd also created an online profile to attach to the e-mail address that said the person was in Texas, and she used a screen capture of a stock photo image for the picture.

Her father was eighty-two years old and far from computer savvy. He didn't even like using his smartphone.

The chances of him suspecting anything were slim. The chances of him suspecting her being behind it were even slimmer.

Smiling to herself, she logged into her work computer and printed the e-mail to take with her later when she visited her father.

While her conscience wanted to rebel at the ruse, Miranda easily justified it.

He's old and will only get in my way. It is long past time he step aside. Were I a son he would have turned operations over to me years ago.

He'd brought this on himself.

It was time for her to make her own fortune, no matter how she had to achieve it.

If that meant climbing over her father to do it, so be it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NAMI

NAMI COULDN'T HELP FEELING apprehensive as the day of Reggie's birthday party approached. She both wanted to attend and yet tried to think of excuses to get out of it.

If she wasn't there, nothing bad could happen.

Right?

It meant Dewi and Badger and Duncan wouldn't be able to assess Dania to see if she really was a shifter.

Just because the girl got a little bitey doesn't mean she's a wolf.

That was her story and she was sticking to it.

By Sunday afternoon, Nami could barely contain her nerves.

Or her bladder.

Even though she went before they left the house, she asked Beck to stop at a convenience store on their way to Reggie's parents' home.

And bless him, Beck didn't even hint at being impatient with her about it.

I really got myself a good one.

"What time are Dewi and them coming?" Nami asked once they were on their way again.

"I told them 3:15. Not too late, but not right when most everyone else is arriving. I want to scope out the scene first, in

case Joaquin and I need to give Dewi a heads-up.”

“You make it sound like a military operation,” she said.

He glanced over at her. “Babe, it kinda is. If Dania is a shifter, or has strong shifter genes for whatever reason, we *need* to know that. And she’s got two little sisters. If Dania is a shifter, we’ll convince them to let us homeschool her, for now.”

“Convince?” That’s a funny way to pronounce ‘hypnotize.’”

“It’s Prime powers, and you know it.”

“So Dewi and Badger will just tell her parents what to do?”

“Duncan’s coming, too. And I don’t know what you want me to say. *This* is what we do. While it doesn’t happen very often, if we find a shifter born to clueless parents, we figure out a way to bring them all in. Or, at least have them move close enough to other shifters so we can interact with them and the child. It’s a rare occurrence but it’s happened enough in the past we have a plan in place. It’s worked every time so far.”

“Then what happens?”

“Once the child is old enough to understand what’s going on and knows not to shift at inappropriate times, and why, then we can back off. But can you imagine what would happen if in the middle of a crowded lunchroom at school they got into a fight with someone and accidentally shifted in the middle of it? Do you understand how deep of shit we’d be in? Especially now?”

“Everyone has cell phones with cameras. Places have CCTV. You can Prime a couple of witnesses to misremember or forget something. It’s harder to track down cameras. And once that footage is in the wild, there’s no getting it back. That might be the only good thing about AI exploding right now is footage can be blamed on that. But blaming AI doesn’t help if the government starts snooping and gets their hands on someone and starts experimenting on them.”

“What if Dania’s just being a kid and acting out?”

Beck shrugged. “Then no harm, no foul.” He stopped for a red light and looked at her over the top of his sunglasses. “And regardless, I finally get to meet more of my extended family.” He smiled.

“Poor Lu’ana. With me and Dewi and Tamsin there today, I just know Imani’s gonna be after her to give her another grandbaby.”

“I don’t think Imani gets much say in the matter, hon.”

“You know what I mean. Pushy. Not in bad way, a loving way, but I know Reggie’s not ready for another one yet.”

“And just how do you know that?”

“Malyah told me. Joaquin told her. Joaquin and Reggie got to talking the other day, I guess, when Malyah and Joaquin went over there for a visit.”

The light turned green and Beck shook his head as he hit the gas. “Glad I lived to see the day you don’t hate Joaquin.”

“I never *hated* him. Not really.”

He arched an eyebrow at her over the top of his shades. “*Seriously?* I recall some disturbingly graphic and specific threats you leveled at him in Idaho when he and Malyah revealed they were mated. It took every last ounce of strength I had to hold on to you to keep you from killing him.” One corner of his mouth had turned up in the slightest of smirks that always melted her.

“I can be angry at someone and still love them. Besides, Joaquin’s redeemed himself. Case in point, Da’von made it to adulthood without me strangling that boy.” She sighed. “And, yes, I love him now, all right? He’s not that bad. Joaquin, I mean. Although, I suppose that could also apply to Da’von. And Joaquin is family. He loves Malyah and takes good care of her. He treats her like a princess. And I know he won’t step out on her. I can’t ask for more than that.”

“Did you put Reggie through that kind of treatment?”

“Not quite. I’ll admit I was a momma hen, though.”

“*Was?*”

She snorted. “Hey, I raised those kids. They might be my siblings, but they are *my* kids. It’s hard to let go. I want better for all of them than Momma got with our no-good father.”

Nami hated even *thinking* about that man. Obviously, it wasn’t all men who were like that. Nami knew that. In the luck of the genetic draw, she and her siblings had managed to be fathered by a dud.

Beck reached over and squeezed her hand. “If it means anything, baby, I think you did an amazing job raising them. They all turned out fantastic. And Reggie is a wonderful guy. I’m glad he’s in our pack even if he doesn’t know he is.”

Heat filled her cheeks, and not just from Beck’s touch. Sometimes she still wanted to pinch herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. She had the family of her dreams now, a large extended family who showed up for her and her siblings, and after so many years of focusing on survival and shouldering the burden alone so her siblings wouldn’t have to, it almost felt like a sinful luxury to be recognized and validated for her years of work and sacrifice and struggle.

He cocked his head as he studied her. “If you want, I could ask Dewi, Badger, or Duncan to give Imani a gentle suggestion to back off on the baby-pushing efforts with Lu’ana and Reggie.”

Nami considered it. “I’ll let you know. Let me see how bad she is today. I mean, please don’t get me wrong, I love her to death. Her and her husband both. And I *get* it. I might even be cheering her on and adding my own two cents if I was still clueless and didn’t know everything I do now.” She snorted. “But could you *imagine*? If the worst happens and Bebe *is* a shifter, and then Reggie’s dealing with a baby on the way *and* knowing that about Bebe?” She gasped. “And what if they have two of them who are shifters?”

“Again, we can help out with that, hon. That’s the plus side of having three Primes in our immediate family living close by. Not to mention trusted babysitters or daycare won’t be an issue for any of us.”

Imani and Davis Starkey owned five acres east of Brandon. Once farmland and orange groves, their rural neighborhood was surrounded by other properties of several acres each, and an eclectic mix of older, modest homes all the way up to new McMansions. Their house looked like it'd been built back in the 50s, but had been added onto throughout the years and was now large and sprawling. The pole barn looked relatively new, however, with a large, newish Class A RV parked under one end of it, and four horses grazed in the pasture.

“*Wow,*” Beck said.

“Right? They picked it up as a property tax foreclosure about twenty years ago. He did most of the additions and other work himself. He used to be a contractor. Retired now.”

“Are those their horses?”

“One belongs to a cousin, I think, two are theirs, and I’m not sure if the other is family or a boarder.”

There were at least twenty cars parked in the yard in front of the house, including Reggie’s, Joaquin’s, and Da’von’s, with plenty of room for more. Nami knew everyone would be out on the lanai around the pool or in the backyard, so she led Beck through the gate in the wooden privacy fence while he carried the casserole she’d made and their present for Reggie.

Nami opened the door to the screened lanai for Beck, since his hands were full. He was just stepping through it when they heard Da’von call out. “Look out, Beck! Incoming!”

“*Unca Beck!*” Bebe happily shrieked as she streaked across the lanai and tackled him around the legs.

Nami managed to snag the casserole dish so Beck didn’t drop it as others who’d witnessed the toddler mauling started laughing.

Da’von hurried over, scooping the girl into his arms where she tried to lunge for Nami next.

“Auntie Nami!” Bebe squealed.

Someone swooped in to take the casserole dish from Nami, and she glanced back to see it was Brianna, who gave her a knowing smile. Nami took Bebe from Da'von and only then realized Bebe was wearing one of her "wuff suits."

Nami's stomach tensed, her nerves tautly strained. "Are you a little wolf today, baby girl?"

Bebe threw her head back and howled, Beck and Brianna softly joining her and making Da'von and others gathered nearby laugh while Nami wanted to stomp on Beck and Brianna's feet to shut them up.

Nami blew a raspberry against Bebe's cheek. "You gonna go swimmin' later?"

She threw her arms in the air. "Doggy paddle!" she squealed.

"Oh! Well, that would make sense."

Lu'ana walked over. "You can't swim in wuffie," she told Bebe as she took her from Nami. "You have to put your swimsuit on first."

Bebe pouted. "Wuffies swim!"

Lu'ana looked at Nami. "Sis, help?"

Beck leaned in. "Wouldn't want to be a wet wuffie all day, would you?"

Bebe considered that and finally shook her head. "Did you and Auntie Nami bring your swimsuits?"

"We sure did," Nami said, patting the tote bag over her shoulder. "We're all gonna wear our swimsuits. Okay?"

Finally, Bebe nodded. "Okay!" Then she wanted down and took off after another little girl, who looked older than her by a couple of years.

"Glad I bought two more of those wolf suits as spares," Lu'ana said as they watched Bebe run off. "Did Da'von ever go through a phase like this? Because I don't remember him doing that."

“All kids do,” Beck said, catching Nami’s eye. “In various ways.”

“He did,” Nami fibbed. “But it was some TV show he loved. Robots or something. And you and Malyah had your own interests at the time.”

Someone walked up to ask Lu’ana a question, giving Nami a chance to grab Beck and head inside to deposit Reggie’s present in the living room with others already there, and so she could go to the bathroom.

Again.

Then she found Imani. She’d always envied the older woman, who looked closer to fifty-two than seventy-two, and wore her natural hair in a short afro. And, as she proudly boasted, her lack of grey hair was all her and nothing to do with her hairdresser. Nami couldn’t remember ever seeing her in a wig or with a weave, either, although she did have an amazing collection of stylish hats and fascinators she would don for special occasions.

“Oooh, lookachoo, girl,” the older woman said, hugging Nami. “You’re glowing! Everything okay?”

“Yes, just had a scan this week and she’s perfect, so far.”

“That’s so good!” She leaned in. “Now help me talk your little sister into makin’ me a grandma again, *hmm?* Not that I don’t love you, too, and you know I will spoil your little girl rotten, but you know what I mean, right?”

Nami nervously laughed but instead of committing to an answer, she introduced Beck to her.

She didn’t miss how the older woman looked him up and down, close to a full-on read if she’d ever seen one.

“Very nice to *finally* meet you, Beck,” Imani said, smiling and offering him a hug. “Welcome to the family. Reggie and Lu’ana have told us very nice things about all of you.”

“Thank you for having us, ma’am.”

“Davis is out back fiddling with his grill, if you want to introduce him,” she said to Nami.

“Thanks.”

Nami took Beck’s hand and quickly led him outside through a side door before Imani could start in on the baby plans again.

“*Did I pass?*” Beck silently asked Nami through their mate bond.

“*I think so,*” she silently replied. “*Thank goodness.*”

“*Now I see what you mean about baby pressure.*”

“*Right?*”

They found Davis Starkey on the large, outside unscreened patio area where a gigantic outdoor kitchen, grill, and smoker setup were located. After introducing Beck, one of Reggie’s brothers walked up, and following a quick intro Nami managed to get Beck away before being drawn into a long and overly detailed lecture about smoking and grilling butt rubs of the not-sexy kind.

“He seems really nice,” Beck whispered to her.

“Oh, he is. He’ll also talk your ear off about smoking and grilling, if you let him.”

“Sounds like he and Badger will get along great.”

She laughed. “You ain’t wrong.”

With the major introductions out of the way—and both barriers apparently passed by Beck—Nami started introducing Beck around to people she knew before she then waved Reggie in to help with the ones she didn’t.

Between introductions, Reggie leaned in and dropped his voice. “Did Imani hit you up for help talking Lu’ana into another baby?”

Nami snorted. “Literally almost the first thing out of her mouth.”

He rolled his eyes. “I love her, but *dang*, she’s been hammering us hard lately.”

Nami exchanged a glance with Beck, saying nothing out loud or silently, but arching an eyebrow at him.

His nod in return was a “*you were right*” answer if she ever saw one.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DEWI AND KEN and the others arrived a short time later, including Tamsin, Mateo, and Carl. Nami worried how Imani might receive all of them until she spotted the wide, friendly smile she wore upon shaking Badger's hand first while Lu'ana handled the introductions.

Oh, thank god.

Nami never thought she'd be happy about them using their Prime powers against people she considered family for a reason like this, but there she was.

Imani enveloped Tamsin in a hug before draping an arm around her and taking over to introduce her around. Carl looked around, found Beck, and gave him a head-tip, which Beck returned, before Carl started trailing behind the women.

"Go on," Nami said to Beck with a smile. "You know you want to, wolf man."

He brushed a kiss across her cheeks. "Thanks, babe."

He hustled after Imani and Tamsin and Carl and was trying to look inconspicuous while talking to Carl as Dewi walked up.

"How's Imani today?" Dewi asked.

Nami looked at Dewi's baby bump, then up. "You know, I might be asking you to Prime *her* to ease up before we all leave today."

Dewi snorted, then swore as she noticed she'd dripped something on her shirt. "Dang it! This was clean!" She swiped

at it with her finger, licking it off.

“Is that...cake batter?” Nami asked.

“What? Oh, um...” Dewi’s cheeks flushed with pink, which Nami knew was not *normal*.

“Okay, seriously, *what* is up with you with that, anyway?” Nami asked. “And don’t be Priming me to not ask, either. Just tell me so I stop worryin’, huh?”

Dewi glanced around and dropped her voice. “The doc wants me to gain more weight. Says the baby is fine and everything looks okay, but my metabolism has kicked into overdrive.”

Nami relaxed. “Lucky duck.”

“*Please* don’t tell Ken and them. Or Beck,” Dewi added. “Doc said as long as I can maintain or add a little weight, he won’t rat me out to them. So I’m just running my cravings out as far as they’ll go before I start craving something else.”

Nami arched an eyebrow at her.

“I swear that’s the whole truth, Nami,” Dewi insisted, which Nami admitted amused her.

That this ferocious woman dropped into a younger sibling dynamic with her when there weren’t worse things to worry about.

Like drug cartel assholes chasing them.

Nami draped her arm around Dewi and side-hugged her. “Okay, sugar. But you know you can confide in me, right?”

“I appreciate it.” Dewi glanced around. “That’s Dania over there, right?”

Nami looked. “Yeah. The feisty one.”

handed Tamsin a ball and then ran a few yards away, turning and waiting. Tamsin smiled, tossing it to her. Imani said something to Tamsin, smiled, and started back for the house while Carl stepped in to help Tamsin lower herself to the grass in a shady spot to continue playing with the little girl.

Nami dropped her voice. “You think we can keep Tamsin alive? After her baby’s born?”

“I sure as hell hope so,” Dewi said. “I think losing her would kill Trevor and Elaine.”



THERE WAS, as Nami had anticipated, a glut of food.

It would not be a proper cookout otherwise, and running out of food would be right up there with the biggest of sins.

Which worked out in the wolves’ favor even though all of them had brought plenty of food with them. Ken had even prepared two pans of homemade mac n’ cheese that Imani had warily tasted before declaring it delicious.

For real, not for politeness. And she wasn’t Primed to like it, either.

They were all still eating and chatting, some family playing in the pool and others just sitting or standing around and talking.

Nami had finished her first plateful of food and was settled in a comfortable Adirondack chair, chatting with her sisters for a few minutes before she headed up for tastes of a few more dishes.

“All the food we got here today, I bet we bought out half the grocery stores in the county,” Nami joked.

Lu’ana shifted in her chair. “Remember that day Daddy took us grocery shopping with him?” she asked Malyah.

Malyah nodded. “God, *that* was a day, wasn’t it?”

Nami sat up, her heart racing. “I’m sorry, *what* now? What’re you talking about? I never heard anything about this!” She had zero memories of their father ever going grocery shopping, much less taking her two little sisters with him. Considering he did exactly zero to help out what little he was home, an incident like that surely would have stood out in her mind for its abnormality, if nothing else.

“You weren’t with us,” Lu’ana said. “You weren’t home that day but I don’t remember where you were. It was before Da’von was born, meaning Malyah couldn’t have been more than, what, five? That would have made me about nine. So you might have been working or studying or something. He had a wad of money in his pocket and told us not to say anything or he’d whup us. Hauled us to the grocery store with him, bought a whole bunch of stuff. Told us to get whatever we wanted. Added things to the cart he said he was buying for ‘a friend.’ Diapers, formula, things like that.”

Malyah chimed in. “Then we stopped by some woman’s house and he dropped most of it off there while he made us sit in the car. Including the baby items. We still had way more than what was on Momma’s list, though. We heard him tell the woman we were his nieces, and that our mom was working.”

“Well, that was partly the truth,” Lu’ana said, “because Momma had gone to work. I remember he’d volunteered to watch us so she could pick up an extra shift. Then he stopped and bought us ice cream. Actin’ all sugar-sweet to us by then. He reminded us to be good and not say anything. Especially not to you or Momma. Told us it would get him in trouble for being a nice guy, and we wouldn’t want to be responsible for him not getting to see us again, right?”

Lu’ana snorted in obvious disgust. “I guess when you’re little the price of silence goes down.” She shook her head. “Wonder if those diapers and formula he bought for her were for kids he had with that woman.”

Malyah nodded. “Wondered that, too, when I got older.”

“Wouldn’t shock me if we have a bunch of half-siblings running around out there,” Lu’ana added.

Nami felt pain in her fingers and realized she had them tightly wrapped around the ends of her chair’s armrests, the wood digging into her flesh.

She loosened her grip and flexed her fingers. “Nothing *bad* happened to y’all, though? While you were with him?”

“No,” Malyah said, glancing toward Lu’ana, then meeting Nami’s gaze. Lu’ana didn’t know about any of the wolf stuff, or that Jarome had abducted Malyah and Dewi rescued her. “I guess that’s one good thing, at least,” Malyah added. “He wasn’t around enough to put us in that kind of danger.”

Nami hoped Lu’ana didn’t pick up on the scowl Malyah now wore.

“Thank god for small favors,” Lu’ana said. “Sad that times like that stand out only because he wasn’t around much, so there were few of ’em.”

“I’m *glad* he wasn’t around much,” Malyah grumbled, her tone darkening in a way Nami caught but hoped Lu’ana didn’t. “Hope he rots in prison.”

Lu’ana cackled. “I still *cannot* believe the dumb fuck shot his own balls off!” She grinned. “I mean, that’s karma, right?”

Malyah met Nami’s gaze. “Yeah,” Malyah said. “Guess you could call it that. But why are we talking about *him* when we’ve got three good men who’ve proven most men aren’t like *that* man?” Malyah waved her arm behind her, indicating the gathering as a whole. “We’ve got a whole family of good men who ain’t like that man. Shouldn’t even be wastin’ breath talking about him today.”

“Don’t forget Da’von,” Nami said. “I think he turned out pretty good, too.”

“I’m still shocked you didn’t pitch a fit about Da’von and Brianna getting married so soon,” Lu’ana teased. She wore a sly smile as she nudged Malyah’s foot with hers. “When are you and Joaquin giving Bebe a cousin?”

“Lord, you’re as bad as Imani,” Nami teased.

“Not yet,” Malyah said. “We’re gonna wait. I want to finish my degree first.” Despite already having an accounting degree Malyah was currently back in college and studying for a degree in creative writing. Now that she was married to Joaquin, he could afford for her to do it and not work. Plus, the pack was kicking in money for her tuition.

Malyah had originally studied for her accounting degree because she knew she could get a good-paying job and help support her siblings and take even more pressure off Nami's shoulders. But with money no longer an issue for any of them, Nami was happy her youngest sister could pursue her true passion, which was writing.

Nami was also working on releasing the guilt she still felt over Malyah doing that, putting them all first and going for an accounting degree. Didn't matter that was exactly what Nami had done when their mom died, giving up her dreams to keep them together as a family. One of the reasons Nami had sacrificed was to make sure her siblings never had to.

At least now she could also finally return to school. Nami planned on finishing her architecture degree, which was what she'd been pursuing when their mother died. Ideally, she and Beck would one day build a new house, hopefully close to Dewi, and be able to design it herself. Gillian was in the process of acquiring more land near Dewi's property. Within ten years, they might be able to have their very own large compound right there in Florida, with other pack members living close by.

It would be perfect having Lu'ana and Reggie living there, too, except that would mean difficult logistics to shield them from the wolf stuff.

"Man, you lucked *out*, girl," Lu'ana said to Malyah. "Married a guy rich enough to send you back to school for fun? *Whoo-whee*." She grinned. "Not bad-looking, either. And he's got that *sexy* accent."

"I think we all did good," Malyah said, now apparently unable to stop glancing over at Nami. "Including Da'von."

Nami looked around and spotted Da'von and Brianna standing in a small circle while talking with Ken, Reggie's dad, and one of Reggie's brothers. Da'von stood with his arm draped around Brianna's shoulders and she leaned into him in a way Nami herself knew all too well, because she loved standing next to Beck just like that.

Sometimes it was difficult for her to see her little brother as a man, a husband, potentially a father in the near future.

But if Da'von had his way, once they both graduated, he and Brianna wanted to move to the pack compound in Idaho, where Da'von already had a guaranteed job working for the pack and helping Ken and Gillian with the computer and software systems.

“Yeah,” Nami said. “Brianna’s a sweetheart.”

“But what about you?” Malyah asked Lu’ana. “You said you want another, didn’t you?”

“I do. Reggie’s not ready yet, though. Every time I bring it up, I can tell if he said yes right now it’d only be for me. That’s not fair to him. And let’s be honest, y’all know firsthand Bebe is a handful. Maybe once she’s in kindergarten he might feel ready to try again. I don’t want to wait a bunch of years and have them be drastically different in ages, though. If he decides he doesn’t want another, we’ve already bounced around the idea that eventually he’ll get a vasectomy.”

She flinched and glanced around, lowering her voice. “But whatever you do, do *not* say that around Imani and them, please? Because we already know she’d come down hard on both of us.”

Nami thought about the reasons her little niece might very well be said handful. “Whatever decision you make, make it for the two of you, not for anyone else.”

“Oh, believe me, we will.” Lu’ana dropped her voice to a whisper and leaned in. “I love Imani. You know I do. But she’s pushing to have a whole house full of grandbabies every weekend, and we’re her current focus since we only have Bebe. She’s already asked both of us directly about it today, and dropped even more hints in conversations with others while we were standing *right* there.”

Brianna walked over and Nami waved her in to sit. “Didn’t mean to leave you out, sweetie.”

“Davis was lecturing us about the proper kind of wood to smoke ribs with,” she said as she took a seat. “Thankfully,

Imani rescued me.”

“*Ah*,” the three sisters echoed. “That just means you’re truly considered family, hon,” Malyah added.

“What about Da’von?” Malyah asked, grinning. “Just left him and saved yourself, huh?”

Brianna smiled. “Imani said something along the lines of, ‘Every woman for themselves.’ Oh, and Joaquin made the mistake of walking up and asking about the smoker,” Brianna added. “Just as Imani helped me make my escape. I didn’t have time to warn him.”

“*Oop*.” Malyah jumped up. “I’d better go rescue him.”

She hurried off as Lu’ana and Nami laughed.

“How you doing, sugar?” Nami asked Brianna, mindful of Lu’ana sitting right there.

“This has been a lot of fun. Thank you for including us. And Carl and Mateo and Tamsin, of course. It’s been a welcomed change having a large family. And I think today has been really good for Tamsin. She needs family surrounding her, even adopted family.”

“That poor girl,” Lu’ana said, glancing across the backyard to where Tamsin currently sat on the grass in the shade while Bebe, Dania, and several of the other smaller kids played with and around her.

Overwhelmed by the larger gathering, Tamsin had apparently opted to appoint herself as a watcher of the kids in the yard, which might actually be the best thing for her right now, in Nami’s opinion.

“What kind of monster turns on their daughter like that?” Lu’ana asked as she watched them interacting. “Tamsin is such a sweetheart. It’s horrible what she’s suffered.”

The “clueless human” version of the story was that Tamsin’s father, enraged when she came out to him as gay and married to Maisie after getting pregnant—by IVF with Maisie’s twin brother, Rupert—attacked Maisie and Rupert and killed them and was now on the run. So Tamsin was

staying in the States with them because she was now the daughter-in-law of a dear family friend, and they wanted to protect her until her father was apprehended.

Close enough to the truth for everyone to remember it. Just leaving out the shifter aspects.

It didn't hurt that Bebe loved her Auntie Tam. Tamsin babysat the little girl nearly every weekday. Everyone knew it was good for Tamsin, to keep her busy. And it was good for Bebe more than Lu'ana and Reggie knew, because Tamsin was working with Bebe to teach her how to shift, or figure out if she even could.

That was still up in the air.

Nami only hoped Bebe didn't pick a day like today to finally test those new skills, if it turned out she even could shift.

Actually, Nami was convinced Bebe was just very attuned to her loved ones and imitating them in the only ways she could. That she would turn out not to be a shifter at all.

At least, that was her desperate hope.

Because the last complication she needed in her life with her own baby on the way was another shifter child in the family to worry about, especially one who was parented by two clueless humans.

Lu'ana leaned in. "I think Imani's adopting her," Lu'ana whispered.

"Who?" Nami asked. "Tamsin?"

They watched as Imani walked out to where Tamsin now sat on a large beach blanket in the shade, bringing her a cold bottle of water and a plate of food. While they couldn't hear the exchange, they could tell the older woman was lovingly scolding Tamsin to eat more. Tamsin finally smiled, nodding. Apparently satisfied, Imani returned to the house.

"Yeah," Lu'ana said. "I'm certainly not complaining about that. Gives Imani another baby to focus on besides trying to

squeeze one out of me and Reggie.” She nudged Malyah’s foot with hers. “Watch out, or I’ll sic her on you.”

Malyah snorted. “Naw, we’re good, sis. Joaquin and I want to wait a while.” Malyah caught Nami’s gaze with a “*don’t just sit there, help me*” look, and Nami smiled.

“Well, I hadn’t planned on having one at all,” Nami said, “but Mother Nature has a way of making fools out of all of us.”

I just hope one of those ways isn’t Bebe being a shifter.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CARL

“SORRY WE HAVEN’T BEEN able to spend much time getting to know you better,” Carl said to Reggie. “Life’s just been so hectic lately with Tamsin and her baby due so soon and everything.”

“We understand,” Reggie said, looking around and lowering his voice. “One of the reasons we’re holding off for a while on having another one, too. Life’s hectic right now, especially with Bebe at the age she is.” He glanced down at Lu’ana, as if to seek her confirmation, but Carl recognized that look on her face—she wasn’t totally on board with that plan. “And I’m sure once Tamsin has her baby that she’ll need a break from babysitting for us,” Reggie added.

“Yeah,” Lu’ana finally said. “As y’all well know, Bebe’s a handful. Maybe once she starts school we can talk about another one.” She laughed. “Or maybe Da’von and Brianna will make us aunties and uncles first and Imani can focus on them.”

“Or Joaquin and Malyah,” Reggie said. “I’m surprised Nami didn’t put that man through the wringer the way she did me.”

“He can thank Beck for that, I think,” Lu’ana said, grinning. “At least they didn’t have to hide things from her the way we did.”

“What do you mean?” Mateo asked.

She nervously laughed. “Guess it doesn’t matter much now but when Reggie and I first met, it was that literal lightning

strike.” She looked up at him with an expression of love Carl knew all too well. “We knew immediately we were in love and wanted to get married. I mean, *right* then.”

“I think I proposed to her after less than an hour,” Reggie added.

“Not even thirty minutes,” Lu’ana said. “And I was crazy enough to say yes! But I just...*knew*. Crazy, right?”

Carl forced himself to remain planted right there and focus on the conversation at hand and not immediately run to find Dewi, Duncan, and Badger and update them with this tidbit. “Not so much,” Carl said. “Mateo and I, we kind of felt like that when we met.” He met Mateo’s gaze and knew even without their mate bond that Mateo was already thinking exactly what Carl was thinking about Reggie and Lu’ana’s story. “Love at first sight.”

Reggie nodded. “So you *get* it, right? Like, when I met her and shook her hand that first time, from that second on, *nothing* else existed except her.” He stared at her with blatant love and longing in his gaze. “It killed us to sneak around behind Nami’s back for so long but we knew if we told her that it was love at first sight she would have called us crazy and fought like hell to keep us apart.”

“I love my sister,” Lu’ana said, “don’t get me wrong. She should be *sainted*. I ain’t even kidding. She’s amazing. And I get why she’s overprotective of us, believe me.” Her gaze darkened. “That worthless man on our birth certificates did a number on us all in various ways. But there wouldn’t have been enough money or promises or ways to prove to her we weren’t making a mistake if we let it slip how we felt right from the start. So we pretended to take things slow for her sake.”

“Meanwhile, we were at my place as often as we could sneak away and going at it.” Reggie grinned. “We almost eloped but Lu’ana convinced me to wait because she didn’t want to hurt Nami’s feelings and deny her throwing a wedding for us.

“I mean, my family might have thought it was reckless, too,” Reggie added. “Although, Mom and Dad maybe would have understood. They were sort of love at first sight, too, but they dated for a little while before they got married.”

“Times were different then, though,” Lu’ana reminded him. “And even though your parents were younger than we were, people commonly got married younger back then. Just out of high school.”

“It obviously worked for them, though,” Reggie said. “They been married, what, over fifty years now, and I can’t remember either of them ever not acting like they’re still as completely in love as they were when they got married. We never even heard them argue. Ever.”

Someone called for Reggie and he excused himself after giving Lu’ana a kiss. She looked around, obviously trying to locate Bebe, spotted she was still safe playing with Tamsin and Dania and other cousins, and pulled her focus back to the men.

“So, y’all ever think about adopting?” she asked.

Carl draped his arm around Mateo’s shoulders. “We raised Brianna. And we’re looking forward to being uncles for all the babies on the way.”

“I think that’s one of the reasons why we get along so well with Nami,” Mateo added. “Because we understand what she went through, raising younger siblings.”

She chuckled. “I don’t know if Nami would kiss or kill Da’von if he got Brianna pregnant before they both graduate,” she said. “I’ll also admit I had my doubts about Beck in the beginning, but he’s proven he’s a good man. The whole family has.”

Her smile faded. “Nami’s never been as happy in my entire life as she is right now. I feel bad she spent so many years forced to be a mom to us when it shouldn’t have been her job. She gave up so much for us. I’m *truly* happy for her. And now we have a huge extended family. Funny how that works, huh?” Her gaze clouded a little and Carl glanced around, spotted

Badger, and when they locked gazes, Carl tipped his head to summon the old shifter.

“Funny how?” Carl asked as Badger worked to disengage himself from a conversation with Reggie’s dad. About the smoker, if Carl had to guess.

“That Nami fell for Beck,” Lu’ana said. “And... he’s related to Joaquin, who Malyah fell for. And...” Her gaze narrowed. “And Brianna is *your* sister, and y’all are cousins with—”

Badger hustled up while Carl sharply nodded toward Lu’ana. Badger placed a hand on her shoulder and whispered. “Just stand there a moment, sweetheart, and ignore what we’re sayin’ ’til I say so.” He looked at Carl.

Carl whispered, “She’s putting together that her three siblings all fell for cousins. And did you know she and Reggie basically had a mate bond? And so did Reggie’s mom and dad?”

“*What?*” Badger glanced around and leaned in. “No! No one told me *any* o’ that!” He focused on Lu’ana, holding on to her arm now. “Love, tell me real quick how you and Reggie met. Short version, if ye please.”

She did, Badger’s expression growing more astonished by the word.

“Right,” he grimly said. “Lu’ana, the last couple o’ minutes of conversation didn’t happen. Stay here chattin’ with these two for a few minutes, aye? Yer not gonna remember what we just talked about. And there’s nothin’ at all odd at all about your siblings’ spouses and how they’re all related.”

“Sure.” Her gaze clouded a little in that way Carl recognized was Badger’s Prime power at work.

Mateo and Carl watched Badger hurry back to Reggie’s dad, glance around, and lay his hand on the man’s arm as they had a quiet conversation.

“So when do you think Da’von and Brianna will want to start a family?” Lu’ana asked Mateo, playfully smiling. “Make us all aunties and uncles. You two ever think about adoptin’?”

Carl was too focused on Badger to answer so Mateo stepped in. “I don’t know, Lu’ana. We’re going to be busy being uncles for a while with all the babies on the way. And we raised Brianna. I think that’s one of the reasons why we have such a great rapport with Nami. We understand what that was like.”

Badger apparently received the answers he needed and then darted off, making a beeline for Imani. She was talking to Davy’s wife, Anisha. Badger reached over, placed hands on Imani’s and Anisha’s shoulders, and their faces went blank. Then he started talking with Imani.

Beck popped up behind Carl and Mateo. “What’s going on?” he whispered so low Lu’ana wouldn’t be able to hear, also watching Badger while Mateo continued talking with Lu’ana. “Why does Badger look like he just swallowed a badger?”

“Tell you later,” Carl whispered back.

It looked like Badger Primed Imani next, and he started talking to Anisha.

From there, Badger looked around and headed off around the side of the house and out of sight.

“Do I need to go help him?” Beck asked.

“I don’t think so,” Carl said. “He’ll be back.”

Less than five minutes later Badger returned, his brow furrowed and single blue eye hooded and dark. He touched Lu’ana’s arm. “As always, been great chattin’ wi’ ye, sweetheart. I think ye need a trip to the bathroom.”

“If you’ll please excuse me,” she said. “I need to run to the little girl’s room.”

The men nodded, and as she left Badger herded them farther across the backyard and well away from others.

“What’d you find out?” Mateo whispered.

The old shifter looked grim. “That I need to make tracin’ out all these families my top priority. Not sure which side it’s on, but there’s gotta be an Alpha wolf close in the past. Mebbe

even a Prime. They all experienced the equivalents of mate bonds when they met. All three brothers *and* their parents.”

“What’s that mean for Bebe?” Carl asked.

Badger was about to answer when a sudden, vicious snarling from the other side of the backyard and Tamsin’s cry of shock made them whirl around.

Bebe, in her wuff suit, and Dania were rolling around in the grass, snarling and barking and—

“Are they... *biting* each other?” Mateo asked.

“Aw, fer feck’s sake!” Badger groaned, moving faster than Carl thought possible for his age. “*Oi! Ye two pups knock it off!*” Badger roared as he hustled toward them.

Even Carl felt the force of that Prime order as he and Mateo sprinted after Badger.

By the time they arrived, Badger already had the two girls pulled apart, one scooped under each arm, as Dewi and others charged over while the rest of the kids stood there in obvious shock.

“What’s going on?” Dewi asked as Duncan jogged up.

Mateo and Carl helped Tamsin up off the ground. “They were all playing,” she said, obviously shaken. “And suddenly they—” Her mouth clicked shut and her eyes widened as she remembered they were surrounded by clueless humans. She looked at the growing number of humans and then back to Badger and making the universal *a little help here, please* face at him.

“Badger grimly nodded. “*Right*. Here, ye each take one o’ them.” He handed the girls off to Carl and Mateo, immediately grabbed both Lu’ana’s and Leila’s arms, and apparently sent the two moms a silent Prime order because they relaxed and headed back to the house immersed in laughing conversation.

Badger pointed. “Dewi, Duncan, help everyone back to the house and assure them *nothin’ to see here*, if ye please. Just wee ones having a perfectly *normal*, friendly little scrap.

Everything's fine. We got 'em. We'll bring 'em along in a minute."

He waved Dewi and Duncan toward part of the gathering behind them, while he immediately started making his way through the kids and family members on his side—minus the ones who knew about wolves—and Primed them all to return to the house or porch or wherever they were and forget about what just happened.

Once it was back to only Carl, Mateo, Badger, Tamsin, Beck, Dewi, Duncan, and the two girls, Dewi turned. "All right. What the fuuu-udge just happened?" she asked, staring at the two kids.

"They started fighting," Tamsin said. "Like two shifter pups! They were all playing with a ball and tossing it to each other, then the next thing I know, Dania and Bebe were having a row."

Duncan looked over each girl. "They don't look hurt. Just scuffed a little from rolling around in the grass."

"Ye say Dania went after Bebe?" Badger asked.

"Well, that's just it," Tamsin said. "I believe it was Bebe who started it. It happened so fast. Bebe wanted the ball, I tossed it to her, and Dania leaned over and caught it. Then it was a flurry of snarls and—" She gasped as she stared at the girls. "They both *are*, aren't they? They're...you *know*."

Nami, who'd apparently been in the house, hustled down, now out of breath. "What the hel-eck happened? Are they all right?"

"Yeah," Badger grimly said. "But now Dewi, Duncan, and I need to make the rounds of everyone—and I mean *everyone*—who's here and clueless, Prime 'em to make sure they forget this happened, and make sure no one got it on video. *No one* leaves today until we check *every* single phone."

"God, I can't ever take a day off, can I?" Dewi snarked as she turned and trudged back to the house, Duncan on her heels.

“That settles it, though,” Badger said, pointing at Dania. “We’re gonna need to get this little one out o’ school somehow. She’s gonna end up shiftin’ in the middle of a crowded classroom and that’s all she wrote.”

Ken jogged up, out of breath. “What happened?”

“Someone fill him in,” Badger said, taking Dania from Carl. “I’ll take this one back to her mum and dad and have a little chat with ’em about the horrors of Florida’s public school system and the dangers of not homeschooling with trusted family. Ken, I’m gonna need ye to come up with a plausible homeschool curriculum for this one.”

“Um, okaaaay?”

“And go help Dewi and Duncan with the phones.”

“Uh, sure.” He turned and left to catch up with them.

Carl and Mateo exchanged a glance.

“Come on,” Badger said to Dania, setting her on her feet and leading her away.

In Mateo’s arms, Bebe stared after Badger and Dania.

Bebe blew a loud, rude raspberry at them. “Dat was *my* ball, you bitz!” she yelled at Dani’s back.

Nami’s eyes widened in horror. “*Bebe!*”

When Dania tried to turn, Badger must have Primed her and he didn’t release her hand. “Now, *none* o’ that, little one. Not ’til ye learn yer proper manners.” He looked back at Bebe and pointed. “And ye watch yer language too, princess.”

Bebe glowered at him as she crossed her arms over her chest, her lower lip stuck out in an impressive pout.

Beck looked as shocked as Carl knew he felt right now. “Um. *Well*. This *certainly* turned out to be an interesting afternoon.”

Tamsin reached for Bebe, taking her from Mateo. “Sweetheart, you mustn’t use language like that. It’s not ladylike.”

“Auntie Dewi does!”

Beck snorted and Nami backhanded his shoulder so hard Carl nearly felt it. “That’s *not* funny!” Nami shrieked.

Tamsin settled Bebe on her hip. “Beebs, love, I know you were upset but you also mustn’t fight like that.”

Bebe pouted. “But it was *my* turn for da ball! She was *wude!*” She burst into tears as Tamsin soothed her.

“I think someone’s in dire need of an N-A-P,” Tamsin said, gently patting the toddler on the back as she sobbed against Tamsin’s shoulder. “I should take her up to the house and see if I can get her to S-L-E-E-P for a little while.”

“Let’s let Dewi, Duncan, and Badger take care of business first,” Beck said, glancing back at the house. “I want to stay out of their way until that’s finished.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FORTUNATELY, the Primes were able to quickly wind their way through the gathering and, with Ken's help, ensure no one had caught the girls' scrap on camera.

It was close to dark before Beck gently talked Nami into saying good-bye and heading home. He sensed how upset Nami was, not to mention exhausted mentally and physically, but he was also damned well smart enough not to open his fricking mouth until asked to.

It was twenty minutes into their drive home when Nami finally spoke.

“*Well?* Aren't you gonna say *something?*”

Beck carefully weighed countless options and, because he was a rational man, finally settled on the truth. “I don't know what you want me to say, sweetheart.”

“Bebe *attacked* Dania! Then she called her a bitch!”

Unable to contain his amused snort over the last part, he faked a cough and hoped she bought it. “If it means anything, the little squabble they had was mutual, and it was perfectly normal for shif—”

“*No,*” she quietly said, deadly calm. “Those babies are *not* shifters. They *cain't* be. They have *human* parents. You said you don't even know if *our* baby will be a shifter because I'm human.”

He took another deep breath. “Bebe and Dania might not be able to shift,” he said. “But it's also not uncommon for kids

born into shifter families, kids who can't shift, to still act like that when they're young. Also, while it's uncommon, sometimes shifters are born to parents who aren't shifters. Even clueless humans. It depends on how the genes were passed down."

She slowly shook her head as she stared out the window. "I refuse to believe it. They were tired, and obviously Bebe is absorbing too much of that...that *stuff* from her time with Tamsin! She wants to be a wolf shifter so much she is pretending to be one. Why are we even trying that with her! That baby is not—" She shook her head. "*No. She is not.*"

Beck took her hand and gently squeezed as tears started rolling down her cheeks. "This isn't the end of the world, sweetheart. It's a complication. It's still an uncertain complication, at that."

"A *complication* that can get either or both of them killed!" she screamed, startling him.

She jerked her hand free and crossed her arms over her chest, angling herself toward the door as best she could despite her seatbelt.

Beck softly sighed and didn't speak, knowing nothing he said to her right now would be right. She felt terrified, not just about Bebe and Dania, but about their baby, too.

I need to cut Ken a lot more slack.

Beck already knew, first-hand, how intense Dewi could be when she wasn't pregnant.

If Ken was dealing with a fraction of the mood swings with her as he was with Nami...

He's a better man than I am.

When they got home Nami headed straight back to their bedroom to take a shower and Beck didn't have to be a mind reader or use their mate bond to sense she needed a little time alone.

Instead, he slumped onto the couch and checked his phone, where he had received a text from Dewi during the drive

home.

We need to talk. Now.

He called Dewi and she answered on the first ring. “Hey. About today.”

“Yes?” he said.

“First, how’s Nami? She seemed pretty upset.”

He sighed. “She is. In denial, I think. Overwhelmed.”

“Well, we need to figure something out. I know Nami is planning on taking over babysitting duties for Tamsin for a while after her baby’s born, but we need Bebe to stay with Tamsin for now during the day. Carl and Mateo volunteered to take up the slack, and Brianna and Da’von will help, too. So will Malyah, and Stig’s wife, if we need her. Today proved that we cannot risk clueless humans caring for those girls until we ascertain if they can shift. Not that Nami’s clueless,” she quickly added. “But we need to continue caring for Bebe and Dania.”

“We can’t abduct their kids, Dewi.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Da had a good suggestion—Prime both sets of parents to let us handle daycare and schooling. We also add an order in there that if anything unusual happens, they call us immediately, get someplace alone and safe, and wait for us to arrive.”

“That’s not bad,” he admitted. “Why do I sense this is more than an FYI?”

“Because you need to convince Nami to get in line. I love her to death, you know I do, but she’s *your* mate. I don’t want to have to Prime her about this. None of us do. But Badger, Da, and I all agree that if you can’t make her understand why this is necessary, we’ll have to do it, because we don’t want her stressing out so much that it makes her sick or hurts her baby.”

Beck closed his eyes and laid his head back against the couch. “I know. I’ll talk to her. We just got home and she went

to take a shower. I think once she wraps her mind around it everything will be okay. Let's give her a few days."

"Well, about that. She's got approximately twelve hours."

His eyes popped open. "*What?*"

"I called Peyton and Trent. Badger and I will intercept Leila tomorrow morning before she heads out to take Dania and the twins to their pre-school."

"What?"

"Yeah. Badger Primed Leila and Earl before we left. Leila's going to awaken with a massive anxiety attack tomorrow morning and call me in a panic that she had a nightmare about the pre-school the kids are attending right now, and the school where Dania's supposed to start first grade this fall. She'll beg us to take care of Dani and the twins and homeschool them like we're going to homeschool Bebe. Earl will see how upset Leila is and eagerly agree to it, especially because he knows Reggie, Lu'ana, Nami, and everyone else trusts us."

Beck's eyes dropped closed again and he hoped Dewi couldn't hear his groan. "And Nami probably won't like that set-up."

"Not at all. Because, obviously, we've already Primed Reggie and Lu'ana that they expect Bebe to be homeschooled by us. We did that after you left. We also Primed Imani and Davis, Reggie's brothers and sisters-in-law—everyone—so they don't question any of what will happen. I'm sorry we didn't read Nami in on it first but it was an executive decision quickly made, and it came from Peyton himself. It's a Pack Alpha edict."

Beck snorted. "I thought you loved me, Dewi," he snarked.

"Heavy is the head, and all that BS," she said. "Remind Nami that if, or when, we determine the girls aren't shifters, they can and will go back to public school if their parents want them to. But until we *know* for sure one way or the other, this is the safest option for them and everyone else involved. Malyah has volunteered to be a full-time teacher, too, once

she's finished her degree. And she said she'll be happy to teach part-time for them around her class schedule. Ken's already researching appropriate homeschooling curriculums and will call tomorrow to talk with some of the teachers at the pack school out in Idaho to pick their brains on age-appropriate lessons. Did you realize how much of the commercially available homeschool material is absolutely *steeped* in evangelical religious garbage?"

"Stay on topic, Dewi," he wearily said. "Nami's not going to be happy Malyah's doing that. She wants her to pursue her writing."

"And she still can. Ken will take point on coordinating the homeschooling. Brianna will help out, too, and in the fall Stig's wife can also teach. And Mateo and Carl, when they aren't doing Enforcer work for us. Plus, of course, Tamsin, for as long as she's here. But realistically we won't know how long she'll be here. I'll reach out to a few packmates who are local and retired who might also be willing to teach. Within a month we'll have everything set up so that, come fall, we'll be ready."

"I don't know if that's going to make this better or worse for her," he said. "Nami, I mean."

"I get it. I do. Again, emphasize to her that if we determine the kids can't shift, they go back to regular clueless-human school. But that, for now, they're safe with us. Keep hammering the safety issue."

"I will. She's still not going to like it."

"We can come over right now and Prime her, if you want. Ease her mind about it. I don't like that option—"

"No," he wearily said. "Let me talk to her first. Let's keep that in our pocket as a last resort."

"You have the baby to consider. If she's going to get really upset—"

"I'll handle it, Dewi. Let me try to talk her through it, please? Consider me out of the office until I say otherwise, though. Keep your phone handy in case I need you."

“Of course. No problem.” He heard her sigh through the line. “I’m sorry, Beck. I didn’t deliberately leave you two out of the loop, but after seeing what happened today we regrouped on the fly and needed to move fast while we still had everyone present to take care of it, instead of hunting people down later and risking complications.”

He rubbed his forehead, a headache threatening. “No, I get it. It’s fine. I mean, it’s *not* fine, but it’s not your fault. I know you’re right about this.”

“Feel free to blame it on me, if you need to. If that’ll help her. Just keep me posted.”

“I will. Thanks.” He ended the call and dropped the phone onto the couch.

So much for trying to calm her down tonight.

Dragging himself up off the couch, he made his way to their bedroom, trudging through it to the closed door of their en suite, where he heard the shower going.

He carefully tried the bathroom door knob first to see if she’d locked him out, and she hadn’t.

Beck risked lightly tapping on the door. “Babe, may I come in?”

She didn’t respond at first, and he was about to knock again, a little louder, when he heard her choked voice. “Yeah.”

When he entered, even with the condensation on the inside of the shower glass he knew from her posture, where she leaned against the wall, that she was crying.

Quickly stripping, Beck hurried to join her, saying nothing but enveloping her in his arms as she started sobbing against him.

Pain knifed through his soul that there was nothing he could do to *fix* this for her. No one’s head he could rip off, nothing he could throw enough money at—it was, like her emotions when Malyah and Joaquin revealed their mate bond to them, something she had to work through in her way and in her time.

Just...accelerated.

“It’s not *fair!*” she finally gasped in a pained whisper a few minutes later. “They’re little girls! *Babies!* They’re beautiful little Black girls who will have a difficult enough life ahead of them dealing with normal trouble, and now there’s *this* bullshit?”

He slowly rocked her in his arms, nuzzling his head against hers. “They’re pack, baby,” he whispered. “They’re *our* pack, and we’ll take care of them. We’ll protect them.”

“How, Beck?”

Beck knew Nami was a strong woman and would be able to deal with this once she processed it. Between her pregnancy hormones and the obviously emotionally fraught issues revolving around the little girls, she was more than allowed to have a meltdown first.

“There’s a plan,” he said. “We’ll homeschool them—Bebe, Dania, and Dania’s little sisters—and if they can’t shift, they can go back to public school. If they can, we’ll keep homeschooling them.”

“You sound like it’s been decided already.” When he didn’t respond right away, her body tensed and she looked up at him. “It already *has* been decided, hasn’t it?”

He nodded. “I just got off the phone with Dewi. Pack edict straight from Peyton.”

Nami closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. “It’s not *fair,*” she whispered.

Her distraught tone ripped at his soul. “They’ll be *safe.* Isn’t that what’s most important?”

“They should be able to be normal little girls, playing and making friends! Not feeling like lepers being isolated from everyone else.”

“No active shooter drills,” he countered. “No metal detectors. No stupid, sanitized lessons passed down by school boards full of racists.”

But he sensed...something else. “Is there something bothering you that you haven’t told me about?”

She hoarsely laughed. “Only that I find out today that piece of shit took my baby sisters to the grocery store so he could shop and spend money on some damned baby momma.”

“Wait, what?”

“Yeah.” Nami told him about the conversation she’d had with Malyah and Lu’ana earlier that afternoon.

“Oh, crap,” Beck said.

“Yeah, exactly.” She slowly shook her head. “Thank god they didn’t get hurt. And no telling how many other—”

“No, babe, you’re not understanding. If there’s a wolf in Jarome’s family tree, we need to trace his lineage out and locate any other kids he might have floating around out there besides you four to see if they have shifter tendencies.”

Her brow furrowed. “*What?*”

“Yeah. We need to track down additional children. Because as you’re seeing now, if you put together two people with strong recessive genes—”

“Isn’t that a contradiction?”

“If you get two people with the right combo of genes, they might both be clueless humans but if everything else lines up, *bam*, shifter.”

“I thought you said it didn’t happen very often?”

“But it *can* happen and *has* happened. Case in point, look at you and your siblings.” He stepped around her. “I need to call Dewi back and tell her about this.”

“The last thing I want to do is think about that man,” she said.

“But if they all have mate bonds like Reggie’s folks, and Reggie and his brothers—”

She grabbed his arm before he could step out of the shower. “*Excuse me?*”

“What?”

“*Mate* bond? No one told me anything about Reggie and Lu’ana having a mate bond!”

Whoops.

Nami glared at him, her grip on his arm growing tighter.

He took a deep breath and decided the phone call to Dewi could wait. “Yeah, we learned a few things today at the cookout. You sure you want to talk about this now?”

Her glare darkened. “*Tell* me, Beck,” she practically growled.

So, knowing his human wife might rip off his balls if he didn’t tell her, he talked.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NAMI STOOD THERE, stunned, as Beck told her what they'd learned earlier.

She wasn't sure what shocked her more—that Lu'ana and Reggie had snuck around behind her back, or that he and his parents and brothers also felt the same intense, sudden, irresistible attraction to their spouses as...

As I did with Beck.

And Malyah with Joaquin, and Da'von with Brianna.

Nami never guessed Lu'ana and Reggie had carried on behind her back to the extent they apparently had. She'd assumed they probably had a few trysts, because they were grown-ass adults after all, but they'd successfully concealed their intense, immediate connection from her.

She leaned against the shower wall, her mind absolutely blown.

Guess that's not just a saying.

It also left her second-guessing herself, because if she missed that, how many other things had she missed?

Beck finally coaxed her into letting him bathe her and she closed her eyes, forcing herself to focus on him and nothing else for a little while.

When they were both rinsed off, he reached out of the shower to grab their towels and lovingly dried her body first, even kneeling and drying her legs and feet so she wouldn't have to bend over.

His hands caressed the tops of her feet and he smiled up at her. “How about we go lay down and I’ll give you a foot rub, baby?” He pressed a kiss against the swell of her tummy, just below her navel, but his gaze never left hers.

I don’t want to think tonight.

With one foot, she lightly trailed her toes along the underside of his sac, then his cock, which immediately stiffened. “I think a foot rub sounds like an appetizer.”

His brows knitted, concerned. “I don’t expect you to—”

She laid a finger over his lips. “Take the win, Dawson Beckett. It’s being freely offered.”

He smiled and sucked her finger between his lips, slowly laving it with his tongue, reminding her of all the delicious things that tongue could do to other parts of her body.

Which was exactly how she’d ended up pregnant in the first place.

To be fair, it hadn’t been intentional on their parts, an oopsie the way Dewi and Ken’s baby had been an oopsie, with slightly different logistics.

He stood and scooped her into his arms, making her squeal with laughter and throw an arm around his neck to hold on. Even knowing he was a wolf, it always blew her mind how he could effortlessly manhandle her, carry her, move her around where he wanted her.

A girl didn’t mind that, either. At least Nami did.

Instead of playfully tossing her onto the bed like he sometimes did before she was pregnant, he reverently set her down then retrieved his towel so he could dry off.

Perching at the end of the bed, his cock still stiff, he pulled her feet into his lap and slowly started rubbing them. “Oooh, my god, that’s amazing,” she moaned.

His sinful smile always lit fires inside her, no matter how tired she was. “Nothing but the best for you, baby.” He dipped his head, sucking her big toe into his mouth, her clit now

echoing pulses through her body with every pull his his mouth and swipe of his tongue.

All while staring right into her eyes with those gorgeous blue peepers of his. Tonight it looked darker, nearly smoky, full of desire for her and only her.

No, she no longer felt jealous of Dewi, because now that she understood the wolf stuff better, she knew Dewi was as devoted to Ken as Nami herself was to Beck—and their men were equally devoted to them.

“Stop teasin’ me, baby. Please?” she begged.

He smiled and switched feet. “But I promised you a foot rub.”

She moaned as he sucked her other big toe into his mouth.

“Holy shit, Beck, please!”

He kept her begging for several more minutes as he switched back and forth, his thumbs feeling amazing on the soles of her feet while his hot mouth wouldn’t let her fall asleep.

Finally, he took pity on her and turned, placing her feet over his shoulders and nudging her thighs apart as he crawled up the bed. Still with his gaze focused on hers, he leaned and slowly swiped his tongue up her slit, circled her clit, and down again to dip inside and taste her.

Hot breath blew against her flesh as he pressed his mouth to her, a low, deep growl rumbling through her pussy and nearly making her come.

Mine.

Because that’s what he always did, always said, staking his claim on her and making sure she never forgot she was his.

She was quite all right with that, because he was every bit hers, too.

His hands curled over the tops of her thighs, stroking, sliding up and over the swell of her tummy to cup her nipples and down again as he teased, tasted, explored. Time dissolved,

nothing existing but the pleasure he gave her and those intense blue eyes burning a hole right into the center of her soul and branding every cell of her being as his.

Always his.

Then he brought her right to the edge, holding, not quite getting her over, keeping her hovering and desperate and finally begging him.

“Please, baby!

The outer corners of his eyes crinkled in amusement as he gently bit down while his tongue started flicking her clit and she came *unhinged*.

And he didn't stop, only easing up enough she continued coasting that edge until he was ready to drop her over it again.

And again.

It was the fourth one where she finally reached down and patted his head. “Please,” she gasped. “You!”

Faster than she could even process the movement, he'd rolled her onto her side and spooned behind her, notching himself and easily sliding inside her slick passage, his arms protectively and possessively holding her.

His teeth pressed against the top of her shoulder, not hard enough to break skin but hard enough to make her body clench around him. “*For me, mate,*” he mentally commanded her.

Unable to resist, she did, shivering in his arms as he quickly caught up and finished with the last echoes of her orgasm ricocheting through her body.

Sated and sleepy, she wiggled her butt against him. “Someone was growly,” she teased.

His tone immediately softened, concerned. “Are you okay, baby?”

Laughing felt good. “I'm *more* than okay, Dawson.” She tipped her head back for sweet, languid kisses from him. “You sure know how to distract me.”

His playful smirk as he nuzzled her nose warmed her heart. “I wouldn’t be doing a very good job as your husband if I couldn’t, now, would I?”

“Husband?” She arched an eyebrow at him.

His eyes flashed, dark and dangerous. Another kiss, this one deeper, longer, sweeter. “*Mate,*” he whispered. “*My mate.* And I’d kill anyone who tried to hurt you. Only thing that upsets me about Ken killing those guys in Idaho is that it wasn’t *me* killing them to protect you.”

She hooked an arm back and played with his hair. Slightly disheveled now, she could see hints of his wolf like this, without his carefully controlled mask in place, the one most people saw.

“You romantic,” she teased.

Nami closed her eyes, just for a moment, but then she opened them again and it was completely dark in their bedroom and Beck lay sound asleep next to her, still holding her, his breath warm and comforting against the back of her neck.

She closed her eyes again.

If this is a dream, please never wake me up.

Because she knew in her heart if she ever lost Beck, she wasn’t sure she was strong enough to carry on.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ABUNDIO

AH, life has certainly grown more complex over the years.

The advent of technology was both a boon and a burden to men like him, with their feet firmly planted in two different centuries.

On the one hand, Abundio Segura hailed technological advances that had allowed his mining and logging companies, along with other ventures, to flourish.

On the other hand...

Idiots like his nephews Raul and Manuel, who'd ended up running what had once been Abundio's father's drug cartel, could more easily be tracked and captured by law enforcement.

Or...others.

Long ago, immediately after their father died, Abundio chose to walk away from his shares of the family cartel and gave complete control of it over to his two brothers. And his sister, who basically let their brothers do everything. Eventually, his brother Berto ended up in control when their other brother passed. And Berto's sons, Raul and Manuel, ended up in charge of running it.

And now I am the last.

Because, no doubt, Manuel was dead.

He already knew Raul was dead.

Abundio had only been blessed with one child, his daughter Miranda, who was nearing forty. While she was aware of the cartel he'd kept her away from it, shielded her from the details, and instead taught her his business, planned for her to take it over.

While he'd announced it publicly a couple of months ago, secretly he still kept close watch on everything from the shadows. Some of that she was aware of, and some she was not.

What concerned him was her response to Manuel's disappearance.

That she was too easily swayed to let it drop.

Like she didn't want to raise suspicions regarding her own suspicions.

When his nephew had arrived unannounced at his gate several months prior, telling a fantastical story about all of his best men being murdered in Idaho by people who seemed to have the ability to turn into wolves, Abundio had initially wanted to dismiss the story out of hand.

He'd certainly told Miranda he didn't believe it.

Still, he'd allowed Manuel to play out his tale, thinking perhaps he would at least learn the truth about what happened. Even sent his two best men, Carl and Mateo, to the US with Manuel in an attempt to hunt down someone else associated with the group out of Idaho to seek answers from them.

And they had all gone off the radar.

A lesser man would have assumed they tangled with a crime syndicate of gun-nut Americans who quickly outmanned the three of them and ended up buried in an anonymous hole somewhere.

Or, perhaps, run through a woodchipper, as Manuel claimed happened to his other men.

But Abundio was not a lesser man.

He'd watched his daughter closely, all while himself pretending to be an old man resigned to the natural

progression of time.

She thought she was being sneaky, but he'd learned his daughter's tells well in her childhood and she wasn't nearly as opaque as she believed herself to be.

Now he had the start of what he believed to be a two-pronged problem—that Miranda was looking for inroads to take over Manuel's now rudderless cartel operation, and that she was digging deeper into the disappearance of Manuel, Carl, and Mateo than she first let on.

Just because Abundio felt a life of crime was distasteful didn't mean he wouldn't resort to ruthless methods to get what he wanted.

It was a side he'd carefully worked to hide from his daughter, but this old wolf could still bite.

That's why he stood at the window with his back to the door when Juan Martinez was escorted into his home office by three of his men.

Abundio didn't turn, at first. "Thank you for accepting my invitation and joining me tonight," he said.

"Y-yes, sir."

Abundio finally turned and saw two of his men had the guy by each arm. They'd given him a robe to wear and the third man stood by the office door with a garbage bag in hand containing the man's things.

"I will get right to the point—you worked for my nephew, Manuel Segura, and his brother Raul. Did you not?"

The man nodded. "For four years, sir."

"And you were at the wedding where Raul was murdered?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you a witness to Raul's murder?"

"Not directly, sir. I was stationed at the other end of the house. By the time I reached the room where it happened, the shooter was gone."

“Did you see video footage of the shooting?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you think you could identify the man?”

“I am not certain, sir. It happened very quickly and the room wasn’t well-lit. It was his daughter’s wedding and she’d wished to be married by candlelight.”

“And what did he say to Raul when he shot him?”

“Based on what others told me, he said his name was Joaquin Carlomarles, and that he was taking blood for their family because of what Raul had...” He now looked terrified to continue.

“Because of the barbarism my nephew unleashed on an innocent girl?”

The man nodded.

“Did he use the word ‘family’ when he shot Raul?”

The man thought about it. “No, I believe he used the word ‘pack.’ But he spoke so quickly and low that I could be wrong.”

“I want your honest opinion of Raul.”

“Sir?”

“I mean it.”

Martinez went pale. “I did not know him very well. I worked for Manuel, and he seemed to love his brother. But Raul... I heard things. Disturbing things. Such as this was not the first girl he’d abducted, raped, and murdered. Manuel’s men who had been with him far longer than I had, who knew those things, were growing tired of Manuel permitting his brother to get away with it. I will not say I’m sorry Raul’s gone, because that would be a lie. I have a daughter and there’s no way I would have let her anywhere near Raul.”

Abundio slowly nodded. “That is understandable,” Abundio finally said. “Do you believe it’s possible Manuel killed his men? The ones who disappeared when they went to the United States with him?”

He already knew Manuel's story, that the group of people whose compound they tried to infiltrate in Idaho captured and killed them.

And that those people were capable of turning into wolves, but Abundio still believed *that* was bullshit.

Mostly.

"I-I don't know, sir. That is what people are saying. Not even the pilot returned. If Manuel ever returned, there are many families who want a piece of him for not telling them the truth about where their loved ones are or what happened to them."

And this was the other reason Abundio wanted to speak with the man. Abundio had worried that people might come after him since he was the men's uncle. Believing that he might know what was going on.

Demand answers from him.

Or demand compensation.

Abundio finally waved for Martinez to sit in one of the two chairs in front of his desk and the man hesitantly lowered himself into it. Abundio finally sat.

"I summoned you here to make you a business proposition."

"Sir?"

"I know you still work for Manuel's wife as personal security," Abundio said. "I will make this worth your while, and it is money that is easy to earn—I want you to listen and report on anything you see and hear. Regarding Manuel, regarding Raul, or if anyone tries to come in and take control of the cartel's operations. In addition, my daughter, Miranda. If you hear any word of her asking around about the business operations, I wish to know that immediately. And you may not tell anyone else, not even your own family, what you are doing."

He looked incredulous. "That's...it?"

Abundio nodded. “That’s it. I want a spy close inside. My men will give you cash and a burner phone to use that already has numbers programmed into it. Even if you think it’s not important information, I wish to know. Sometimes, we will call or text you with questions we wish you to make the best attempt possible to answer.” Abundio held up a finger. “There will be no punishment for not being able to obtain an answer. I do not want to hear lies, and some questions might not have answers. If so, tell me that. But you can always give us observations, yes?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“In addition to the cash you will receive today, you will give my men information on your children’s schools, and I will take care of their tuition going forward. Because,” he added, “if I pay you too much directly, it will look suspicious where you suddenly came into all this extra money. I will structure this to look like a scholarship through one of my charitable foundations so as to raise no questions. That will allow you to remain under the radar and perhaps learn more. Understand?”

He nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“I will give you your first assignment right now—I have reason to believe Miranda desires access to computers that belonged to Manuel and were used for his...business. That she may be seeking information that would allow someone to step in and take over. I wish for you to make your best effort to discern what her true motives were for her visit to my nephew’s wife not long ago. Where she went, if she spoke with anyone, and so forth. Any nugget of news, I wish to know immediately, no matter how tiny. Am I clear?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

Abundio offered him a smile. “Who is currently in charge of the cartel operations with Manuel absent?”

“Mario Reyes. Manuel left him in charge when he left. Everyone is still obeying him, so far, and he is reporting to Manuel’s widow, although apparently she is not taking much control on her own.”

“Excellent. Give me his contact information.” He motioned to his men to return the man’s belongings. The guy dug through the bag, retrieved his phone, and read the information he had to Abundio. One of the men took notes.

Abundio already had this information because he’d obtained it directly from Manuel before he’d left for the States, but Abundio wanted to know if there’d been any change in “management,” so to speak, in the interim.

Apparently, there hadn’t.

“Thank you very much,” Abundio told him, sitting back. “My men will escort you to one of the guest rooms so you may freshen up, take a shower if you wish, and get dressed. Dinner is in forty-five minutes. Once we’re finished, you may either spend the night or depart, as you wish. In addition, I wish to tell you that as long as you do your best to keep me informed, and do not lie to me, I will take every action possible to protect your family. If you ever fear for their safety, you contact me immediately and I will take it from there. Understand?”

He almost looked like he couldn’t believe he wasn’t going to die. “Thank you, sir!”

Abundio dismissed him and two of his men took him away, the third remaining behind. Once the door was closed, Abundio dropped his voice. “I want him followed. I want to know everything about him, about Mario Reyes, and more importantly I wish to confirm if Miranda has been in contact with anyone other than direct family.”

“Yes, sir. And if she has?”

He grimly shook his head. “I do not wish to think that far ahead. Let us hope she has not.”

Abundio pulled a burner phone from his desk and dialed Reyes’ number. Another reason Abundio wanted to do this now, while Martinez was still in his home, was in case he needed to add instructions, or learned there was a discrepancy in the man’s story.

The man answered, sounding wary. “Hello?”

“Hello, Mario Reyes? This is Abundio Segura, Manuel and Raul’s uncle.”

He hesitated. “Yes, sir?”

“The code Manuel left for you was ‘desert cactus,’” he said.

A hint of relief crept into the man’s tone. “Yes, sir. What can I do for you today?”

“I need to pass information on to you. Manuel is currently out of the country and engaged in pressing matters I am not at liberty to discuss with you...”

By the time he ended the call twenty minutes later, Abundio had confirmed Manuel had not been in contact, alerted Reyes to let him know if Miranda tried to insert herself—along with how to respond—and let him know that he had just hired a man to also keep tabs.

Oh, and that one of Abundio’s men would approach him within twelve hours with a generous cash stipend, a thumb drive to hold in reserve, and another burner phone, and that he was not to let on to Martinez that he was aware of his job.

Playing all loose ends against the middle had become one of Abundio’s specialties throughout his career, especially when he needed to coerce politicians to do his bidding.

Once he ended that call, he looked up at his man. “It’s all ready?”

He nodded. “As you ordered, sir.”

“Tell them to follow him and wait four hours to approach him. I want there to be expectations of unpredictability.”

“Yes, sir.”

Abundio dismissed him.

That’s when his gaze fell to the print-out on his desk, the one Miranda had brought to him yesterday, and which he told her he would consider the options and let her know in a day or two.

Ah, Miranda, what do you think you are trying to do, hmm?

The sad thing was, he knew she expected him to fall for it, trust her, believe it without question because she assumed he was a clueless old man.

What she failed to take into consideration was that he knew enough to hire people skilled in this very technology.

And he'd already spoken to the head of their corporate IT department, who took less than five minutes to determine that the e-mail in question had most certainly been sent from Miranda at her condo using her personal laptop. All he'd had to do was compare things in it to e-mails he knew she'd sent from home.

It was the same machine.

So why the ruse, Miranda?

Abundio swiveled his chair around to look out the window. The man Manuel had originally pursued, one Joaquin Carlomarles, had disappeared into the wind. Manuel had been so intent upon finding that particular man that he'd let his rage and grief and need for revenge blind him—and all over a man who admittedly deserved none of those emotions being shed for him—and get the better of him.

No reconnaissance, no information, just a hunch and sketchy information.

Then the trip to Florida with Carl and Mateo escorting him had led to all three disappearing.

Abundio didn't want revenge.

On the contrary, he was simply curious as to what was so important to protect that such measures were being taken, and could also take out his two most capable men.

And he wondered if his daughter had already discovered that fact and was attempting to profit off of it without including him.

If so?

Well, that was treachery he could not overlook.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KEN

LATE TUESDAY MORNING, Ken was emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausted.

Trying to plan a homeschool curriculum for several preschoolers who were potentially shifters wasn't exactly something in his wheelhouse, but it wasn't like he could very well say no, either.

Yesterday, Dewi and Badger had spent the morning with Tamsin, Bebe, Dania, and Dania's little sisters, twins Laura and Lucia. Adorable little girls.

Bundles of energy.

The logistics of caring for the children were in flux and arrangements still being hammered out, with Tamsin, and Joaquin taking point, for now, while Ken worked with the pack teachers from Idaho to put together basic lessons for the children.

Mateo and Carl were also pitching in to help, and Ken had to admit it was adorable how quickly Dania and her siblings took to the two men.

Ken decided to start a load of laundry while awaiting a return phone call from Idaho. He'd already been shopping that morning at the nearby discount warehouse store they frequented, and Badger had been out in the garage organizing the haul. When they walked into the kitchen from the garage, Ken with an empty laundry basket in hand and Badger on his heels, they pulled up short at the sight of Dewi standing in the kitchen, where she pulled a package of butter out of the fridge.

Dewi looked around and turned to Ken. “Is it organic, grass-fed butter?”

Badger barked a laugh. “Are ye shittin’ me? After all the stuff ye et lately—“

Ken slapped a hand over Badger’s mouth. “Yes, honey. It is. Organic, grass-fed butter, just like you asked for. It’s the store brand but I looked it up and it’s made by one of the companies that makes the name-brand stuff and they just package it for the warehouse store chain. It was a little cheaper to buy it that way.”

She nodded and grabbed it—*it* being the entire three-pack of one-pound boxes of butter he’d just purchased from the discount warehouse store that morning—and left.

He was pretty sure she mumbled, “*Thanks*,” under her breath.

Ken wheeled on Badger once he heard the office door shut behind her. “What in the *actual* fuck is *wrong* with you, Badger?” Ken hissed. “Are you *trying* to get me killed?” He pointed in the direction of the office. “I’m married to a literal pregnant velociraptor! I’m barely hanging on by a thread here, and you’re trying to rile her up?”

Badger scratched at his chin. “She might make ye wish ye were dead, lad, but she won’t actually hurt ye. Ye know that. Scaring the hell outta ye an’ hurtin’ ye are two different things entirely and not mutually exclusive, neither.” He pointed toward the doorway. “Are ye seriously telling me she’s about to eat three *pounds* of butter, and yer okay with it?”

Ken set the laundry basket down and walked over to the sink, grabbed the sponge, and wiped up a spill of dried cake mix on the counter from Dewi’s earlier snack attack. “Three pounds of organic, *grass-fed* butter, thank you very much. And I have six more three-packs out in the garage fridge.”

“Feckin’ hell, man! That’s”—Badger did quick math—“eighteen *pounds* of butter ye bought today!”

“Yup. Sounds about right. Hopefully that lasts her until tomorrow, because I wiped them out and their next shipment

doesn't arrive until tomorrow afternoon. They're going to hold ten packs for me."

Badger's eyes widened. "Are ye barkin' mad?"

Ken turned, water splattering from where he shook the sponge at Badger. "Then by all means, be my guest and *you* go in there and tell her she shouldn't eat three pounds of organic, grass-fed butter in one sitting. Oh, wait. First, let me get my phone and record that little encounter so I have a record of your demise to show to Peyton and Trent, because they damned sure won't believe you were dumb enough to question her dietary choices when she's in this mood!"

Badger held up his hands in surrender. "Fine, fine. Ye sure this won't hurt her or the baby?"

"According to her doctor, and Duncan, and Trent's experience with Asia's other pregnancies, Dewi's fine and acting normal for her condition."

"I didn't hear anything about Tamsin eatin' like that."

"Well, for starters, we don't live with Tamsin and I don't audit Carl and Mateo's grocery expenses. Secondly, Tamsin's an omega corgi shifter, not a Prime Alpha wolf. I don't claim to be an expert on shifters but I think there's a better than slim chance there might be a huge difference in their diets regardless."

The old shifter slowly nodded. "Sure, sure. I s'pose yer right about that."

Ken finished wiping down the counter and sink. "If you really want to help, make another grocery run for me this afternoon and hit the other warehouse store down in Brandon. See if they have that butter in stock."

"Eh, why not regular butter?"

Ken slowly turned on him. "Did you *not* just witness that entire exchange? Don't you think I clarified that with her already? If she *wanted* regular butter, she'd *have* regular butter. She specifically wants *that* kind of butter. The kind from Ireland will also do, because it's similar in texture and

taste. Something about the fat content or processing methods or something.”

Badger slowly shook his head. “Ye know, I used to feel sad Tahlia and I didn’t have pups.” He barked a laugh. “Now? I’m thinkin’ maybe I dodged myself a big one.”



BADGER

Badger wrapped up a few chores around the house, received an updated grocery list from Ken, and headed out to Brandon. There was another warehouse store there from the same chain and they’d likely have the extra stock on hand.

No, Badger absolutely didn’t believe he’d dodged anything by not having pups. But something he’d painfully learned from his experience was that it hurt less to learn how to joke about some things in front of others, even family, rather than talk about them honestly.

Otherwise, the weight of their discomfort and their well-intended sympathies only magnified the size and pain of his loss.

And he was forced to relive it over and over again.

It was ironic that while it felt like life was currently far more chaotic than it certainly had been since Dewi was a child, increasingly, memories and thoughts of Tahlia had crept into his mind, peeking around corners he’d believed long reinforced against the strain of the emotional agony.

They’d all been hyper-focused on first losing Louisa and then Duncan, with Badger working as Charlie’s second.

But then for Charlie and Chelsea to be brutally murdered...

Badger sometimes wondered if Trent and Peyton asked him to raise Dewi more because they worried they might lose him to his grief rather than because he was a Prime strong enough to raise her.

Except he'd long ago made peace with the fact that he'd spend the rest of his existence in pain. With a daily reminder, every time he looked in a mirror, of his failures as a husband and mate.

Perhaps survivin' after failin' her is my penance from the Goddess.

So while the circumstances of Louisa's death were different from Tahlia's murder, Badger understood, to a degree far more than most, what Duncan felt every day.

The pain in his soul that would never go away.

The piercing ache that marred every single beat of his heart.

There were days it was only because of the oath Badger had sworn to Charlie during that dark and miserable time in his life that Badger was still alive. An oath he'd meant every word of, sealed in blood.

The stormy night that had masked the intruders' presence in their small village until it was too late to summon help.

Tahlia herself picking up a sword, but the attackers had both been young Primes, rogues, brothers intent on wiping out any and all competition from other Primes in an attempt to eke out a new slice of territory for themselves by eliminating others who'd lived on the land for generations.

Well, they'd also been in search of shifter women, Alphas, to claim as mates, regardless of whether the women wanted that or not.

Tahlia, they'd found, had other ideas about that.

Badger had managed to severely wound both of them, but not before they'd mortally wounded Tahlia. Charlie, sensing trouble, had appeared from out of the tempest and that's when the rogues realized their error. Badger killed one but Charlie had to run down the other one, and then they—

A car tried to merge into Badger's lane, too close to make it, and he slammed on the brakes and laid on the horn.

“Bloody feckin' cunt of an idjit!” he screamed.

But at least it'd dragged him out of the darkness of his thoughts.

For now.

Because nothing drove those away for very long.

Especially when lying alone in his bed at night.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE REST OF THE WEEK, fortunately, passed without a hitch. Although as they settled into a routine with Leila and Earl taking turns dropping the girls off with Tamsin and Brianna, Dewi knew they'd once again be house shopping in the near future.

Tamsin lived with Carl and Mateo, and Brianna and Da'von. There was one extra bedroom for a nursery for Tamsin's baby. Dewi knew newlyweds Brianna and Da'von should have a place of their own, but right now Brianna was helping them care for Tamsin as much as she was helping care for Bebe, and now Dania, Laura, and Lucia.

It was uncertain how long Tamsin would remain in the States once she had her baby. Ideally, they'd catch that fucker Faegan Lewis so she and her baby could return to England to live with Trevor and Elaine Clarke.

But having a bigger house, even if Tamsin moved back to England, wasn't a bad thing. It would no doubt get filled with wolfish relatives in short order.

Maybe we can get one of the neighbors on either side, or directly behind them, to sell.

Logistically, it would make things much easier.

Friday night, all Dewi wanted to do was go to sleep. Except her bladder didn't want to co-operate, and their growing daughter was apparently happy to use her bladder as a soccer ball. A little after 1:00 a.m., Dewi had nearly fallen

asleep following her latest bathroom trip when Ken's cellphone rang on his nightstand.

"Arrrrrghh!" she groaned into her pillow. "I thought that was on silent!"

"It is," he said, his voice thick and deep from sleep. "That's Carl's ringtone. I set it to bypass." He sat up and answered. "Hello? ... Yeah?" He sounded wide-awake now. "We'll be right over."

Dewi hadn't even realized she sat up and was now also wide awake. "What happened?"

"Nothing bad," he said, getting up. "Tamsin's in labor. Her water broke. He's already called Dr. Collins and he's on his way. I'll go wake everyone." He pulled on shorts and headed out of the bedroom to do that.

So much for sleeping.

Dewi climbed back out of bed and made another insurance trip to the bathroom before pulling on shorts and an oversized T-shirt. She brushed her teeth and her hair and by the time she made it downstairs, Da and Badger had, too.

"Field trip, gentlemen?" she said as she headed for the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee for the drive.

"Preview of comin' attractions," Badger snarked.

Dewi turned and growled at him.

He cackled. "Sweetheart, ye canna blame me."

"No, she'll blame *me*," Ken said as he rounded the corner, now fully dressed. He leaned in and gave her a kiss where she stood at the single-serve coffee maker. "What happened to our 'don't rile Dewi' rule, dude?"

Duncan chuffed. "You might want to take notes tonight, because you might be begging us for sanctuary while Dewi's in labor, son."

"Probably. That's what I'm afraid of."

They took Badger's truck with him driving. Dr. Collins beat them to the house. His RV, which was a portable medical

clinic, sat taking up the entire driveway while cars had been moved to park along the street. So Badger pulled up next to the curb behind Beck's car and they all hurried inside.

She spotted Mateo and Carl in the kitchen and from the scent of food and coffee knew they were preparing for them all to settle in for a while. Beck and Da'von were in the living room, and before Dewi could even ask, Beck hooked his thumb toward the hall.

“Nami and Brianna are back there with her and the doc.”

Ken, Badger, and Duncan held back Dewi hurried on down the hall and paused in the doorway. The home birth had been planned because Tamsin was a shifter and it was fortunately rare for there to be severe complications with them. But just in case, they could quickly move her out to the RV if an emergency developed. Dr. Collins had the equivalent of a mobile trauma center and could even handle surgery. If Tamsin had been a human, they would have taken her to the hospital, where another doctor who was part of the pack and business partners with Dr. Collins would supervise her care.

Dr. Collins was eighty-six despite looking half that. He was currently a practicing veterinarian, but he'd started out as a human doctor. When he'd aged out, he'd gone back to school to become a vet. But he still treated their packmates in this area. In another few years, the fake identity Gillian had set up for him a while back would age-in enough they could get him his new human medical license, and from there set him up with privileges at local hospitals.

Ironically, in a few years the other doctor would switch to vet medicine, and then take over treating their packmates from the mobile clinic while Dr. Collins moved to treating patients in a hospital again.

One of Gillian's current projects was setting up a secondary medical clinic there in Florida, so it would make everyone's lives easier. From ordering supplies to being able to write prescriptions as needed. It was an elaborate ruse, but necessary in the long-run to avoid raising suspicions and drawing attention from state regulators.

They'd pushed the bed to the far side of the room, there was monitoring equipment set up, an IV pole, a tarp covering the carpeted floor, and Tamsin was currently sitting on a large yoga ball while Brianna and Nami helped her balance.

"Hey, sweetie. How you doing?"

Tamsin was working on her breathing but nodded.

"So far, everything looks fine," Dr. Collins said.

"Did anyone call Trevor and Elaine yet?"

He pointed, and that's when Dewi spotted the tablet set up on a dresser. Elaine Clarke's face filled the screen and she waved.

"Cheers, Dewi! Trevor's making our breakfast."

Nami looked a little exhausted already. "Want me to take over for a while?" Dewi asked.

She nodded, and when Dewi swapped places with her, Nami sat on the edge of the bed. "Thank you, hon."

With her Prime powers, Dewi gently reached out to better assess how the young corgi shifter was faring. Tamsin currently had a laser-focus on giving birth. Dewi sensed her grief and anguish, but for now it wasn't her priority.

"You're doing great, love," Elaine encouraged, helping lead Tamsin through her breathing exercises.

"Are you certain you don't want an epidural?" Dr. Collins asked her.

Tamsin shook her head. "I can do this." She met Dewi's gaze. "And I know Dewi and everyone can help me, too."

"Don't be a martyr," Dewi teased. "Shifters use painkillers when needed, too."

"I'm all right." The contraction ended and Tamsin straightened on the ball, stretching her back. "I know I can do this." She offered Dewi a smile. "Apologies about the early wakeup, but Rupert and Maisie were both night owls."

Elaine tearfully laughed. “Yes, that’s right, they were.” She sniffled. “They came in the middle of the night, too.”

For the next several hours, Tamsin made progress while Dewi, Brianna, Nami, and even Badger and Duncan took turns with her. When it came time for the final push, it was Brianna and Dewi flanking her, Dewi sending her energy and helping dull the pain until, finally, a tiny but strong cry filled the room.

Tamsin collapsed on the bed while Nami moved in to help the doctor.

“Congratulations, Tamsin,” the doctor said. “She looks perfect.”

Tamsin started sobbing while Brianna and Dewi held her. The sound nearly broke Dewi’s heart, because she remembered how Tamsin had screamed in anguish on Christmas when she’d unwrapped the present Trevor and Elaine had sent her, a little stuffed bear with a voice box in its paw and recordings of Rupert and Maisie’s voices on it, as well as little T-shirts made from their clothes, still smelling like them.

Dewi heard a chorus of joyful howls in the living room as word was passed to them.

“Would you like to snip the cord, Tamsin?” the doctor asked.

“Dewi, if you please?” she asked.

“Of course.” She did, and the doctor laid her on Tamsin’s chest while he finished what he had to do. Nami brought the tablet over so a tearful Trevor and Elaine could see Tamsin and the baby, and while they were doing that Dewi eased herself out of the bedroom and into the hall.

Duncan stood in her line of sight and with a head-tip she motioned for him.

He joined her and she reached for his arm to send him a silent thought. *“I think she’ll need you or Badger with her, now that it’s sinking in.”*

“You’re probably right. And we’d rather you not be absorbing that much grief with you pregnant, too.” He walked into the room while Dewi retreated down the hall and out the back door onto the lanai. At some point Joaquin and Malyah had arrived, too, but Dewi didn’t want to talk to anyone just yet.

She needed to...breathe.

Space.

Dewi lowered herself into one of their chairs and stared up at the early morning sky. It wasn’t fair that Tamsin had to endure that without Maisie and Rupert. Or, at the very least, without Trevor and Elaine at her side.

She’d pulled out her phone and was about to text Peyton with the latest when she faintly heard Tamsin’s anguished howls start, mournful, keening wails for Maisie and Rupert.

Dewi closed her eyes, trying to hold back her own tears. She herself was the yang to that yin; her parents celebrating her birth while she spent her entire life mourning their deaths.

When she heard the sliders open behind her she knew it was Ken and didn’t turn even as the volume of the howls raised and then dropped again with the closing of the door. He walked over, standing behind her, leaning in to wrap his arms around her.

“Badger went down there to help him,” he said. “They’re going to let her cry it out for a while and then give her a helping nudge to focus on the baby if she doesn’t seem like she’s going to pull out of it on her own.”

Dewi held on to his arms, nodding, the tears finally slipping down her cheeks.

It was gut-wrenching, knowing she couldn’t *do* anything to make this right for Tamsin. Even bringing her father’s head to her would be cold comfort, not recompense.

He rubbed his chin in her hair. “Are you all right, sweetheart?”

“Mom and Dad should be here,” she whispered without thinking.

He softly sighed, kissing the top of her head. “I know.”

“*Your* mom and dad should be here,” she added.

“I know, baby.”

“It’s not fair.”

“No, it’s not. Unfortunately, there’s nothing we can do except live and remember them. Living our best lives is honoring them, because I know with every cell of my being that’s exactly what they’d want us to do. To live, to be happy, and to enjoy our lives.”

She sniffled, nodding, and remembered she was going to text Peyton. She hadn’t opened her text app yet when it rang.

Peyton.

“Hey,” she sniffled.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “Beck just texted me she had the baby.”

“Just... Yeah. I’m fine. Tamsin and the baby are okay. She’s...adjusting.” In the house, the howls were briefly interrupted by gasping, hitching breaths before resuming, weaker now, like the water had almost finished draining from the burst dam.

“You don’t need to bring her out here for a recognition ceremony for the baby,” he said. “Not right now. Do something small for her there with all of you. Once she’s feeling better, we’ll hold a larger one for all the new babies sometime late in the summer. Hopefully Trevor and Elaine will be able to come over for that, and then maybe be able to take her home by then.”

“Okay.”

“Love you, Dewster.”

Finally, something to make her smile. “Love you, too, Pain-in-the-ass-ton.”

He chuckled as she ended the call. Behind her, Ken laughed into her hair.

“‘Pain-in-the-ass-ton’?”

“Yeah. Started that when I was in high school. By then I’d come to understand how powerful I was and what my position really meant. Sometimes, when he irritated me, I called him that in private on the phone. Trent was ‘Dent’ or ‘Bent’. I was pretty brave when they were on the end of a phone line at the other end of the country.”

“I bet.”

After a few minutes the howls eased, and Dewi patted Ken’s arms. “Let’s go see.”

He circled the chair and offered her a helping hand up, which she really didn’t need but she knew letting him do things like that made him feel good.

Meaning it was worth it to *her* to do them.

Inside, Badger caught her gaze, looking grim, but he nodded.

Nami stood in the hallway just outside the bedroom door, so Dewi walked down to join her and watch, laying a hand on Nami’s arm.

“*How is she?*” Dewi silently asked using her Prime.

“*She named her Maisie Rue. Have you ever heard anything so adorably heartbreaking in your life?*”

Dewi gently squeezed her arm and released her. On the bed, Tamsin lay tucked in the crook of Duncan’s arm while Brianna sat on her other side. Tamsin still softly wept while cradling the baby against her, and Carl and Mateo were helping the doctor clean up the room.

Over their trip to Idaho at Christmas, Duncan had gone on a run with Tamsin, trying to help her process and deal with her grief. Both he and Badger had become stand-in fathers for her, not just because of their Prime powers but because as widowers themselves, they understood her grief and anger.

Dewi took a deep breath and let it out again, trying to rein in her own emotions. “If you guys want to go get some sleep,” she whispered to Nami, “go ahead. We’ll stay with her.” Nami looked completely exhausted.

“Thanks. Won’t even argue with you.” She headed down the hall, and Dewi knew for Nami to admit she was too tired to stay to help someone she considered family, it meant she felt beyond wiped out.

By mid-afternoon they’d finally coaxed food and water into Tamsin, and physically, both she and the baby were doing well. Little Maisie had already started latching on and the doctor pronounced her completely healthy.

Dewi hoped if they could help her through the next several days that Tamsin’s mothering instincts would kick in and she’d find the will to live, to stay alive for her baby.

Badger approached Dewi at one point and handed her his keys. “You and Ken should go home. You need rest and food.”

“How will you get home?”

Joaquin held up his hand. “I can ride with you and bring his truck back.”

“And you can pack a change of clothes and sundries for me and Duncan,” Badger said. “And Joaquin can bring ’em back for us.”

“You don’t want me to take a turn with her overnight?”

“Tomorrow, sweetheart,” he said. “You know grief, yes, but hers is of a different flavor than yours.” He touched her arm and silently spoke to her. “*And yer not a horrible person for needing out of here to clear yer head, Dew. It’s intense, and we know it, and it’s all right. Besides, we don’t know what it might do to yer baby to be exposed to it too long.*”

Guilt-tinged relief filled Dewi and she took the keys, hugging Badger. “Thanks,” she whispered before heading out with Ken following.

Dewi drove, more because she needed the distraction. Ken rode shotgun while Joaquin took the backseat without

comment.

They were almost to the house when Joaquin broke the silence. “That was by far the most painful thing I think I’ve ever witnessed in my life,” he said. “And I brought Felicia Escobar’s body home to her family and helped them bury her,” he said. “Never in my life did I ever think I’d witness that kind of pain again, and I’d prayed I never would.” She glanced in the rearview mirror and saw him shake his head. “Do you think Duncan and Badger will be able to keep her alive?”

“If anyone can, it’s them,” she wearily said.

An hour later, Joaquin was on his way back with Duncan and Badger’s overnight bags, and Dewi and Ken had showered and were snuggled in bed with their phones on and set to loud so they could hear if anyone called or texted them.

Dewi practically wrapped herself around Ken. “You’re not allowed to die on me,” she said.

He nuzzled the top of her head. “I’m doing my best not to, baby. But that goes for you, too.”

She closed her eyes and deeply inhaled. “I’ll do my best, too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

SUNDAY NIGHT, Badger and Duncan were still staying with Tamsin. Fortunately, her mental state was slowly improving, but the two Primes planned to remain there indefinitely, until they were suitably convinced she was out of danger. Each man had already taken a turn returning to the house to pack more clothes in anticipation of a prolonged stay over there. Malyah, and Nami had promised to return early Monday morning to help Brianna, Carl, and Mateo take care of Tamsin and the baby, as well as to care for Bebe, Dania, and the twins.

Unfortunately, there was still pack business to conduct.

Dewi groaned when her work cell phone rudely awakened her at 4:32 a.m. Monday morning. Without opening her eyes, she flailed her hand around on the nightstand until her fingers finally latched on to it, and she dragged it to her ear. “*What,*” she growled.

“I-is this Ms. Bleacke?”

The young woman’s terrified tone drove all sleep out of Dewi’s system and she sat up. “This is Dewi Bleacke-Ethelbert. Who’s this?”

“Emily Hansley, ma’am. I’m Ralph and Susan Hansley’s daughter. In Miami.” She burst into tears. “Please, you have to help me! Daddy will kill him and I don’t want him to go to prison! I just want my baby back!”

Five minutes later, Dewi was downstairs in her office taking notes as she talked to the distraught young mom on the

phone, while Ken called Beck and Joaquin and summoned them to the house.

Emily Hansley was twenty-two, a non-shifting daughter of packmates Ralph and Susan Hansley, and the new mom to a three-month-old baby, Hannah.

The problem was, Henry Roche, Emily's baby daddy, was a 37-year-old deadbeat asshole clueless human. He literally had zero interest in the baby until Emily made the mistake of sending him a text late yesterday that she was moving back to Idaho to live with Ralph and Susan, that her parents were en route to help her pack and move, and that she was filing paperwork once she arrived in Idaho to terminate his parental rights. That she would be gone by the next evening, and if he wanted to see the baby this was his last chance.

He not only hadn't attended the birth he'd never even *seen* the baby. Never asked to see her, either. In fact, he'd tried to talk Emily into an abortion, and when she wouldn't get one he broke up with her and informed her he wasn't paying child support for a baby he didn't want, and to lose his number.

There'd been no further contact from him and he hadn't responded to Emily's texts when she went into labor, or after the baby was born.

Unfortunately, Emily was too nice—and trusting—and had listed Ralph on the birth certificate without considering the full possible future ramifications.

Ralph apparently cruised Emily's social media, somehow found her parents' accounts, and saw pictures of their house, which was located in the pack compound in Idaho.

A very nice house, because even though Ralph and Susan weren't millionaires or anything, they were both over 100 and had worked for the pack for most of their lives.

He also must have seen public pictures of previous family outings, such as ski trips and vacations.

Upon seeing those pics, Ralph apparently got an idea.

He'd just shown up fifteen minutes earlier with his mother Fawny, who Emily had never met, and with a sheriff's deputy,

and Henry walked out of Emily's apartment with the baby.

Which, unfortunately, he was entitled to do since he was listed on the birth certificate as the baby's father and there were no standing custody or protective orders prohibiting it.

Henry also told Emily if she wanted to see her baby again, she'd fork over ten thousand dollars. Otherwise, he would file for custody and claim she'd withheld his baby from him. And she could bring the money to him after 12:00 noon at a friend's place in Little Havana. Fortunately, she'd had enough sense to snap a picture of his car's license plate. Ken found the plate was registered to Fawny Roche at a different address than the one Henry gave Emily for the money drop.

By the time Beck and Joaquin arrived at Dewi's, Dewi had taken a shower and dressed, and Ken had an initial dossier on Henry Roche and his mother, Fawny, who was 55.

Both mother and son had impressive rap sheets, mostly for fraud, check kiting, and other financial crimes. Henry also had eight child support orders against him by five other women. Unfortunately, neither of Henry nor Fawny had outstanding criminal warrants that would make Dewi's job a lot easier, and it explained why the deputy had been forced to allow Henry to take the baby this morning instead of hauling Henry off in handcuffs. Had Emily refused to allow anyone entrance to the apartment until she could consult with an attorney, she could have staved off this incident, because as the baby's mother she also had the right to hold on to the baby.

But she didn't know she didn't have to allow anyone inside, and Henry had already picked up the baby and carried him outside by that point. Had she tried to attack him, a) the baby could have been hurt, and b) she would have been arrested for assault and domestic violence.

Emily's first call had been to her parents, who were driving down and still in northern Georgia.

Ralph told her to call Dewi, and told Emily to pass word that if Dewi didn't get the baby back before he arrived, he would hunt Henry down and rip out his throat himself, if necessary.

For several pesky legal and annoyingly practical reasons, Dewi couldn't let that happen.

No matter how satisfying it might be to her on a personal level to not only let that happen, but to facilitate it happening.

Dewi quickly relayed all this to Beck and Joaquin upon their arrival. "Okay," Dewi said, standing and stretching, her back cracking. "Joaquin, you're with me. I want to pull out of here in ten. Beck, you and Ken mind the store here today."

"Wait, what?" Beck shook his head. "No. *I'm* going with Joaquin."

"No, your ass is staying here, where you can deal with anything that happens and quickly get to Nami," Dewi said. "If she goes into labor when you're on the ass-end of this fucking state, I'll never hear the end of it. And if there's muscle needed here today, you can handle it. Besides, a Prime should go with Joaquin. Da and Badger are tied up taking care of Tamsin. I won't jeopardize her safety over this."

"Then swap places with one of them!"

"We still don't know why my Prime powers failed with Malyah," Dewi reminded him. "That was before we knew there was a wolf in their background. Do you honestly want to risk me failing Tamsin when she's a full shifter? And both Da and Badger say they prefer I not be shouldering Tamsin's grief right now because they don't know what it might do to my baby."

"Then let's send Stig or Elliot," Beck said. "They're both Primes."

"Yeah, and they're both out of state right now with Martin, coordinating resettlements. The earliest they could probably get down there, *if* they can even get a direct flight to Miami, would be sometime tomorrow morning. Emily's father will arrive down there tonight and go on a rampage if that baby isn't safely back in Emily's arms. Joaquin and I can be there in three hours and hopefully have this resolved before dinner. I need Joaquin because he speaks Spanish way better than I do, and looking at the logistics of this, and some of the dude's

known associates, not speaking Spanish could be an impediment.”

“Then send Carl or Mateo with him!” Beck practically shrieked.

“They are not Primes. And they need to stay at home, with Tamsin and everyone, helping Da and Badger with her and the baby, and helping Brianna and Malyah take care of the kids. That is *not* negotiable, Beck.”

“You’re being unreasonable,” Beck protested. “Send *me*! Or at least bring me with you, too!”

She struggled not to lose her patience with Beck, knowing this came from a place of love and concern.

Even if it did aggravate the snot out of her.

Instead, she looked to Ken. “Your call,” she finally said. “And you know I don’t offer that lightly. I will not Prime you, and I will abide by your wishes.”

Beck snorted. “Okay, then! *Finally!* A voice of reason. At least *someone* will see things my way.” Beck smugly crossed his arms over his chest and wore a victorious smile.

The reluctance on Ken’s face was almost enough to make Dewi change her mind about going, but then he nodded. “Dewi’s right,” Ken said. “There’s a baby at risk and we are on the clock with it running out fast. This requires a rapid response, and she’s the best one available to go with Joaquin. We don’t need action delayed because we don’t have a Prime there, or can’t communicate with people. I’m not willing to risk Tamsin’s safety, and if Badger and Da have a concern about Dewi’s baby, then I defer to them.

“Hopefully Dewi and Joaquin can locate this guy quickly, Joaquin can be the muscle to subdue him, and Dewi can Prime the dude. And we need someone available to stay here, meaning Beck. We have to get that baby back to her momma, and we’ll likely need a Prime to do it peacefully. If Emily’s father gets hold of the guy before Dewi does, we *will* have a massive headache on our hands to clean up. Not to mention innocent people could get hurt. And no one wants that.”

Dewi was both pleasantly shocked as well as glad for the backup. “*Thank* you, voice of reason!”

Ken offered her a smile.

Beck glared. “What the *fuck*, dude?”

“What?” Ken asked. “I don’t see a problem with this. And she *asked* me for my opinion.” He looked at Dewi. “You’re not going to drag the guy back here and toss him in the woodchipper, right?”

She snorted. “No, I’m not. Woodchipping is not on the agenda. My goal is for this situation to end quickly and peacefully, with as little drama as possible, and without me having to do much more than Prime people for info and to make the guy forget he even knows Emily, much less that he has a baby with her.” She chuffed. “Although I do *not* promise to not make him punch himself in the balls and face a few times before he forgets.”

Ken actually snorted. “Only if you promise to try to get video of that.”

She high-fived him. “Deal.”

Beck glared at Ken. “You know it’s not that easy! Since when does Dewi not go the extra mile? And she’s *pregnant!*”

“And I’m your *boss*,” Dewi growled, shooting a pointed glare at Beck. “I want this handled quickly before we have a complicated mess to clean up because Ralph kills the guy. Or, worse, kills innocent people while looking for the guy. Or, worse than that, the baby is harmed or killed. The only reason Henry grabbed the baby is because he thinks Emily’s family is rich and he’s looking to extort money out of her. He doesn’t want the baby.”

Beck walked over to Ken. “I do *not* like this, dude. Not one bit. It will *not* be that simple.”

“You don’t have to like it,” Dewi said. “You do, however, need to stay here and hold down the fort with Ken in case anything happens. I don’t want Carl and Mateo forced to go on a call unless it’s an emergency and you need backup. We’ll be home by late tonight.”

“Who’s driving?” Joaquin asked Dewi.

She arched an eyebrow at him. “We’re taking my Saleen.”

“And you never let anyone drive your Saleen,” he said. “I’ll go get my stuff from my car.” He headed out of the office, leaving Beck standing there with his hands on his hips.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Beck said. “Dewi, *please*, I’m *begging* you, let me go with Joaquin.”

“Beck, it’s really okay,” Ken said. “How about getting the coffee pot started for me, please? I haven’t had a chance to do that yet.”

Grumbling, Beck left the office.

“I’ll pack you some breakfast and coffee,” Ken told Dewi.

She leaned in and kissed him. “*Thank* you,” she said. “I really appreciate you backing me up.”

“Yeah, well, be careful, sweetheart. Don’t make me have to listen to Beck say ‘see I told you so’ for the rest of my life, huh?”

She smiled and gave him another kiss. “Easy-peasy!”



THERE WAS no direct route from Dewi’s house to Miami. Technically not Miami, but out in the northwest Hialeah area. After checking her map app, instead of taking I-75 south and then east across Alligator Alley, Dewi opted for a route that would cut across the state on I-4 and then head south on a connecting highway to pick up the Florida Turnpike. Otherwise, they’d get bogged down in construction traffic around Sarasota.

After packing coffee, water, food, two spare pairs of undies for Dewi—because like hell was she taking any chances—and extra ammo, and another bathroom trip for Dewi to pee, they headed out with Dewi driving the Saleen. If they got pulled over, she’d simply Prime the officer into letting them go with a verbal warning, claiming she was on her way

to the doctor because they thought there was a problem with her baby.

Joaquin rode shotgun and kept in contact with Ken and Emily via text, as well as studied the information Ken had dug up and sent to their phones. “Looks like Henry’s mother is a real grifting piece of shit, too,” Joaquin said after summarizing Henry’s thick rap sheet to Dewi. “That, or she has the worst luck and balance in the world. Ken found where she’s been the plaintiff in several slip-and-fall cases against local grocery stores and settled for undisclosed amounts. And that’s just down here in the past fifteen years. Looks like she moved here from New Jersey.”

“Terrific,” Dewi snarked. “Remind me to tell Emily not to be so nice in the future. And to not fall on some grifter’s dick.”

“No doubt.”

They were able to avoid the worst traffic due to the early hour, and it wasn’t long before they were heading south on the Turnpike. “Here we go,” she said after merging onto the toll road and effortlessly weaving around cars as if they were standing still. “Easy peasy chicken squeezezy.”

Joaquin didn’t respond at first. She sensed...something from him.

“What?” she finally asked, glancing his way.

There was a strange look on his face. “What did you say?”

“Huh?”

“Just now. What did you say?”

“Easy peasy chicken squeezezy?”

“*Chicken* squeezezy?”

“Yeah. Why? Haven’t you ever heard that phrase before?”

He stared, disbelief on his features. She also sensed him trying not to get snarky with her.

“What?” she asked. “Just spit it out.”

“It’s not *chicken* squeezy,” he finally said. “It’s *lemon* squeezy.”

“*What?*” Joaquin continued staring at her. “No,” she said. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Uh, and squeezing a chicken does? I’ve heard of lemonade but I’ve never heard of chickenade. You sure you aren’t conflating ‘winner winner chicken dinner’ with ‘easy peasy lemon squeezy’?”

“Oh.” Dewi thought about it. “I guess a lemon would be easier to squeeze than a chicken.”

Joaquin snorted. “Ya *think?*”

“Don’t push it,” she growled.

“Sorry, boss.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DEWI

DEWI COULDN'T HAVE ASKED for more perfect weather for the drive. As dawn broke it turned lightly breezy, with the wind blowing in from the east off the Atlantic and tempering some of the heat of the late March morning and making the humidity more tolerable.

It was just before 10:00 am when Dewi pulled the Saleen into the parking lot of Emily's apartment complex. Wasn't the ritziest place, but it looked like it'd been constructed sometime in the past ten years, based on the size of the trees planted in the common spaces and by how well-kept it looked. Joaquin had given Emily a heads-up that they were arriving. When they pulled up, she was standing outside waiting for them, her eyes red and nose puffy from crying.

Dewi immediately dropped into work mode as she draped an arm around the girl's shoulders and escorted her back inside her apartment, a ground-floor unit facing the parking area.

Then again, considering Dewi was only four years older than Emily, maybe "girl" wasn't the right word to use to describe her. Except Dewi had come to realize most people her own age felt younger to her because they hadn't endured the weight of the pack's safety crushing her shoulders for the past fourteen years.

After Dewi hit the bathroom, Emily ran them through what happened in detail. Dewi handed her key fob to Joaquin. "Emily, give Joaquin your car keys so he can get your car seat and put it in mine."

“Why not take Emily’s car?” he asked.

“Because Henry and his mother might recognize it,” Dewi said.

“Oh. True.”

While he handled that, Dewi had Emily text her several pictures she’d snapped of Henry that morning, including one that had captured Fawny in the background.

Dewi halted in her tracks. Henry was a white guy with muddy brown eyes and a hairline that was racing toward the back of his head faster than a Formula 1 car.

Dewi turned to Emily. “Okay, I’m not usually one to put down someone’s appearance, but I gotta ask—”

“I know, I *know*. I was *really* drunk when I met him,” she admitted. “But surprisingly enough, he was good in bed, and funny. He speaks Spanish pretty well, too, so it kind of impressed me when we’d go somewhere and he could order in Spanish and stuff. He knew how to work on cars, and...”

She sighed. “I was an idiot. I’ll admit it. But at first it was enough to carry us through a couple of months. We only saw each other a couple of nights a week because of our schedules, so he was able to put on an act. Believe me, I did *not* mean to get pregnant. I also didn’t know I was pregnant at first. I was almost twelve weeks when I finally realized something was going on. We were close to breaking up anyway by that point, and that was the final nail in the coffin. I also didn’t know about all the other baby mommas then, either. He told me he didn’t have any kids.”

“In the future, if you’re going to date a bilingual dirtbag, don’t let beer goggles get you into bed with him, huh?”

Emily snorted. “Oh, believe me, I have learned a lesson.” She blinked back tears. “I just hope he doesn’t hurt Hannah. I’ll never forgive myself. I shouldn’t have texted him we were leaving. Dad told me not to, and I felt guilty for not trying one more time, thinking what do I tell her in the future?”

“That her father’s a pasty-white bilingual broke-ass, male-pattern-baldness-poster boy, baby-momma-collecting dirtbag?”

Or would you rather me pull my judgmental punches?”

“No, I deserve that.”

Henry’s mother appeared exactly as Dewi would have pictured a middle-aged grifter named Fawny—looking ragged, dark roots exposed in frizzy and harshly over-bleached blonde hair, her tackily over-applied makeup unable to fully hide how old and wrinkled her face really was, no doubt from years of hard living, and with tits too unnaturally perky for a woman her age and build to not be filled with silicon.

Emily had, as Dewi instructed her earlier, compiled a list of Henry’s friends and associates that she’d gathered from memory and from scouring social media accounts, along with addresses in some cases. Dewi forwarded all of that to Ken to follow up on. He was also trying to see if it was possible to get a ping on the guy’s cell phone, but so far he hadn’t. Apparently, the number Emily had and used for him was actually an Internet phone number that forwarded to his real cell phone. Making it practically untraceable in that timeframe and with the tools Ken had at his disposal.

“What do I do now?” Emily tearfully asked.

The apartment was full of packed boxes, but it looked like she still had more packing to do. “Get back to packing. If your parents show up before we’re back, call me immediately and tell them I’m ordering them to wait here.”

She nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Their first stop was the address where Henry had ordered Emily to bring the money. It was a unit in an old, small, run-down one-story roadside motel that advertised daily and monthly rates on a cracked and faded sign out front. Dewi parked two blocks away to wait while Joaquin sprinted to the location.

I know it can't be this easy.

She easily kept track of his progress via a location app all the Enforcers had on their phones, but they were also using two-way radios that had good range, and wearing small earpieces so they could communicate.

“This place is a dump,” he said. “How did a place like this get spared by any number of hurricanes?”

“Dude, focus,” she said. “We’re not here to critique their curb appeal. What do you see?”

“Not many people around right now. A few cars.”

“What about the vehicle we’re looking for?” she asked.

“Negative. Circling around back.” He went quiet for a moment. Finally, “Can’t see in the window. Curtain in the way.”

“Hear anything inside?”

“Nothing. Bars on the window, so can’t go in or out this way. No back door. No vehicles back here, either. Barely enough room between the building and the fence next door to walk with all the garbage.”

“Wait by the door. I’m coming in.” She quickly drove over, parking right in front of the unit, where Joaquin now stood off to one side of the door with his hand on the gun holstered under his shirt in his back waistband. It was only five doors down and clearly visible from the office, so there wouldn’t be any chance of secrecy regarding this part.

Dewi moved to the other side of the door and motioned for Joaquin to remain silent before she reached over and pounded on it. “CPS, open the door!”

Joaquin shot her an odd look, but she ignored him and pounded again. “Child Protective Services. Open up! ¡Abre la puerta!”

Joaquin arched an eyebrow at her.

“See?” she whispered. “I know a little.”

She normally didn’t impersonate government officials but sometimes it was necessary to gain the slight advantage she needed until she could get close enough to put hands on someone and use her Prime powers. It was more likely anyone inside might open the door for a woman shouting they were CPS than if Joaquin knocked and said they were police.

Still nothing.

Joaquin listened at the front window, which wasn't barred but where a ratty-looking curtain hung in place blocking his view, and shook his head.

The door, which was made of cheap wood, looked old and battered. "Cover me," she said. She drew her gun and kicked the door open on the first try, planting her foot just under the knob. The old wood in the frame easily splintered under the force of her Prime Alpha wolf strength, and the door slammed back on its hinges, hitting the wall.

Empty. It was obvious someone lived there, but they weren't home and there were no signs of a baby. The place thickly reeked of stale cigarettes and weed. There was a full-sized bed, unmade, a bathroom that looked like it needed a flamethrower to clean it, and a decrepit table and chair. An old color TV sat on the stained and battered dresser. Dirty clothes, empty beer and liquor bottles, and random garbage was strewn all over the room.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered.

An older man ran up, screaming at them in Spanish. From his neatly pressed dark blue guayabera shirt and the name tag pinned to the upper left pocket that read *Orlando*, she guessed this was the manager or owner.

Dewi holstered her gun, reached out, grabbed his arm, and sent him a Prime command to calm down and believe whatever they said. Fortunately it was easy to do that with mental images and not actual words, so a language barrier wasn't an issue. "Tell him we're CPS," she told Joaquin. "Ask him about the tenant in this unit."

Joaquin quickly spoke with the man, Dewi understanding less than half of their conversation.

Which is exactly why he's here and Beck isn't. Can't wait to tell him I told him so.

"The guy who rents this room," Joaquin relayed, "is out of town this week with a roofing crew. He saw another guy go in and out yesterday evening, but he had the key in his hand and

the rent's paid until the end of the month, so he didn't ask questions."

Dewi opened her phone and showed the guy a pic of Henry. "Him?"

Joaquin exchanged words with him and the older man nodded. "Si."

"¿Viste un bebé?" she asked, tapping the picture.

The man shook his head.

"I'm impressed, Dewi," Joaquin muttered.

"Shut up. Tell him to go back to the office and go about his day and he's not to say anything to anyone about CPS, not to call the cops, the usual. Nothing's wrong. If anyone asks him about us, we're visiting from out of town and waiting for a cousin to return from work."

Joaquin escorted him out of the room while Dewi exited and closed the door, doing her best to arrange things so it was harder to tell from a distance that it'd been kicked in. Then she spotted a housekeeping cart several rooms down, walked down there, and had a conversation with the housekeeper, who fortunately spoke English so Dewi didn't need Joaquin's help.

Dewi gave her two twenties and a Prime order to keep the cart parked immediately in front of the room all day today, which temporarily solved one of their problems.

When Joaquin rejoined Dewi in the car, they sat there with it idling and the AC blasting while Dewi considered their options. "I need to be the one to confront Henry," she said.

He shook his head. "I don't like that plan, boss."

"I have to Prime him. We can't risk him running with the baby. If he sees both of us, he'll spook."

"This car is gonna spook him no matter what. You don't see many Saleens sitting in front of shitboxes like this place."

"Fuck," she muttered. "We should have brought Emily's car. Or yours."

He fake gasped. “Are you *actually* admitting I’m *right*? Oh, my *god*! Should I write this down?”

She flipped him a bird and backed out of the parking space to find them a better and less obvious vantage point while they contemplated their next move.

Joaquin referred back to his phone. “We’re ten minutes from one of the recent addresses Ken found for Henry.” He looked the place up on the map app’s street view. “Single family residence. Street parking. Looks like an old neighborhood.”

“Let’s go. Which way?”

He gave her directions while she drove. Dewi kept her eye out for the car in question as the cruised by the house the first time. At least this neighborhood, while old, was filled with a mix of gentrified and rundown houses, including a variety of new and old vehicles in a variety of income levels.

They circled the area once without spotting the car and Dewi dropped Joaquin in the alley behind the house.

A moment later, he spoke up on the radio. “No one’s home. Even went up and knocked. Lights are off. No sounds inside.”

“Okay. I’ll pick you up out front.”

She circled around and he jumped in almost immediately when she pulled up.

They drove off. “Where to next?” she asked. “Anything else close by?”

“Yeah. One of the friends Emily gave us the info for.”

Another goose egg—no one was home at the dumpy apartment. They also dropped by a nearby convenience store listed in Henry’s employment history from two years ago, but they had no idea who he was.

“I’m getting the sense Henry doesn’t run in wealthier circles,” Dewi snarked. “Back to the motel.”

They parked half a block away, where the room was visible from the car. “I’m going to go back in there and talk to the manager,” she said.

“Yes, because that worked *so* well before,” he drawled.

She glared at him. “*¿Dónde está el baño?*” she said. “I know a little, okay? I’m a pregnant woman—I think he’ll get the hint if I smile and do the universal pee-pee dance.”

Besides, she really did have to pee. “And if I grab him and Prime him I can think stuff to him.” She held up her phone. “Plus, I always have the translation app.” She reached for her door handle. “Not to mention I have you in my ear. You can feed me lines and translate for me. Roll in if I yell for you.”

“Wait... Are you actually *trusting* me to *drive* your *car*?”

She threw him another glare. “*Only* if I tell you to. You *do* know how to drive a stick, right?”

“Well, yeah, but it’s been a while.”

She handed him the key fob. “Don’t grind the goddamned gears,” she growled. “You burn out my clutch or so much as put a scratch on it, I will neuter you with my bare hands and Malyah won’t have to worry about birth control. And don’t adjust the mirrors or anything. Seat only.”

Truth be told, she *really* had to pee now. The guy in the office perked up a little when he saw her. She smiled and pointed at the door to the public bathroom there in the lobby, and asked if she could use it. He shook his head and opened the locked door at the end of the counter to wave her in and around to the private bathroom in the tiny apartment he apparently occupied that was located in the back of the office.

Spotless.

That’s more like it.

She’d just started going when she heard Joaquin’s laughter in her ear.

“*Gee*, boss. Thanks for *that* audible.”

She cut off the low growl rumbling from her. “You mention this to *anyone* and I swear, Joaquin, I *will* neuter you. I mean it.”

He laughed harder. “It’s okay, boss. Everyone pees.”

She quickly finished and washed her hands, returning to speak to the man behind the counter.

No, he hadn’t seen anyone since they’d left. And yes, Dewi was welcomed to wait in the air-conditioned office.

Plus, he offered her a dish of homemade flan while she waited, which she gratefully accepted.

God, I love Miami.

“That’s just mean, Dewi,” Joaquin groused in her ear. “Now I want flan.”

“Sucks to be you then, doesn’t it?” She turned away from the counter and toward the window, keeping her voice low after loudly slurping down another spoonful of the decadent custard. “Sometimes, it’s good ta be da preggo Prime, dude.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AT 11:55 AN OLD, beat-up Impala pulled into a parking spot one door down from the room, and Dewi perked up.

“You see that?” she asked Joaquin over the radio, already moving toward the office door.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m watching.”

When the male driver stepped out—not Henry, unfortunately—he looked at the housekeeping cart parked right in front of the door and took several steps toward it. Dewi exited the office and sprinted toward him.

“Drive over,” she ordered Joaquin.

Before the man could even reach the housekeeping cart, Dewi swooped in and grabbed his arm, immobilizing him.

“Where’s Henry?” she asked.

He shook his head and she realized he didn’t speak English.

She plucked the room key from his hand as she turned and looked at his car. “There’s no baby in the car, Joaquin.”

“Fuck!”

She patted the guy down and took a .38 revolver off him while awaiting Joaquin. Moments later, Joaquin pulled up next to the man’s car and jumped out.

“Question him.” She handed the man off to Joaquin after giving the guy a mental Prime order to stand there and answer

all questions truthfully while Dewi donned nitrile gloves and searched the car...

Which was *disgusting*. Thank the Goddess there wasn't a baby inside. Apparently the AC didn't work because all the windows were down, and it was filled with empty beer cans and food wrappers that made the inside stink. And there were suspicious stains on both front seats. The trunk was full of a bald spare that was low on air, old rags, more empty beer cans, and some plastic bottles of motor oil, transmission fluid, and power steering fluid.

Five minutes later, they'd learned Henry had paid Jorge Morales fifty bucks to come sit here and wait for anyone to show up looking for him. And that Henry would pay him \$500 on the back end of things. Dewi took notes, including snapping pics of the man, his car, the license plate, and his driver's license.

Morales didn't know where Henry currently was because Henry had met him, alone, earlier that morning at a fast-food restaurant just a few blocks down the street. That meeting took place about forty-five minutes after Henry and Fawny left Emily's.

"If he's supposed to call Henry when someone shows up," Dewi said, "and Henry's supposed to bring the baby, that means Henry's likely close by. Especially if Fawny and the baby weren't with him this morning. We need to find him."

"Then let's have the guy call Henry and tell him the money's here," Joaquin said.

"I'd rather not give them a chance to put a gun to the baby's head and get in a standoff," she said. "Because if Henry's plan is to come in first and he has Tawny watching and waiting to bring the baby, if she sees something sus she might take off and then she's in the wind. I'd rather surprise them where they are with the baby. No chases, no attention, no cops. Easy-peasy."

Dewi snapped her fingers at the guy. "Car keys and cell phone. And lock code for the phone."

Joaquin translated and the guy surrendered the items. She immediately unlocked the phone and changed the code to 1234 so she wouldn't have to remember it.

She grabbed the guy's arm again. "Joaquin, tell him to go into the room and stay there, door closed, until either we return or tomorrow at noon, whichever comes first. Not to call anyone, not to leave, not to make any noise. He can watch TV, sleep, drink water from the tap, and use the bathroom. And tell him to take a shower. That's it. And he'll have no memory of us or how he ended up here unless we return to talk to him."

Joaquin gave him the orders and the man pushed the cart aside and walked into the room, closing the door behind him.

"So he's on ice and out of our hair for now," Joaquin said as he moved the housekeeping cart back into position. "What's our next step?"

"Even Henry can't be stupid enough to think Emily could come up with \$10k in a few hours."

"You might be drastically overestimating his intelligence," Joaquin sniped.

"Maybe." She started checking Jorge Morales' phone's call log and found texts in Spanish and a call from earlier that morning. But the phone number wasn't assigned to a contact, and it wasn't the same number they had for Henry.

She handed Joaquin the phone. "What's that say?"

He read them. "It's the exchange from Henry about meeting him this morning. Told Jorge he had an easy job for him." A low growl erupted from his throat. "Said he wants to stick it to his ex for being a bitch to him and not aborting the baby, and for not telling him her parents were loaded."

She looked over Joaquin's shoulder and called Ken to update him, putting him on speaker phone. "Can you start a trace on this number?" she asked, reciting it to him.

"Yeah, but also check to see if the guy has any social media apps on his phone where he's friends with Henry," Ken suggested. "We might be able to track Henry's recent whereabouts that way."

Joaquin started looking. “Ha! Ken, you’re a goddamned genius. Henry checked in yesterday afternoon at a bar three blocks from here.” He scrolled further. “And there’s a sandwich shop two blocks in the other direction. He’s got to have a place close by.”

“Stand by,” Ken said. “Let me see what I can find.” The pack had access to sophisticated software and resources to locate information thanks to their money and well-placed packmates in various levels of state and local governments. Even a few at the federal level, and at some major tech companies. It wasn’t magic, but with enough information they could sometimes work miracles.

“Fawny checked in at a different bar nearby two days ago,” Ken said. “And she’s not listed at an address close to there, but it looks like a guy who is crawling all over her profile and liking all her posts and pics has a car registered to an address smack in the middle of those places and close to the motel.”

Dewi crowed with victory. “Text it to us. We’re on our way.” She ended the call. “Let’s go.”

“We should take his car,” Joaquin said.

“I’m not leaving the Saleen here. And I’m damned sure not riding in *that*.” She handed him the keys to the Impala. “*You* drive his car.”

He held the keys pinched between his thumb and forefinger like they were a piece of garbage. “Gee, thanks, boss,” he grouched.

“I have a spare pair of tactical gloves in my trunk that will probably fit you. In the duffel bag.” She turned and popped the deck lid open with her key fob. “Use those. Besides, then you won’t leave prints.”

“*Ugh*. Is this about the chicken squeeze comment? Because I’m sorry.”

“Gloves, asshole!”

They headed over to the address, Dewi parking on the street two driveways down. It was a small grouping of six

ancient duplexes, two of them with blue tarps of various threadbare condition nailed to the roofs. Parking areas flanked both sides of the cluster of duplexes, which sat positioned in two rows of three each.

Joaquin parked at the far end of the closest parking area, where the unit was located, so the vehicle couldn't be seen from the windows. Joaquin headed around the rear of the building to watch the back door while Dewi walked up to the front door. Just then, in the opposite parking area, a vehicle pulling in caught both their attention.

“Shit! That's them!” Joaquin said.

Henry was behind the wheel and Fawny occupied the passenger seat. But Henry spotted them first and quickly backed out, squealing tires as he pulled away.

“Goddammit!” Dewi screamed. “Don't let them get away! Take the other car!” She sprinted for the Saleen and didn't even bother fastening her seatbelt as she peeled out to follow them.

Weaving through traffic, Dewi lost sight of them but Joaquin had managed to get ahead of her and skate through a traffic light before it turned red. He kept her posted as he pursued the car west along US 41.

“Talk to me, Joaquin!” she screamed.

“I think he's heading to Krome Avenue,” he said. “I've dropped back just enough I can keep up with him.”

“Don't you *dare* fucking lose him!”

“I don't want him to wreck with the baby inside, Dewi!”

“Dammit!”

Somehow, they managed to weave through traffic without picking up any law enforcement, and then Joaquin spoke up. “Turned north on Krome Avenue,” he said. “Right turn. Intersection where the casino is.”

“Where's Krome lead?” she asked.

“All the way north to Alligator Alley, if he doesn’t turn off first.”

She was still about a quarter mile behind them and managed to slide around the corner on a stale yellow light without fishtailing into traffic waiting in the oncoming left turn lane. The road was four lanes but divided in the center by a wide, grassy median and cable barrier.

Thirty seconds later, she finally caught up to and passed Joaquin, flooring it as she pulled alongside the vehicle they were pursuing.

Sure enough, she spotted a baby carseat in the back.

“Let’s box him in,” she said. Praying he wasn’t stupid enough to hit her car, she pulled ahead of the vehicle and hit her brakes, weaving as Henry did behind her, blocking him in and forcing him to slow down and stop.

Both she and Joaquin jumped out with guns drawn, and in the distance Dewi now heard sirens she suspected were approaching them. Just to the west, on the far side of the southbound lanes, was a wide irrigation canal. West of that lay a vast expanse of sawgrass swamp that composed most of the Everglades.

She ordered Henry out of the vehicle, grabbing him by the arm as he exited and pouring the full force of her Prime into him to immobilize him.

In the back seat, the baby squalled where it was strapped in.

Dewi tightened her grip on Henry’s arm and smacked him, hard, on the back of the head. “That’s for abducting the baby, asshole. Leave your phone, wallet, keys, and any weapons on top of the car. When I tell you, start heading west. Don’t stop until nightfall, or law enforcement catches up to you, whichever happens first. Then you can turn around and head east and turn yourself in to the first cop you find. You’re also going to fucking confess to everything about crimes you haven’t been caught for yet. And pay off the debts you owe to your baby mommas.

“You will forget about Emily, forget you have a child with her, and if you’re ever reminded of that fact you will deny you have any children with her. Delete all your social media accounts. You will forget all about this morning. You’ll also forget about us. Oh, and punch yourself hard in the balls a few times before you head east again. Or if you see law enforcement coming. In fact, start every morning for the next year by punching yourself hard in the nuts first thing when you wake up, and again right before you go to bed.”

“What if he gets off on that?” Joaquin snarked.

“Shut up,” Dewi growled.

Henry left the items, including a gun and a knife, on the roof.

“What’s the phone lock code?” she demanded.

He gave it to her, and she unlocked the phone and reset the code.

“Okay, head west, fucker.”

He did, barely avoiding getting hit by an oncoming car in the southbound lanes as he crossed Krome Avenue.

Whoops.

Dewi scooped the remaining items off the roof, walked around the car, and dumped them into the passenger seat.

Fawny looked terrified where she stood next to the passenger door. “What’d you do to him? Who are you people?”

Dewi grabbed her arm. “Forget about Emily, and forget about Hannah. Leave your purse and phone in the car. And stop being a goddamned grifter. When I tell you, go stand by the canal over there. When you see the cops pull up, scream at them, yell that you’re trying to kill yourself, make sure you have their attention, then jump into the water and head for the other side. When they fish you out and question you, this entire morning is a complete blank in your mind. You got high or drunk or something.”

She nodded.

“Dewi,” Joaquin said. “Clarify.”

“What? Oh. You’re not *actually* trying to kill yourself. Just put on a good show for the cops so they think you are so you distract them. Don’t tell them I told you to do it. Don’t say anything about us—forget about us. And what’s your phone lock code?”

She recited it. Dewi grabbed her phone and unlocked it. “Okay, now walk over there and get ready. Don’t get hit by a car.”

Fawny headed off.

“What do we do?” Joaquin asked while Dewi reset the code. Behind them, traffic was starting to back up, and they spotted vehicles pulling over for approaching FHP cruisers.

In the back seat, the baby was still crying but looked unharmed.

Joaquin still wore the tactical gloves. “Take this car,” Dewi said. “Head back to Emily’s. I’ll hang here to run interference and then catch up with you. Toss the keys to the other car.”

He did and then jumped into Henry’s car and took off while Dewi pulled the Saleen off onto the shoulder and got out to wait while traffic tried to resume moving around them.

When the first FHP cruiser pulled up, Dewi frantically waved at the trooper with both hands and pointed to where Fawny now stood on the canal bank. It looked like Henry had already made it to the other side of the canal, climbed out, and was heading west, quickly disappearing into a thick stand of sawgrass.

“She’s trying to kill herself!” Dewi screamed. “Stop her!”

The officer turned, spotted Fawny, then hurdled the median barrier and sprinted toward her while yelling into the shoulder mic of his radio. Fawny started shrieking she was going to kill herself and jumped into the water.

Shit. I hope she can swim. Whoops.

Dewi dove into her car and peeled out, quickly catching up with Joaquin, who’d turned east at US27 to return to Emily’s.

“How’s your passenger?” Dewi asked Joaquin over the radio.

“Screaming her head off, so she’s probably hungry or needs a diaper, but she sounds strong. Want me to pull over so we can check on her?”

“No,” Dewi said. “Let’s get her back to her momma right now. Turning my radio off while I make calls.”

Dewi called Emily next. “We got her. Safe and sound. Heading back to you.”

Emily burst into tears. “Oh, thank god! Thank you so much!”

“We’ll be there in about fifteen minutes.” She ended that call and then called Ken. “Tell Beck you told him so, honey.”

“You found Hannah?”

“Yep. Safe and sound. Easy-peasy! Taking her back to Emily right now. I’ll call you before we leave here and are on our way back.”

“Huzzah! Great job! Love you, baby.”

“Love you, too.” She ended the call and grinned, breathing a huge sigh of relief.

I know I shouldn’t feel petty about this but I can’t wait to rub Beck’s face in this.

Because, yes, she could *still* safely do fieldwork.

When they both pulled in and parked in front of Emily’s unit she raced out to greet them. “How’d it go?” Emily asked.

Dewi walked over. “Easy-peasy.”

Joaquin shot her a look but didn’t comment as he opened the back passenger door and unfastened the crying infant, handing her over to Emily. She wore a T-shirt and diaper and nothing else.

The baby, not Emily.

“Now I don’t have to worry about bailing your dad out of jail,” Dewi joked. “*And* we can get back to Tampa in time for

dinner. I need to use your bathroom first, though.”

But Emily didn't look relieved.

In fact, she looked terrified as she held the baby, and that pulled Dewi up short. “What's wrong?” Dewi asked.

“Um, Ms. Bleacke? I-I don't know h-how to tell you this...but this isn't Hannah.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DEWI

DEWI BLINKED. "SAY *WHUT?*"

Emily looked terrified. "This isn't m-my b-baby."

Does. Not. Compute. "What do you mean she's not your baby?"

Emily hooked a finger in the front waistband of the baby's diaper and pulled it out, just enough she could look. "This is a boy. Hannah's...not. A boy. She's a girl. And he's at least a couple of months older than Hannah. He's a lot heavier than her. And bigger."

"Are you sure?" Dewi asked. "That that's not Hannah? You're *positive* that's not your baby?"

"Uh, pretty sure, yeah." She stepped closer so they could see where she still had her finger hooked in the diaper's waistband, pulling it out a little more.

Dewi and Joaquin both leaned in and looked.

Sure enough, there was no denying it was a baby boy.

And he was still fussing, although not crying as hard as he was before Joaquin unbuckled him from the car seat.

"Oh for fuck's sake!" Joaquin groaned. "I cannot *believe* this!" He glared at Dewi. "Easy-peasy my *ass.*"

"Well, to be fair," Dewi said, still processing this hiccup, "babies look a lot alike to me when they're little."

Joaquin glared at her.

“Okay, so who in the hell’s baby is *this*?” Dewi asked. “He was in the car with Henry and Fawny when we chased them down! Why would we *not* expect this to be Hannah?”

“And now how do we find Hannah?” Joaquin asked. “*And* how do we get this baby back to his parents?”

“Can you ask Henry?” Emily asked.

Joaquin snorted. “Kind of hard to do when he might be somewhere in the middle of the Everglades right now.” He glared at Dewi.

“What?” Emily gasped. “He’s *dead*?”

“He’s not dead,” Dewi wearily said. “I told him to head due west until the sun set or he got arrested, and then head east. He’s to turn himself in for any crimes he’s committed that he hasn’t been arrested for. And pay off his debts. And punch himself in the balls.”

“And heading west meant straight into sawgrass swampland along Krome Avenue,” Joaquin explained as he pulled out his phone. “Then there’s a possibility the gators and pythons and other natural dangers might mean he never makes it back. Unless the cops already caught him. We need to find Fawny’s place, right now. In case any cops show up there looking for relatives. If the baby’s there and the cops get there first, we’re fucked.”

“Who are you calling?” Dewi asked.

“I’m not.” He showed her his phone. “I’m looking at the dossier Ken sent us. It lists all the known addresses for Fawny and Henry. We’ll start there.”

“Can’t we just *ask* Fawny where Hannah is?” Emily asked.

Joaquin harshly laughed. “We could, but last we saw her, FHP was fishing her out of a canal alongside Krome Avenue.”

Emily’s eyes widened. “*What?* She’s *dead*?”

“No,” Dewi wearily said. “She’s not dead, either. Nobody’s dead.”

Yet.

Although killing Henry and Fawny were starting to creep closer toward the top of Dewi's list of preferred options just because of the sheer amount of aggravation they were causing her today.

Certainly were topping the list of extreeemely satisfying albeit unviable options.

"Dewi ordered her to scream she wanted to kill herself and jump in and swim to the other side of the canal," Joaquin explained. "To draw the attention of the cops so we could get out of there with minimal contact."

"Before we do anything else, I have to pee," Dewi said. "Joaquin, search the car and meet us inside."

He did, found nothing else of note, and brought in the diaper bag that was on the backseat. It turned out that wasn't Emily's either, and Fawny had snatched Emily's diaper bag that morning. Meanwhile, Emily changed the baby, who needed it, and fortunately there was powdered formula in the diaper bag so she could make him a bottle.

"I'll go look at the registration slip on the car," Dewi said. "Let's start there. Make sure this damned thing isn't stolen or registered to anyone else first." She headed out and rummaged around in the glovebox. There, she found the paper, double-checked it against the license plate and the car's VIN number to make sure it was legit, and then pulled out her phone to compare it to the dossier.

"Found it," Dewi said when she returned to the apartment. "Matches the most recent address Ken has for Fawny."

"What about this baby?" Emily asked.

Dewi winced. *Beck will never let me live this down.*

Worse, he'd probably never let Ken live it down, either.

Hell, no one would let her live it down.

Dewi stared at the diapered bane of her existence. "We'll leave him here with you for now. I don't want to risk him getting hurt. When we figure out who he is and where he's supposed to be, then we'll deal with him." She took a couple

of pictures of him, and his diaper bag, so she'd have them for reference.

Joaquin held up his phone. "I'll let Ken know—"

"Don't you *dare*," Dewi growled.

"But I have to—"

"*No!* I called him on the way over and told him it was done. There's no reason yet to tell him otherwise. Or anyone else," she added.

"You lied to him?" he asked.

"*No!* I *thought* we were done! You were standing *right* next to me when I learned at the same time you did that we grabbed the wrong baby."

Joaquin glared at her. "What if we need Ken's help?"

"*Then* I'll tell him. But we already *have* information. We'll go to Fawny's first."

"What do I tell my parents?" Emily asked. "I called them and told them you got her back."

"*Nothing*," Dewi said. "You don't call them or text them and you don't tell them *anything* yet. Let them think she's home safe. Your parents will calm down and hopefully your dad's homicidal rage will ease up. And he'll slow his roll getting down here and that buys us some time."

They headed out in the Saleen after backing Fawny's car into a parking space down the lot away from Emily's apartment, just in case it had ended up on law enforcement's radar, but they left the keys with Emily. Dewi drove as Joaquin navigated and looked through the confiscated phones for info. Meanwhile, Emily texted them recent pics of Hannah, as well as a description of the outfit she'd been wearing that morning and what her diaper bag looked like.

"There's a thread in Fawny's phone from last night and early this morning between Fawny and someone she has listed in her contacts as 'Super-D.' Talking about a baby." His face scrunched up. "Based on the context, I'm not even sure I *want* to know what the nickname stands for."

“Dude, *focus*. Does Super-D’s phone number match any of the other contacts we have info on?”

“No.”

“Terrific. What’d they talk about?”

He skimmed. “She asked if ‘C’ has room for another baby this morning, and Super-D responded a few minutes later that C does have room.”

“Any idea who C is or where they are?”

“Stand by.” After a couple of minutes of looking, he shook his head. “No. Nothing in the call logs that matches. Let me check Henry’s phone.” He was finishing that as they pulled into the driveway of the house where Fawny supposedly lived.

But there was no one home. They let themselves in with one of the keys on Fawny’s key ring, and a quick search revealed no signs of a baby, or the supplies for one.

They tried the address for Henry again, found a working key, but also found nothing helpful—no supplies for a baby.

“Wonderful,” Joaquin snarked. “Now what? Do you want to try calling Super-D?”

“No. We don’t need him knowing something’s wrong and hiding out, or maybe even moving the baby. We need to find him. Let’s head back to the duplex where we caught up with Fawny and Henry.”

Which was also a dead end because there was still no one home. While Joaquin stood sentry behind her, Dewi tried all the keys on both Fawny’s and Henry’s key rings, and none of them matched.

So she wrenched hard on the doorknob, which snapped the lock. Without the deadbolt being thrown, it allowed Dewi to then push open the door.

A quick sweep of the one-bedroom apartment confirmed no one was home. It looked like a man’s home, from the sparse decor and items in the bathroom, but in one corner of the living room sat an older, well-used folding playpen and a grungy diaper bag.

Dewi snapped a pic of the diaper bag and sent it to Emily with a text asking if it was hers.

She quickly replied it was not.

“What the fuck?” Joaquin said. “They running a baby-snatching ring or something?”

“Henry has a bunch of baby mommas,” Dewi wearily said as she quickly rifled the apartment, looking for any sign of paycheck stubs or other info that might give them an idea where the resident worked. “Maybe Fawny’s booty call is babysitting or something.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Joaquin said.

Dewi turned. “What?”

He pulled out Fawny’s phone and opened the social media app. “This place belongs to the guy liking her pictures and posts, right? She’s friends online with him. Anthony Cordoba.” Dewi watched over his shoulder as he checked out the guy’s profile. “Oh, thank god. He’s got a recent employer listed.”

It was an oil change place close to downtown Miami. They saved screenshots of pictures of the guy on their own phones so they both had them and headed out again.

Twenty minutes later they were talking to the shop manager, who said Cordoba had quit three weeks earlier. He’d heard the man now worked as a mechanic over at a yacht club on South Beach.

That was their next stop.

After Dewi used the shop’s bathroom.

Which Dewi then Primed the manager to go in and clean the damned thing, because it was gross. If she hadn’t been pregnant and desperate, she would have held it a little longer.

Dewi took A1A over to the island as her phone’s map app guided them. Sunny day, gorgeous blue water, and barely a cloud in the sky. Postcard Miami.

“God, it’s beautiful out here,” Joaquin said, “but it would drive me stir-crazy after about a week if I lived here.”

“You and Malyah should come over for a weekend,” Dewi said.

“Maybe. Not right now. Between Tamsin, and Nami, and now Dania and the twins...”

She snorted. “And me. Because that’s the third rail you don’t want to touch, right? Mentioning that I’m going to pop soon?”

He smirked. “*You* said it, boss. *Not* me.”

“In all seriousness, maybe hold off on getting Malyah pregnant, huh?”

“Absolutely. She doesn’t want to have a baby right now. Maybe in a few years.”

Dewi felt a little guilty about that. “I didn’t mean wait years.”

“She wants to finish her degree. And we still need to see what’s going on with Bebe and Dania and the twins.” He stared out the window.

“And you’re worried about Nami castrating you if you accidentally get Malyah pregnant before she’s ready.”

“Fuck *yes*, I’m worried about Nami castrating me.” Joaquin laughed, but then his smile faded. “Truth be told, I’m still...processing.”

“Processing what?”

“Felicia Escobar.”

Dewi sucked in a sharp breath. “Oh. Sorry.”

He slowly shook his head. “I’m already vulnerable enough with Malyah. I am not yet ready to have a child who could potentially be at risk. And I know I shouldn’t let her murder stop me from finding joy, but it still weighs on me.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“She was one of mine to protect,” he said, finally looking at her. “I swore an oath as an Enforcer, and she died on my watch. Everyone can tell me all they want that it wasn’t my fault she was murdered by Raul Segura, but it doesn’t change how I *feel*, okay? Not to mention the entire pack compound, including mates and kids, were all put at risk because the Seguras were chasing *me*. Ken and Nami could have died because of *me*. And I’m still working through all of that.”

“That’s why you’re an Enforcer, Joaquin.” She stopped at a light and looked at him. “Because despite the personal bullshit you and I went through before I assigned you to Mexico, I saw your heart and knew you were a pain in my ass but you were tenacious and driven and focused. You’re damned good at your job, and I’m glad you’re one of the Enforcers. I’m sorry if I don’t say that to you often enough. You know me—I’m a hard-ass. I wouldn’t have someone working for me if I didn’t think they could keep up with me or if they weren’t the best candidate for the job. You also know I don’t bullshit people. I’m not just saying that to make you feel good.”

“Thanks, boss. I appreciate that.”

Dewi pulled up to the front entrance of the yacht club. When one of the valets tried to step in and help her out, she waved him off. “No need.” She got out, leaning in to speak to Joaquin. “Go park it and meet me out back.” She leveled a finger at him. “Do *not* put a scratch on it.”

“Sure thing.” Joaquin quickly climbed out and rounded the car to get behind the wheel. Meanwhile, Dewi headed inside after Priming the guy in charge of the valet stand to not hassle them about parking.

By the time Joaquin rejoined her, Dewi had already Primed the man at the front desk for information on where they might find Cordoba, and had him look at a picture to confirm the man was, in fact, working there.

They headed through the building toward the piers. “How are we playing this?” Joaquin whispered.

“Quickly and quietly,” she said. “In and out. Corner him, and then I’ll Prime him to see what he knows. I want no fuss, no attention drawn to us. Then we can hopefully get the hell out of here and retrieve Hannah. Easy-peasy.”

“Chicken squeezy?” He grinned.

“Fuck you,” she growled.

The place was huge. Outside, Dewi stopped an employee on their way out to the pier to ask where they could find Cordoba. The man turned, looking.

But when he pointed out their quarry, Cordoba, who was over sixty yards away from them, at that moment turned around and saw them looking at him.

He bolted.

“Motherfucker!” Dewi yelled.

Cordoba was already to the parking lot and had knocked over a woman passing by on a bike and took it from her by the time Dewi and Joaquin rounded the building and spotted him.

“Shit!” Dewi screamed.

As Cordoba took off, heading north, Dewi realized there was no way with his head-start and as fast as he was pedaling that either she or Joaquin could catch up with him on foot. As it was, she had a good twenty yards on Joaquin already.

So she improvised.

She stepped out in front of a group of tourists riding little rented motor scooters, Primed one of them, ordered him off the scooter, and yanked the obnoxiously mint green helmet off his head and buckled it on hers.

Joaquin pulled up short. “What the hell are you doing?” he yelled over the radio.

“Go get the car and follow me.” She turned the scooter around and headed after Cordoba while Joaquin ran for the car.

Not today, motherfucker, Dewi thought as she wove around startled tourists. *Not today.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JOAQUIN SWORE in Dewi's ear.

“What?” she yelled as she tried to keep an eye on Cordoba and not wreck the scooter.

“Nothing. Just stalled it.”

“Do. Not. Fuck. Up. My. Car!”

“I'm trying not to! Clutch is sensitive!”

Despite her growing rage at the guy for fleeing, she had to give him all due credit—for a human Cordoba sure could pedal fast.

Either that, or the little piece of shit gas-powered motor scooter was just *that* sucky. Wasn't even a Vespa. Hell, it wasn't even as fast as a moped. There were probably electric bikes that could outrun the thing.

In fact, Cordoba made it north on A1A as far as the Fontainebleau when Dewi was finally able to coax enough speed out of the scooter and weave around traffic to come up alongside him and side-swipe him, sending him flying into a thick batch of hibiscus bushes. Before he could scramble to his feet Dewi leapt off the scooter and pounced on him, grabbing his arm to Prime him.

“Stop *running*, motherfucker!” She smacked him on the back of the head. “We just want to talk! Where's the goddamned ba—”

“Dewi, where are you?” Joaquin screamed at her over the radio.

“Fontainebleau.” She glanced around at the people who’d stopped to watch what was going on. “Hurry. I have witnesses.”

“Almost there.”

Dewi stood and jerked the man to his feet. “¿Habla inglés?” He nodded.

She pulled her phone out of her back pocket and showed Cordoba screenshots of the texts between Fawny and Super-D. “You Super-D?” she growled.

He looked terrified but he nodded.

“Who the fuck is C, and where is the baby? Little girl. Hannah. Fawny and Henry had her this morning.”

“C is my cousin Catarina. She runs an unlicensed day care out of her house.”

“Is the baby there?”

“I-I think so!”

That’s when Joaquin pulled up alongside the curb. Dewi dragged Cordoba by the arm to the car, opened the passenger door with her free hand, and pulled the seat forward, shoving him into the backseat head-first. Then she climbed into the front seat and closed the door.

“Drive!” she ordered.

Joaquin did.

Dewi turned and bared her teeth at Cordoba. “Give us an address and directions. *Now*. And if you want to live, do *not* piss or shit yourself in my car! Or puke!”

He gave them an address in Opa-locka, and with a fear-induced stutter provided Joaquin with directions. Dewi texted the address to Emily and told her to get the carseat out of Fawny’s car, bring the baby boy, and meet them there. And not to go inside if she beat them to the house.

Dewi finally remembered to fasten her seatbelt and did her best not to order Joaquin to pull over so she could drive.

Then Joaquin let out a snort.

“What?” Dewi growled.

He tapped his head, and that’s when she realized she still wore the obnoxiously mint green helmet she’d also snatched from the tourist.

She ripped it off and resisted the urge to beat Cordoba with it. Instead, she dropped it on the floor behind her seat. “FYI, dude, we broke into your place looking for info. Don’t report it to the police, just fix the damned door. We didn’t take anything. And if anyone does rob you, well, sorry about that. Serves you right for running when all we *fucking wanted to do was ask you questions, you asshole!*” She was screaming by the end of that.

Cordoba shrank from Dewi as far as the rear seat would allow.

“Why the *fuck* did you run from us?”

“I-I owe child support to my ex and she’s pregnant again. Her brothers are in a gang. From a distance, I thought you were them!”

“*Fuck* me,” Joaquin muttered. “This day just gets better and better.”

That’s when an incoming call to Dewi’s phone sounded over the car’s hands-free system.

Ken.

Dewi accidentally answered it when she meant to send it to voicemail.

She made a shushing sign to Cordoba. “Hey, honey,” she said in a forced cheery tone. “What’s up?”

“Are you guys on your way back yet? I thought you said you’d let me know when you were?”

She spotted the way Joaquin pressed his lips tightly together, trying not to laugh. “Had to wrap up a few loose ends,” she said. “And we haven’t had lunch yet.”

“Easy-peasy,” Joaquin muttered.

She punched him in the thigh.

“Ow!”

“Is... Is everything okay?” Ken asked. “You sound stressed.”

“Yeah everything’s fine, sweetie. Gotta go, we’re driving, traffic’s bad. Love you!” She hung up just in time because despite rubbing the spot on his thigh, Joaquin started braying with laughter.

“You suck,” she said.

He shook his head. “How’d you just lie to him?”

“I didn’t.”

“You did. You said you were driving.”

“No, I specifically said *we* were driving. It was a collective *we*, like a royal *we*, which includes you and Running McFuckwad in the backseat. Traffic *is* bad—it’s fucking Miami, *duh*. And *this* motherfucker”—she hooked a thumb back at him—“is a loose goddamned end.”

The guy whimpered.

“No, you’re not dying,” Dewi growled at him. “As long as we find that baby safe and sound. And you don’t pee or shit or puke in my car.” She glanced back at him. “Why the *hell* does Fawny have you in her phone as ‘Super-D’?”

Joaquin groaned. “I told you I don’t want to know.”

The man still cowered from Dewi, which was fine with her. “Sh-she said she really likes riding my di—”

“Never mind!” Dewi snapped. “We get it.”

“Told you,” Joaquin muttered.

“I hate you,” Dewi muttered back.

Joaquin smiled.

That was *twice* in one day he was right about something. First the easy-peasy, and now this.

I will probably never live this down with him.

Joaquin continued to snicker occasionally but refrained from further comment.

They pulled up to the house and parked in the driveway. Fortunately, Dewi didn't see Emily's car anywhere. Dewi dragged Cordoba out of the car and kept a tight grip on his wrist all the way up the front walk.

This house looked like it'd seen its fair share of hurricanes and hadn't weathered all of them as stoically as newer construction. There were at least five different kinds of roofing shingles in obviously patched areas, and one front window still bore weathered and warped plywood emblazoned with GO AWAY ANDREW! in faded red spray paint.

The older woman who opened the door appeared to be in her late forties or early fifties, and Dewi immediately grabbed her hand and Primed her to let them in so they could all step inside and close the door.

Dewi was about to start questioning her when she spotted eight portable crib/playpens in the living room. The house was spartan in terms of furnishings, but it looked tidy and smelled clean to Dewi's keen lupine nose. Not only did it smell clean, she didn't even smell any dirty diapers. Every portable crib held at least one baby, and one held two tiny babies that looked like they'd been born premies. They were all sound asleep, with ages that appeared to range from the tiny premies all the way up to larger babies who might be on the verge of learning how to walk.

Dewi forced herself to whisper. "Why are they all asleep?"

Catarina looked at Dewi like she was a two-headed dog. "It's nap time," she whispered back. "They all just had lunch." The *duh* was implied, but clearly visible in the woman's expression.

"They're not drugged or anything, are they?"

A wave of indignant outrage suddenly pounded Dewi from the woman, who opened her mouth to yell when Dewi shushed her and ordered her to speak quietly.

“No!” the woman hissed. “I would *never* do that! They have full tummies. That’s what babies do.” She pointed at Dewi’s baby belly. “You should learn this quickly. Babies eat, sleep, poop, and cry, and they want to be held and feel safe. I would *never* harm a baby!” She sniffled. “I can’t have children. But at least I can take care of them for others.”

Joaquin showed the woman a picture of Hannah. “Is this baby here? Little girl? Fawny and Henry maybe brought her this morning.”

She looked at it and nodded. “Hannah.” She pointed to the farthest crib in the back corner of the living room. Joaquin picked his way over there and then nodded, holding up a diaper bag that matched the description Emily had given them.

Dewi spotted a table with three mismatched chairs around it over in the kitchen. “Go sit over there,” she told Cordoba. “And be quiet. Don’t move from that seat until I tell you to.”

He did.

Dewi took a deep breath and released the woman’s arm. “Anyone else here but us? And the babies, obviously.”

She shook her head. “My husband works until 7:00 tonight. The first mom doesn’t pick up her baby for at least another two hours.”

Dewi pulled out her phone and showed her a picture of the baby boy. “Do you know this baby?”

She looked at it. “That’s Eduardo. Henry’s son. I usually keep him, but as it is I couldn’t handle an extra one because I wasn’t expecting the twins today. They brought them after I’d already told Henry I’d watch Hannah. So Henry took Eduardo with them and they left the little girl. He gave me one hundred dollars not to tell Eduardo’s mom he had him. Swore he’d bring him back early this afternoon before she came to pick him up.” She looked panicked. “Is Eduardo okay?”

Answers that question. “He’s fine. Stay right here.” Dewi moved deeper into the house, motioning for Joaquin to follow. They quickly cleared it and, yes, the rest of the house was just as clean, much to Dewi’s relief.

They'd made it back to the living room when they heard a car pull up out front, and Dewi motioned for Joaquin to go outside and handle it. Meanwhile, Dewi returned to the crib and picked up the sleeping baby g—

She peeked down the front of the diaper.

Yep. Girl.

She had just slung the diaper bag over her shoulder and turned when Joaquin returned, leading Emily inside. She carried the baby boy and Joaquin carried the diaper bag.

When Emily spotted Dewi holding Hannah, she burst into relieved tears but Dewi held up a finger to shush her as she picked her way through the playpens of sleeping infants.

“Is this Eduardo?” Dewi asked Catarina and pointed at the baby Emily held.

She took the baby from Emily and after looking him over, nodded. “Yes, this is him.” She protectively held him. “When did he last eat? It’s supposed to be his nap time right now!” She sounded indignant and practically snatched the diaper bag out of Joaquin’s hands.

Dewi nearly burst out laughing. “He’s been well-cared for, don’t worry.” She returned Hannah to Emily. “Please verify that’s Hannah.”

Emily lifted the hem of her little T-shirt and pointed out a small birthmark. “It’s her.” She started crying again as she held her against her shoulder. “They didn’t hurt her, did they?” she asked Dewi.

Catarina looked indignant again, and Dewi wearily touched the woman’s shoulder and told her to calm down and quietly converse with the mom. Five minutes later, Catarina was setting Emily up in one of the back bedrooms to nurse Hannah, at Catarina’s insistence. Catarina was concerned about Hannah because she hadn’t been able to get the baby to take as much formula that, in Catarina’s opinion, Hannah should have taken.

And Catarina *definitely* had opinions when it came to the well-being of babies.

Well, at least she wasn't in danger from this woman.

When Catarina returned to Dewi after getting Emily settled, she scowled. "I knew those cans of formula Henry brought weren't right for that baby!" she hissed at Dewi. "*Pendejo!* Something told me when the little one didn't want to take a bottle that she was being breast-fed, and it was wrong that they didn't bring any bottles or pumped milk with her! I *will* tell that man off when I see him!"

"Well, you won't be seeing him for a while," Dewi said. "Or Fawny. They're both probably going to jail."

Catarina sharply nodded. "Good! I never have liked that man. Or that...*woman.*" She threw a murderous glare toward Anthony, who had the good sense to cower from her, too.

Meanwhile, Dewi had Catarina sit at the table with Cordoba while they waited for Emily to finish nursing Hannah.

Joaquin leaned in. "What do we do?" he whispered to Dewi.

"About what?" Dewi asked.

He motioned, indicating all the babies. "This is illegal as fuck."

"Yeah, but they look well-cared for and clean. They're obviously not being abused or neglected while in her care." She waved Joaquin closer to the table, where Dewi stood next Catarina and laid a hand on her shoulder to Prime her. "Who are most of your parents?" she asked. "These children. What do their parents do for a living?"

Even with Dewi using Prime the woman looked hesitant to answer, so Dewi added, "We're not with INS, and we're not with CPS. No one's in trouble. Just tell us the truth."

"Most of their parents are undocumented workers," she admitted. "They pay me cash. Or sometimes food. Or even diapers, and I can give those to other parents. Whatever they can pay." She burst into tears. "Please don't shut me down! I just want to take care of them! I have the best job in the world

—I get to play with babies all day, and their parents have a safe place to bring them!”

Dewi Primed her to calm down again, her own mind swirling.

Best job in the world, huh?

And here she was, kvetching that her own job—which she honestly thought was the best job in the world—was being impacted by her impending motherhood.

She looked at Joaquin and shook her head. “We’re *not* shutting them down,” she said. She then put her other hand on Cordoba’s shoulder, and just as she was about to speak she spotted the blood sugar tester on the kitchen counter.

“Catarina, who’s diabetic?”

“I am. I was born with it. That’s why I can’t have children.”

“Okay. You never saw the three of us here today. Anthony, forget you even know Fawny. She’s just using you. And she’s probably in jail right now anyway. Lose her number and block her on all your social accounts. You had an episode of low blood sugar while at work today and it really screwed you up and somehow, you ended up getting dropped off here by friends.”

Joaquin snorted. “*Wow*. That’s generous. What about the chase?”

Dewi looked at him. “Are you *helping*? Make yourself useful and go swap the carseats. Get Emily’s out of the Saleen and put it back in hers, and bring the other one in here and leave it.”

He rolled his eyes but went to do it.

Dewi returned her focus to the cousins. “Anthony, friends stopped by work to see you because they said you were acting strange this morning and they thought you were sick. You ran from them but it was all due to your blood sugar being way out of whack.” It wasn’t Dewy’s best work, but considering how her day had gone already she was done worrying about it.

“Catarina, you never saw Hannah, or Emily. Or us. Henry and Fawny were never here today, never brought a baby girl, and they didn’t take Eduardo. Everything was calm today. Normal day, except Anthony showed up out of the blue. Friends dropped him off, you didn’t see who, and you were worried he was drunk or high until you had a suspicion, checked his blood sugar, and realized it was out of whack. Then you got him straightened out and he had no memory of how he got here or which friends dropped him off. Both of you will delete any and all texts from your phones from or about Fawny, Henry, and Hannah. Do that now.”

They did.

Dewi was just finishing up with them when Emily emerged from the bedroom with Hannah and Joaquin returned from his chore.

“Okay, everyone sit tight for a minute,” Dewi said. “I have to pee.”

The hall bathroom was spotless, and Dewi drew in a relieved breath that everything finally seemed to be handled and worked out just fine without any further complications.

She returned to the kitchen and looked at Joaquin. “Did I forget anything?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You drive Emily back to her apartment in her car. I’ll leave here shortly.” She held out her hand to Joaquin. “Keys.”

Joaquin dropped the key fob into her palm and they departed.

Dewi looked around to make sure she didn’t forget anything. “Oh, you don’t have one of those doorbell cameras, do you?” she asked. “Or security cameras?” No telling how many caught her and Joaquin during the chase along Miami Beach today.

Then again, it *was* Miami Beach. What happened probably didn’t even top the ten weirdest things to happen there that morning.

Catarina shook her head. “No cameras.”

“Great. Okay. I’m going to leave. In five minutes, unless one of the babies cries before then, you can get up from the table and move around normally. Remember, you never saw any of us today, it was a normal day, other than Anthony unexpectedly showing up. You guys were just sitting here talking and catching up.”

They both nodded.

“Oh, and Anthony?” She smacked the back of his head. “Get your goddamned child support caught up, dude. By *legal* means, okay? Start wearing condoms. At least until you can afford to support the kids you already have, you deadbeat. And consider getting a vasectomy if you don’t want anymore kids.”

Dewi let herself out, breathing a sigh of relief as she climbed into the Saleen, then swearing when she had to undo her seatbelt so she could adjust the seat and steering wheel.

Then she looked into the mirrors.

“Motherfucker adjusted my goddamned mirrors!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TWO HOURS LATER, Dewi and Joaquin were back on the road and heading north to Tampa.

For realsies this time.

It was after dark when they returned. Dewi had to drop Joaquin at her house so he could pick up his car, and then she followed him over to Carl and Mateo's to visit Tamsin and pick up Ken, who rode over there a couple of hours earlier with Beck.

After Dewi arrived—and peed—then said hello to Tamsin and the baby, she and Joaquin stepped outside onto the screened lanai to talk with Beck, Badger, and Duncan to give them an update.

Brianna and Malyah volunteered to stay with Tamsin. They still weren't leaving Tamsin alone, but every day she was incrementally improving now.

As far as relating the day's events, Dewi took point and didn't...lie. Exactly.

She just...

Omitted.

Trimmed out the boring parts.

Like the whole part where they recovered the wrong baby.

And the chase up A1A along some of Miami's most expensive real estate.

Joaquin arched an eyebrow at her but she shot him a deadly glare that kept him quiet.

Until...

Ken had got the key fob for the Saleen from Dewi so he could put his laptop bag in the car, as well as several clean casserole dishes he was taking home from food he'd made and brought over to them during the past few days.

Dewi was almost finished wrapping up the story when Ken walked out onto the lanai...

Carrying the obnoxiously mint green helmet.

Which, she now noticed, was emblazoned with *SoBeMi Scooters! RENT ME TODAY!* in bright coral pink letters. With a phone number and website.

Everyone went quiet and focused on Dewi.

Except Joaquin, who stuck his hands in the back pocket of his jeans and stared at the concrete.

Ken cocked his head at Dewi. "I know I wasn't out here for the whole story, so maybe I missed something, but mind telling me where *this* fits into the narrative? Because I'm reasonably certain it was not in the Saleen when you left this morning. Especially since we drove it yesterday when we came over to visit, and I sat my laptop bag exactly where I found this helmet."

Duncan and Badger both cleared their throats and looked at Joaquin, who tensed and slowly met their gazes. Before Dewi could dive toward Joaquin with the intention of putting a hand on him to shut his trap, he folded like a wet paper bag and filled in all the blanks. When she tried to interrupt both Badger and Duncan pointed at her in warning to be quiet.

Her face heated as she and Ken stared at each other.

When Joaquin finished relating the considerable epilogue to their original report, silence descended upon the group for several long, uncomfortable moments.

She felt anger radiating off Beck. "*Told* you she was extra when it comes to revenge!" Beck said. "No one listens to *me*,

though. Not like I've known her since she was born and spent over a *dozen* years working with her as her partner! *No! How* could I *possibly* predict Dewi would go off half-cocked like that!"

Dewi glared at Joaquin. "I *knew* I should have Primed you to keep your trap shut before we left Miami. Snitches get stitches, you know."

"*Dewi!*" Ken barked, surprising all of them but probably Dewi the most. "What in the *actual* fucking *hell* were you thinking!"

"I was thinking about getting that baby back safely! Come on, it was a freaking *scooter*. A cheap, slow-ass, discount brand knock-off scooter. It wasn't even a Vespa! It's not like it was a crotch rocket or a Harley or something! Shifted, I could almost run faster than the damn thing moved. And I grabbed the helmet, too. Don't I get credit for *that*? Obviously, I didn't get hurt! There was more risk to my pride wearing that damned helmet than there was risk of harm to my person."

Badger slowly shook his head and focused on Ken. "What'll it be, lad? Yer her mate. We'll defer to ye on this. How ye wanna handle it? I wouldn't blame ye if ye want to call Peyton and order her chained to her desk until the babe is born."

Dewi started to explode in outrage when Duncan reached out and touched her shoulder, but he didn't Prime her to be silent. "May I please say something first?" he said.

Ken nodded.

"I know we all wish Dewi would take things easy," Duncan said. "But she's correct that a baby's life was at stake. Two babies, actually. We had no idea if Hannah was safe, or locked in a car, or where she was."

"*Ha!*" Dewi crowed at Beck, jabbing a finger at him.

"And yes, it *was* reckless and impulsive how she acted—"

"*HA!*" Beck crowed right back at her.

“*That* being said,” Duncan continued, “there *were* extenuating circumstances. If she hadn’t taken immediate action, albeit extreme, no telling what might have happened if the man had escaped. If the lead disappeared, she might have had to go to the jail to try to talk to Henry or Fawny, meaning more witnesses, meaning more risks. And meaning more time passing before recovering the baby.

“If this was a case of her chasing someone in a less dire situation over far less critical stakes, I would likely agree it was reckless disregard for her own well-being. But weighing all the factors brings me to the conclusion that it was necessary.” He looked to Joaquin. “Were there other viable options immediately available to pursue him?”

“I—” Joaquin’s jaw snapped shut and he pondered his words before speaking, glancing at Dewi as if weighing each one before finally putting them together in a sentence. “He had a head-start on us already, then grabbed the bicycle and took off. I couldn’t have caught him on foot unless I’d shifted, and that obviously wasn’t an option. And even if it was, maybe not even then, as fast as he was moving. Dewi was farther ahead of me and had a better view of him, and I had the car keys on me because I’d parked it. There’s no way we could have caught up to him in a car because there was too much traffic and too many pedestrians. Too many places for him to zip off and get away. Honestly? I was going to swipe a bike from someone, the way he did, but Dewi reacted faster. I ran back to get the car to follow her. And we were in contact at all times via radio.”

“It’s not like I went for a joyride,” Dewi added. “And like Joaquin said, I couldn’t have chased him down on foot unshifted even if I wasn’t pregnant. He was on a bike and had a head-start on us. I didn’t want to lose him. If it’s any consolation, the scooter was less exerting than riding a bike. Definitely easier than running.”

Beck’s jaw remained clenched as he slowly shook his head. “Why am *I* suddenly the voice of reason around here?”

“She’s not a human, son,” Duncan said. “She’s a Prime Alpha wolf.”

“She survived the beatin’ Endquist gave her when he likely would have kilt ye, had ye been there instead of Ken,” Badger added.

“She’s also standing *right* here,” she muttered.

“But she wasn’t *pregnant* then!” Beck argued as if she hadn’t spoken. “Dewi could have swapped places here with you or Duncan to stay here with Tamsin today!”

Duncan shook his head. “No. Tamsin loves Dewi, but the weight of her grief is immense. She is only now finally beginning to truly process it in a healthy way instead of suppressing it. Badger and I sadly have experience surviving that kind of grief. I’m not saying Dewi’s experience with grief isn’t valid, or is less intense than ours, but mourning parents isn’t the same as mourning a bonded mate. And Dewi was right that we *still* don’t understand what happened with Malyah being able to throw off Dewi’s Prime orders. Meaning we don’t know how effective Dewi’s abilities might be in regards to helping Tamsin through this.

“There is also the point that yes, Dewi is pregnant. And we honestly don’t know if trying to filter the crushing grief Tamsin is dealing with would harm Dewi’s baby or not. Neither Badger nor I will take that risk and let Dewi have more than intermittent exposure to that. Not until Tamsin’s stronger.”

Duncan shifted position, his arms crossed over his chest. “This wasn’t the ideal decision but, overall, I agree it was the correct decision. We have two babies safely back with their moms, the bad guys will get theirs, no one had their throat ripped out or was unexpectedly run through a woodchipper and, hopefully, none of the video footage of the chase will end up on the news.”

He shrugged. “So, that’s my opinion. If Peyton asks, that’s what I’ll tell him, too. If I was Pack Alpha, I wouldn’t issue any sanctions in this situation and likely would have made the same decision to send Dewi and Joaquin in the first place.” He looked to Badger, who nodded.

“I wouldn’t sanction her, either,” Badger said. “And likewise I woulda opted to send her and Joaquin. It was a fast-movin’, fluid situation, and it had to be handled. No one got hurt what didn’t deserve it, and the babies are all safely home.”

“If I’d gone,” Beck gritted, “we wouldn’t *be* in this situation at all, and Dewi wouldn’t have had to do it.”

“No,” Joaquin said. “For all we know, Hannah might have been hurt or killed by her father if we hadn’t recovered her as quickly as we did. If you’d gone with me instead of Dewi, we *still* wouldn’t have Hannah back, and we’d be forced to restrain Emily’s father to keep him from going out and making the situation worse. Or Catarina or Eduardo’s mother would have called the cops, CPS would have gotten involved, and then it would have been a mess. And we *still* would have been in a holding pattern because we *needed* a Prime.”

Dewi wheeled on him. “Then why the *hell* did you just rat me out when keeping your goddamned mouth shut was a totally free and available option?”

He pointed at Duncan and Badger. “Because I’m not going to lie about this, Dewi! They would have asked me if that was the whole story, and then sensed me trying to cover for you, and then Primed me to tell them anyway! Either now or later! I worked hard enough to get off Nami’s shit list. I’m *damned* sure not going to get myself put on Duncan’s or Badger’s!”

Badger cackled. “Smart lad.”

“And, guess what?” Dewi said, planting her hands on what she remembered was the approximate location of her hips. “If I recall correctly, I’m also the expanded pack council Alpha, am I not? Meaning, honestly? *I’m* the babe with the power here.”

Ken softly snorted, and the slight smile curving his lips warmed her heart.

It was a callback to one of his favorite movies and Dewi loved that she was finally, *finally* getting the hang of

connecting with her geeky grazer mate—outside of bed—in a meaningful way that nourished his soul.

Beck glared at all of them. “I know it feels like it happened a couple of years ago in our time, but was it *not* just a few weeks ago Ken was terrified Dewi was going to impale herself brushing her teeth, or poke her eye out eating with a spork, and secretly called Peyton to ask him to haul her out to Idaho for a thorough full-body bubble wrapping until her baby turns twenty-one?”

Oh, that’s right, she thought.

Ken still had to weigh in.

And while Dewi was the expanded pack council Alpha, Ken was still her mate.

And *nothing* overruled what the two of them felt for each other.

Ken set the ridiculously mint green helmet on the patio table and let out a sigh as everyone awaited his decision.

“The babies are safe,” he eventually said. “Emily won’t have to worry about Henry again. I am also painfully aware that I will *always* feel tempted to err too far over the line on the side of being cautious, because I didn’t grow up in the Targhee Pack, and overly cautious was my default risk profile before I met Dewi.”

He met Dewi’s gaze again. “Do I like it? No. But if I was the one there with Dewi instead of Joaquin, I honestly can’t say I would have stopped her, either. Being too cautious in this case could have easily resulted in harm to either or both of those babies.”

Badger patted Beck on the shoulder. “Boyo, we know ye care. We know yer protective. How can ye not be? Sometimes, decisions aren’t gonna go yer way.” He hooked a thumb toward Duncan. “Jes like we canna have Duncan go back to his previous and highly effective method of kneecappin’ people as a form of behavior modification in the way he wants.”

Duncan smiled and snapped his fingers. “Dammit.”

“I helped *CLEAN UP THEIR BLOOD!*” Beck roared, shocking them all into silence. “My tears dripped into the soapy water I used while on my hands and knees helping scrub Charlie and Chelsea’s blood and guts off their living room floor!” He threw a deadly glare at Duncan. “While *you* couldn’t be *bothered* to deal with reality and fucked off into the wilderness, *I* was standing guard over Dewi’s bassinet in the hospital praying first that she’d live, and then that I could be the one to put a bullet between the eyes of whoever it was who’d hurt her. Because. I. *Failed.*”

Oh, shit.

Dewi had never seen Beck like this before.

Ever.

Dewi heard the sliders open behind them but her full focus was now on Beck and she stepped forward, keeping her voice soft. “Beck—”

“When you were born, I swore a *personal* oath to Charlie Bleacke to protect his miracle baby girl. And then I *swore* on their *graves*, Dewi! I *promised* them with every tear I shed and with every drop of blood I scrubbed and with every scoop of dirt I *personally* shoveled to fill their graves. And every second I was on my knee with my throat exposed to Peyton and swearing allegiance to him as Pack Alpha, I *swore*. I promised to protect you and keep you safe. Every night I stood watch outside your room and every minute I stood guard at your school. My life *revolved* around protecting you, because I *swore* to Charlie Bleacke to protect you! Not just as my Pack Alpha, but as my friend. And I swore over their graves to help find and kill the monster who did it. And I miserably failed on the second part.”

He pointed at Ken. “*He* killed Endquist and kept a promise I couldn’t. Not complaining he did it, because you know I’m glad he did, but I *failed*. And you seem bound and goddamned *determined* to make *sure* I fail to keep my first oath, too!”

“Dawson,” Nami whispered, now standing just behind him, at his right shoulder, her left arm draped around his shoulders. “Baby, *shh.*” Beck trembled, his nostrils flaring.

Now Dewi spotted his tears. It crushed her soul because she honestly couldn't say she ever remembered seeing Beck cry.

Not like this.

Not over her.

Dewi edged closer. "I'm sorry, Beck," she softly said, meaning it.

Nami stepped sideways and wrapped her arms around him from behind. "Baby, you kept your promises," Nami whispered to him, but Dewi's shifter hearing meant she understood every word. They all could, even Ken.

No doubt Nami knew that, too.

Beck slowly shook his head again, his voice thick and choked. "No, I haven't—"

"Yes, you *did*, sugar," Nami insisted, as if gentling a spooked horse, calming a hurricane, chasing away monsters. "You kept all your promises. Dewi's starting her own family just like we're starting ours. And you're gonna feel like this about our baby, too. I felt this way about my brother and sisters. I swore to Momma on her deathbed and then again on her grave that I *would* protect them and keep them together. And any little thing that got in the way of that, if I couldn't go around or through it, I did everything in my power to *crush* it beneath my feet. We're always going to have these kinds of moments where things feel bleak, but we have to power through them. There's no other option. You have never *not* kept your oaths, Dawson Beckett. To Charlie or the pack or anyone. Sometimes, things happen. But in no universe have you failed."

Badger also stepped in. "She's right, lad." He laid a hand on Beck's shoulder but Dewi knew he wasn't using his Prime on Beck. "I felt the same way when Charlie died. I swore him the same oaths at her birth and their deaths. And yes, ye kept yer oaths. Every breath of them." Badger sniffled. "I'd kick any man right in the cunt what tried to say different."

Dewi was aware of Joaquin and Duncan easing away from the small huddle now surrounding Beck.

Dewi was used to dealing with Beck in a variety of moods.

Broken was not one of them.

And this pain she felt over hurting her friend—her family—came second only to that day she unintentionally upset Ken by bringing Segura home to woodchip the sonofabitch.

Nami wasn't done though. "Baby, Duncan didn't have a thing to do with what happened with Charles and Chelsea, either. No matter how much guilt he wants to heap on himself or how much guilt you think he deserves to carry. The bottom line is that Endquist would have killed them even if Duncan had been there. He would have found a way to do it. That kind of seething, narcissistic rage doesn't dissolve just because one person's there or not."

"Endquist would have killed Duncan, too," Ken added. "Maybe not up close and personally. Maybe ambushed him in his house or outside with a gun. But I heard him myself, and *nothing* would have stopped him from killing Charles and Chelsea. If he'd been forced to, he would have shot them and disappeared. Not even you would have been able to stop him."

Ken stepped closer. "Endquist wanted revenge, and he wanted control of the Targhee Pack. He felt wronged that Chelsea rejected him, both because he took it personally and because he thought he deserved to have a mate of his choosing and a pack simply because he was born a Prime Alpha, but he didn't want to do the work to build and nurture one. He was toxic masculinity on steroids. He wanted to destroy everything Chelsea loved because she dared say *no* to him. He spent years nourishing that rage, feeding it, when he could have easily dusted himself off, moved on, and found someone else to love. Because he didn't *love* Chelsea—he wanted to possess her and possess the power he knew he could access by her becoming his mate. Of everyone standing here, I've had the most up-close and personal experience living with someone exactly like that. And that fucker murdered my mom."

Ken pointed to Joaquin. “Joaquin killed Raul Segura. From what we know of Raul, he was way worse than my stepfather. A full-on sociopath. People like that will always bulldoze through innocents to achieve their goals no matter who is in their way. Especially if their ego is bruised.”

“And what if Duncan hadn’t ‘fucked off,’ *hmm?*” Nami asked. “Then he wouldn’t have been there in the wilderness that day to *save* me and Ken.” She made Beck turn and placed his hands on her stomach. “*She* wouldn’t be here today.” She pointed to Dewi’s baby bump. “Or her. Because Ken and I wouldn’t be *here* if Duncan hadn’t been *there*. I am *convinced* we would not have survived the night without his help. And Duncan didn’t have to be here for me to meet you or for Ken to meet Dewi. But he *had* to be *there* that day in the woods for *us* to still be *here*.”

“He wouldn’t have been here to help Tully cross,” Badger gravely said. “She woulda spent those last weeks sufferin’ far worse than she did. The truth is, we can coulda-woulda-shoulda all day and all night and it doesn’t change what *is*. Yer under a lot of stress, lad. A lot. And...”

Badger choked up. “I don’t think any of us what were there and lived through losin’ Charlie and Chelsea ever really got a chance to grieve right and proper. You, me, Peyton, Trent. None of us. We were too busy keepin’ Dewi alive and protectin’ her and keeping the pack alive and protectin’ it. Huntin’ the bastard, for all the good it did us back then. And we just kept...goin’. Until it’s now a quarter-century later and none of us still have dealt with it proper. I know seeing Tamsin’s pain as she’s trying to find her way through that thick, black forest is stirring a lot of old pain inside ye and bringing it to the surface. I know it certainly is for me. Maybe it’s time we open those wounds and clean ’em out once and fer all, together, so we can all finally start to heal from it.”

Beck’s breath hitched, gasping, as he tried to choke back his sobs. “I’m *scared*,” he finally managed. “I feel like I’m going to fail. I can’t protect Dewi. I wasn’t there that day with Ken and Nami. How am I going to keep our baby safe?”

Ken laughed, startling all of them. “Dude, *you’re* scared? Join the club! I’m shitting bricks *terrified!* At least you’re a wolf!”

“Yeah, but you’re a badass,” Beck said.

Ken looked at Dewi. “You sure he didn’t get a concussion or something lately?”

“You *are* a badass,” Duncan said, Joaquin nodding. “I watched you and Nami that day in the woods. Followed you. It’s one of the reasons I followed you. Because I could clearly see how scared you were, I knew you were humans, and yet you weren’t giving up. You had a plan, and you were doing your damndest to execute it without any training, supplies, or tactical advantage. That’s the absolute definition of a badass.”

“I thought it was the definition of stupidity,” Ken snarked.

And that’s what finally made Beck laugh, sniffing back his tears. “Sorry, Duncan. I shouldn’t have dumped all that on you like that.”

He held up a hand. “No worries. I deserve it, and more.”

Beck took a breath. “No, you don’t. I don’t know what you went through, Duncan. And I guess tonight it finally hit me, all of it, about what I might go through one day if...” He wrapped his arms around Nami. “I wouldn’t want to live if I lost you, baby.”

“Well, lucky for us you ain’t losin’ me.”

“It just finally all...hit me.” He looked at Dewi. “And *you.*” He reached out and *booped* her nose with his finger, something he hadn’t done since she was a kid. “You’re going to be the death of me yet. Thank god your baby’s half Ken’s, because maybe she’ll get at least half of his common sense and better judgement and sense of self-preservation.”

Dewi smiled. “I don’t know if I should feel insulted or not.”

“Yes,” Duncan said with a smile.

Beck pulled himself together, hugging everyone, saving Dewi, then Duncan for last. “I am sorry,” Beck said. “I just...”

He sucked in another long breath and slowly blew it out. “Feels like my brain short-circuited for a moment.”

Duncan smiled. “It happens at least once to all new fathers who aren’t sociopaths, usually during the first pregnancy. Hey, Badger.” Duncan waited until Badger turned and looked at him. “Lemon. Meringue. Pie.”

Badger’s face went blank before he howled with laughter, so long and hard that he had to lean over to catch his breath. Between gasps he pointed at Duncan and wheezed, “You... feckin’... *twat!*”

Dewi knew Beck’s look of confusion had to mirror hers. “What?”

But Duncan’s placid smile remained unmoved. “Never mind.” He turned back to Beck. “Suffice it to say new-father-terror-induced meltdowns are common. And as Ken reminded me that day we met, we’re *pack*. And no matter what, we always will be.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Dewi

KEN AND DEWI finally headed home an hour later. She felt exhausted but she knew she couldn't go to sleep that night without talking to Ken first.

A serious discussion.

Dewi sank onto the end of their bed and looked up at Ken. "Are you upset with me about today?"

He didn't answer, at first. "Define upset?"

She stared at him, waiting, knowing she couldn't deflect, or let him deflect, either.

"Am I concerned?" he finally said. "Yes. Am I happy? No. Am I frustrated that you didn't immediately call me when you guys realized you didn't have the right baby? Absofuckinglylutely." He stared down at her. "Sometimes, it feels like you're actively trying to box me into a corner where I have to be an asshole and put my foot down, and I'm not that guy. I don't *want* to be that guy, either. If you actively *want* me to be that guy, *tell* me so we can negotiate it, and I'll be happy to play along. But if you organically want me to be that guy, all the time, it won't happen. If this is going to be a recurring problem then we need to figure out an equitable solution that's going to work for both of us. I have no problem being playfully pushy with you when it comes to sexytime, but I don't want to keep having these kinds of conflicts with you just because I refuse to be an asshole to you."

"I really am sorry," she said. "I didn't expect any of that to happen. If it wasn't for the fact it was about two babies I wouldn't have done it, I swear. But I was afraid if we lost him we'd then be bogged down for days or maybe even weeks trying to track down the right people. I couldn't risk it. You can ask Joaquin. Before the guy took off running, I'd *literally* just told Joaquin I wanted to do it fast, quietly, and get out of there. In and out. Easy-peasy. Almost like I jinxed it by saying that," she added in a mutter.

He sat next to her. “I know. I realize that. That’s why I’m trying *really* hard to be understanding, Dewi. It’s your job, and I *get* it. But any time you cut me out of the loop like this it makes it harder for me not feel like maybe you don’t trust me.”

“What do you mean? I trust you!”

“Then why didn’t you immediately tell me what happened with the wrong baby? Of anybody, I should have been your first call.”

“I—” Her mouth snapped shut.

He sadly nodded. “Exactly. You worried I’d put my foot down and demand that you hold until we could send reinforcements to you.”

She finally nodded. “Maybe,” she softly said.

He curled his fingers around her hand. “I wouldn’t have, sweetheart. This wasn’t a missing dog—it was a missing *baby*. Despite my personal concerns, absolutely I would have deferred to you to take whatever actions you deemed necessary.”

She leaned against him. “You’re right. I should have trusted you. I promise I’ll try harder not to be like that.” She sighed. “Do I get brownie points for not woodchipping the guy, though?”

Ken snorted, draping an arm around her and pulling her close. “You do, baby.” he nuzzled the top of her head. “And making Henry punch himself in the balls was a nice touch. Classy.”

“Effective,” she said. “Maybe he’ll render himself sterile. Or at least not wanting to fuck around for a while.” A thought hit her. “Hey, did you know the phrase is ‘easy peasy lemon squeezy’?”

He cocked his head at her. “*What?*”

She felt her cheeks heat. “Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.”

“Why? What about it?”

“Never mind,” she mumbled.

“No, seriously, I want to know.”

She scrunched up her face. “Joaquin might possibly have the satisfaction of knowing I was today years old when I learned this morning that the phrase isn’t ‘easy peasy chicken squeezy’. He took great pleasure correcting me. Fucker.”

“*Chicken squeezy?*” Ken fell over onto the bed, helpless with laughter. “And you didn’t make him punch himself in the balls?”

“No. But that would have been a damned good idea.”

He reached for her hand. “See? You have restraint. You’ll make a great Pack Alpha one day when Peyton retires.”

She shook her head. “Nope. *Not. It.* I don’t *ever* want to be Pack Alpha if I can avoid it. I’m hoping Peyton and Gillian have a Prime Alpha pup who can rightfully take over one day. Or even Trent and Asia.”

“Why not you?” Ken asked.

“I have enough to deal with as Head Enforcer. And that’s not the kind of job I want to pass on to someone else when I’m still perfectly capable of doing it.”

“But you’re already sort of a Pack Alpha now.”

“No, I’m head of the expanded pack council. Like being a CEO of one division, but not the actual owner of the whole flippin’ company.” She flopped back next to him. “Why? Were you looking forward to me being the Head Bitch in Charge or something?”

He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Not necessarily. I just want to support you and help you meet your goals.”

“What about you?”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“What are your goals?” she asked.

He leaned in and kissed her again. “To be a husband and father and enjoy our family. I’m not kidding that when we met, I had no goals other than survival. I’d hoped to maybe save up enough money to one day buy a house. Get tenure. Security. That was my only goal. I’d hoped to meet someone, but as you well know, I wasn’t exactly very social.”

“Lucky for me.” She nuzzled his neck. “Because you are definitely the best thing that ever walked into my life.”

His fingers trailed up and down her back. “At least you have a snazzy new piece of headgear,” Ken teased.

Dewi sat up. “Ooooooh, no,” she said. “I am *not* wearing that thing. I need a helmet, I’ll grab my motorcycle helmet.”

He sat up with her. “Oh, come on, baby. Mint green and coral on you is soooo *Miami Vice*-hot.”

“Cannot believe I didn’t throw that goddamned thing away before we left Miami.”

He nuzzled her nose. “You do get brownie points for grabbing the helmet.”

“See? I was *trying* to be safe!”

He laughed, and the easy sound of it settled her heart. “I know, baby. I would like you to sit down with Beck in the next day or two and talk with him.”

There went her warm fuzzies. “Yeah.”

He went quiet for a moment. “I’m guessing you had no idea he felt like that.”

“I mean, I remember he was super-protective when I was little. Everyone was. Him, Badger, Peyton and Trent. All the Enforcers who were at the compound. Even people who weren’t Enforcers. I rarely had a moment alone-alone unless I was safely locked in my room. Even when I went out to visit the cemetery, I knew someone was keeping an eye on me. I was never really ‘alone.’ Not until I moved here.”

“That must have been difficult.”

“I...” She thought about it. “It wasn’t that it was difficult, it just...*was*. It wasn’t like I knew anything else. I knew I was the little sister to the Pack Alpha, and that explained why I couldn’t just run around like anyone else. Why I couldn’t go on shifted runs unless Beck or Badger or one of the others was with me.”



Ken

In some ways, he'd had the exact opposite problem Dewi experienced while growing up.

Not really knowing what it was like to *not* be alone.

He cupped her cheek and leaned in, lightly tracing her lips with the tip of his tongue, loving how they easily parted for him with a breathless whisper.

This was their future, their forever.

And a true forever with Dewi would still feel too short to him.

He kissed his way along her jaw to her ear, Dewi's eyes falling closed as she tipped her head to give him better access, her hand lightly gripping his arm, holding on to him like she needed to steady herself.

He could never get enough of her.

Hooking a hand around the back of her neck he threaded his fingers up, into her hair, cupping her head as he deepened their kiss.

She was the sweetest, rarest liquor on the planet, and he was an eager drunk unable to drink his fill.

He kissed down her neck, along her shoulder, wanting to take his time and savor this while also wanting to bury himself deep inside of her immediately.

Everything about her short-circuited his willpower, his body and soul wanting nothing more than to own and be owned completely by her.

To throw himself into her volcano until his soul settled, quiescent, and he forever slumbered, finally sated.

Her hands found their way to his waistband, where she frantically started trying to unfasten his jeans. He helped her, shucking them even as they kissed and she shoved her jeans

off and he helped her pull her shirt and bra off and over her head, all of it being discarded to the floor.

Kneeling over his lap where he still sat on the edge of the bed, her fingers wrapped around his erection and she rose onto her knees, notched him, and then sank home with their moans echoing through each others mouths and lungs and souls.

This.

Her.

She started riding him, her hands cupping his face as his cupped her ass and he didn't bother thinking about anything else in this moment—only her.

Only *them*.

She broke their kiss to stare down into his eyes, her brown eyes dark and smoky with desire, her hips rocking and drawing closer.

With her breasts right there, fuller than ever, he cupped them and bent his head to them, back and forth between her nipples and making her moan.

“Yes!” Her body echoed what his mouth did to her as she pulsed around his cock, her hands now tangled in his hair and holding him there. “Please!”

He could do this all night but it was harder for him to hold back. Gentle nips with his teeth, grazing her sensitive flesh and urging her to rock harder, faster, until she threw back her head and cried out about the time he realized his control had completely frayed.

He released her breasts and grabbed her by her waist, thrusting up into her even as she rode him, until they both finished and sort of flopped over onto the bed, their foreheads pressed together, their breathing slowing, in time.

Dewi giggled. “I liked that.”

He snorted. “Thank goodness.” He twirled a lock of her long hair around his finger. “Shower?”

“*Mm-hmm.*” But she didn’t move and neither did he, at first.

Her gaze focused on him, peering deeply into his eyes, into his soul. “I’d quit if you asked me to.”

Another long, sweet kiss. “I don’t want you to. Unless you ever decide to. You’re good at your job. Let’s just find mutually satisfying ways to make this work, okay?”

“Okay.”

They finally untangled themselves and headed to the bathroom.



Dewi

They made love again in the shower, Ken kneeling and pressing his face between her thighs, playfully growling as he made her come. Then, despite his protests, she dropped to her knees and went down on him, refusing to give up until she'd pulled one out of him and he slumped against the shower wall.

“Okay, baby. I think I'm ready to collapse now,” he said.

She stood and kissed him. “Me too.”

They dried off and settled in bed, and Dewi was about to say goodnight when Ken's phone vibrated with a text message where it'd ended up on the floor when they shed their clothes earlier.

He reached over, found it, and sat up. When he read it he snorted, laughed, then climbed out of bed.

“What is it?” Dewi asked. “Where are you going?”

“I'll be right back,” he said, leaving without even pulling on his robe. Then again, they currently were the only ones in the house.

Ooookaaayyy.

She thought she heard the door from the kitchen to the garage open, then close. Ken returned a couple of minutes later.

With the obnoxiously mint green helmet.

“What the fuck?” she asked as she sat up.

He handed it to her and arched an eyebrow at her.

“If this is some new kink, I'm sorry, but I'm safewording,” she snarked.

He showed her his phone.

It was a text.

From Peyton.

Just got off the phone with Badger. Picture of her wearing it. NOW. I WILL call Badger and Duncan and make one of them Prime her if I don't get it by morning. And if I have to do that, she won't like what other indignities I'll demand.

Followed by the smiling devil emoji.

Her jaw dropped. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, are you *shitting* me?”

“Let’s make it fast,” he said, reaching over and grabbing his robe to hand to her so she could pull it on.

Grumbling the whole time, she covered her naked bits with the robe, stuck the helmet on her head, and then flipped birds with both hands while crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue.

Ken laughed as he took the pic. Then he sent it and set his phone on the nightstand. “There. That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Peyton replied almost immediately. Ken grabbed his phone and showed her the text. Several crying laughing emojis, and then:

Thank you. I know you’ll show her this, so...
Love you, Dewster. Next time, at least try to keep Ken in the loop, please? FYI I’m proud of you for how you handled it. You did good.

Dewi didn’t expect the prickle of tears that hit her. She took the phone, tapped his contact, and he answered on the first ring.

“Love you, too,” she said. “I really did think it would be simple and easy.”

“I know. But you’re adaptable and think on the fly. That’s one of the reasons you’re the best.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

She took a deep breath. “Beck. When Mom and Dad... When they died.” She didn’t know how to phrase it. “How was he?”

Peyton sighed. “When you were born, Dad pulled *all* of us aside, not just me and Trent and Badger and Beck. All of the Enforcers. Pack Alpha Edict—protect you. Dad had always planned to split the continent into two equal co-packs when our populations were strong enough. He was grooming Beck and Trent to become Head Enforcers.”

“What about you?”

“He knew I didn’t want to be Pack Alpha yet. I wanted to travel and run operations at different places for a few years, at least. I still had a semester of college left. Maybe one day take a turn as an Enforcer. Dad was still young, in shifter years. I told him maybe one day, in the far future, yeah. But that I hoped he wasn’t looking for an early retirement.”

Another sigh. “Look, Badger told me what Beck said. He looked up to Dad. We all did. He was *Dad*. Charlie Bleacke was anointed by Duncan Lister. Everyone loved Da already, but Dad had made a name for himself in the pack before that, before he ever met and mated with Mom. Honestly? People told me later they really believed Dad would go start his own pack before he met Mom and Da ceded Pack Alpha to him after Grandmother Louisa died.

“Mom and Dad weren’t important just because they were the Pack Alpha and his mate. They were beloved by our pack. Not only were they the leaders, they helped out. They pitched in. Mom took point on social issues for the pack. Dad actually talked to people and listened to their ideas and complaints. He had a knack for mediating disagreements that could leave both parties smiling and laughing and satisfied on the back side of the conflict. When I became Pack Alpha, I was receiving calls and letters from all over the world about him. I heard stories from everyone. Even Ray fucking Dorland, that douchebag, called me and said nice things about Dad and Mom.

“So, yeah, it gutted people. Especially the extra indignity of someone coming onto pack land and the way they were killed. And you...”

He made a noise Dewi realized was him choking up. “And we almost lost you. We never had time to properly grieve.

Because we were in survival mode in the early days. I mean, think about it—I was younger than you are now when I became Pack Alpha. Da was, what, almost 300 years old when they came over from Scotland and started the pack? Badger was over 100. Hell, Dad was in his forties when they crossed, I think. Mom hadn't even been born yet. And Beck's only a year older than me, right? It was just...a *lot* for us all and we did the best we could at the time. Our priorities were you and the pack. And it drove home to all of us of a certain younger age range how fragile life was despite the potential for us to live really long lives. Beck and Trent and I never had to fight for survival the way Da and Dad and Badger did in Scotland. There was always food in the pantry. We could close our eyes and sleep without needing a guard all the time. We didn't have to fight for survival.

“It was a shock to us on multiple levels when...*that* happened.”

“*That* happened,” she said. “Endquist happened.”

“Exactly. Maybe it was wrong for us to work so hard to try to shield our thoughts and memories from you about what happened. And I know I could throw my hands up in the air about Faegan Lewis and just say, oh well, we tried, and walk away and let life go on. But I've seen what happens when we do that. That doesn't work. Just like Manuel Segura didn't give up, and he came back and almost cost us packmates. Everyone lost sight of what you and Ken and Tamsin are now all painfully aware of—it's not enough to weaken someone who wants either your total obedience or your total destruction. You *have* to rip the threat out at the roots and then burn it all to the ground, or you'll always be looking over your shoulder.”

After saying good-bye and ending the call, she returned the phone to Ken.

He seemed to be studying her. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

She nodded. “Yeah,” she quietly said. “But I need to make things right with Beck. I do owe him an apology. Because I

didn't really understand where he was coming from.”

She snuggled in with Ken to go to sleep and he quickly dropped off.

Which left her lying there staring at the far bedroom wall and pondering Peyton's words.

She had lived a charmed life, in many ways. Despite the tragedy that kicked it off, she'd never never had to—normally—fight for everyday survival. Life was easy.

Maybe too easy. She was used to achieving anything she set her mind to.

And now a darker thought had set in—she was a Prime Alpha.

Beck...was not.

Fuck.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Beck

BECK SPENT a rough night tossing and turning even after Nami had distracted him upon their return home by giving him a blowjob, and then he'd buried his face between her thighs and made her come until she finally tapped his head and breathlessly begged him to stop.

On the one hand, the logical side of Beck understood everyone was right. Dewi was a Prime Alpha.

On the other hand, he could still remember the sound of Charlie Bleacke's voice that night when they all stood around the fire in the backyard following Dewi's birth, enjoying celebratory drinks and swearing to him that they'd protect his miracle baby girl.

Because after almost losing Chelsea in childbirth during Peyton's birth over twenty years ago, she now had the little girl she'd always longed for, and making Chelsea Bleacke happy was Charlie Bleacke's reason for living.

Especially after the tragedy of losing Chelsea's mom and dad the way they had.

Or, the way they all thought they had.

And then, six months later...

A long, slow-motion nightmare began.

Beck must have slept, because he awakened the next morning to the smell of coffee and bacon and the sound of Nami singing to herself out in the kitchen. When he joined her a few minutes later, he wrapped his arms around her from behind and kissed the back of her neck.

"Good morning, beautiful."

"Mornin', handsome." She tipped her head back so she could get a peck on the lips that time. "You sleep okay?"

He must have let something slip in his expression because she sighed. "You have a huge heart, wolf man. But you need to

learn that your shoulders aren't the only ones strong enough to support this family.”

Beck wasn't sure he was ready for this discussion yet. “Can I help you do anything?”

She snorted. “Nice way to change the topic. No, I got this. Take your shower and this'll be ready by then. I'm heading over to Tamsin's this morning. I mean Carl and Mateo's. Brianna and Da'von's.” She wrinkled her nose at him in that adorable way that always melted his heart. “All of them's house.” She focused on the bacon again. “You want to do something helpful, let's get them all moved into someplace bigger. Or closer to Dewi's. Something.”

He released her after pressing a final kiss to the back of her neck. “That's the plan. Gillian's looking at buying property. Our own mini-compound.”

Nami sharply nodded. “Good. We're gonna need it.” She turned to him and ran a hand over her baby bump, arching an eyebrow at him. “Because I have a feeling this little girl isn't going to be an only child, Dawson.”

Finally, something to chase away his mental clouds. He set his coffee aside and returned to her, kneeling in front of her to kiss her stomach. “You hear that, sweetie? Mommy said you might just end up being a big sister after all!”

Nami giggled and he loved hearing her make that sound. “Get up, you. Crazy man.”

He stood. “What brought this on?”

“It finally sank in last night that *this* is my family now. My *pack*. And we're gonna have all these babies and kids close in age, anyway. If we start a school here for them, I really want them close together. Not spread apart like me and Da'von. I don't ever want our kids to think they have to parent their younger siblings. They should be able to grow up as kids.

“Momma did the best she knew how, but I have knowledge and resources and people—and a loving husband—that she didn't. And I know she'd want me to be happy. I can still go to school part-time *and* enjoy our babies' childhoods *and* enjoy

being an auntie. I'll be able to enjoy all of it in a way I couldn't before, for decades longer than I could before. I literally get to have it all now, meaning I'd be a fool not to take advantage of having it all." She shooed him out of the kitchen. "Go get your shower before this is done and gets cold."

He snagged his coffee cup and headed back to do just that, his mind spinning.

Okay, so I overreacted a little yesterday.

It wasn't fair of him to dump all of that on Dewi—and Duncan—last night. Those were his issues to deal with, not theirs.

I owe some apologies today.



Nami

After breakfast, Beck insisted on cleaning up the kitchen for Nami so she could go take her shower and get ready.

Despite how upset she'd felt after the cookout last weekend, she was—as she had with Joaquin mating with Malyah—finally accepting the situation.

Part of that was due to witnessing how hard Duncan and Badger were trying to keep Tamsin alive. A process that, to her inexperienced eye, appeared to be incrementally easier each day.

And then last night, feeling the weight and power of Beck's old grief...

The roots of this family ran deep and were tightly twined with each other.

Nami wasn't merely an outsider marrying into the group—she *was* family. All of them were. Including Reggie's family now, even though they didn't and couldn't know the full extent of it. The Targhee Pack had extended those branches to enfold her in their protection and welcomed her to sink her roots along with theirs.

She'd keenly felt Beck's pain last night and even caught mental glimpses of what had happened way back then, glimpses that she knew he'd never wanted her to see.

The savagery unleashed on Dewi's parents.

And on infant Dewi.

Who was to say that very same kind of savagery wouldn't be unleashed on Bebe, or Dania, or any of those babies, if they weren't carefully enfolded within the safety of the Targhee Pack's protection and brought up accordingly to keep them safe?

Even more, from Peyton all the way down, they *wanted* to proactively protect these children.

Was it ideal?

No. But then again, nothing ever could be.

And if she spent her life living in fear instead of trying to learn how to bravely pivot the way Dewi did, no telling what she might miss out on.

Like a house full of children.

As she'd learned in the wake of her mother's death, screaming at the sky and stomping her feet about what was fair and unfair wouldn't change a damned thing about the situation.

The past year had shown her she could finally lean on others. Lean on Beck, trust what he said about the Pack, trust Dewi and everyone.

Not have to remain on guard around them, not having to doubt their motivations.

Not having to worry if there would be a metaphorical knife stuck in her back.

Obviously there was an element of self-preservation in their plans, because protecting the kids included protecting everyone as a whole. Honestly, Beck was more worried about what if the government figured out what was going on while Nami knew it didn't have to be some nefarious secret alphabet-soup agency.

It could be assholes in a pick-up truck attacking an innocent jogger. It could be a woman on a cell phone harassing a man out birdwatching.

It could be anyone. Countless times, it *had* been "anyone."

And her life was now simultaneously more complicated and simplified than she'd ever dreamed possible.

There were also two clear choices—as Ken had eloquently said, she knew she could always opt to err on the side of extreme caution. But then the beauty of much of this new chapter of her life would always be hidden even when it didn't need to be. Lived in fear, anticipating attacks that might never happen from enemies that didn't truly exist.

Or she could opt to *live* her life. To help all these children learn how to step carefully, but also to walk tall and proudly. To learn how to wield this different kind of privilege to level the playing field once and for all.

To be fearless.

In some ways, to be a little more like Dewi, all while Nami also tried teach Dewi that it was perfectly okay to relax and slow down and appreciate these kinds of moments.

Nami of a year ago hadn't wanted children, no. Not really. She'd wanted to live her life, and with Da'von close to fledging, she realistically accepted children were not in her future. She'd raised her siblings—they *were* her children.

In a perfect world their mother would still be alive, their father wouldn't be a literal nutless asshole filling a cell in a state prison, and they would have all grown up with the kind of childhood Lu'ana and Reggie were giving to Bebe, and the kind of childhood other kids in that family were enjoying.

She was rinsing off when the baby kicked, making her smile.

I want you to grow up fierce, little girl. Fierce and fearless and having fun.

Nami was ready to leave about the same time Beck was. "You sure you don't want me to drive you over?" he asked. "I don't mind taking you."

"I'm good, baby." She cupped his face in her hands and stared up into his beautiful blue eyes. "You know how last Sunday I was so upset after we left Reggie's party?"

He nodded. Bless his heart, he'd been so patient with her about it, too.

"I'd like you to look at that in relation to last night," she gently said. "You know how you kept telling me there was a plan, and this was the way it had to be, and how the Pack needs to keep kids safe?"

It took him a moment but he finally nodded.

“Now, obviously, I haven’t known Dewi a fraction as long as you have. But I love her. She feels like family. I remember how she put her neck on the line for Malyah that day without question. I remember how she helped us with Da’von. And how desperately worried she was about finding me and Ken when we got lost in the woods. So, I’d like to give you a little something to chew on, wolf man.”

Finally, the hint of a smile. “And what’s that, baby?”

“How many instances can you count on those handsome paws of yours that Dewi put herself first instead of putting this Pack and everyone else in it before her?”

He started to answer but no sound came out. His gaze unfocused for a moment, and she felt him thinking.

Trying to come up with an argument.

Trying to justify his—to be fair—perfectly logical fear.

His jaw slowly shut and his gaze dropped to her tummy, where he stroked his hands down and around the swell, resting there.

“She never puts herself first,” he softly said. “Ever.”

“Sounds like someone else I know, *hmm?*”

His gaze finally returned to hers.

“Dawson Beckett, I put forth, again, that you *have* kept your oaths. All the...*complicated* relationship stuff between the two of you aside—which I still don’t *get* but I’m not jealous over, anymore—you instilled in Dewi that very thing you swore to Charles Bleacke. Right? You put her before yourself. You modeled it, demonstrated it. Lived it. And now *she* puts everyone else before herself. There was nothing on her mind yesterday except getting that baby back safely. I’m guessing that Charles Bleacke was the kind of guy to put everyone else first?”

Beck nodded. “Yeah,” he hoarsely said. “They both were. They were good people and great parents.”

“Do you think they would want you to spend *your* entire life smothering Dewi? Would they want you to deny yourself

your happiness, your family?”

He shook his head.

“Do you think Charles would have read her the riot act over yesterday, or would he have congratulated her on a job well done?”

A weary sigh. “He probably would have been damned proud of her.”

“She’s an adult. She’s a mother-to-be with a mate who has, beyond everyone’s expectations including my own, proven himself. Multiple times. You told me you love Ken like a brother, right?”

Beck nodded again. “I do.”

“And everyone has been working really hard with me, showing me a lot of patience—including you—about how I need to let my siblings fly free, correct?”

“Yes.”

“So when I ask you this next question, I want the immediate answer, the *first* word that pops into your mind: With Dewi grown and living her life, who does Dawson Beckett now put first in his?”

“You.” His gaze dropped to her belly again. “And her.”

She pulled him close, holding him, listening to his ragged breathing slow and ease.

“You, baby,” he hoarsely said. “You’re first in my life and will be until my last breath.”

Nami kissed him. “I would have also accepted you putting yourself first and interpreted it to mean me and our baby by default.” She smiled, finally pulling a smile from him. “There’s my handsome wolf man.”

He nuzzled noses with her. “I love you so much it makes my heart ache when I hear Tamsin’s grief and yet I stand there feeling grateful that it’s her and not us. And I feel like a horrible person for thinking that.”

She sighed. “Oh, Dawson. If you think you’re the only adult in this family that thinks that, do I have news for you. It’s a kind of survivor’s guilt. We are allowed to have our happiness. Our happiness doesn’t diminish the validity of her grief. We’re not rubbing Tamsin’s face in it. Do you know how much she said she’s looking forward to me and Dewi having our babies so she can help take care of them?”

He scowled. “Really?”

“Really. She told us one of her dreams, which Maisie shared, was a house full of kids. And Rupert living with them, maybe one day Rupert’s mate, too, if he’d met one, and then their kids. One big family. All she ever wanted was to be a mom.

“You’ve seen her at her worst but her better times are getting longer as she finally can work through it. It’s always gonna hurt her. No one denies that. But she is trying to figure out how to keep living. As much as she misses the Clarkes, she told us she finally feels like she has a family that she thought she’d never have again when she lost Maisie and Rupert. She also told us she never felt like she had a family when growing up. It felt more like she and her momma were under siege from her father. It wouldn’t shock me, the longer she stays here, that she decides not to return to England even once that’s all settled.”

“You think?”

“I do. People are more resilient than they are given credit for. Especially moms. She endured multiple traumas on top of existing CPTSD from her childhood. But she’s beginning to slowly find her way toward learning how to live in this new normal, as much as that’s a horrible way to say it.” She kissed the tip of his nose. “And if she can learn to find her way through something so horrible, you’ll figure out how to find your way through this, baby.”

Now he cupped her face in his hands and gently slanted his lips across hers in a kiss that, if she wasn’t careful, might send them both back to bed for the rest of the morning.

“I love you so much, baby,” he said.

“I love you, too. New day, fresh start. Right?”

Beck nuzzled her nose with his. “Right.”

“Good.” But as they both climbed into their vehicles and headed out, Nami wondered if her tough wolf would ever truly be able to let go of his guilt and find his way to healing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Beck

BECK TOOK his time driving to Dewi's because now he had a lot to chew on.

A.

Lot.

He knew they were all right. About everything.

Something he'd never admitted to anyone before was, at the time, he'd thought the oath Charlie Bleacke extracted from them all that night while gathered around the fire after Dewi's birth was more the emotional warbling of a man who'd just experienced a personal miracle and felt desperate not to tempt Fate by instead taking every precaution possible to protect it.

And then...

And then.

Intellectually, Beck knew it was not his fault Charlie and Chelsea were murdered.

He knew it wasn't his fault Endquist attacked Dewi.

But the sound of Badger's tortured howls that night when they found them, of Trent and Peyton screaming for their parents, and then the weak sound of Dewi's cries that broke all of their horrified paralysis and sent them desperately scrambling through the blood and gore to find her, would haunt his soul forever.

In the blink of an eye he'd gone from an invincible boy who'd never felt an empty belly and thought nothing bad could ever happen to him at that time in his life to a jaded man realizing how incredibly fragile this existence was.

Even for those of their kind.

When he arrived at Dewi's house, Joaquin's car wasn't there yet, and Ken's SUV was gone. He knew Ken would be over with Tamsin and them today. Beck headed into the kitchen first, where Dewi was filling her coffee mug.

They stared at each other for a moment.

“Hey—” they both started, nervously laughing, then, “No, go ahead.”

More nervous laughter.

He never used to feel nervous around her. Even when their relationship transformed into lovers.

She smiled and pointed to her mug. “Coffee, and then can we please go out to the lanai and sit and talk?”

“Yeah. Definitely.”

Five minutes later, they were seated at the patio table next to the pool.

“I’ll go first,” he offered. He played with his coffee mug for a moment, staring at it, unable to look her in the eyes right then. “I’m sorry,” he finally said. “I was out of line yesterday. I will be sitting down with Duncan and Badger and apologizing to them, too.”

He slowly spun the coffee mug in his hands. “You aren’t a kid and haven’t been for years. You were forced to grow up too damned young. And, yes, I love you. I loved you. I will love you. And what form that love takes has grown and changed throughout the years as our relationship has grown and changed.”

Beck drew in another breath, trying to sort out his thoughts as he spoke. “You have always been fearless, Dewi. I think part of me envies that in you. Even as I knew it was my duty to teach you to live without fear. What’s that garbage about the student becoming better than the teacher, right?”

He glanced at her, knew she was watching him, and he plunged forward. “I love Nami. She is my mate, and while before I met her there were times I almost resented how much I loved you because I knew you didn’t feel a mate bond connection with me, I will *always* be grateful for those short years we had together. Because they were beautiful.”

He harshly laughed. “The irony is that when you were my lover, it was easier for me to let go and watch you work and

not worry about you in that way, to treat you as my partner, because I knew you could kick my ass. Now I'm back to feeling like I did when you were six and I nearly shit myself because I took my eyes off you for two damned minutes to take a phone call from Peyton, and then I couldn't find you, just to hear you call my name and I look up to see, there you are, *running* across the roof of the house! Shifted."

She smiled. "You screamed like a little girl. And even louder when I jumped off into your arms."

He shoved down the memory of other screams.

From *that* night.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that I know I have to learn to let go," he said. "We had several years there where we could effortlessly bounce in and out of each other's beds while we did our jobs, and everything kind of merged together. When you met Ken it finally hammered home for me that I wasn't the only guy out there lucky enough to be with you. I wasn't even the best guy to be with you. No complaints, because I love him. He's family, but even more importantly, he's *pack*. Besides, now I have Nami. I might not ever have met her had you not met Ken. *And* we're having a baby."

Beck slowly shook his head. "I know you love Nami, and how much you're going to love our baby, because I know how much I love Ken, and that I'm going to love your baby. We are where we're supposed to be. You've been in my life for over half my life—and I've been in yours your entire life—but there will always be pieces of my soul remembering how crisp the air felt that night, how the smoke from the fire curled up into the dark and how clear the stars looked, the smooth taste of the Aberfeldy as we drank toasts to your birth. Your dad and brothers and Badger and several others, everyone laughing. Charlie laughing."

His nose prickled and he sniffled back the tears threatening. "I wish you could remember how he sounded when he laughed. It was big and broad and never cruel. I don't think Charlie had a cruel bone in his body. Protective, yes.

Strong, absolutely. But it takes more strength to be kind than it does to be cruel.

“Your mom gave the best hugs. And Goddess, could she cook! Don’t tell my mom, please, but Chelsea could take the most boring ingredients and turn it into a feast. No one ever left her house hungry. *Ever*. She wouldn’t stand for it. She told anyone who’d listen that she couldn’t wait to start teaching you how to cook. Food was a love language to her. Not feeling good? She brought you soup. Feeling down? She made you cookies. Celebrating? She whipped up cakes. She always had to make three of whatever she was bringing to the pot lucks, especially casseroles, because everyone homed in on them first and wanted some. Not because she was Charlie’s wife and they wanted to make themselves look good, but because she was the best cook in the pack.

“When everyone says you look so much like her, even sound like her, we’re not exaggerating. Pictures and videos don’t do her justice—you are the mirror image of your mother. I still have trouble reconciling that Trent and Peyton and I are only a couple of years younger now than she was when we lost her. But I also see Charlie in you. When you’re concentrating, the way your brow furrows, the way you set your jaw when you focus. The immovable determination. The strength of your protective nature. As a wolf, you look like a smaller version of him.”

Dewi’s eyes brimmed but he forged onward. “After...*that* night, no matter what any of us tried, we couldn’t get you to laugh, to smile, the way you did...*before*. And we tried *damned* hard.” He choked up. “I honestly never thought I’d live to see the day I’d ever hear you laugh again. And what I don’t think Peyton or Trent or Badger or I have completely conveyed to you is your laugh sounds like *hers*. And it’s *so* damned good to hear it.”

She reached over and squeezed his hand but didn’t speak.

“You made the right call,” he finally said. “You did. Even if, Goddess forbid, something had happened to you while chasing that guy, you still made the right call. You made the kind of call that I *should* have readily made myself. And I

should not have argued with you. But I'm still trying to find my new footing, I guess. You're all correct that if Duncan had been there that night he probably would have been murdered, too. And I also know it would destroy me to lose you, but it would *kill* me to lose Nami. I see Tamsin struggling to get through it, and how Ken somehow disobeyed your Prime order to save your life, and as much as I don't want to admit it I'm starting to understand why Duncan tried to kill himself. Because there's a bond that goes deeper than any you and I ever had. Badger himself told me the only reason he lived after losing Tahlia was the blood oath Charlie begged him to swear."

He drew in a deep, shuddering breath. "I'm sorry for yesterday. I'm trying, but I'm a work in progress. I know I will have times I need you and Nami and everyone else to remind me to back off and let these two little girls of ours, and any others we have, just be who they need to be. And I need to remember to let you be who you are. Because I'm still learning how to be okay with not being in control of everything. You're good at what you do, and I have to cement it in my mind that we are now on the third step in our journey together—you were a kid, and then we were lovers, and now we're friends, family, and pack. I can't revert back to step one, to how I worried about you when you were a kid."

She sniffled, blinking back tears.

He nodded his head to her for her to go.

Dewi remained silent for a long moment. Then, "I need to ask you something, and I need you to be completely, brutally honest without me having to Prime you for that honesty. Please?"

"Of course."

It took her a moment and he felt how much she didn't want to ask this, meaning dread was quickly building inside him as a result.

"You refused to sleep with me until I turned eighteen..."

Oh, shit. Here we go.

At the time, Beck had felt a vague sense of unease until Badger, Peyton, and Trent had all assured Beck they didn't have a problem with what relationships Dewi had with him or any other consenting adult after she turned eighteen. Especially any she sought out and initiated.

And Beck had never actually *thought* of Dewi as his daughter. She'd never treated Beck as a "dad," either. That was always reserved for Badger. Badger and Dewi absolutely did have a father-daughter bond, but Badger was also far older than Beck, and had been Charlie's second. Was like a second dad to Peyton and Trent from their births.

To Beck, Dewi had *always* been Charlie and Chelsea Bleacke's daughter.

He'd also honestly never thought of her sexually until she was a few months shy of eighteen, after she'd broken up with her latest boyfriend and then she'd started dropping innuendos and hints into nearly every conversation they had until Beck flat-out told her no, because she was a minor. It was common for there to be noticeable age differences in wolf relationships, especially if they pinged on a human mate. Not only did wolves mature faster than humans, they lived a lot longer.

No one cared if teenagers—within reason—messed around with minors their same age or *slightly* older, if they were an older teen. It was an explicit understanding, however, that when there was an age difference and one side was considerably older than eighteen, regardless of the gender or orientation, paws off minors.

Period.

Being raised like that in the pack, Beck honestly never saw Dewi that way until she'd started dropping hints the size of anvils on his head.

Once that switch flipped, however, he held that line firmly.

Jerked off a lot, took a lot of cold showers, went on frequent booty calls, absolutely.

But he held that line.

He also didn't ask Dewi. He *refused* to ask her.

He didn't give her *any* encouragement until *she* finally flat-out asked *him*. *After* she'd turned eighteen.

And he'd prayed that, one day, she wouldn't see that as a betrayal.

She took a deep breath. "Did I force you to start sleeping with me?"

"I—" His mouth snapped shut as his brain struggled to process what she'd just said, because it in no way aligned with any of the anxieties that had started spinning up from his mental depths. "*What?*"



Dewi

Dewi released Beck's hand, worried that, even now, maybe she would accidentally influence his answer. "You were *never* creepy with me. You *never* did anything inappropriate with me. I felt safe with you, and with Badger. And I knew what creepy felt like, from guys at school, and even from teachers sometime. And—"

"Wait, *what?*" He suddenly looked enraged. "*Which* teachers?"

"We're off-topic," she said. "No, none of my teachers tried stuff with me. I'm just saying I could *feel* it when one was a potential creeper, okay?"

He finally sat back, nodding.

"I'm a Prime Alpha. We all know I know get what I want. Kind of a massive part of the whole gig of being a Prime. But when we started our relationship, was that what *you* wanted? Because until I started saying something to you, I never felt that from you. I need to know if I used my Prime Alpha powers to make you sleep with me."

He stared at her for a long moment. The snort, one at first, was quickly followed by more, until he brayed with laughter almost the way Badger had laughed the night before.

I still need to find out what the hell's the deal with lemon meringue pie.

Wait, focus.

He was still snorting when he finally brought himself under control enough he could talk. "No, Dew. You never forced me to sleep with you. You in no way violated my consent."

"How can you be sure? You said you loved me but knew we didn't have a mate bond."

"I..." He cocked his head at her. "*Really?* You're *actually* worried about this? You're not just fucking with me?"

She nodded.

He leaned forward, meeting her gaze head-on now. “When I was a teenager, I fucked around, okay? We’re wolves, and it’s not unusual. But once I was over eighteen, it’s like this mental filter showed up. I think because we all grow up in the pack knowing this rule. It’s the norm, not the exception. You don’t fuck around with minors. I mean, if kids are dating before one comes of age, and there’s a year or less difference in their ages, no one gives a shit.

“But are you asking if when you were fifteen, sixteen, I thought you were attractive? Yeah. I didn’t go jerk off over you, though. Maybe it’s because I have little sisters, I don’t know, but I, personally, can think someone is attractive without framing that in a sexual way, much less wanting to fuck them. Besides, you weren’t throwing any signals at me that you were interested in me. I know some guys—even some wolves—will try to press for something even if the woman isn’t showing interest. I’ve *never* been that guy. Even adult women, if I’d struck up a conversation, they could be the most gorgeous woman in the world but if they showed absolute zero interest in me like that, I couldn’t have gotten it up to fuck them with an entire bottle of blue pills.”

He laughed. “I was *very* careful, once you did start tossing me those signs, to make sure I didn’t allow any situations to develop that would test my willpower with you or put me in a compromising position where we’d be at risk of crossing a line. But never, not once, did I *ever* feel like you violated my consent. There was never a time I thought, ‘Gee, I do *not* want to fuck Dewi,’ and then magically found you bouncing on my dick simply because *you* wanted to.”

“What about that time in Miami when I was nineteen and we were tracking down that guy who forged a couple mil in checks from that other guy in New York? You told me no then, and then I talked you into it.”

He laughed. “Dewi, your memory is leaving out a few key details. I told you no, we both took a shower, then we *both* took a nap because we were fucking exhausted. When we woke up, yeah, then I said yes. Because I’d *had* a *nap*. We

were both running on about an hour's worth of sleep in the previous forty-eight hours. That's *not* your Prime powers 'making' me sleep with you—that's called I was too tired to get it up, rested, then my body was like, okay! Cool! Nookie!"

"Really?"

"Yes, really." He reached out, waiting, and she took his hand.

"Tell me if I'm telling you the truth—you *never* violated my consent. Ever."

He believed he was telling the truth. "How would you know if I did, though?"

"Seriously, *where* is this coming from, Dew?"

"Because it never occurred to me before." She stared at their hands, their entwined fingers. "And I'm sorry for yesterday. I didn't mean to scare you. I honestly never stopped to think about why you would be worried beyond my fears that everyone automatically assumed I wasn't capable because I'm pregnant now. It led me to wondering if maybe there were times I pushed envelopes I shouldn't have. That maybe I got my way not because it was right, but because I wanted it. And we aren't lovers anymore. It's funny how *you* went from not worrying about me to *Ken* was worried about me, but now *Ken's not* worried about me, right?"

"Ken absolutely worries about you, but he's trying to learn acceptance that this is who you are and what you do." Deep lines furrowed his brow. "Is this a pregnancy-brain thing because that made absolutely no sense to me whatsoever."

She drew in a deep breath. "Like you said, you were the voice of reason last night. Ken was the one okay with it. How'd that position flip between you two if I'm not somehow using my Prime on you without realizing I am?"

He dropped his head, slowly shaking it, before squeezing her hand and releasing it. Then he looked her in the eyes. "Nami's right—I taught you too well."

"Huh?"

He sadly smiled. “I taught you by example to put everyone else before yourself. If you can’t believe a single word I or Ken or anyone else says about this, then believe this—you are *not* that guy. You are *not* Endquist. You didn’t force me or Ken to do anything.”

“I claimed Ken in a goddamned sports bar bathroom.”

“We’re not talking mate bonds. I’m not proud that I kissed Nami on her bus and ran off. I mean, hell, Peyton fucked Gillian behind the dumpster of a restaurant, and—”

“*Whoa! Wait! What?*”

She’d definitely *not* heard this story.

Beck held up a hand. “I am *not* telling you that story. You want to know I can safeword? Here it is—please, I am *begging* you, do *not* make me tell you that story. You want to hear it, ask your brother or Gillian.”

She stared at him. “You believe that goddamned rat bastard ordered Ken to take a pic of me wearing that stupid fucking helmet and text it to him?”

Beck snorted. “Peyton?”

“Of fucking course Peyton! Who else is so goddamned sadistic or have that kind of pull?”

“Trent’s terrified of you so I know he wouldn’t.”

“Fuckin’ A, he wouldn’t.”

Beck smiled. “So what’d Peyton say when you talked to him last night?”

“Good job,” she mumbled.

Beck leaned in and cupped a hand to his ear. “Say that again? I couldn’t *quite* hear you.”

“He told me I did good, okay? He agreed I made the right call.”

“Funny how hearing Peyton tell you that you did a good job always seems to make you uncomfortable.” Beck smiled again. “I will *never* regret the time we spent together as lovers.

And I will admit that, yes, I wished *really* hard back then that we felt a mate bond, but we didn't. Knowing what I know now, I am glad you met Ken, and I'm so glad I met Nami. You are a good person with a good heart, and you put everyone ahead of yourself."

He held his hand out, indicating her baby bump. "And now is the time for you to put yourself first. Without guilt. It's a lesson I'm going to do my damndest to learn, too, because I suck at it as badly as you do." He stood and opened his arms to her. "You can't let this shit eat holes in your brain. You have to pick and choose who you can trust but one of those options cannot be that insidious little voice in your head that negs you and makes you doubt yourself. You are Charlie and Chelsea's daughter, and you are a good person."

She stood and hugged him, and...yeah.

It felt so different now between them.

Comfortable. Not sexy at all.

The sliders opened and Joaquin stepped out. He nervously eyed Beck. "Everything...safe? We all good?"

"Yeah," Beck said. "We're all good. Except I'd like to cut out a little early today so I can go talk to Duncan."

"He doesn't hold it against you," Dewi said.

"Yeah, but *I* hold it against me. I took my own shit out on him and he didn't deserve it."

"Sure. No problem."

They got to work and Dewi tried to shove it all out of her mind.

Mostly, she succeeded.

But later that evening, after Ken had fallen asleep spooned around her, Dewi still stared at the wall and wondered if she'd ever be able to shut off that dark voice.

The one that sounded like Endquist.

The one that taunted her, haunted her nightmares.

The same one she knew was the last voice her parents ever heard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Dewi

OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL WEEKS, Dewi—and everyone else—was relieved to see great improvement in Tamsin’s state of mind. To the point that Duncan and Badger felt comfortable easing back to taking turns with only one of them staying with her at a time and alternating days. Then staying with her only at night.

Now, closing in on the end of May, the men were available to her any time over the phone, but other than visits only lasting a couple hours at a time, she was leaning more on Brianna and Malyah, on Nami and Da’von, on Carl and Mateo.

Dewi had used Tamsin’s condition as another excuse to stall scheduling her trip out to Idaho and with the other Enforcers. Instead, Ken set up weekly video conferencing with all of them for Dewi, with Peyton’s blessing to handle it that way.

But it made Ken and Beck both happy that Dewi was, in some ways, actively making an effort to try to take things easy, meaning she was able to force herself to accept and justify it without heaping too much guilt on herself.

Bebe couldn’t understand why she couldn’t bring little Maisie home with her every day, but she and Dania both loved helping Tamsin and the others around the house when Malyah and Brianna weren’t working with them on lessons. Ken spent several mornings a week there, too, juggling his usual duties with trying to create lesson plans that were age- and skill-appropriate for the kids so they could evaluate them for the teachers in Idaho and then, come fall, get them all on a lesson schedule.

But they still had no answers about Bebe and Dania, although there hadn’t been a repeat of the scuffle between the girls.

On that Friday, Dania and the twins had a regularly scheduled check-up with their pediatrician, so Leila opted to take the day off work and keep them home. Dewi knew all that because Ken had also stayed home that morning to catch up on some work instead of driving over to work on lesson plans with Malyah and Brianna and Tamsin.

That didn't mean the morning was a smooth one, unfortunately. Because Dewi, with Badger's help, had been juggling calls from the Argyros family. The pack was still in the process of finding them a new home and jobs so they could get them moved.

Apparently someone else in Calvin's family—Dewi wasn't sure who although it seemed there was an older brother and a cousin involved—was harassing the family while trying to make contact with Calvin, convinced he was “in a cult” and wanting to extract him.

Yes, ironic.

Then they'd received a call from Sarasota, needing an Enforcer down there to scare a clueless human boyfriend away from a packmate's teenage daughter. The kid tried to break up with him and he'd...

Well, acted like a stupid boy.

Beck volunteered to go down there to see if he could scare the boy off without having to bring a Prime into the situation. Beck had already been scheduled to go handle a mediation in Arcadia that afternoon between a couple of cousins. He could stop in Sarasota on the way.

Joaquin was on his way to Orlando already with Martin to help a newly resettled pack family from Mexico.

And all this had started before 8:00am Dewi's time, *before* she had consumed her first cup of coffee.

Dewi didn't blame the Argyros family one bit, especially Karolos, who was begging Dewi to let him start ripping out throats. And she was doing her best to talk him off that ledge to buy time for Tyrone and Carbry to get there and help out.

Finally, she extracted a promise from him to hang tight and let the Enforcers handle it when they arrived in a few hours. When she dropped the desk phone handset back on the cradle, she stood, grabbed her coffee mug, and headed toward the kitchen.

“Well, that was as much fun as cauterizing an amputated toe,” she told Ken, who with Badger was waiting for another pot of coffee to finish brewing. “What the *hell* else can happen today?”

In her back pocket, her cell phone rang.

“Now ye did it,” Badger cackled. “Ye tempted the Goddess.”

She craned her head around to yell at her phone. “That was *not* a challenge-accepted situation, dammit!” She yanked it out of her pocket and answered without looking at the screen. “*What?*”



Nami

Lord, please let this baby come sooner rather than later. As long as it's healthy to do so, she quickly added.

Fortunately, she was currently between class semesters . She now spent nearly every weekday over at “the clubhouse,” as she’d accidentally dubbed it sometime in the days after “the Great Wrong Baby Escapade,” as it was now being playfully referred to by them all.

Just not around Dewi, because they knew she was still beating herself up over that.

Now that Tamsin had her baby—and *lord*, did shifter women bounce back envyingly fast from childbirth, Nami noted—and she was finally on a slow road to healing, she’d picked up a lot of the slack of chores around the house and with the kids that Nami had tried to do and now frequently... couldn’t.

Because she felt too dangd exhausted.

Which the doctor assured her was completely normal for where she was in her pregnancy.

Little Maisie was absolutely adorable and Nami loved being able to hold her.

Yeah, maybe I do want at least one more of our own after this little one comes.

That day would be easier than some, because Dania and the twins weren’t coming today. Nami had given Da’von a shopping list, and on his way home from his classes today, he’d do the shopping and buy everything Nami would need to cook up a huge meal for all of them for that evening. And with Da’von and Malyah’s help, she planned to teach Brianna and Tamsin a few of the Drexler family’s favorite meals.

Today, Carl and Mateo were outside handling yard work. They were planning on going out for the day tomorrow, alone, to spend some well-earned date time together while Nami,

Beck, Badger, Duncan, and others would be coming over in unobtrusive shifts to make sure Tamsin was still okay.

Not to mention, Nami and Beck were going to let Da'von and Brianna go over to their house for a few hours for some alone time.

They promised to wash and change the guest room sheets before coming back.

Beck playfully told Nami that acceptance was a sign of coming to terms with their new family's structure.

Nami told Beck to shove it.

Which, fortunately, only made him laugh harder because he of all people understood how miserable she was feeling lately, both physically and mentally. Mentally because she wasn't used to not being able to *do* things.

And she preferred to be the one doing for others. Not the one being doted on by her family.

Bebe ran over to where Nami sat on the couch and bounced up next to her. "Play ball?"

Nami wearily smiled. "Auntie Tam's nursing Maisie right now, honey. When she's finished, I'm sure she'll play with you. I need to get up and eat something, though. Would you like a snack?"

Bebe cheered. "Yay! Snack!"

Nami hauled herself to her feet. "Yay, snack!"

Tamsin finished nursing Maisie and got her burped and changed and settled into her little bouncy lounger. Nami could see it from where she stood in the kitchen, talking about the recipes for later with Brianna and Malyah.

Then, in hopes that maybe Bebe would settle in for her nap, Tamsin put on Bebe's favorite wolf DVD to see if she could convince her to sit and watch it.

Bebe ran over to Tamsin. "Play wit me?"

"Of course, sweetheart."

“Outside?”

Nami turned and nodded to her. “I’ll keep an eye on Maisie.” Nami hoped the more Tamsin played with Bebe that the little girl’s enthusiasm for life would rub off on Tamsin.

If nothing else, hopefully keep Tamsin distracted and keep her putting one foot in front of the other.

And, short-term, hopefully wear Bebe out so she’d settle down for a nap soon.

Nami wasn’t paying much attention to Tam and Bebe when they finally headed outside. She occasionally glancing out the window and then back to Maisie.

That’s why when she saw something outside that made her do a double-take, her scream scared the crap out of Malyah and Brianna and sent Nami running out the back door.



Dewi

“Um, hello? Dewi?” Tamsin.

Dewi immediately tempered her tone. “Hey, Tamsin.” She rubbed her forehead. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you. What’s up, honey?”

In the background, Dewi thought she heard a strange howling, and Malyah, Nami, Carl, Mateo, and Brianna all talking at once.

No, not talking.

Pleading.

Dewi’s hackles went up.

Tamsin sounded...odd. “Um, well, I... shouldn’t really explain this over the phone. Firstly, no one’s in danger,” she quickly added.

Dewi was already snapping her fingers at Ken and Badger as she ran for her purse and keys. “Then tell me what’s wrong.”

“Can you please—safely and at the speed limit—come over? Right now? Or at least perhaps send Duncan or Badger, if you aren’t available? It’s not about me,” she added. “I’m fine. We...need a Prime.”

Shit. “Get Da,” Dewi called over her shoulder at Badger. “Is someone dead, injured, bleeding, or needing a doctor?” she asked. Dewi hit the garage door almost at a full run, punching the button as she passed it to roll up the large door on her way toward the Saleen. She was aware of a couple of sets of footsteps behind her.

“No, I swear. It’s...” Tamsin sighed. “We really need to *show* you.”

“This isn’t a ‘surprise’ birthday party, is it?” Dewi growled. “No offense, I love you, honey, but I don’t have time

for that bullshit right now. I already told all of you I don't want a birthday party next week. Or this week. Or any week."

Tamsin nervously laughed. "I *wish* that's what this is. But we do need a Prime here before Lu'ana comes this afternoon."

"Why—" Dewi skidded to a stop and Ken nearly ran into her. "What happened to Bebe?"

"Not...happened *to*, exactly. She's safe. Please?"

Dewi wished she could place the sound of that howling in the background. "We're on our way."

"Brilliant! Cheers!" Tamsin hung up before Dewi could ask anything else.

Dammit, I wish my Prime powers worked over a phone!

She turned to find Badger and Duncan rushing out into the garage, Ken on their heels. "Change of plans. All four of us are going. Badger, you're driving. Let's take your truck."

"Thank feckin' hell for that!" he muttered as he smacked the button to roll up the door. He rummaged around in his pockets for his keys.

"What's going on?" Ken asked as he followed them to the truck.

"I don't know," Dewi said as she climbed into the backseat next to Ken while Duncan took shotgun. "It has something to do with Bebe. All I know is she's safe, no one's hurt, but they specifically asked for a Prime to get there before Lu'ana does."

Badger froze in the middle of fastening his seat belt. "Tamsin *specifically* asked for a Prime?"

"Yeah. And there was howling in the background I couldn't—" Dewi suspected her train of thought had just arrived at the same station as Badger's because their gazes met over the seat back.

"Oh, no!" Dewi gasped.

Badger grimly nodded and finished buckling up. "Aye," he said. "I believe our lives just grew a lot more complicated."

“By what metric do you gauge *that*?” Ken drawled.

Duncan snorted from his spot in the front passenger seat.



DEWI BARELY WAITED for Badger to pull to a complete stop in the driveway before she threw her door open and leapt out, hitting the ground at a literal run. The front door was unlocked and Dewi didn't bother knocking as she burst in, resisting the urge to reach for the gun holstered in her rear waistband.

“What happened?” she barked.

Everyone turned at her entrance. Nami sat on the couch and looked exhausted, with a sleeping Maisie on her shoulder.

The others stood gathered around where Tamsin sat on the floor facing Carl, and between them...

Dewi slid to a stop as Badger and Duncan barely avoided running into her. “Oh, holy fu-dging shi-irtballs,” Dewi whispered.

“Ye gotta be kiddin’ me!” Badger said.

“Well, that’s unexpected,” Duncan said.

Ken finally caught up, closing the front door behind him. “What hap—oh, *shit*.”

On the floor between Carl and Tamsin the large, mostly brown corgi puppy, which had silenced when startled by their entrance, sniffled as it looked at them with Bebe’s sweet brown eyes before mournfully howling again.

CHAPTER THIRTY

DEWI SAT on the couch with Bebe snuggled in her lap, where the girl—eh, puppy—had just fallen asleep after exhausting herself crying.

Eh, howling.

“Run us through what happened, please?” Dewi asked. “Every. Detail. From the beginning. Where everyone was and what they were doing—everything. No matter how small the detail.”

Tamsin now held Maisie, who’d just finished nursing. “I was playing with Bebe. Brianna, Nami, and Malyah were in the kitchen. Carl and Mateo were outside doing yard work. Maisie was sleeping in her little bouncer recliner. I had put the Yellowstone wolves video on the telly that Bebe loves so much, thinking I could get her to settle for a nap.”

The young woman blinked back tears. “Then Bebe brought me one of the balls from her skittles set—”

“Her what?” Dewi asked.

“The toy bowling set,” Carl clarified, pointing to where it sat in the corner with other toys.

“Yes, sorry,” Tamsin said. “Anyway, I thought she wanted to play with that, but she said no, she wanted me to go out to the garden with her and throw the ball for her and... Well, she wanted to play fetch. I haven’t worked with her on shifting for a couple of weeks now, with the baby and everything, so I wasn’t even thinking about that. I left Maisie inside with Nami and went out with Bebe and...”

She looked at a loss for words. “The third throw, Bebe shifted and went rolling across the yard when she tripped over her clothing. I was...gobsmacked, quite frankly. By the time I finally processed what happened, I dashed after her and caught her. I suppose I must have cried out.”

“And we heard her,” Carl said. “I guess that’s about the same time Nami came streaking out of the back door, screaming bloody murder. We were working around the side of the house and didn’t see Bebe shift. We came running, worried someone was attacking them.”

Dewi looked at Nami, but she still appeared shell-shocked, so Dewi held off asking her any questions.

“Did anyone else see what happened?” Duncan grimly asked. “Neighbors?”

“Security cameras?” Badger asked.

Mateo shook his head. “No. There aren’t any trained on the backyard. Between the trees, fence, and shrubbery, there’s no way anyone saw. We’re secure there. The ones we have don’t cover that part of the yard because it’s not near a window or door.”

“Then what happened, Tamsin?” Dewi asked.

“At first,” Tamsin said, “I was so happy for her and proud of her that it didn’t fully register with me.”

“That she’s a corgi shifter,” Dewi said.

Tamsin nodded. “Correct. I’m used to corgi shifters. It wasn’t until Carl noted that she wasn’t a wolf puppy that I fully processed that...” She shrugged. “I’m simply gobsmacked. There’s no other adequate word for it.”

Dewi took a deep breath and focused on Nami, gentling her tone. “Are you okay?”

Nami started to nod but then shook her head as her tears brimmed and rolled down her cheeks. “I thought I was prepared for anything,” she quietly said. “But I was *not* prepared for a glowing neon target to be painted on that baby’s forehead. I was certain y’all were wrong and she was just

bein'...feisty." Nami choked back a soft sob. "Does this mean Dania can shift, too? And why is Bebe a *corgi*? How the hell does that even *happen*? How do we have two little girls who are shifters but their parents are humans?"

Malyah draped an arm around her shoulders, comforting her.

Badger stood there, arms crossed as he stared at Bebe. "At least now we know why the girls were scrappin' the way they did at Reggie's birthday party."

"We don't know for certain Dania's a shifter," Duncan said.

"Oh, just *stop* it!" Nami snapped. "Denial ain't just a river in Egypt. I know this means Dania's likely a shifter, too. Girl's been *bitin'* other kids and acting like a wolf when she ain't been around Bebe to pick it up from her. Which means her sisters could be, too."

Dewi stroked Bebe's fur. "But we don't know any of that. The only thing we know for certain right now is that Bebe is a shifter. And once Faegan's eliminated, that particular threat is nonexistent." She offered Tamsin a kind smile. "And well-done, you, on teaching her to shift."

Tamsin blushed. "I don't think I had much to do with it."

"She knew what was possible with your tutelage. So yeah, you did. At least now we know. We finally have our answer. About her, at least. Still need to figure it out with Dania."

"Nami's right—how is this *possible*?" Malyah asked, looking at Badger. "Forget having human parents—how do we go from wolves to a *corgi*?"

Badger crossed his meaty arms over his chest. "I dunno. Far's I could tell, there are no known corgi shifters in either yer family's line or Reggie's. Meaning all my plans just went right out the window."

"Why?" Malyah asked.

"Fer starters, I'm gonna need to take DNA swabs on all of Reggie's immediate kin. Maybe the issue is incomplete or

faulty information.” He slowly shook his head. “Not to cast aspersions on anyone’s character, mind ye, but perhaps there’s someone who believed they were a father when they actually weren’t. Whoever the culprit is, it’ll likely be a recent ancestor. I’m gonna need DNA to puzzle it out.”

“Corrine, Reggie’s grandmother, is still alive,” Nami softly said. “Imani’s mother. But she’s in an Alzheimer’s care facility outside of Atlanta. She’s in her 90s, I think. I haven’t seen her since Lu’ana and Reggie’s wedding, and even then she was in decline.”

Badger grimly nodded. “Aye. She’ll be my first stop, then. Can ye get me that info? Immediately?”

Nami numbly nodded. “Yeah. We send her cards and care packages all the time.” She started paging through her phone.

Badger looked at Dewi. “I mean, I need to handle this *immediately*. Time is of the essence. I will head out tonight and drive up to Atlanta so I can see her first thing in the morning.”

“Yeah,” Dewi said, feeling weary as she stared down at Bebe’s adorable sleeping face. “She’s got to be getting up there in years.”

“No, yer not understandin’ me.” Dewi focused on Badger. “If there’s a *corgi* shifter out there somewhere—in the United States—who sired or birthed a child no one knows about, are they alive? Dead? How many other children are there? *And*, how close is that shifter to Faegan Lewis? Not to mention, are they givin’ him aid? Here. In the US.”

They all looked at Tamsin.

“Your father never said anything about a corgi shifter in the US?” Dewi asked.

“Never. I don’t remember Father mentioning any relatives or potential mates over here. Father had many in-depth conversations in front of me about potential mates.” She bitterly added, “Not that he cared what *my* opinions were regarding any of them. Had there been a corgi shifter he knew about, I’m certain his name would have topped Father’s list.

Father's primary concern was with not 'diluting the pack's gene pool'." She wrinkled her nose in distaste at that phrase. "He would have eagerly married me off to a full corgi shifter even if they weren't from our pack. I know he had contacts in Europe, and elsewhere in the UK, but I never heard him discuss American contacts."

"Can they question Tamsin's mom?" Carl asked Dewi.

"Peyton told me he was one of the Primes who questioned Tamsin's mother," Dewi said. "She had no information about any US contacts. But that doesn't mean Faegan didn't have some and never told her."

"We still don't know if this shifter is or was a man or a woman," Badger said. "Faegan Lewis had a sister but he reportedly killed her for mating outside their species without his permission."

"Regarding this mystery corgi," Duncan said, "we don't know for sure if he—or she—is even related to Faegan. There were multiple corgi shifter families at one time. Maybe someone crossed the Atlantic the way we did a long time ago and they lost the knowledge of their true roots after living over here for a generation or two. Especially if they crossed earlier than we did to settle here."

Badger scratched at his chin. "I dunno. My gut tells me this shifter is closer than that. We know there's a Prime Alpha wolf in the Beatrice Wycroft Drexler line, but it's far back. For the corgi to overpower it, I'm bettin' it's close. In my experience, the corgi shifter is most likely within four generations. And DNA tests will quickly tell us if Bebe's in any way related to Tamsin or not. So I guess were gonna be doin' all of that now."

"Is it possible the corgi shifter could be an unknown child of Uncle Hamish?" Tamsin asked.

Badger's eyebrows tangled. "Uncle who?"

"One of Father's younger brothers. He died in the Great War. I mean, World War 1," she added. "I never met him, obviously."

“Died where?” Duncan asked.

“I’m not quite sure. I believe he was either the youngest or second-youngest sibling. Father never spoke about him. Father rarely spoke of several of his siblings. Mother told me who Uncle Hamish was when I found a picture in the attic when I was a child. She also told me never to ask about him or even mention him around Father, so I imagine it was a very tense topic.”

Badger looked at Dewi. “On it,” she said, reaching for her phone to text Peyton. “I’ll have Peyton ask Trevor to see if he can find and send a copy of the picture.”

“Right,” Badger said, returning his focus to Tamsin. “How old was Hamish, do ye know?”

Tamsin shifted Maisie onto her shoulder to gently burp her. “I’m not certain. I believe he was younger than 100 when he left home. He was a shifter, and an Alpha.”

“Any idea the cause of the bad blood ’tween ’em?” Badger asked.

“Mother didn’t say in great detail, but my impression at the time was that marriage arrangements were in the works when Hamish suddenly enlisted in the military and left home. Such as he did not wish to be forced into a marriage.”

“I’m certain this would be a very interesting discussion under different circumstances,” Mateo observed, “but Lu’ana will be here to get Bebe in less than four hours.” He pointed at Bebe. “And while Bebe’s every bit as adorable shifted as she is in human form, I believe it will trigger a few...questions. So unless we are prepared to reveal this truth to Lu’ana today, we need to think of something.”

“Did you try to talk her into shiftin’ back?” Badger asked.

“Gee, we didn’t think of *that*,” Nami wearily snarked.

“Yes, we tried before you arrived,” Tamsin said. “We all did. I mean, Carl and I did while everyone else was supportive. We tried to show her how. We aren’t certain if she’s unwilling or unable to shift back. That’s why I asked for

a Prime. I thought perhaps you could...order her to shift back?"

"It doesn't work like that," Duncan said. "If she doesn't know how to do it, it's impossible to make her do it. For example, if she can't swim, and we ordered her to swim, she wouldn't be able to. She has to be able to perform the action. What we should be able to do, however, is communicate with her. Once she wakes up, obviously. She needs to rest. She's so young, and shifting is extremely exhausting for little ones before they have the hang of it. If we can keep her calm, she might be able to figure it out."

"Or she might even shift back while she's asleep," Badger said. "That's not uncommon with little ones. To shift and shift back in sleep. That happens less the older shifters get and have more control over it. Usually doesn't happen with adults."

"Terrific," Nami said. "So we have to worry about her just randomly doing it when she's at home?"

"Once she knows how to do it," Badger said, "we might be able to use Prime powers to help her control it. But we do need to think about how to break this to Lu'ana and Reggie. We have the standin' Prime order to them to call us immediately if anything strange happens, but that was before we had this confirmation. We'll have to figure out how to tell them about this."

"Well, at least you get your wish, sweetheart," Duncan said to Dewi.

Her head snapped up. "Huh? What?"

Duncan smiled. "You now have a valid reason to indefinitely postpone your trip to Idaho."

Dewi gently pumped her fist so as not to awaken Bebe. "Yes!" she whispered.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

UNFORTUNATELY, once Bebe woke up, she was so happy to see Dewi, Badger, Duncan, and Ken that she either couldn't or wouldn't shift back. She was having too much fun running around, happily chattering away as she normally did, but only the three Primes could understand her, just...

Shifted.

And trying to talk everyone who was a wuffie to "play wuffie" with her, too.

As the afternoon wore on, Ken set up his laptop and worked while Dewi, Badger, and Duncan, along with Tamsin and Carl, tried a variety of techniques while making calls to Peyton and others for ideas.

At one point, Dewi was sitting on the floor with Bebe, trying to talk with her, when Nami tried to get Dewi's attention.

"Dewi—"

"Honey, please give me a minute to think, okay?"

"You don't *have* a minute!" Nami said.

"Please, just—"

"Dewi!" Carl snapped. "Lu'ana just drove up! She's early!"

"*Shit!* Why didn't y'all tell me!"

Nami gave her a honkin' good side-eye. "What you *think* I been doin', girl!"

Ken walked over from where he'd been working on his laptop at the dining room table. He had his phone in his hand. "Take Bebe into one of the bedrooms," he said. "I got this."

"What?" Dewi asked.

He pointed at Bebe. "Someone take her into the back of the house and keep her quiet. Badger, I'll need your help. Hug Lu'ana as soon as she comes in and Prime her to listen to me and believe everything I say."

"What are you gonna do to her?" Nami's shrill tone set Dewi's nerves on edge.

He held up his phone to show her, and there was a picture on it but Dewi couldn't tell what from that angle. "I *got* this," he calmly said. "It'll buy us until Monday afternoon. Just please get Bebe out of here and everyone stay chill and follow my lead, okay?"

Brianna and Malyah scooped up Bebe and her clothes and hustled back to Brianna's room while everyone else exchanged nervous glances.

Badger waited by the door and gave it a second or two after Lu'ana rang the bell to open it.

She wore a bright smile. "Hey, Badger!"

"There ye are, lass." He hugged her and then turned with her to face Ken while keeping a hand on her shoulder. "Okay, do yer thing, lad. She's all yers."

Ken showed his phone to Lu'ana. "Happy Anniversary! We have a surprise for you and Reggie—we got the two of you an all-expenses paid weekend over at a resort on St. Pete Beach! And it's for *this* weekend. So you have to go."

Dewi and Badger exchanged a look but Dewi was getting *incredibly* turned on watching her mate thinking so fast on his feet.

"A...weekend?" Lu'ana asked, sounding a little out of it from being under Badger's Prime influence.

"The whole weekend! And we'll take care of Bebe for you. We'll happily keep her until Monday evening after you get

done with work. And then you guys will come over here for family dinner. But you need to go home right now and get packed for the two of you. I'll text all the info to you. All you two have to do is drive over and check in. Food, drinks, spa, couple's massage session—everything's included."

Lu'ana blinked. "But... Our anniversary isn't for three months?"

"Uh, it's... an early present," Ken said. "Before the school year starts and everything. And, okay, you got me, we found a Groupon and it expires this week if it's not used, but you're going to *love* it. You'll have so much fun! No worries, and we've got Bebe for you. She's *really* looking forward to spending the weekend with all of us." Ken looked at Nami as he nodded in an exaggerated way to get her to nod, too. "Isn't that right, Nami?"

Dewi turned and Nami's expression would not have fooled Lu'ana if it wasn't for Badger's Prime powers. "That's right," Nami said as she started nodding. "Bebe's really looking forward to this weekend. We're gonna do pedicures and everything."

"Well... Thank you!" Lu'ana said, her smile beaming. "That's so sweet of y'all to do that! Let me just go say hi to her—"

"Oh, she's asleep right now," Ken said. "She wore herself out running around with Tamsin this morning, then had a big lunch, and she just fell right to sleep."

"Ye know she's sound asleep and just as adorable as ever," Badger told Lu'ana. "Nothin' to worry about. Ye wouldn't want to wake her up early from her nap and throw her off her schedule and be cranky. You'd better go home and get busy packing. No need to even call us and check in, just focus on the two of you. If Reggie asks about her, you've already checked in while he's in the bathroom or wasn't around or somethin'. Improvise."

"You know, really I don't want to wake her up," Lu'ana said. "I guess I'd better go home and get busy packing! I can't wait to tell Reggie about this. I love you guys so much! And I

promise we won't bug you all weekend checking in." After another round of hugs with everyone, she happily headed out.

Badger watched through the viewfinder on the front door. "Okay, she's gone." He turned. "It's safe," he called out to Brianna and Malyah before turning to Ken. "Damned good job, lad."

"Well, I realized a couple of hours ago we needed a contingency plan in place, *stat*. We can always send them on a seven-day cruise starting Tuesday if we have to, but a Prime will need to visit their works to give them the vacation time without fucking up their jobs. Tell them they won it in a contest or something."

Dewi managed to get up off the floor and walked over to Ken, grabbed his head, and kissed him. "*You are so getting laid tonight,*" she silently told him. "*That was hawwwt.*"

"What? Thinking fast?"

"And taking control."

He grinned. "*Then you should sit in on our meetings with me and Gillian and Trent when we discuss computer systems.*"

She giggled. "*Hard pass. You'd never get any work done. I'd keep trying to blow you.*"

He wagged his eyebrows at her. "*I don't see a problem with that, baby.*"

"Okay, so we just bought ourselves, what, seventy-two hours?" Mateo said, scrubbing his face with his hands. "Now what? If we don't want to literally ship them out to sea next week, I mean."

"What's this 'we' stuff, dude?" Ken playfully snarked. "*I was the only one not panicking, and I'm the one who came up with the plan.*"

"What I'm gonna do," Badger said, "is run home, pack, and grab a bunch of DNA swab kits. Ken, if ye'd come with me, ye can get yer SUV and drive back here, and ye can bring test kits back with ye. There's some of ye I haven't done tests on yet." Badger did a quick head count.

“Is that really necessary?” Carl asked. “What if the Seguras stumble over that information?”

Badger scoffed. “Do ye think I’m stupid enough to use real names, lad? I run it all through an anonymous system, no worries. But one of my unofficial jobs is keepin’ track of pack bonds and family lines. I’ve got some genealogy work done on many of ye already, but the DNA testing hasn’t been done yet. Time to rectify that now.”

Dewi hugged Ken. “Drive safe,” she said.

“Can I bring you anything?” he asked.

She turned to Duncan. “Actually, can I go, too? I never grabbed a shower this morning and I really need one. I’ll come back with Ken.”

He nodded. “Sure. Carl, Tamsin, and I will hold down the fort. Did anyone tell Joaquin and Beck and Da’von what’s going on?”

Malyah and Nami exchanged a glance. “Honestly, I didn’t even think about it,” Malyah said.

“Neither did I,” Nami said. “I’m...in shock.”

“Da’von should be home soon,” Brianna said. “I figured I’d wait until he got here. Nothing he can do about it, and it’d only be a distraction for him in class.”

Five minutes later, Dewi and Ken, with Badger driving, were heading back to the house. Dewi opted to take the backseat so Ken could more easily talk with Badger and take notes on his phone regarding the old shifter’s instructions.

“The most important thing, obviously, is labelin’ everythin’ right an’ proper. I’ll give ye plenty of extras in case ye need ’em, so don’t be bashful. I’d rather ye take too many than not enough. And the mailer box, ye can just scan the label and then stick it one of those pick-up boxes so it’ll be on it’s way in the mornin’. I’ll head to Davis and Imani’s house first before I head north, Prime ’em, and test ’em. I’ll work my way through the rest of their kin when I get back from Atlanta.”

“How fast do the results come back?”

“The rapid tests I can have results for in under forty-eight hours,” Badger said. “That’s why I want several swabs from everyone. So I can also get the in-depth tests done. The rapid tests will help me start nailin’ down the stray branches of this family tree into their rightful places on the trunk. Dependin’ on what I learn from this round of testin’, I might have to start lookin’ for extended relatives and test any I find to look for hints of who this corgi shifter is.”

“Is it possible it’s not a recent shifter?” Dewi asked. “Maybe it’s just the right combination of recessive genes popping up to say ‘hi’.”

Badger glanced at her in the rearview mirror. “An’ since when’s it ever been *that* simple with our lot, missy?”

“Just thought I’d throw it out there,” she muttered.

“Sure, yes, it’s *possible*,” Badger conceded. “Stranger things have happened.” He glanced at Ken. “Like a grazer and a Prime Alpha matin’.”

Ken held up a hand without looking up from his phone. “Represent.”

“Like I said, in *my* experience, when an unexpected shifter pops to the surface, there’s almost *always* a recent shifter ye can trace ’em back to within the past three generations. And whatever form they shift into is usually the most recent shifter in the family tree. At least now with DNA testin’ I can more easily find where someone fits and then trace out again to see if there are other potential sleeper shifters out there.” He looked grim. “Because if there’s one, yes, chances are there’s more.”

“And that’s how you decide who you need to keep an eye on?” Ken asked.

“Exactly. In the past when I’ve found families where I suspected a good chance of a sleeper shifter poppin’ up among a family of clueless humans, I’d pay ’em a visit, give ’em a few Prime orders, and they they suddenly become the beneficiaries of a distant relative they never even knew they had. Small monthly stipend—we adjust that based on their

income level—from their share of nontransferable stocks in a private Idaho company. So, of course, they need to keep in touch if they want to keep receivin’ the stipends.”

“Oh!” Ken looked at him. “So *that’s* how you keep track of them!”

“Right. Incentive. Once we’re certain there won’t be a sleeper showin’ up there, we taper off the stipend and tell ’em some excuse. Obviously, the Prime command makes them believe and accept all of that with no questions asked. And they call us if a shifter makes themselves known. But, as part of all that, they also have to keep us apprised of children, marriages, divorces, deaths, et cetera, and that makes *my* job easier when it comes to tracing back people who marry into their family. I send out an annual census form that I follow up on if I don’t get it back.”

“That’s fricking genius,” Ken said.

Badger smiled. “Ye can thank Charlie Bleacke fer that idea. Wasn’t as easy to do long ago, so we’ve evolved over time as technology changed. After we crossed and Duncan started the Targhee Pack, we knew we’d need a way to try to keep tabs on people. Especially since Duncan insisted we’d not be a blood pack of exclusion, like most were. Ye didn’t have to be wed or born into the Targhee Pack to become Targhee. Ye only had to take a knee, show yer throat, swear allegiance, and then live that allegiance. But we needed to keep tabs on the clueless humans.”

“I wish I could have met him,” Ken said.

“Me too,” Dewi said, then realized she’d spoken it out loud.

Ken glanced back over the seat. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. Sorry.” She leaned forward as much as her seatbelt allowed and laid a hand on his shoulder, gently squeezing. “I know he was my dad, but when other people talk about him sometimes it’s hard for me to piece that together, you know? Because he is a stranger to me. So’s Mom. I know Peyton and Trent and Badger’s public

personas, and I know them personally. I don't have to rely on what people tell me about them because I *know* them. But Mom and Dad...I don't *know* them. I only know what people knew about them and the filter of their perception."

Ken patted her hand. "I know what you mean. At least I'm lucky enough I have a few memories of Dad before he died.

She gave his shoulder one last squeeze before sitting back. "And I wish I could have met both of your parents."

When they reached the house, Dewi hurried upstairs to take her shower while Badger showed Ken what to do with the testers and how to pack and ship them overnight to the lab.

At least her clumsiness had eased up over the past few weeks, as the doctor had predicted it likely would. But as she stood under the hot spray and tried to clear her mind, she couldn't help but dread what surprises Badger's search might uncover.

Because it's not like I need another damned thing to worry about right now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

INSTEAD OF RIDING BACK with Ken, Dewi opted to drive herself so she could stay over all night, if need be.

And it looked like she'd be needed.

She also brought clothes, shower stuff, and her own pillows. In addition to her laptop and chargers.

Dewi never had sleepovers with other kids when she was a kid.

Malyah wryly assured her this was *nothing* like what that would feel like.

All afternoon and evening, the toddler ran around shifted, playing, having fun, barking—all while taking to Dewi and Duncan—and the only hiccups were when the potty-trained little girl needed to use the bathroom.

Dewi had hoped she'd shift back for that, if for nothing else, but clever Bebe managed to sit her little puppy self on the toddler potty she used in the hallway bathroom and go just fine.

After dinner Bebe had taken another nap and conked out, and everyone sat there, barely talking, watching her sleep and hoping she'd shift back.

Nope.

She'd bounced up after her nap ready to play some more. Bebe's initial fear that she couldn't shift back had given way to her loving her new fun games and four-legged perspective.

Beck had taken one look at Nami upon his arrival and convinced her she needed to go home for the night because it was late and she—and the baby—needed rest.

That she was so exhausted physically and emotionally she didn't even try to point out that Dewi was almost as pregnant as her—without needing to be Primed into going—wasn't lost on anyone.

Tamsin, and Brianna and Da'von, had tried to get Dewi to take their beds—as had Carl and Mateo—but Dewi opted for the sofa.

Because she wanted to stay out there with Bebe.

Finally, close to eleven, Dewi declared it bedtime and she sent Ken, Duncan, Malyah, and Joaquin home, bedded down on the sofa with Bebe tucked against her side and with *The Flintstones* playing on TV, and settled in for the night.

“Where'd Gampa Bada go?”

Dewi opted to respond aloud instead of with her Prime, thinking it might coax the girl into shifting back. “He had to go visit someone. He'll be back by tomorrow evening.”

I hope.

“Pway wuffie wif me, Auntie Dewi!”

“It's bedtime now, sweetie. Auntie Dewi's tired. I played wuffie with you earlier. We can't play wuffie all the time.”

“Why not? Wuffie fun!”

“I know it's fun but it scares people who don't know about it. You have to learn when you can and can't play wuffie. People will get hurt if you play wuffie at the wrong time. Maybe even you.”

Bebe went quiet at that, even though Dewi knew she was still awake.

“Wanna be wuffie,” Bebe finally said.

“You are a wuffie. You're just like Auntie Tam. Same kind of wuffie.”

“Will Maisie pway wuffie wif me?”

“Maisie’s a baby, sweetheart. She’s way too little for us to know if she can play wuffie yet.”

Another period of quiet. *“Dania’s a wuffie.”*

“You think so?”

“Mean wuffie. She growled at me and took da ball that day at Gramma’s.”

Wow. That’d been a few weeks ago. “I thought you loved Dania. She’s your cousin.”

“I do when she’s not growlie.”

“Well, we don’t know yet if Dania can be a wuffie for real or just for play. And we can’t show her that you’re a wuffie yet, either.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t want her to feel bad if she can’t be a wuffie, right?”

Long pause. *“No.”*

“But you know, if she *is* a wuffie, that’s kinda cool you figured it out first, huh?”

Bebe’s little tail wagged. *“Yep!”*

“Sometimes, it’s better to know something someone else doesn’t know. Especially if it’s about something you can do. That’s the good kind of secret to have.”

“Like what?”

Like making an asshole punch himself in the nuts.

But Dewi didn’t say or think *that* to her and instead sought a more child-friendly, age-appropriate example.

“Like part of my job is to protect our family. And you know how I can understand what you say now, right?”

Bebe nodded.

“Okay. Well, it’s the *good* kind of secret that we don’t tell people that I can do that. Or that Gampa Bada and Gampa

Dunk can do that. Because sometimes we have to find out if a person is lying so they don't hurt someone in our family. So it's a good secret that only people close to us know. Just like it's a good secret that only people close to us know we're wuffies."

Bebe didn't respond at first and Dewi wondered if she'd punched a little too high with that analogy.

But then Bebe surprised her. "*So bad guys can't know we're wuffies?*"

Close enough. "That's right."

"*I shouldn't tell Dania I'm a wuffie unless she's a wuffie?*"

"Exactly."

"*I was wuffie first.*" If Dewi wasn't mistaken, Bebe sounded...pleased about that.

Dewi wasn't sure where Bebe wanted to go with this, but she'd follow along in hopes of a breakthrough. "Pretty much, yeah."

"*I'm better at it.*"

Bingo. "Well, I don't know, sweetheart. Apparently, you can't change back to *stop* being a wuffie when you want to. If Dania can change back before you can, I'm sorry, but that means she's the better wuffie, and—"

And...just like *that*, there sat Bebe, in all her indignant naked toddler glory, with a scrunched up face that would set a thousand ships aflame with the force of her anger and her arms crossed over her chest. "Auntie Dewi, I'm a better wuffie than her! See?"

Dewi choked back her howls of laughter. *Competitive nature, FTW.* "You're right. You *are* a better wuffie than Dania. I'm sorry, sweetheart."

Dewi sat up and didn't dare drop the advantage. She touched Bebe's shoulder and used a pinch of Prime powers to keep the tactical advantage—and to keep Bebe from shifting back. "Let's get your PJs on, and then you and I can snuggle up to watch TV before we go to sleep. You can sleep here on

the couch with me and we'll let the TV play all night. I've never had a slumber party before."

Bebe nodded. "Okay!" She bounced off the couch—still two-legged—and ran to her Hello Kitty backpack where her things were.

Dewi snagged her phone, waited until Bebe had the nightgown pulled on and was looking for a pair of her nighttime sleeping diapers she still wore, although it looked like she wouldn't need those for much longer, and then took a picture of her.

She opened today's group text she had going with Peyton, Trent, Beck, Ken, Duncan, Joaquin, and Badger and sent the picture with a text message.

We once again have a two-legged toddler. Beck, please tell Nami. Now I'm going to sleep.

There was a flurry of thumbs-ups and smiley faces in response. Then, a private text from Beck in their ongoing thread.

How'd you do it?

Dewi smiled.

Used one of the oldest and most powerful forces in the world—the cousin equivalent of sibling rivalry. Long story short, I implied Dania was a better wuffie than Bebe if Dania could change back and Bebe couldn't. BAM—toddler.

Beck replied with a series of laugh-crying emojis. Then:

Holy shit, I have 3 little sisters. I don't know why I didn't think of that!

Bebe finished pulling her sleeping diaper on and then returned to the couch with her special blanket.

Dewi was snuggled in with Bebe when her phone rang.

Nami.

Dewi answered. “Secret Wuffie Girl Slumber Party Club. Press 1 for information. *Beep.*”

Nami sounded like she was laugh-crying herself. “I love you, Dewi.”

Dewi didn’t expect the prickle of tears to hit her the way it did. “Love you, too. Hold on, I’ll put it on speaker.” She did. “Say hi to Auntie Nami.”

Bebe was already engrossed in the cartoon. “Hi, Auntie Nami!”

Nami started laughing again but Dewi heard the relieved tears choking her voice. “Hey, baby girl. You gonna be a good girl for Auntie Dewi tonight during your slumber party?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay. Me and Uncle Beck will be over tomorrow and you can help me make your favorite cookies.”

“Yay!”

“Now, gimme sugar and I’m going back to sleep.” They made kissy noises at each other. “Love you.”

“Love you, Auntie Nami.”

“I mean it, Dewi. Love you.”

Dewi blinked back the tears. “Love you, too, Auntie Nami.”

They settled in and Dewi let Bebe lie there and watch TV for a few more minutes until several large yawns hit her. Only then did Dewi use her Prime again to nudge her into sleep.

Once she was softly snoring next to her, Dewi let out a huge sigh of relief. She didn’t know if that had been the best way to encourage Bebe to shift back, but at least now Dewi knew the little girl could shift and shift back deliberately, not just accidentally. And they could use their Prime to guide her about when it was appropriate to shift and when not to until she was old enough to understand.

Now came the harder part—figuring out the best approach between then and Monday to break the news to Lu’ana and

Reggie without having to overwhelm them with their Prime powers to get them to understand.

Yes, she totally got the irony that she had no problems using her Prime to make a dirtbag nut-punch himself, but she was reluctant to use more than necessary on family. Especially on a young child.

But Dewi knew, just like they couldn't artificially force Tamsin to get through her grief with their Prime powers, that this had to be dealt with carefully, tactfully.

Lovingly.

I absofuckinglutely never want to be Pack Alpha.

Not if this was just a hint of the bullshit Peyton had to deal with on the regular.

Now how the hell do we break the news to Lu'ana and Reggie?

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

BADGER

SATURDAY MORNING, Badger sat in his car for a moment outside the nursing home in southeast Atlanta, and reviewed his notes on his tablet. He drove straight up from Tampa, stopping only for gas and breakfast before getting there.

The DNA swabs he took from Imani and Davis before he left Tampa last night were already safely tucked in an overnight delivery box he'd seal after he finished his errand here today and added these swabs to the mix.

Getting in to see Corrine wouldn't be a problem.

The probably would be, depending on her level of cognitive decline, if he'd get any answers from her. Useful answers, anyway.

He was taking five DNA test kits in with him, just to be certain. They fit neatly into the little messenger bag he stowed his tablet and the video camera in.

Reggie's mother, Imani, was seventy-two and the eldest of four siblings—three daughters and a son. All of them still alive. Their father, Caleb, had passed away of a heart attack over forty years prior, and Corrine never remarried. She'd married him at nineteen and had Imani nine months later. There was no preliminary evidence from Badger's initial searches of Caleb's available family information that the shifter was in his line.

Heading inside, he put on a smile as he made his way to the front desk. The young woman who looked up from her computer frowned when she saw him. "May I help you?"

He held out his hand, as if to shake with her. “Yes, thank ye kindly. Rodney Williams. I’m here to visit Corrine Ronald.”

She automatically shook with him, and when she did her face went blank.

“I need a visitor badge, her room number, and directions there, if ye please,” he softly said. “No need to take my picture for it, either. You’ve seen me in here plenty of times before and know I’m a frequent visitor of hers. Happy to see me again.”

He released her hand and she offered him a beaming smile as she started tapping into her computer. “Mr. Williams, so good to see you again!”

He glanced at her name tag. “Good to see you, too, Amber,” he replied. “Have they moved her room since my last visit?”

“Nope! She’s still in 306 in the memory care wing.” She tapped a button and a visitor pass decal printed out. She handed it to him with another smile. “Just down that hallway there, to the green elevators. They’ll buzz you in through that lobby. I’ll tell them you’re on your way up.”

He took the thermal printed sticker pass and pasted it onto his shirt. “Thank ye kindly, dear. Always a pleasure to see yer smilin’ face here.”

“You, too! Have a good visit and a great day.”

“Likewise.”

He headed off toward the elevators.

Sometimes it’s too bloody easy.

The nurse on duty upstairs buzzed him into the wing and he walked over to shake her hand and greet her, just in case Amber was a little too enthusiastic with her advanced notice. That nurse, Karen, was also happy to see Corrine’s repeat visitor, and after Badger confirmed Corrine’s date of birth, and that Imani was also a frequent visitor, he made his way to her room.

Corrine sat in a recliner chair staring at a TV, which currently played a golf match. He cleared his throat as he closed the door behind him and she slowly looked over at him.

“Hello, ma’am,” he said. “Corrine.”

His heart sank, thinking perhaps she was non-verbal when a slight smile curved her lips. “Hello.”

Her light brown skin was mottled by age spots in places, and marked by smile lines along the outer creases of her eyes and around her lips. Wispy, mostly grey hair laid at haphazard angles, and he imagined in her youth she’d sported beautiful loose and natural waves. Her hazel-brown eyes peered at him through silver-rimmed glasses.

He walked over and touched her arm. “My name is Rodney Williams, and if anyone comes in to ask, I’m an old friend of yers from church. Okay?”

She nodded. He sensed there was still enough of her mind present he might be able to learn something.

Anything.

He slid a chair over next to her. From his messenger bag he produced a small video camera and a tabletop tripod, which he quickly set up on her side table next to her chair to record video of this in a way that wouldn’t catch him in the frame, especially his face. Then he laid his hand on her arm again.

“Corrine, I’d like to talk to ye about yer family, and about Caleb’s family.”

She nodded. “All right.”

Maybe since this was old information she might retain more of it. At least he wasn’t worried if she talked about shapeshifters to anyone.

Not like they’d believe her.

“Do ye know of anyone in yer family, or in Caleb’s, who might have come from an unusual family? Perhaps they could do things people whispered about? Strange things? And would you possibly have any information about their names, or where they were born?”

“Maybe in the family bible.” She pointed at a shelf, and he nearly crowed with joy. He released her arm and stood, walking over to it and retrieving it, bringing it back to her. She watched as he took pictures of all the records in the front and back of the bible. As he asked more questions, she revealed additional information about where people had lived or were born.

It was far more than he’d had to start with.

He was about to return the bible to its shelf when she said something that caught him by surprise. “But I don’t know anything about Hamish’s family. He’s not in there, of course.”

Badger blinked, stunned. “Hamish? Hamish Lewis?”

She sighed. “I don’t know his last name. I never asked. I’m certain he’s Imani’s father but she doesn’t know. No one does.”



ONCE BADGER GOT over his shock, he gingerly walked Corrine through the story, not wanting to accidentally influence her with his Prime. Corrine Adams had been just shy of her nineteenth birthday when she took a seven-day trip from Brooklyn to New Hampshire to visit some cousins.

She was engaged to Caleb Ronald and their wedding was two weeks away. After they married they planned to move to Georgia where he would work for his uncle at his mill there. It was guaranteed work and housing at a time when both were a precious commodity.

One of Corrine’s cousins was a seamstress and she was making Corrine’s wedding dress. That visit might be one of the last opportunities she had to spend time with these cousins for a while, if ever, and she wanted to make the most of it.

“I loved that man *so* much,” she said, her gaze unfocused as she stared at the wall. “Smart, handsome.” She smacked her lips. “And couldn’t keep his pants zipped to save his life.”

Bollocks. Badger wondered if Caleb also had secret offspring floating around that no one knew about.

“Caleb, ye mean?” he asked, just to make sure.

She nodded. “He was four years older than me but had a taste for much older women. She arched a barely-there eyebrow at him. Especially rich, older white ladies who liked to buy him things in exchange for his time in their beds when their husbands weren’t around.”

“*Ah.* I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. He said anything done before we were married didn’t count. He promised me once he had a ring on his finger that my fingers were the only ones that would touch him, and there’d be no one but me in his bed ever again. He didn’t take me to bed before then, either. I wouldn’t let him. Didn’t want a shotgun wedding.”

Her smile turned playful. “Plus, he bought me things in return with what he was given by those ladies. Sometimes, they gave him cash, but when they gave him presents he sold them to buy *me* presents. Gave me a nice little engagement ring, and bought our wedding bands with that. And the truck we drove to Georgia. Drove that thing for years.”

Badger wasn’t certain how he was supposed to react so he kept a tight rein on his shock. “Um...okay. So what happened on yer visit? Before ye were married?”

“On that visit to New Hampshire, I decided if it didn’t count before a ring for him, then it wouldn’t count for me, either. Because once we were married, Caleb would be it for me, and I wanted a taste of what was out there before it was no longer mine.”

Oh, boy. “What happened?”

“There was this man who stopped by the garage where my uncle worked when me and my cousins were there taking him his lunch for my aunt. Handsome devil, sinfully so. White guy. He *looked* at me and I felt my panties dampen. Little bit of an accent, like from England or something.”

Her smile widened. “He asked me if I wanted to go dancing that night. I told him I’d meet him, because I didn’t want my cousins to know.”

“I take it there wasn’t much dancin’ involved?”

She laughed. “Maybe five minutes of it standing up. The rest of it on his bed.” She happily sighed. “Caleb was the love of my life and he wasn’t bad but that stranger was *way* better.” She sighed again. “Only got his first name. Didn’t tell him my real name. Said my name was Alexis because it sounded fancy to me. Didn’t want him to know who I really was. But after, I felt...*changed*. Not because he was my first, mind you. I wasn’t silly like that. He knew what he was doing. And he said all the sweetest things, like he could read my mind.”

She met Badger’s gaze. “I left the next morning, back to Brooklyn. Never saw him again. And I knew on my wedding night I was already pregnant, because I was late.” She chuckled. “That was the only regret I had, all those months of worrying. How would I explain it?”

“If she was born white?” he ventured.

“Of course! I didn’t want to lie and say I was forced. My mother’s side of the family was very light. And Caleb’s father was, too. But Imani was born beautiful and perfect and looked just like my sisters did when they were babies.” Her smile widened. “I realized no one would ever know what I did. And to the best of my knowledge, Caleb never stepped out on me after we were married. So I just made myself forget about Hamish and never mentioned him to anyone. Except you.”

“No offense, ma’am, but how could ye be certain Caleb was true to ye?” Normally he wouldn’t be this nosy, but now that he’d discovered this knotted mess he figured he might as well tug on all the threads to unravel them and see where they led.

She laughed. “I was wicked good with a butcher’s knife. I told him it’d be a shame for him to wake up gelded like one of his uncle’s horses. That he’d had his fun, and now it was time to settle down and be a man, or I was going to take Momma’s advice to heart.”

“You put the fear o’ god in him.”

“Nah. I put the fear of *me* into him.” She leaned in. “Momma got a visit one day from a woman claimin’ she was Daddy’s girlfriend, and she wanted Momma to leave him.” She grinned. “That was before she and Daddy had any of us.”

“What’d yer momma do?”

“Momma got somethin from her friend who worked for the druggist and put it in his dinner. Daddy woke up later that night after dinner, found himself tied to a chair in the kitchen, no pants, a tarp on the floor under him, with Momma sitting there holding a knife. She gave him a choice—to stay married, or to go to his girlfriend. But if he left her, his dick would stay with her. Community property, she told him. And if he ever put his dick in any other woman but her, she’d repossess it for that, too.”

Badger’s gaze widened. “Um...”

Corrine cackled. “She wasn’t scared of him retaliating, either. Because she told him he had to sleep sometime. And so did his girlfriend. That she could just as easily repossess his dick at her place as she would right there. Needless to say, that curbed his wandering eyes *and* his wandering dick. They had five of us, all girls, and were married over fifty years. That story wasn’t a secret, either. Momma raised us on it. I mean, once we were older, of course. When we were old enough to start dating, she wanted us to know about it. And wanted our men to know it, too. Daddy agreed it scared him faithful.”

She sat back in her chair. “Sometimes, I wondered what ever happened to Hamish. Wonder if he ever thought about me. He didn’t strike me as the kind to cat around. Something felt...*different* about him. I don’t think it was me being a naive girl, either. He was a sweetheart, though. Really wanted to meet up with me the next night. I hadn’t told him I was leavin’. Thought it’d be better that way. Didn’t want him showing up at my uncle’s house askin’ about me, either. But he sure was a fun night.”

Badger swiped into the picture Trevor Clarke had texted him overnight and held up his phone. “Is this that man?”

Hamish?”

She peered at it. “That sure does look like him.” She sighed. “I hope he had a good life.”

Badger dug the DNA test kits out of his messenger bag. “I need to take a few samples real fast,” he said. “This won’t hurt.” He quickly performed them, swabbing the insides of her cheeks, and tucked them away in his bag.

“Well, Corrine, I’m gonna tell ye something ye won’t remember later.” He looked her in the eyes as he touched her hand. “Don’t get upset, please. Yer absolutely right that Hamish was someone special. He was a shapeshifter. And yer little great-grand, Bebe? She’s a shapeshifter, too. Just like Hamish. So if there’s any information ye can give me that might help me locate Hamish, or find any other family o’ his, I’d appreciate it.”

She scowled. “Shapeshifter? Like a werewolf?”

“Sort of, but not exactly.”

“And she’s Imani’s granddaughter, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She slowly bobbed her head from side to side a couple of times. “That would explain the time when Imani was little and I found a puppy in her bed when she was supposed to be napping. Puppy was wearing her clothes, no less, and I could *not* find that girl.”

Badger stared for a moment, processing that, shocked that another revelation could top the earlier one about Hamish. “Beg pardon?”

“She swore she didn’t have a dog. When I went back into her room to look again after I couldn’t find her anywhere in the house, she was sitting there, and *swore* there wasn’t a dog. Not proud of myself, but I spanked her *so* hard for lying to me like that and scarin’ me. Never did find that dog.”

Badger was rarely rendered speechless.

Like now.

It took him a moment to gather his thoughts. “What kind of dog?”

“One of those little short-legged things. Like the Queen has.”

He grabbed his phone and found a picture of a corgi puppy to show her. “Like that?”

She peered at it. “Yes, only darker brown in places.”

“Did she ever do it again?”

“Oh, ho ho, you best believe she did *not*. I didn’t raise any liars, let me tell you what.”

“I meant did ye ever see the dog again?”

“No sir. I figured she must have somehow got it through her window. We lived in a little house but it was a single story.”

Badger wasn’t sure how to proceed because he’d honestly never run into a situation quite like this before. “How old was she when this happened, do ye reckon?”

“Tiny thing. Couldn’t have been more than three.” She thought about it. “She had to be younger than four, because we moved not too long before her fourth birthday into a new house close by, little larger.”

He needed a moment.

A looong moment. Finally, he remembered something else to ask. “Did Hamish mention anything about family? Where he came from? Where he was going?”

“I remember he said he had a brother he hated. Older brother. Maybe another brother or two. And maybe a sister? I got the feeling the older brother is why he left wherever he was from. I remember he said he wasn’t in town long. He was heading first to Boston, and then out to...” She pursed her lips. “It’s just so hard to remember sometimes. I’m sorry.”

This was likely the most she’d spoken in months, goosed by the influence of his Prime powers on her. He rested his hand on her arm again, focusing. “Just think about the

memory, Corrine. Think about that night. You don't have to talk, just remember and relive it as best ye can."

She closed her eyes and Badger tagged along, trying not to interfere so he didn't taint her memories.

The good-bye that night, as she hugged Hamish and kissed him in his hotel room.

"You ever think about moving to St. Louis?" he asked.

"Why should I do that?"

"Maybe tomorrow night I can convince you why."

She smiled. *"We'll see."*

"Another night of fun, at least?" He offered her a playful smile. *"I mean it though. About coming with me. Friend of mine from the war offered me a job at his car dealership. St. Louis Car Company."*

She laughed. *"Such an inspired name."*

"Seriously. I'm settling down there. It'll be a good opportunity."

"We'll have to talk about it. Tomorrow night."

Although she knew she wouldn't be talking with him, because she left the next morning.

Meaning Hamish might have fancied her, but he hadn't pinged on her with a mate bond. If he had, he would have marked her that night. At the very least, he wouldn't have let her walk out of his hotel room without knowing exactly where she was going and walking her home. Especially if he realized he'd got her pregnant.

Badger sensed she was nearly worn out. He stopped recording with the camera and sat back, taking a few last notes on his tablet before tucking his equipment away.

"Thank ye, Corrine. It's been a pleasure talkin' with ye today. You won't remember anything about this conversation later, just that an old friend from church came to chat with ye. That's how ye know me. I stop by quite often to see ye. If ye

ever see me again, ye'll immediately recognize me from church, and as a frequent visitor.”

She opened her eyes and nodded, smiling. “It was so nice to see you again.”

He patted her on the arm and stood, leaning in to kiss the top of her head. “Nice to see you, too. Take care, Corrine.”

Badger was shaking by the time he returned to his car. It wasn't much, and it was over seventy years ago, but it was a clue.

He'd done more with less in the past. And now?

Now he knew what Hamish looked like. Well, what he'd looked like seventy years ago. In shifter years, there was a good chance of there not being a drastic change in the man's appearance.

Badger now also had a *lot* more trouble on his plate than he ever imagined. First things first, he needed to get these samples sent off to the lab for a rush job. He'd receive the rapid test results in under forty-eight hours while they performed detailed tests on the other samples. Then he could plug the results into the genealogy sites he used for comparison.

“All right, Hamish Lewis. Time for ye to come out of the shadows so we can see what kind of trouble ye been gettin' into over all these years.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

PEYTON

PEYTON ENDED the call with Badger and fought the urge to heave his phone against the wall.

This is absolutely not what I needed right now.

Especially not with Faegan Lewis still on the loose.

The longer that situation remained unresolved, the more certain Peyton grew that they were missing a vital piece of the puzzle.

Like that maybe someone with a lot of resources and connections was helping Faegan stay hidden.

And that person would have to be eliminated. If they could even identify and locate them.

It also bothered him that with all the information available at his fingertips, somehow this newest development had slipped under the radar.

That a corgi shifter—a brother of Faegan fucking Lewis—had crossed to the US and set up a new life here.

Meaning how many other active shifter lines were now spread across the country, unknown and unsupervised?

He groaned at the knock on his office door. “Come.”

It opened and Gillian walked in, looking grim and carrying her laptop.

And she closed the office door behind her.

“Do I want to know?” he asked.

She smirked as she rounded his desk to sit the laptop in front of him. He immediately stood and had her take his seat.

And fought the urge to run his hands all over her beautiful body, her growing baby bump—

“I have Peyton, Alvarez,” she said to the computer.

That focused Peyton, who now looked at the screen. On it, their secure video conferencing software, military-grade and encrypted. And one of their Enforcers, Alvarez, who was still in Mexico, was shown on the screen.

“Good morning, sir,” Alvarez said.

“I don’t know,” Peyton snarked. “Is it?”

“Well, it won’t be, soon. We’ve had movement regarding the Segura cartel...”

Twenty minutes later, they’d finished the call and Gillian remained in Peyton’s chair while he paced the length of his office, trying to sort out his thoughts.

“Are we reading Dewi into this?” she asked.

“Not yet. Next week.”

“Why next week?”

“I want a more complete picture. I want to see what Badger digs up.”

She scowled. “I don’t see how Imani and Bebe are related to a drug cartel. Enlighten me.”

He turned. “I want to know if Badger can find out if Hamish is alive. Because whatever those people in Mexico have in mind, if they are somehow making contact with whoever’s helping Faegan Lewis, I want to know if there’s a connection to Hamish.”

She laced her fingers together, her hands resting on the swell of her baby bump as she leaned back in his chair. “Ken said he’ll have that computer payload ready to go this afternoon.”

“And we’re sure the guy Alvarez is using is loyal?”

She grimly smiled. “Raul Segura killed one of his cousins a couple of years ago. He told Alvarez it’s an honor to do this even if we weren’t paying him. He has access to the offices the cartel’s currently being run out of and has already cracked the Wi-Fi router password. Ken was right—they never reset the admin password.”

Peyton snorted. “How can something so simple be so damned important? And overlooked?”

She shrugged. “Works in our favor. He already did a test run. He’ll crash their connection, then offer to help them get up and running again. That’ll give him direct access to the computers. He’ll drop the payload into them, get the Wi-Fi back up and running, and we’re in. We’ll have passwords, e-mails—everything.”

“What about Miranda Abundio?”

“They infiltrated her condo and installed a keystroke logger program on her personal computer. It’s too risky trying to physically infiltrate the corporate offices. Their IT department isn’t as good as ours, but it’s good enough they’d notice something like a phishing attempt or a brute force attack. Alvarez has a guy tracking her movements and establishing a pattern. If they can’t access the system by skimming information from the keystroke logger, they have a backup plan. She takes her work laptop with her to lunch. They’re working on infiltrating the Wi-Fi networks at the places she frequents to see if they can get it that way.”

“How?”

“Fake login screen. While she’s using the Wi-Fi they’ll download the package into her work computer.”

“Okay. Keep me posted.”

She stood, gathered her laptop, and walked over to give him a kiss. “You still leaving Monday?”

“I have to. I want to sit down with Hyacinth Lewis and go over all those old photo albums and other information with her.”

“Can’t another Prime do that?”

“They can, but Trevor said he has an Enforcer candidate he wants me to evaluate. A woman. An Alpha.”

Gillian cocked her head. “Really? A woman?”

“Yeah.”

She snorted. “Dewi will probably hate her.”

“On sight. She’s not a wolf, though, so maybe it’ll work. If I put her through her paces and she’s fit, I’m bringing her over.”

Her eyes widened. “Uh, you’re assigning a new Enforcer to the States without asking Dewi first? She’s definitely not going to like that.”

“Until we know what the hell is going on, and the major players involved, we have to treat everything as a related threat. And we need another female Enforcer besides Dewi.”

Gillian scowled. “*Peyton.*”

He was tempted to use his Prime on her to make her back down, but in this case, he knew he owed her at least a basic explanation. “We might have to set a trap one day. If it gets to that point, I want a female Enforcer besides Dewi that we can tap for the role, okay?”

“She *definitely* won’t like that.”

“Which is why we’re *not* telling her that part of it. I’m going to say Trevor asked me to bring her over and assign her to Tamsin to be her bodyguard as a personal favor, and that’s not exactly a lie.”

“It’s not exactly the truth, either.”

He returned to his desk. “Not like I’m happy about this but I’m sick of playing defense and getting nowhere. If we’re going to start playing offense I need my pieces in place now.”

Her phone buzzed in her back pocket and she fished it out and looked at the screen. “I need to take this. Love you.”

He nodded and she headed out as she answered, closing the door behind her.

No, he was absolutely certain Dewi wouldn't be happy about this plan.

Not at all.

Which was exactly why she couldn't know the truth about it yet.

After thinking about it, he picked up his phone, looked through his contacts, and made a call, drumming his fingers on the desk as he waited for it to connect.

“John? Hey, Peyton Bleacke... Yeah, I know. How are you? ... Great. Listen, this is an official call as Pack Alpha today. I'm going to need a rush job on an incoming visa. Woman name of Aisling Walsh, from the UK. Great. I'm going to text you Trevor Clarke's digits, and I need you to call him immediately when we end this call and get that ball rolling, please. He's expecting your call. ... Yes, thank you. Have a good one.” He texted him Trevor's info and then dropped his phone onto the desk.

No, Dewi was most definitely *not* going to be happy about this.

Unfortunately, in this case, he didn't care about her happiness.

He cared about her safety.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“WE DON’T TELL ’em just yet. In fact, we aren’t.”

Dewi stared at Badger. She’d hit him with that question as soon as he’d walked in the door. “*Whut?*”

It was early Saturday evening, and Badger had literally just returned from his trip to Georgia. Dewi had come home earlier because Duncan offered to stay over at the house in case they needed help with Bebe.

Dewi was feeling the pressure of the ticking clock because they now had less than forty-eight hours until Monday evening, when Lu’ana and Reggie would return to pick up Bebe.

And she’d wanted to plan strategy with Badger alone, without little ears able to overhear.

Or selected adult ears, in the case of Nami, whose nerves were absolutely frayed now.

“We don’t tell ’em just yet,” he said, walking past her with his messenger bag slung over his shoulder and wearing the same clothes he’d left in last night after taking a shower. “Ye got her back on two legs. Now Duncan and I can gently Prime her to want to stay that way, at least fer the next few days or so.”

She followed him toward the stairs. “What’s going on? What’d you find out in Georgia? I thought we had to tell them?”

“Because turns out it’s not so simple.”

“Why?”

“Lass, can I *please* to take a shower an’ change clothes? Then we’ll talk. Okay?” He looked back at her. “And if yer of the mind to wave a couple of steaks over the flames for me a few times, I wouldn’t say no. Ye know how I like ’em. It’ll get me talkin’ faster.”

Grumbling, Dewi returned to the kitchen. She and Ken had already eaten and he was currently working in the office on a project for Peyton.

She stayed out of that end of things. If she was supposed to know, they would tell her.

It worked out better for everyone that way.

Twenty minutes later, when Badger returned to the kitchen, Dewi had two steaks ready for him.

“You going to make me beg for it?” she snarked as he perched on one of the barstools at the counter and began eating.

He glanced at her. “Did Ken get those testers sent in?”

“Yeah. He said he dropped them in the pick-up box like you said and when he tracked them this morning, they were already picked up and in the system.”

Badger nodded. “Good. I sent Corrine’s, Davis’, and Imani’s from up there. Now I have to wait for DNA tests to come back to know for certain. It looks like Hamish Lewis is Imani’s birth father.”

Dewi blinked. “You mean Hamish *Lewis*? As in brother to Faegan mega-asshole-we’re-gonna-rip-his-head-off Lewis?”

Badger nodded. “One and the same.”

Dewi needed a minute to absorb that. “*What?*”

He eyed her. “Ye heard me. She told me herself. Got it on video.”

“Are you *sure*?”

“I speak English, lass. She said it. Plus, I saw it in her memories.”

“Are you sure she didn’t make it up accidentally based on your Prime powers influencing her?”

“She volunteered his name. Well, his first name. I hadn’t said it to her yet. But she volunteered that and that she felt certain he was Imani’s father.”

Dewi slumped against the opposite counter. “Holy shit. But... How could he walk away from a mate?”

“He didn’t. I don’t think they had a mate bond. They met when she was on a trip visiting cousins right before her wedding. Last fling for her. She left to return home the next morning and never saw him again. She didn’t tell him her real name or where she was from, and he was a stranger passin’ through town anyway. She dinnae realize at first she was bringin’ an extra present home wi’ her. Imani was born nine months to the day her parents were married, and Corrine said Imani looked just like her sisters when they were born, so not a single person batted an eye.”

“And they all thought Caleb was her father. Holy shit, if Imani’s father is an Alpha corgi shifter, and Lu’ana has a Prime Alpha wolf in her background, it completely explains why Bebe can shift. And it explains the mate bonds Imani and her kids all had.”

He slowly nodded. “And why Bebe’s a corgi shifter. Two generations back. Just like I said.”

“Do you think Hamish raped Imani’s mom?”

He shook his head. “No. She had fond memories of that interlude.”

Dewi considered the options. “We have no idea if he’s still alive or where he is if he is, do we?”

“Not the slightest. It’ll be my next task, once I have DNA confirmation.”

“I mean, if she’s saying it—”

“I want to make sure it’s *him*. Ken took Tamsin’s DNA, too. That’ll confirm if they’re related and it’s really Hamish Lewis. One step at a time.”

“Is this why you want to wait to tell Lu’ana and Reggie?”

Badger nodded. “Because if the DNA test comes back confirming it, it changes everything. Besides, there’s another issue at play.”

“I hate when you drag shit out, Badger.”

He grinned. “I know. That’s why I do it sometimes, sweetheart. To teach ye patience.”

“You suck.” She leaned over the counter. “I should have spiked your steak with a laxative.”

He cackled. “At my age, I’d welcome it, thank ye kindly.”

“Please?”

“*Ah*, now there’s the magic word. Pass me a Guinness first, would ye?”

“Wait... You said *two* generations back. Hamish would be *three* generations back from Bebe, wouldn’t he?”

Badger pointed at the fridge with an arched eyebrow.

She grabbed a bottle from the fridge and fought the urge to shake the crap out of it before turning and handing it to him. Then she remembered the church key and grabbed it from the front of the fridge and handed it over, too.

“Thank ye.” He popped the cap and took several swallows from the bottle. “I have one more thing, but ye need to see it fer yerself. It’ll answer yer question.”

“One more thing?” she snarked. “You haven’t dropped enough on me today?”

He pulled out his phone, called up a video, and handed the phone to Dewi.

She hit *play*. It was a video of an elderly Black woman and Dewi realized this was from Badger’s visit to Corrine. It was a short clip, and when she talked about finding the puppy in

Imani's bed, Dewi nearly dropped the phone. She hit pause and, jaw gaping, stared at Badger.

“Holy *shit!*” she whispered. “Way to bury the fucking lede, Badger!”

“Why are we whisperin’?” he whispered back.

She stuck her tongue out at him, rewound the video, and watched it again.

And a third time.

“Still don’t change, no matter how many times ye play it, Dewi.”

“Imani’s a shifter, too.” She set the phone on the counter and he took it back. “Two generations back.”

“Yep,” he said.

“Why didn’t you start with that headline?” she asked.

“I needed you to see the larger picture. Lots of threads tangled together.”

“Why the hell couldn’t you tell Imani was a shifter when you met her!”

“Fer starters, ye snarky thing, ye met her, too. I can ask the same question. As did Duncan. Secondly, if she only shifted the one time, and bein’ so young, it’s like as not she doesn’t even remember it, much less ever did it again. She’s, what, seventy?”

“Seventy-two, I think.”

“Okay, then. I wasn’t tryin’ to read her or sniff her when we first met at the party. We had no clue about this. Then later, I was too worried about Primin’ people so they didn’t remember the fight between the wee ones. If she only shifted the one time, seven decades ago, maybe we didn’t smell the shifter in her because it was so faint.

“Not to mention Tamsin was there. Imani isn’t a wolf shifter—she’s a *corgi* shifter. Our snoots are attenuated to Tamsin. Imani was huggin’ all over Tamsin all day. Anythin’ we thought we scented, our brains filed it away as bein’

Tamsin. If the DNA confirms it's Hamish, and he is Tamsin's uncle, the scent was similar enough for us not to notice any difference, especially when we weren't payin' attention."

Dewi wearily leaned back against the other counter again. "What do we do now?"

"I dunno. We need a long planning session with Peyton and Duncan and Trent. We're literally in unknown territory, even for our kind. Bebe's a shifter, Imani doesn't know she can shift, and Dania and her sisters might very well be shifters, too, but we don't know what kind yet. Shifter blood runs throughout this whole family and now we need to go through and evaluate everyone to see who else might have the abilities. But we can't do anythin' until I get the DNA test results back an' know what we're dealin' with."

"So the next step after that?" she asked.

"Startin' tomorrow mornin', after I've got some sleep in me, first I run by Leila and Earl's house early and get swabs from them and the girls and send them in for testing. I stopped by on my way back but they were out. I also need to get swabs from Davis Junior and Caleb and their wives and kids, and we'll need to come up with a way to subtly evaluate them. Meanwhile, I start lookin' for Hamish. Or traces of him. Figure out if he's still alive. I'll start in the St. Louis area. As soon as I receive test results, I'll upload them and run searches. Find out if Hamish has any other offspring, maybe under a different name'."

"We really can't just send Bebe home with them on Monday, can we?"

He nodded his head. "We can. Again, we'll Prime Lu'ana and Reggie to make sure that holds. That if something happens, they immediately call us and come over. They'll go home, go to sleep, bring her back in the morning, and go to work. There's not much risk."

"Unless Bebe shifts in a grocery store."

"We Prime them not to take Bebe anywhere except home and to bring her to us, for now. We also Prime Bebe to try to

keep her from shiftin' until we get a handle on this. I'm not fond of that option, though, because I don't want to impede her shiftin' abilities by dampening them this soon. Look what happened with Imani. And that was just from being scared by a spankin'."

"But she didn't even know she shifted. Did she? It sounds like she shifted in her sleep."

He shrugged. "Unknown. But the other reason I want to wait until I get test results is so I have the data right there in front of me to show them. Because this is gonna get tetchy. Emotionally."

"Yeah, Nami's fucked up about it, and she already knows about shifters."

Badger shook his head. "No, not in that way. Imani is gonna learn her mother slept with someone else. That she's not the biological sister of her siblings. That her entire existence, everything she's known, has been a lie. That's a very bleak moment in any person's life."

"Oh."

"Aye." He gravely nodded. "Because I want to make sure we handle this as delicately as possible. It can do unpredictable things to a person's psyche when their life is upended like that. She don't really know us. This is one of those situations where Priming her to accept it all isn't as simple as it looks."

"Just like we can't Prime Tamsin not to grieve."

"Exactly."

"Have you told Peyton yet?"

He nodded. "I called him when I left there."

"Why didn't you call me?"

He smiled. "Because sometimes I like seein' ye all flustered and whatnot." He laughed. "And it could hold until I showed ye the video in person. I wanted to watch yer face when ye did."

He reached across the counter and touched a spot in the middle of her forehead. “Ye get a little furrow, right there, just like yer mum did.”

He slid off the stool and gathered his plate and cutlery to wash them. “So forgive a raggedy ole’ wolf who wants to conjure up a friendly ghost every once in a while, eh?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Beck

BECK WORRIED that this whole situation with Bebe was taking a heavy toll on Nami. And there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it, either. Except to be there for her.

Late Sunday morning, after dropping Nami off so she could spend the day with everyone, he headed over to Dewi's, Joaquin riding with him since he'd driven Malyah over to the house and left his car there with her in case she needed it.

"What do you think they have to tell us?" Joaquin asked. "Because I get the feeling this is big. They couldn't tell us in text or over the phone? That's never good."

"Good, it's not just me then."

"Not just you." Joaquin drummed his fingers against his thighs. "Think they're firing us?" he joked.

Beck snorted. "We're not that lucky. We're too good at our jobs."

Joaquin fake-gasped. "Was that a compliment you just paid me?"

"Fuck you."

Joaquin laughed. "And *there* he is. Mr. Sunshine, everyone."

"I doubt it's news that Faegan Lewis' head was delivered to Trevor Clarke. Peyton would be mass-texting everyone that."

When they arrived, they found Ken, Dewi, and Badger already gathered in the living room. Beck relaxed, hoping this meant whatever it was, the news wasn't dire.

"Informal is not bad, correct?" Joaquin asked as he took a seat in one of the chairs.

"It's... complicated," Badger said. "Let's just handle it this way." He held a remote control and hit a button, bringing the 53" flatscreen TV on the wall to life. On it, a video was

queued and ready to play. “This is Imani’s mother, Corrine. Filmed it yesterday mornin’.”

As they watched, Beck knew his expression probably mirrored the shock he saw on Joaquin’s face. When it ended, they both turned to Badger.

“Holy shit!” Beck stared from Joaquin to Badger and back again, just to confirm what he’d watched.

Badger nodded. “Before ye even ask, I’ve got DNA tests being run as we speak. When I know, ye’ll know. But we’re not tellin’ anyone else this yet. Not even yer mates. I want proof first.”

“That looked pretty damned proofy to me,” Joaquin said.

“‘Proofy’?” Ken snarked.

“Hey, I can curse you out in two languages—”

“He’s *my* mate, Joaquin,” Dewi growled.

“But I’ll be polite in both of them considering who you are.”

Dewi snickered. “Ass.”

“As I was sayin’,” Badger said, glaring at everyone, “I want *proof*. And then we plan.”

Beck listened as Badger detailed exactly why this was trickier than it appeared on the surface.

He also couldn’t argue with his logic. “Yeah, I don’t think Nami and Malyah need to know this yet, either. Let’s wait until we have a plan. We don’t need to worry about Priming them every time they turn around just so no one picks up on the fact that there’s a problem.”

“My thinkin’ exactly,” Badger said. “Joaquin?”

Joaquin held up his hands. “Majority rules, but in this case I concur. Malyah’s not pregnant, and Nami is. I think we need to worry about keeping her calm and mitigating her stress.” He looked at Beck. “No offense intended, and I’m not trying to say I know your mate better than you, but she looked like shit this morning.”

Beck nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

Dewi scowled. “Do we need to call the doctor?”

“I don’t think so. I’ll talk her into going home early today and hopefully get her to take a nap.” He touched his hands together, a brief Namaste. “*Thank* you for getting Bebe to shift back. I can only imagine how stressed Nami would be right now if you hadn’t managed that.”

“Any other parenting tricks you might have forgotten about from having little sisters?” she lightly teased.

“I swear, I dropped the ball on that one. I forgot that Jacie did the same thing. Wanted so badly to shift that once she could she didn’t want to shift back. I don’t remember exactly how it went down, but Mom used something similar on her. That it was a shame Jacie wouldn’t be able to learn how to shift back faster than Sadie, I think. Because Sadie didn’t start shifting until she was like seven, I think, but once she did it was *BAM-BAM*, she could shift to wolf and back faster than any kid the adults had seen up until that point.”

“Oh!” Badger snapped his fingers. “That’s right! I remember that now!”

“Right? It was like the talk of the pack compound for weeks. I remember Charlie coming over himself to see it. Well, anyway, Mom used sibling rivalry on Jacie and then she was trying to shift back and forth faster than Sadie could.”

“Remember that trick,” Ken told Dewi.

“Oh, I will. Believe me.” She was about to say something else when her phone went off with a text alert.

And so did Ken’s.

And Badger’s.

And Joaquin’s.

And Beck’s.

And as they all shared a concerned glance and checked their phones, Beck’s stomach dropped. “Oh, shit!”



Nami

“You don’t have to do that, sis,” Malyah said. “Will you please let us help? You can supervise just as well sitting right there at the table.”

Nami stretched her back and looked at Bebe, who was sitting on the counter and helping mix the cookie dough. “Do you mind if Auntie Malyah helps you?”

Bebe waved at the chairs. “Take dat load off, Aunti Nami!”

Malyah, Nami, and Brianna all looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“Oookay, well I guess I been told,” Nami said as she made her way over to one of the chairs and sat.

Truth be told, she felt exhausted. She suspected her ankles were swollen, but she couldn’t see them to tell, and she honestly wasn’t certain she could go through the effort to prop them up without help.

Duncan walked in with his coffee mug, then stopped and backed up to look at Nami. “Are you okay?”

She forced a smile. “Just really tired.” Bebe now had her back to them, focused on helping Malyah. “*And worried about her,*” she silently mouthed, pointing at the toddler.

He nodded and continued on to the coffeemaker, setting up a new pod in the machine and then sitting next to her at the table while he waited for it to brew. “If you wish to go home, I believe we have it covered. I’ll be here.”

“Maybe when Beck comes back I might let him talk me into it.”

“*Wow, I know you’re tired, sis,*” Da’von said as he walked into the kitchen, smiling.

“Don’t you sass me, kiddo,” Nami said. “I’ll sic your wife on you.”

Brianna giggled where she stood at the counter on Bebe's other side. "I love you, honey," Brianna said to Da'von, "but I'm smart enough to know to side with Nami every time."

"Dat's right!" Bebe held her hand up for a high-five from her. "Team Auntie Nami!"

Nami smiled, halfheartedly pumping her fist in the air. "That's right."

"Why don't you let me help you out to the couch?" Duncan asked. "We can prop your feet up. Make you more comfortable."

She had half a second of thinking she'd protest that she was fine...then realized that was an utterly asinine reaction.

She *was* tired.

She nodded, holding a hand out to him as he stood.

It was the look on his face when he took her arm that worried her. "What? What's wrong?"

Duncan's other hand shot out and grabbed Da'von, who froze for a moment, almost as if listening to Duncan tell him something silently.

Then Da'von turned and ran out of the kitchen, grabbing his phone off the counter as he passed.

"What?" Nami asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Duncan said. "Everything's—"

Nami gasped as a pain hit and then...

She looked down. "I think my water just broke!"

Duncan smiled. "You're going into labor. Da'von's calling Dr. Collins and letting everyone know."



Beck

His paralysis broke. “I need to get back there!” He stood and bolted for the door, Joaquin on his heels.

“Let me drive, dude,” Joaquin said.

“No!”

“Give me your fucking keys, because I don’t want either of us to die today!” Joaquin said, practically snatching the key fob from Beck when he caught up with him at the front door.

“Let Joaquin drive!” Badger yelled from the living room doorway. “We’ll be along shortly.”

“Okay, fine!”

“Don’t let the rat bastard adjust your mirrors,” Dewi yelled. “It’ll take weeks to get them right again!”

Seconds later, they were out the front door and in Beck’s car. “I have to call Nami!” Beck grabbed his phone, fumbling it, dropping it between the seats, and finally fishing it out while Joaquin sped down the driveway toward the front gate.

It felt like forever before it was answered—by Malyah. “Hey, Beck! Guess what—”

“Is she okay? We’re on our way.”

“She’s okay. Her water just broke a few minutes ago and we already called Doc C. He’s fifteen minutes away.”

“We have to get her to the hospital.”

“Doc said to hold what we got and he’ll evaluate her as soon as he gets here,” Malyah said. In the background, he could hear Nami groaning. “Just be careful, okay?”

“Let me talk to her!”

“Lemme put it in speaker mode. Hold on.” Then she said, “Okay.”

“Baby, we’re coming. I’ll be right there.” It would take at least thirty minutes to drive over there, depending on traffic. Maybe longer with church traffic.

“Ooooh, I’m going to *kill* you, Dawson Beckett!” Nami screamed, then whined. “Please hurry, honey! I need you!”

Joaquin snickered. “Yep. She’s in labor.”

“We’re hurrying, baby!”

Beck stayed on the phone with her, while she alternately cursed his existence, threatened to serve his testicles fried with breading made from Old Bay Seasoning, begged for him to hurry, and told him she loved him more than her own left foot.

Or words to that effect.

Dr. Collin’s RV was already parked in the driveway when Joaquin slid to a stop in front of the house and Beck jumped out. He was almost to the front door when it opened and Duncan, carrying Nami, stepped out.

“Into the RV,” Duncan said.

“What? We need to get to the hospital!” Beck protested as he took her from Duncan.

Dr. Collins was right behind them. “No, son, this baby is coming *now*. *Right* now. As in, you’re going to be a father in the next fifteen minutes.”

“But she’s early!” Beck protested.

“She’s a shifter baby, Beck,” the doc said. “And you can argue with her about it after she gets here.”

They got Nami into the RV and onto the exam table there, where Beck and Duncan flanked her as Malyah crowded in, too, with her phone recording it all.

“Beck, you sonofabitch, if you so much as *show* me your penis again, I will *CUT IT OFF!*”

“I’m sorry, baby,” Beck said, kissing Nami’s forehead. “You can castrate me later, but let’s meet our daughter first.”

Malyah giggled. “This is gonna be goood.”

Nami panted and breathed through the next contraction as the doctor got things ready.

“I’m sorry, Beck,” Nami tearfully said. “I love you. I just want to rip your testicles off before we have the next couple of kids. Okay?”

Duncan laughed. “It’s okay, Nami. Louisa threatened to neuter me with all of our daughters. He’ll make it up to you.”

“Don’t you get my cooter on video!” Nami yelled at Malyah, before it devolved into another scream as a contraction hit.

“We’ll edit it out, sis. Don’t worry about it. I’m not live-streaming it. Just focus.”

“Beck,” Duncan said, and he looked over at him. The old shifter tipped his head toward Nami, his meaning clear.

Beck nodded so hard his head probably looked like one of those bobbleheads.

“Nami,” Duncan said, “do you want me to help you?”

“Oh, god, if you can make this pain go away I will GIVE YOU THIS BABY AND MY *WHOLE FUCKING UTERUS!*”

Duncan almost successfully suppressed his snort. “It’s okay, Nami.” He held her other hand. “Just think about breathing, and focus on Beck’s voice. It’s okay...”

Beck tried to remember the classes they’d all been taking, going with Tamsin and Dewi, and thank god for Malyah because she’d gone, too, for support, and remembered what to do.

Because Beck couldn’t remember a goddamned word of any of what they’d learned.

Between the doctor and Malyah coaching them, Beck got Nami breathing and time seemed to stop for a little bit.

“Okay, Nami,” the doc said. “Give me a big push.”

She screamed as she leaned forward, Beck holding her, his head pressed against hers. “Come on, baby, you can do it—”

Until a strong warbling cry filled the room and Nami's screams quickly turned to relieved sobs while Malyah let out a joyful cheer.

"Congratulations!" The doc said. "Your baby girl looks perfect. Just give me a moment." The doctor worked on the cord, had Beck cut it, and then their daughter was draped with a blanket and laying on Nami's chest as she laugh-sobbed.

Then again, so was Beck. Laugh-sobbing, that is.

And then it was just them and the doctor and their baby, and Beck didn't even know when that had happened.

"I love you so much, sweetheart," he told Nami.

"We...we have a baby!"

"We have a baby, baby!" He blinked back tears as he held Nami and reached around her to stroke their daughter's arm.

"She apparently wasn't going to wait," Dr. Collins said as he draped a sheet over Nami's legs, tucking it in around her waist. "And yes, she's perfect and full-term, for a shifter baby. Just fudge and say we goofed on the conception date when telling your clueless human friends and family so they don't question that she's full-term. Let me grab a newborn kit so I can get her cleaned up for you, okay?"

Beck nodded. "Okay." He pressed his forehead to Nami's. "I love you so much, baby."

She laughed, sniffing back tears. "I think I might have pooped on Duncan."

Beck burst out laughing. "I'll pay for his dry cleaning." He nuzzled her nose.

Dr. Collins also laughed. "Believe me, you are far from the first or last laboring mom to poop. But, here's some more good news—you didn't tear at all. Everything looks textbook perfect with you and your daughter. Have you picked out a name yet?"

Nami looked at Beck again and nodded.

“Then tell him, baby,” Beck said. “I told you, that’s up to you.”

She sniffled as she looked down at their daughter. “Tahlia Dellis Beckett,” she said. “After a woman I wish I could have met, and one I’m glad I did. But don’t tell anyone yet, please? I want to tell them first.”

Okay, now Beck really was crying as he kissed her. “That’s beautiful, sweetheart. It’s perfect.”

The doctor got the baby cleaned up and then left the three of them alone for a few minutes.

“She’s got your eyes, Dawson,” Nami whispered as she stared down into her cherubic face. “She’s gorgeous.”

“That’s because she’s beautiful like her momma. I’m going to need Joaquin’s help killing her boyfriends and hiding their bodies,” he playfully growled, making Nami laugh.

Nami looked into his eyes. “We have a baby.”

He smiled, kissing her. “We have a beautiful, perfect baby. And I love you so much. I’m sorry I wasn’t here when it started.”

“You were here for the important part.” She laughed. “It just happened so fast. Are Dewi and Badger here yet?”

“Want me to go check?”

She nodded. “Have them come in right now if they are. I want to tell them so we can tell everyone else.”

“Okay.”

He opened the RV door and, yep, Dewi and Badger stood right there, talking with Duncan. Beck waved the two of them in.

Dewi immediately teared up as she leaned in to kiss Nami’s forehead. “Congratulations! She’s gorgeous!”

Badger even sniffled and wiped at his eye. “She’s beautiful.”

“I wanted you two to know her name first,” Nami said. “Tahlia Dellis Beckett.”

They both froze. “Really?” Dewi asked, looking stunned.

Nami nodded. “Just like I told Doc, I wanted to name her after a woman I wish I could have met, and one I’m glad I did.”

Badger leaned in to hug her. “That’s beautiful,” he said, his voice thick and choked. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I love both of you so much. Badger, you’re the closest thing any of us have had to a father in our whole lives, and we love you. And Dewi, you’re another sister to me. Our baby wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for the two of you coming into my life and helping me meet my wolf man.”

“At least I get a little credit,” Beck joked.

“You’re not just family, Nami—you’re *pack*,” Dewi said. “And I know sometimes that comes with extra burdens, but the benefits far outweigh those. We’ve always got your back.”

“Can we start letting people come in to say hi?” Badger asked. “Bebe is going nuts wantin’ to meet her new cousin.”

Nami nodded. “Just a few minutes each, please?”

“Sure,” Dewi said. She and Badger left and Malyah and Da’von came in. It was only after Tamsin had come in to see the new one that Nami let out a horrified gasp. “Lu’ana and Reggie! Did anyone tell them?”

“Whoops,” Malyah said from where she’d come back in for another visit. “I’ll do go that right now. What do I tell her?”

Nami laughed. “Tell her I had a baby!”

“Wait,” Beck said. “I’ll do it.”

“Okay. Want me to bring you some water or snacks or something?” Malyah asked.

“Cold water, please!” Nami said.

They left them alone and Beck pulled out his phone. “Let me coordinate this with Badger, honey.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re going to ask why we aren’t in a hospital with her coming early. And they’re going to want to come over right away to see you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” He walked over to the door and waved Badger in, had a quick chat with him, and then made the call. When that was done—and of course Lu’ana wanted to leave the resort immediately and return—Beck turned to the doctor, who’d come back in to check on them. “Can we get a lift home in this jalopy, doc?”

He laughed. “Sure can.”

By that night, Lu’ana and Reggie had finally returned home—after Badger and Duncan convinced them not to pick up Bebe yet—and Beck and Nami were all alone at home with their little girl.

“We woke up without a baby this morning,” she said. “And we’re going to bed parents.”

Beck smiled where he sat on the edge of the bed next to Nami, where she held their sleeping baby. “Yeah.”

“I won’t really neuter you,” she said. “Maybe.”

He laughed. “I promise I’m going to treat you like a queen, baby. I’m going to change diapers and everything. You might have to teach me what to do, but I’m going to try to learn.”

“I wish Momma was here,” she said. “It’s not fair that man is still alive when she was a good person with people who loved her.”

“I know, baby.” He sighed. “But all we can do is live and remember her. And Mom and Dad and Lucie are on their way down now. I told them they can stay with us, but they said if you’d prefer, they’ll go to a hotel or Dewi’s.”

Nami shook her head. “I want them to stay here. They’re family and I hardly know them. We have the room.”

“Okay.” A few minutes later they had the baby safely tucked in the bassinet next to Nami’s side of the bed, and they were curled up together. “This is the new happiest day of my life, baby,” he said.

She pulled his arm tighter around her. “Mine, too.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Ken

THAT MONDAY MORNING, Badger looked over at Ken, who was riding in the truck with him on their way to Carl and Mateo's. Duncan and Dewi were staying behind at the house this morning. Martin, Stig, and Elliot were back in town, and she wanted to sit down with them and Joaquin, get a detailed debriefing about the resettlement process so far, and get them caught up. With Beck out of commission for the next several weeks, at least, she needed them here.

“What’s wrong? Yer awfully jumpy.”

“Besides the obvious?” Ken snarked.

“Yeah.”

There was sooo much wrong that Ken hadn't been authorized to tell Badger yet.

Peyton was, once again, winging his way halfway around the world to the UK on another visit.

That much Ken could reveal. “Peyton’s heading back to England today.”

“Fer how long?”

“I don't know. He said a few days. I guess with this latest news he wants to have another talk with Tamsin's mother. Don't say anything to anyone but Dewi.”

“Eh, I know why him leavin' would set Gillian's teeth on edge at this time, but why's it botherin' *you*?”

Because it means the weight of the pack drops on my shoulders.

But he couldn't say that.

He had a default answer he *could* use, however.

“Because I don't want to be put into a position, if something happens to him, that I'm not comfortable with. Official things to handle for him.”

“*Ah.*” The old shifter nodded. “Pack Alpha business.”

“Pack Alpha business,” Ken confirmed. “And why can’t we swap Beck for Carl? Nami could go over with Beck every day, we get another full-time Enforcer out in the field, Nami gets to spend time with family, and everyone’s a winner.”

He didn’t like the shadow that flitted across Badger’s features. “No options are off the table yet, lad. But let’s at least give the new parents a couple of weeks to nest before we drag him back into the office.”

They were almost to “the clubhouse,” to use Nami’s nickname for it, when Ken’s phone rang.

Gillian. His stomach tightened as he answered. “Hey. I’m in the car with Badger.”

She sounded chipper, which immediately relaxed him. “Oh! Put me on speaker, please.”

“Hold on.” He did. “Okay.”

“Hey, Badger!”

“Hey there, lass. How ye holdin’ up?”

“More like blowing up, but I’m doing okay. Listen, I just received word that the pack’s offer was accepted on that big piece of property two properties over from Dewi’s. Over two hundred acres.”

Ken’s relief hit him so sharply he nearly cried. “Yay! What’s that mean?”

She laughed. “It means I’ll handle the paperwork and send you details once it’s finalized. Badger, I’m also going to send you information I have for the two properties between them. Peyton asked me if you could try to locate the owners and convince them to sell? I haven’t been able to contact them yet. Looks like shell companies own them.”

“Eh, I’m a bit busy right now. Can I send Duncan and Ken to do it?”

“Like I’m *not* busy?” Ken snarked at him.

Because Badger had no clue how busy Ken *really* was.

Or why he was *really* opting to work several mornings a week over at “the clubhouse.”

“No rush on this Ken,” Gillian assured him. “But yes, please add this to your to-do list.”

“Sure,” Ken sighed. “Why not?”

“Thank you! Gotta go, another call coming in. Bye!”

Ken ended the call and made a note on his phone about the new task.

“I know yer working over here to stay offa Dewi’s radar,” Badger said.

Fuck. “Pack Alpha—”

“Business. Yeah, I know.” He cast Ken a glance. “I’m not askin’ what the business is. But if ye need me to run interference with Dewi about it, just ask me.”

“Thanks.”

They pulled in and parked. “All I *am* askin’,” Badger continued, “is that if ye get word there’s somethin’ dangerous, I’d like a heads-up. Deal?”

“Deal. Peyton gave me certain parameters.”

“Good lad.”

They climbed out, and as Ken grabbed his computer case and followed Badger inside, he hoped he’d never have to test the limits of those “parameters.”



Dewi

Monday afternoon, Ken and Badger had returned while Duncan went over to the clubhouse ahead of Lu'ana and Reggie picking up Bebe. So far, Bebe wasn't shifting anymore, but they wanted to monitor things as closely as possible. Duncan would reinforce their orders with Lu'ana and Reggie and Bebe because the couple would eat dinner there with everyone before returning home.

Ken had told Dewi about the property purchase and his assignment from Gillian, so he headed out to the pool house to work there since Dewi was still using the office.

When Badger appeared in the office doorway, Dewi waved him in.

Between the grim look on his face and the way he pulled the door shut behind him without asking first, she knew it didn't bode well.

"Do you have DNA results back?"

"Yep." He took his time settling in a chair, apparently to gather his thoughts. "We seem to have us a little...problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"I haven't talked to anyone else about this, either. Not even Peyton. Yer the first."

"What is it?"

He handed her the tablet in his hand. "I've received preliminary results on DNA tests. Nami was right. I have more potential siblings to run down."

"Sibl—" Her jaw snapped shut.

On the screen was displayed a chart, with Nami and her siblings on one side, as children of Beatrice Wycroft and Jarome Drexler.

On the other side, however...

“*Ten?*”

“That I know of,” Badger said.

“He certainly is a prolific motherfucker, ain’t he? No pun intended.”

Badger snorted. “I also searched through birth certificates. I had hits on the initial DNA searches to half-siblings of Nami and them and started tracking back from there. At least four different mothers, in addition to Beatrice Wycroft. Meaning there are likely more children out there, maybe without Jarome listed as the father on the birth certificates. Those are only the ones I’ve confirmed so far. Three of them had different fathers listed but there was DNA in the database that matched. I haven’t even made a deep dive yet. There could easily be more out there.”

Dewi slumped back in her chair. “Holy. Shit.”

“I know.”

She stared at the data. “Is it possible Jarome has an identical twin?”

“In this case? No. Besides, contrary to popular belief, it’s rare identical twins have the same DNA. An’ the birthdates of the offspring I’ve found correlate to conception dates that would fall durin’ periods when he was out of jail. Most of ’em were all born in or around Tampa.”

“What now?” she asked.

He heavily sighed. “I’ll have to start tracin’ back Jarome and all these mothers. See who’s in their pasts. And then spread out from there to see if there are more children elsewhere. Try to scrape together a more detailed family tree on his side. Because I’m also seeing traces of who I believe is an Alpha wolf in the paternal side of Nami and them’s DNA. My theory is there might be an Alpha somewhere in Jarome’s family tree within a couple of generations. I doubt it’s a Prime, unless he died or was killed. Or it was far enough back in history for the knowledge to be lost.”

“And we have no idea how many other half-siblings they have?”

Badger nodded. “Exactly.”

“Jeez, why is it the worst of humanity who insists on sowing wild oats?”

“Ye got me. But it’s not a problem fer only humans. Plenty of shite shifters breed like bunnies. Or, used to. Not as many now, of course.”

“Is that it?” She returned the tablet to him and he swiped into something else.

“Not even close. I’ve confirmed that Hamish Lewis—who we’re all assumin’ is the same one who is Faegan’s younger brother which everyone thought was dead—is Imani’s biological father. I used Tamsin’s DNA tests to dial it in.” He stared at the tablet in his hands. “I haven’t fully traced Corrine’s ancestors. And I still have to locate Hamish, or at least any other offspring of his. Even more interestin’ is what I learned about Dania’s parents. Dania’s mum Leila, Leila’s dad, Earl, and Reggie and his brothers are all descendants of the Prime Alpha wolf Cornith McTavish from various branches.

“Earl’s father and Reggie’s father are brothers, and the DNA agrees, so fortunately no shockers there like we have with Imani. I don’t know by how many generations all that goes back, or which branches exactly, because I’m still unravelling it.

“However, Earl’s mother’s family apparently descends from one of Cornith’s direct grandsons. And Earl’s wife Leila, her father’s family descends from a great-great-something grandson of Cornith. Meaning Dania and her little sisters basically closed a loop in that family tree. I’ll keep working on tracin’ ancestors to figure out if there are other wolves sprinkled in there.”

“Beatrice Wycroft Drexler was also a great-something granddaughter of Cornith,” Dewi noted. “And we know Bebe can shift, so it’s very possible Dania and her little sisters might be able to.”

“Perhaps. There’s another connection, however, that we really need to discuss.”

Dewi was starting to get a headache trying to keep all of this straight in her head. “Now what?”

“Ye know how ye like to joke about pack relations bein’ complicated? Well, it’s the Goddess’ own truth.”

“Why?”

“Hamish closely shares DNA with another person in this family.”

“*Please* just tell—”

“Ken.”

She stared at him. “Don’t screw with me, Badger. I’m not in the mood for it.”

“I’m not. The man we’re presuming is Hamish Lewis has to be the brother of Ken’s maternal grandmother. His birth grandmother, not who Ken thought his grandmother was. Yes, to be clear, I’m talking Faegan’s sister. I come to that conclusion based on the DNA results from Tamsin, Maisie Rue, Ken, and Imani.”

Now this was starting to give Dewi a headache. “So Ken and Reggie and Reggie’s brothers are cousins to each other *and* Tamsin, *and* are nephews of Faegan Lewis?”

Badger nodded. “Ken through the sister of Hamish and Faegan, Reggie and his brothers through Hamish, and Tamsin through Faegan. And don’t forget Imani. She and Tamsin and Ken’s mum are first cousins. Ken, Reggie and his brothers, and Tamsin are first cousins once removed to each other.”

She propped her elbows on the desk, her head in her hands. “Holy shitballs,” she groaned. “Why can’t this be easy?”

Badger continued. “That means yer baby will have a dose of corgi shifter and she’s a great-grand-niece of Faegan Lewis.” He looked a little confused. “Or maybe that makes her a first cousin something removed. Anyway, that’s still not all. I’m fairly certain Ken’s maternal grandfather—who mated with the unnamed sister of Hamish and Faegan—was a wolf shifter. Because that wolf’s DNA shows up in another wolf’s family line.”

She lifted her head enough to look at him. “Whose?”
Badger stared Dewi dead in the eyes. “Mine.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Dewi

DEWI TEMPORARILY FORGOT how to form words.

Badger forged onward. “I have reason to believe Ken’s maternal grandfather is one of my uncles on my mother’s side. If it’s who I think it is, then the man is a powerful Prime Alpha. Name of Callum.”

“Is?”

“No one knows what happened to Callum, or if he’s alive or dead. He disappeared long ago. My mum was one of eighteen and they mostly scattered to the winds before I was ever born. Not like they had social media back then. But this proves he was still alive at least up until nine months before Ken’s mother was born, when for centuries before that people thought he was dead. At least, that’s what the rumors said. Mebbe he wanted them to say that.”

“Why?” Dewi asked.

“Because these results mean Callum has to be the wolf who ran off with the younger sister of Faegan Lewis. Supposedly, Faegan killed both of them fer matin’ without permission. Mebbe he didn’t, though. At least, not before they had a baby. Because, obviously, they had a baby. Mebbe they faked their deaths to let people believe that.”

“Or Faegan flat-out lied because his ego couldn’t handle his sister defying him and running off. Or he lied to buff his ego to make people think he killed a Prime Alpha wolf,” Dewi said.

Badger nodded. “Could be.”

“Why wouldn’t a Prime Alpha wolf just kill Faegan Lewis for threatening them?” Dewi sat back. “Faegan’s a lucky asshole, not Iron Man.”

“Aye, that’s a good question, innit?” Badger noted. “Perhaps Faegan used somethin’ against them as leverage.”

“Or *someone*?” Dewi asked.

“We don’t know. That’s a feckin’ great hole ripped in the tapestry of the story, right? Maybe Faegan put a failsafe in place to kill someone one or the other of them loved. Or maybe the Prime was just tired of fightin’ and they ran. Perhaps she begged Faegan to accept a dowry and let them disappear and tell whatever story he wanted. Who knows?”

“Maybe they ran and ended up abandoning their baby on a church’s doorstep because Faegan’s men were almost on them and they were afraid the baby would be killed?” Dewi numbly asked. “Maybe Faegan *did* catch up with them and kill them after they did that. Or maybe Faegan’s men killed them but couldn’t stomach the thought of killing a baby, so they lied and said they killed it but instead left it there. Could have lied and said there wasn’t a baby at all.”

Badger slowly nodded. “Aye. Any of that’s possible. They’da known the babe wouldn’t be safe wi’ ’em as long as Faegan was alive.”

“But...that wolf was a Prime Alpha, you said.”

“Prime’s aren’t immune to death, Dew. Ye know this. Doesn’t take another Prime to kill ’em, neither. Just a well-placed bullet or blade or bolt from an arrow. Hell, a car wreck or plane crash. Lookin’ the wrong way before crossin’ the street. Long life and good healin’ abilities doesn’t mean death-proof.”

She thought about her father...and Endquist. “Yeah.” Dewi focused on breathing for a moment. “But...that could mean your uncle’s still alive, right?”

He slowly nodded. “Perhaps. But I find it difficult to believe a Prime Alpha with a claimed mate, and who’s alive, wouldn’t come back to try to find his infant child.”

“Being a Prime doesn’t mean he’s not an asshole,” Dewi said. “Case in point, Endquist.”

“The rumors spoke of the wolf having a mate bond with Faegan’s sister. Cunt or not, a Prime Alpha wolf with a mate bond would likely want his child. For his legacy, if nothing else.”

“Ooorrr the Prime Alpha wolf might have already been dead when she abandoned the baby,” Dewi said. “Which could be why she ran, because she was alone and afraid she couldn’t protect her.”

“Frankly, of all the most likely options, my money’s on that one.”

Badger didn’t speak again for a long moment as Dewi struggled to process all of the possibilities.

“So what happens,” she finally managed, “when you have the only known female Prime Alpha wolf make a baby with someone who’s one quarter corgi shifter and one quarter Prime Alpha wolf?”

“I dunno,” he gently said. “But I guess we’re gonna find out, ain’t we? That’s only three generations back on that side.”

“Did some witch put a curse on us?” she only half-joked.

He laughed. “Come on, you know that’s a bunch o’ bollocks, lass. No such thing.”

“Oh, my god, I’m going to need a spreadsheet to keep track of all this now.”

Badger chuckled and held up the tablet. “Yer in luck! On the one hand, technology sure makes it easier to keep track.”

“Yeah, but it makes it harder to conceal who and what we are,” Dewi said.

“I dunno. With AI now, someone grabs a video of something, we just claim it’s faked. That it’s AI. What’ll people want to believe, truly?”

“You have a point there.” She sat back in her office chair and unfocused her vision as she stared at the wall behind Badger.

She needed a moment to...process. “Worst. Birthday gift. Ever,” she teased.

He chuckled. “Could always be worse, lass. Ye know that.”

“True.”

He gave her another moment. “I think we need to start by telling Ken.”

“Why?”

He arched his good eyebrow at her. “Because he has a right to know.”

“I meant why start there?”

He sighed. “I will tell him for ye.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Let’s get him in here and get it over with.”

“Oh, thank god! I love you, Badger.”

“Just remember that next time yer swearin’ at me.”

“I hate keeping personal secrets from him, you know that.” She texted Ken to see if he could take a break and come into the office. A couple of minutes later, he joined them. “What’s up?” he asked.

She pointed to the chair next to Badger. “He has something to tell you.”

Badger shook his head. “Certainly not bashful about it, are ye?”

“Hey, you offered!”

“I know I did. Hold yer knickers.”

Badger spent the next ten minutes going over everything with Ken. Dewi kept her focus on him, studying his face—watching a mask drop over his features.

It was tempting to reach out with her mate bond but she knew this was too important to interrupt. If Ken needed her to, he knew how to reach out to her.

When Badger finished, he waited for a moment while Ken digested the info.



Ken

“This isn’t a joke, right?” Ken finally asked, looking first at Badger, then Dewi.

They both shook their heads.

“I had a suspicion about your grandparents for a while,” Badger said. “But I didn’t have proof until now, only rumors that might have fit.”

“So that makes you, what, my cousin?” Ken asked Badger.

“First cousin once removed. Yer mum and I are first cousins.” He grinned. “See? Yer really blood kin, not just adopted by marriage!”

Ken’s mind...whirled.

Holy. Shit.

“What about my dad’s family?” he finally asked.

“I will be unraveling that, too,” Badger said. “My priority right now is Hamish.”

“Because we don’t know if he’s alive and helping Faegan Lewis?” Ken asked.

“Correct.”

Now I know how Nami feels.

“This is...” Ken blew out a long breath. “This is going to take some adjusting to.”

Badger cleared his throat and stood. “I’ll give ye two some privacy.” He quickly let himself out of the office and closed the door behind him.

Dewi stood and rounded the desk to take the chair Badger had just vacated. Then she tentatively reached out and took his hand. “Are you okay?”

“I...don’t know. I mean, how do we know for sure Mom’s parents weren’t really her birth parents?”

“Well, mostly because they’re both dead from old age when shifters likely wouldn’t be. That, and Badger was able to trace their lineage. There’s not a hint of shifters in either family.”

“Poor Imani,” he said. “This is...”

He didn’t know what it was.

“*Wow.*” He turned his hand over so he could lace fingers with Dewi. “This is a *lot.*” With his free hand, he mimed an explosion. “Mind blown.” And...it was.

But it led him to another question. “If Mom was the daughter of two shifters, why didn’t she fight back? Why was that fucker able to kill her?”

“She very well might not have been a shifter,” Dewi gently said. “We don’t know.”

“And we never will,” he bitterly said.

“I’m sorry.”

He gave himself a moment to breathe. “It’s not your fault, Dewi. It’s just... Stuff I need to process.”

And considering what he’d been in the middle of doing when they’d asked if he had time, he really didn’t have the available brain cells to devote to...*this*.

The *only* reason he’d stopped to talk with them was he didn’t want them thinking what he was doing was so important that he couldn’t take a break.

“I know this is a stupid question,” she said, “but is there anything I can do for you right now?”

He nodded. “Actually, yeah.” He squeezed her hand. “Let’s call it a day, take showers, dress up, and go out to eat somewhere nice.”

“What?”

Ken didn’t want to give in to the nagging fear trying to tug at him, because he dang sure didn’t want Dewi trying to dig in and figure it out. “I want a date night with my beautiful wife. A normal, boring dinner made by normal, boring people.”

One eyebrow arched and he loved when she did that. “Boring dinner?”

“You know what I mean. Not the food is boring. I mean no distractions. No psychotic shifters, no surprise-cousin shifters, and no secret-baby shifters. Just you and me. Let’s call it an early birthday dinner.”

“*Hmm*. Where’d you have in mind?”

“Anywhere you want. Birthday girl’s choice.”

“You don’t think it’s too early to have dinner?”

“We’ll beat the rush.”

She smiled. “Okay. Meet you in the shower?”

“You go ahead and get yours first. I need to wrap up something first. I need about twenty minutes.”

She kissed him and headed out of the office. Ken waited until he heard her on the stairs before leaving the office and returning to the pool house.

He opened his laptop and logged in.

There, in the window, was the live feed from the remote laptop, everything being saved to a file in the cloud. He pulled the first batch of data, saved it to another file, and then ran it through the script he’d created to organize it.

Which left him a text file of readable information, including...

He breathed a sigh of relief. He didn’t enjoy doing stuff like this even though he knew it was necessary. More grey hat than black hat, in this case.

He pulled up his e-mail and copy/pasted the login url, username, and password into it, then sent it to Gillian.

Grabbing his work phone, he texted her.

Incoming e-mail. Let me know.

He shut down his laptop and had stood when his phone vibrated.

I'm in! You're a genius! Thanks!

He packed his laptop into his bag and locked the pool house door behind him.

The one thing that eased his conscience about all of this was knowing that by helping Gillian, he was helping to protect his family.

His daughter.

His *pack*.

And if there was anything the last year had taught him, it was that he would do *anything* to protect his pack.

Including kill.

So hacking into the computer system of a company run by the uncle of a notorious cartel leader he'd shot in his backyard?

Easy-peasy.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Dewi

IT WAS hard for her to believe that a year ago she wouldn't have been looking forward to a *date*.

With anyone.

And now? She was.

With her *mate*.

Mate date? Is that a thing? That could become a thing, right?

Letting the hot water pour over her, she closed her eyes and savored this. Yes, despite what most everyone else thought, she *was* trying to "take it easy."

She'd just finished drying off when Ken appeared in the bathroom. Dewi flashed him a smile. "Want me to come in and scrub your back?"

"You want to scrub my front, and if I let you do that right now, we'll never make it out to eat."

"Is that a bad thing?"

He wrapped his arms around her. "I really want to take you out to dinner," he said. "Just the two of us. Won't be long before our baby arrives. I want a little time alone with you so I can be selfish and have you to myself."

Goddammit, she felt tears stinging her eyes and hated that it was probably in no small part due to her pregnancy hormones. "That's sweet."

He slanted a gentle kiss across her lips. "I can't wait to meet our daughter, but when was the last time you and I went out to eat, alone, in a relaxing way?"

She thought about it.

And kept thinking.

A sexy smile quirked his lips. "Exactly."

“I suppose you want me to wear a dress?” she teased.

He slipped around behind her, wrapping his arms around her, cupping her breasts and making her eyes drop closed. “Well, if you wear a dress, baby,” he murmured in her ear, “it’ll be easier for me to tease you on the way home.”

Gulp! “Okay!” she squeaked, making him chuckle in that throaty way she loved when he was feeling the good kind of dominant.

She also felt his erection press against her butt through his shorts and he lightly brushed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples. “If you decide you don’t want to wear a bra, that wouldn’t hurt my feelings, either,” he rumbled in her ear.

Ohmygawd! She felt like she’d melt against him from the heat in his tone.

She tipped her head back against his shoulder and tried to grind against him, but he shifted his hips back. “No, baby,” he cooed, nipping the shell of her ear. “Not now. Later. If you’re good, I’ll even let you pick how you want to get it out of me.”

And with that, he released her.

Dewi stood there, her pulse pounding and her pussy throbbing as she panted. But when she turned he’d already backed away, evilly smiling and pointing at the doorway. “Go on, baby. Sooner we get some food in you, sooner we can come home and play before we fall asleep.”

At war within her, the urge to drag his handsome ass back to bed and the unfamiliar but not unpleasant desire to obey him and keep him smiling that playfully devious smile.

Only for him, though.

No one had ever made her feel like this. “Okay!”

She headed out into the bedroom, to their closet, while she heard the shower start.

Okay, he wants to play? We’ll play.

Except she didn’t have a lot of choices in the way of dresses.

For starters, she haaaaated wearing dresses even when she wasn't pregnant. So she didn't have a huge selection.

But...

She found a maxi sundress she'd purchased while they'd been on their little Valentine's Day beach weekend down at Manasota Key. He'd liked the way it looked on her and so she'd bought it just for that reason. Sort of tie-dyed in shades of turquoise and purple, with a smocked bodice and empire waist. Meaning she could get away without a bra.

She pulled it on and...

Yes! It was almost too snug around the tummy, and it was a little too casual for where she wanted to go, even for Florida.

But she was pregnant, so she knew she'd get a fashion pass.

Then she eyed one of Ken's button-up shirts, a long-sleeved black one, and she snagged it, neatly rolled the sleeves up to her elbows, and then rolled the hem up and under and tied the shirrtails under her boobs.

Ha! Perfect!

She wouldn't win any awards, but the black shirt did tone it down a little and made it look slightly less beachy. Again, she was obviously pregnant. Anyone who didn't like how she was dressed could kiss her ample ass.

She almost opted to eschew panties but then realized that might not be the wisest thing when an errant laugh could sometimes make her piddle. She donned a pair and tucked two clean extra pairs in her purse.

That was the only bad part about this outfit—no way to carry.

Unless...

No, bad *Dewi*. She could wear a shoulder holster harness under the shirt, but that would be uncomfortable in this outfit. And an ankle holster in this dress would likely be uncomfortable, possibly catch on something, and even though her clumsiness had mostly abated she didn't want to make

headlines “for pregnant lady accidentally shooting herself in the foot while peeing.”

Purse carry it is.

Her preferred method was a waistband holster, front or back when she wasn't pregnant, and of course in the back now that she was. Her usual working outfit, a cami top with an overshirt, allowed her to easily conceal it.

“I'll meet you downstairs,” she called into the bathroom. “I'm going to talk to Badger.”

“Okay.”

She headed down and found him in the kitchen getting ready to cook himself dinner.

He did a literal double-take. “Holy shite! Where's my Dewi, and what'd ye do to her?”

She flipped him off. “He made me an offer I couldn't refuse.”

“Food?”

“Of course food. And... Never mind,” she muttered.

He cackled. “I can connect the dots, thanks. Early birthday dinner?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, good, because I have something for ye.” He retrieved a small box from the pantry. “I was gonna have Ken get it fer ye if I wasn't back.”

She didn't take it yet. “Back? Where are you going?”

“To see if I can track down Hamish.”

“You found him?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. I found some things that match up with Corrine's memories. Obviously, there's no one named Hamish Lewis I can locate. He'd be a right silly twat if he hadn't changed his name. But I followed a few trails and want to see if my suspicions are correct. Obviously, I want to do this in person.”

She finally took the box and unwrapped it. Inside was a simple gold narrow cuff bracelet. Obviously old, from the small dings and scuffs on it, but it looked like it'd been lovingly hand-polished. And there were small symbols stamped in it.

He took it out and slipped it on her right wrist, holding her hand, staring at it for a moment and his eye shimmering with limned tears. "I put this on Tahlia's wrist when we wed," he hoarsely said. "It belonged to my mother, and she gave it to me for her. Tahlia always wanted to give it to our daughter, if we had one." He sniffled back tears. "And of course, we didn't. But yer my daughter, and I love ye. And yer about to become a mum. So I want ye to have this. And one day, pass it down to yer baby girl and tell her stories about me if I'm not around to do it for ye."

She threw her arms around him. "Don't talk like that—you've got plenty of years left in you and you know it."

"Yeah, well, seems like we've had a lot of lessons lately remindin' us it ain't guaranteed."

"Thank you. I love it, and I love you, too. And yeah, you are my dad."

He stepped back and took her hand again. "To be honest, I don't know if what I know is correct, and I haven't ever had the heart to research it. But this one here is supposed to be for protection. This one here for love. And this one for strength."

He smiled. "Now, I know ye won't want to wear it all the time. Ye won't hurt my feelings if ye don't. But it deserves to be passed on to someone I love, who I know will appreciate it and what it means and keep it in the family."

She was glad she hadn't put any makeup on, because she would have smudged it with her own tears. "Thank you. I promise I'll take good care of it."

"I know ye will. I thought about takin' it and havin' it duplicated in silver or stainless so ye'd have that to wear more often, but with this past year, things got away from us."

She laughed. "They did."

She perched on one of the stools while he set the box aside for her and continued his dinner preparations. “Anyway, I just realized I never answered yer question. I think he might have ended up near St. Louis, like he told her. I won’t be home when ye get back. Duncan’ll drive me to the airport tonight. My flight out is early tomorrow morning. I sent Ken an e-mail with the info.”

“If he’s alive? Hamish, I mean?”

“Well, that’s the rub, innit? I can’t make a plan beyond what’s in front of me. The next steps depend on what I find or not. I’ll keep you posted and I’ll take actions as warranted.”

“Why not send Jared?” That was their Enforcer based out of Chicago.

“He’s busy with resettlements and he’s not a Prime. With Stig and Elliot back, ye can spare me a few days. Don’t fash yerself; I won’t take any risks.” He cleared his throat. “Say, like stealin’ a scooter.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, making him cackle.

A few minutes later, she heard Ken on the stairs and when she turned to look, she nearly fell off the stool.

And not because she was clumsy.

“Holy...*wow!*”

Badger looked up and did another double-take. “Well look at ye! That’s right smart!”

Ken walked over to Dewi. The charcoal suit looked custom-tailored, slacks and blazer, and he wore a navy blue button-up under it that was nearly black. His black silk tie had a subtly embossed pattern on it with little paw prints that were only identifiable when viewed up close.

“So *there’s* my black shirt,” he teased.

“I don’t care what ye say, I’m takin’ a picture of the two of ye!” Badger said as he dug out his phone.

Dewi still tried to process how *haawwwwt* he looked. “When did you buy *this?*”

“Gillian ordered me to. Guilt-tripped me.” He smiled. “Said she knew damned well you’d shoot Peyton and Trent if they tried to hang a big picture on the wall of just us from our wedding day. So she wants a nice picture of us dressed up that she can have blown up to an 8x10, because her plans to get good dressy pics ahead of our wedding at the rehearsal dinner got borked thanks to the Segura cartel...And, also, apparently you never sent them prom pics?”

“Okay, *wow*,” Dewi snarked. “She’s nursed *that* grudge nearly ten years, huh?”

“Honey, I love your family, but I gotta tell you, y’all are kinda weird.”

She snickered. “Yeah, but we’re the good kind of weird.”

Badger had them stand in front of one of the living room walls and took several pics, including Ken and Dewi kissing.

Then Ken said, “Hey, Badger, get ready for this one.”

“Yep.”

“What?” Dewi asked.

He smiled and draped an arm around her shoulders. “Slide your arm around my waist, baby.”

She did, and Badger perfectly caught her huge “O” face of happy surprise when she realized Ken was wearing a 9mm in a holster in his waistband.

“So you can leave yours in the car. Right?” Ken said.

Dewi sighed. “Yeah, I suppose. But I need to run back upstairs for a second.”

“Why?”

She draped her arms around his neck and kissed him, then whispered in his ear, “You made me *splloosh* my panties.”

He nipped her ear. “Just think what I’ll do to you later, baby.”

Dewi giggled.



Ken

Okay, Gillian was right.

He'd asked her several weeks ago for ideas and he'd had his doubts about this.

Turns out his fierce Prime Alpha Enforcer mate *did* have a suit fetish.

Gillian had assured Ken that, as long as he bought what she told him to and had it professionally tailored, it would be a hit with Dewi. Plus, she'd sent him the tie, a custom-made one like Peyton and Trent and a few others in the pack also wore when they had occasion to. An inside joke of sorts, with the paw prints.

They headed to a nice steakhouse where Dewi could eat her fill of rare filet mignon while Ken enjoyed the salmon.

It was fun seeing this side of Dewi for a change, the sweetly carefree—as carefree as she ever was—and living-in-the-moment woman whose life could have gone a drastically different direction had things not worked out the way they did.

Had she not lost her parents.

Or had he not lost his.

He wanted to stay out of his head tonight, too, because he didn't want to think about the revelations Badger had dropped on him earlier.

No, he wasn't comfortable carrying the 9mm, but he was even less comfortable with Dewi carrying one in a purse, and the outfit he wanted her to wear tonight wasn't conducive to carrying. The trade-off was well worth it.

And him carrying meant she would relax and not be as hyper-aware.

He also remembered advice Nami, Asia, and Gillian had all given him out in Idaho before the wedding: walk like you own not just the suit, but the whole damned building you're in.

The appreciative glances he uncomfortably clocked from female patrons—and a couple of the male ones as well—when they'd walked in and were shown to their table apparently indicated the three ladies hadn't been wrong in their advice.

He'd spent most of his life hiding, shrinking. Trying not to be noticed so he wouldn't draw attention to himself from his step-brother or step-father. Later, from fellow students and then co-workers.

Obviously, there wasn't anything wrong with *him*. Call it a mate bond or whatever, Dewi had fallen for him the way he was, loved him, before she knew anything about his lineage.

And tonight her smile lit every beautiful inch of her face. Another reason Gillian had wanted pictures from tonight—pictures of Dewi *smiling*.

Because until recently, they had almost *none*. The best they'd been able to do while she was younger was to get her to stop scowling long enough to take something that didn't resemble a mugshot.

Even once, when she was three, by Badger dangling a raw steak just out of frame. She hadn't smiled but her eyes lit up and the photographer had called it close enough and snapped the pic.

While they were waiting for the check, Ken leaned in and crooked a finger at her so he could whisper in her ear.

“I'll take care of this. I want you to go into the bathroom, and when we get back to the car I'd better not find panties on that gorgeous ass of yours.”

Sure, he could have said it to her silently through their mate bond, but where was the fun in that when he wanted to be a little naughty with his wife and completely shut her brain down?

Her cheeks adorably flushed, but she smiled. “I think I can do that.”

“Thank you, baby.” He kissed her and sat back, waiting with an eyebrow arched while she stood so he could waggle his fingers at her, indicating the direction of the restrooms.

He thought she had to stop herself from running, which amused the *hell* out of him.

The waiter brought the check as well a large paper shopping bag holding the to-go desserts Dewi had ordered. “Your six cheesecakes, sir. They said they were already sliced or they would have given you a whole one.”

“Thanks, no problem.”

He was ready to go when she returned, the pink a little deeper in her cheeks now. He stood, the key fob in hand when she walked up. “Ready?”

She nodded, and he took her hand to lead her out, holding the bag in the other. When they reached the car he turned her around and pressed her against the passenger door of his SUV so she could feel how hard he was already.

And so he could run a hand down her side, over her hips. “If I say ‘good girl’ tonight will that make you hotter or get me castrated?”

She giggled. “Tonight? It’ll get you blown *and* laid.”

“Oooh, lucky me. Good girl, then, baby.” He slanted his lips over hers for a kiss before moving her so he could open the door and help her in.

He stowed the bag on the floor behind his seat and got in, starting it. Before she could fasten her seatbelt, he opened the glovebox and put his gun in there with hers. “Okay. Shirt off, baby. I want to have fun.”

She met his gaze as she removed the shirt and tossed it over the seat. He leaned in, skimming the hem of her dress up to her thighs so he could reach between them while kissing her.

Oooh, she was wet, all right. His fingers explored, circling her clit and dipping inside her, making her softly moan.

Then he made sure she was looking him in the eyes when he put his fingers to his lips and tasted, licking them clean. He glanced around, making sure they weren’t being watched, and pulled down the front of the dress enough to free her left

breast. Lowering his head to it, he grazed his teeth over her nipple while his hand returned to between her thighs, two fingers easily sliding in all the way to the knuckles.

He knew if he wasn't careful he could easily get carried away and lose himself in this beautifully simple pleasure, of bringing her pleasure.

In a perfect world, that's all they'd have to worry about—taking care of each other and their children.

But this wasn't a perfect world, and he wanted to cram as much perfection into small moments like this as he could.

Dewi grabbed his head, moaning now as he sucked her nipple into his mouth. Wouldn't be long before he wouldn't feel right about doing this with her until their baby was weaned, so he figured he'd better enjoy it while he could.

Soft whimpers escaped her as she tried to rock against his hand. He released her nipple and tugged the bodice back into position while glancing around.

Still safe.

“Look at me, baby,” he said.

She forced her eyes open and met his gaze.

“This has been one wild year. Back then, that night we met, you took control, didn't you?”

She nodded.

“Tonight, *I'm* in control.” He started finger-banging her. “So you'd better be my good girl and *come* for me, *right* now.”

The shock and ecstasy mixed on her face as she did nearly made him come right there. He hadn't been sure if that would work, but apparently it had because he felt her pussy clamping around his fingers as her orgasm washed through her.

Once he was certain she'd finished, he pulled his fingers from between her thighs and then put them to her lips. “Open.”

She did, eagerly sucking on them and licking her juices off them and making his cock throb with every pull of her mouth.

“Good girl,” he whispered. “God, I can’t believe how fucking lucky I am to have you.” He pulled his fingers free and kissed her, pressing her back against the seat, his tongue plunging into her mouth as hers met him stroke for stroke.

He pulled her hand onto his erection, so she could feel it through his slacks. “I’ve been hard most of the night, baby. I hope you have plans for it.”

She smiled, but it looked sweetly sated and come-drunk. “I do.”



Dewi

Boy, did she.

No, she'd never tolerated a "good girl" in bed before. Not before Ken.

So many firsts he'd experienced with her, but there were plenty of firsts she'd experienced with him, too.

Like coming on command. That was *definitely* a first no one had ever done with her before.

No one had ever been brave enough to try—not that she would have let them. Not even Beck.

Ken was the first person she'd dropped her walls with, gave herself to because she knew she owned him just as thoroughly as he owned her.

Her mate.

Her fucking *hot* geeky grazer mate, and holy shit, she'd deck anyone who ever tried to insult him.

She'd loved Beck but never been "in" love with him.

Thank goodness.

Because if Beck even felt a fraction for Nami of what Dewi felt for Ken, she knew he had to be much happier than when they were together.

Ken gave her one last kiss and then they headed home. He made her recline her seat so he could hike her dress up even more, and reach over and play with her breasts, which he'd once again freed from the bodice of the dress. By the time they finally reached home, Dewi was moments away from ripping the seatbelt out of the way and trying to ride him right there in the SUV.

"Come on, baby," he said, smiling. "Let's take this upstairs."

Duncan wasn't home yet from taking Badger to the airport, meaning they still had the house to themselves for a little while. Ken paused to put the cheesecake away in the fridge. Then he pulled Dewi into his arms, rucking her dress up again so he could squeeze her ass. "I think that needs to come all the way off now. I want to watch you walk up those stairs ahead of me."

She needed no further command to pull it up and off over her head. He smiled and turned her, lightly smacking her ass. "Let's go play, baby."

Ooooh, I love this side of him!

Because she knew it was only one facet of his personality and didn't mean he was a pushy, domineering asshole. If she wasn't into this, all she'd have to do was say so and he'd stop.

But she didn't want him to stop.

Right now, all she wanted to do was give him a show as she led the way upstairs to their bedroom.

She'd thought he'd start ripping his clothes off, but instead he made her bend over the edge of the bed, braced on her hands, so he could run his hands up and down her body, reach around her and play with her nipples, slide over the swell of her tummy and down, back between her thighs.

Dewi stuck her ass out, trying to grind against him, needing him. "Please!"

His throaty chuckle nearly made her come. "Please what, baby? What's the matter?" His finger found her nipples again, so goddamned sensitive now, and gently tweaked them. "Tell me what you want?"

"Please fuck me!"

"Sure. I can do that." She'd started to stand but he planted a hand in the middle of her shoulders. "Didn't say move, baby."

She heard him unzip, then felt him swipe the head of his cock up and down her, slicking himself, before he slowly slid home inside her.

“Yessss!” she hissed, her head drooping. Once she felt the fabric of his slacks rubbing against the backs of her thighs, her body gave a little shudder at how *good* this felt. How naughty.

How goddamned sexy.

He reached around her, one hand playing with her nipples and the other sliding between her thighs again. “Okay, baby. Let’s see if I can make you feel good again.”

Her body came unhinged, between the pleasure, the fullness of him inside her and able to go deeper at this angle, and her eyes dropped closed as she moaned.

Another chuckle. “Oooh, baby. Let’s do that again.” He didn’t stop, taking a languid thrust every so often, but using his hands to drive her back over the edge again. She didn’t realize she was fucking herself back onto his cock, her ass bouncing against him, until she started coming down from that one and he groaned.

“Baby, damn that feels so good having you come all over me like that.” He grabbed her by the hips and plowed her, and Dewi wasn’t sure if he or she was more surprised when she came again like that, her arms trembling at the force of her release, with him quickly joining her.

He didn’t pull out, instead bracing an arm alongside hers, feathering his lips down her spine. “Love you so much, baby.”

She let out a contented sigh and lifted her head, turning so she could kiss him. “Love you, too.”

“*Ahem!*” they heard from downstairs. “No offense, kids, and I hope I’m not interrupting, but can you please close your bedroom door so I can come upstairs?”

Duncan.

“Oh, shit!” Ken said, racing over to the door. “Sorry!” he called down. “All safe.” He closed the door and when he turned, she couldn’t help giggling again.

He still looked hot, even with his suit now ruffled and his cock hanging out.

She climbed up onto the bed and rolled onto her back, crooking a finger at him. Toeing off his shoes first, he then ditched the blazer and climbed up, his body caging hers as he smiled down at her.

“Happy birthday, baby,” he whispered, slanting his lips over hers again for another kiss. “And happy almost anniversary of our first meeting.”

She reached up, cupping his cheek. “Thank you. And happy anniversary.” She lifted her head to kiss him again.

“Was that okay?” he asked.

“What that *okay*? Are you *kidding*? That was fucking *amazing*! I might not be in the mood for that every time, but tonight? Yeah, that was *perfect*.”

She rolled him over and shoved his legs apart. “Seems like I told you that you’d get laid *and* blown.”

He pulled a pillow under his head. “I remember something about that.”

She went down on him, pulling his hands on to her head, encouraging him to take charge as she worshipped his cock.

But he didn’t force her, instead gathering her hair in his hands and caressing her as she quickly got him up a second time and brought him over with a gasping, shuddering moan when he spilled and she lapped up every drop.

Crawling up his body, she nestled in the crook of his shoulder, half-draped across him. “*Now* it’s a perfect night,” she said.

He laughed and shifted position to face her. “The most perfect ever.”

CHAPTER FORTY

BADGER

BADGER SPENT two days in St. Louis combing through newspaper archives, searching cemeteries, and studying maps and real estate records.

On the third morning, he set out from his hotel several hours before dawn, driving around the neighborhood where his target house was located. The neighborhood was full of older homes on larger lots, most surrounded by fences or walls, and with gates. Over the years the real estate value of this particular zip code had gone up substantially as monied residents left the city and spread out.

Not exactly a walkable community where he could easily blend in and poke his snout around on two legs during daylight hours without attracting attention.

Figures.

A few blocks from the house he located an older shopping center, a main building with several out-parcels, some businesses open that time of morning, some closed, including a 24/7 gym that was currently busy.

He parked there, left everything locked inside the car except the key fob, and quickly made his way to a thickly wooded swale at the edge of the parking lot. There, he stripped, tucked his clothes and the key fob up in the branches of a tree, and shifted.

It only took him a few minutes to run back to the house, where he sniffed around the edges of the fence before he found a gap he could wiggle under.

They didn't have any dogs that he could tell, and the grounds were wooded, not unkempt but like the owner wanted them left semi-wild when compared to the manicured lawns of the neighbors.

Interestin'.

He took three paces onto the property before he scented the shifter.

Gotcha.

Carefully, aware there might be motion-detector lights, he crept toward the house, listening, sniffing.

Just the one shifter then.

He also picked up faint human scents, like maybe landscapers, especially around the fence where the grass was kept trimmed about two feet from the fence.

There was a large in-ground pool just behind the house, and Badger settled into the deep cover under a thick bush to watch the back of the house for a few minutes and to search for security cameras or lights.

The occupant didn't have their curtains drawn. Badger spotted it a few minutes later when a light came on in the kitchen. An older man appeared, walking across the Badger's field of view in front of the window, but from the angle and brevity of the sight Badger couldn't positively confirm his identity.

After watching for another twenty minutes, Badger moved closer to the house, skirting around the pool. The scent of the shifter was much stronger now, especially at an outside table where there was also an ashtray that smelled like cigar ashes.

He circled the house and spotted one car parked in the long, winding driveway, just outside the garage. A new Mercedes, which made sense, now that Badger had the confirmation he needed.

Aware that sunrise was fast approaching, Badger retraced his steps and beat a hasty retreat back to his clothes, shifted, dressed, and returned to the rental car without being spotted.

Well that's that, then.

He sent a text to Peyton, who was boarding a flight back to the US in the next hour, and then looked up the dealership on his map app. He'd stop for breakfast first, then go wait for Hamish, hopefully beating him to work.

Badger had just pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant down the block from the dealership when his phone buzzed with a text from Peyton.

Proceed as you feel best. Full authority. Keep me posted.

Badger acknowledged it and then headed inside to eat.

An hour later, the city was coming alive with heavier traffic as Badger walked to the dealership, bypassing the front showroom to head straight into the service department.

Smiling, he shook hands with the first mechanic he encountered and in two minutes was standing in front of the dealership's manager, who with a little help from Badger's Prime powers heartily agreed to letting Badger into his boss' office so he could surprise his "old friend."

Sometimes, it's too feckin' easy.

That didn't mean Badger wasn't going to stay aware.

Badger closed all the blinds in the office and kept the lights off as he sat and waited. At 7:42, then the lock rattled and the door opened, Badger was up and ready, clamping a hand on the man's shoulder as he stepped in.

"Keep comin' in, there's a good lad," Badger said. "Quietly, if ye please. Just wanna chat with ye."

A wave of fear washed from the shifter but Badger eased the door shut, locking it before flipping on the lights. He took the man's laptop case from him and set it on the floor before searching him for weapons, finding none.

Hamish didn't look much older than he had in the picture Peyton sent him or in Corrine's memories. "Yer gonna sit behind yer desk, hands flat on top, and no one's gettin' hurt

today, I promise.” He followed the man around his desk, getting him seated before Badger took one of the chairs in front of the desk and sat himself.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Badger *tsked*. “Well now, it’s been a long time since ye’ve visited yer homeland, so ye might not be familiar with me. Name’s Badger Williams. Targhee Pack. Wolves. And before ye even ask, if ye couldn’t guess, I’m a Prime.”

The man blanched.

“Yer not in any trouble,” Badger added. “But there’s a situation with yer brother. First things first, I wanna confirm yer name is Hamish Lewis, yes? Yer real name, I mean.”

“Yes.”

“If ye don’t mind me asking, how’d ye come up with Earl Johnson?”

Hamish smirked. “I needed something that would easily blend in and make it harder to find my particular needle in a haystack. ‘John Smith’ was a little too on the nose.”

“Yes, well, I can see where that makes sense. Has yer older brother been in contact with ye?”

“Who, Faegan?” Badger nodded. “No! I faked my death to get away from him. He thinks I died in World War 1 in France. I didn’t want him to know I was alive. Why do you think I changed my name?”

“Good, good. An’ yer sister?”

“Bryn? I haven’t had any contact with her, either. Again, I wanted Faegan to think I was *dead*.” Now Badger heard the faintest traces of a Welsh accent that the man had obviously spent decades trying to eliminate from his voice. “How did you find me?”

“Had a little inside info. Don’t suppose you remember a one-night-stand you had with a woman named Alexis in New Hampshire about seventy-three years or so ago? Mighta been not long before ye went to Boston, if ye even ended up visitin’ there.”

The man's brows knit in confusion. "What?"

"You met her at her uncle's garage. Beautiful young Black woman, lighter skin. She was there visiting cousins, ye spent one night with her, and she disappeared the next day."

Recognition dawned. "Just tell me!"

Badger smiled, pulling out his phone and swiping into a picture he'd taken of Imani at Reggie's birthday party. "Congratulations, daddy. It's a girl."



WHEN HAMISH ENTERED THE US, he'd used the ID of the dead soldier he'd swapped dog tags and ID with while in the British military. The man had no family, so Hamish didn't feel guilty about the ruse. That man's name was Earl P. Johnson, so it'd been easy to fudge the immigration paperwork. Especially when he bribed the overworked clerk filling it out.

Although his friend, who he went to work for, still called him Hamish, and he'd obtained an ID in that name as well, just in case.

Less than a year after arriving in St. Louis, Hamish reverted to using Earl Johnson, Sr., because he realized Alexis wouldn't be following him. He married and divorced four human women without getting any of them pregnant. Three of them because he refused to get them pregnant, one of them because she cheated on him with their landscaper.

He never revealed his true nature to any of them because he never felt a mate bond with any of them. And about twenty-five years ago, he became his own son and started going by the name Earl Johnson, Jr., which led to a seamless transition when Senior "died" and Junior fully took over. Although Senior had not been actively involved in the daily operations at the dealership for several years at that point.

Late that afternoon, as they sat in Badger's rental car outside the assisted living facility in Atlanta after driving

straight there from the airport, Hamish stared at the building.

“I never dreamed she was still alive, much less had my baby,” Hamish said. “Hell, I can’t believe it’s been over seventy years since I saw her.”

“I want ye to follow my lead,” Badger cautioned. “When we get to her room, I need ye to stay quiet for a moment. She’s fragile, and I don’t want to shock her.”

“I understand.”

Badger led him inside and quickly repeated the same story he’d used during his first visit. Ten minutes later, they were standing in the doorway of Corrine’s room. She was sitting in the recliner and staring at the TV, which was playing a syndicated game show.

“Why is she up here in Atlanta and not closer to our daughter?” Hamish whispered to Badger.

“Two of her children still live in the area. And she has friends who come visit on the regular. Imani visits at least twice a month. Drives up for a weekend. She’s not being ignored, if that’s yer worry.” Badger motioned for Hamish to step inside and then closed the door behind them for privacy.

Corrine finally looked at them, faintly smiling.

Badger walked over to her and gently took her hand. “Corrine, I’m Rodney Williams. Ye might not remember me, but we spoke a brief while ago. I’m a friend of yers from church.” He gently sent Prime energy to her, reopening those memories, and her eyes widened.

“Yes! Rodney, I remember you. We talked about Hamish.” Now she seemed to really see Hamish standing there. “Oh, my goodness! You brought him to visit me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Badger said. He pointed for Hamish to drag a chair over and sit next to her. Badger took up a stance on her other side, so he could keep a hand on her shoulder while Hamish sat and took her hand in his.

“Hi there, Alexis,” Hamish teased, dropping his American accent. His Welsh burr drew a girlish giggle from her. “You

were a naughty thing, weren't you? Leaving without saying good-bye. Not even giving me your real name. Enough to make a boy worry he didn't show a girl a good time."

A faint blush rose in her cheeks. "I'm sorry about that. I was gettin' married."

He smiled. "I heard, Corrine. Congratulations. You know, I really did hope you'd come join me in St. Louis."

"That's awfully sweet of you but it wouldn't have worked out between us. And that's all right. I've had a good life. How about you?"

Badger spotted the shifter's wistful smile. "No complaints. I ended up opening my own dealerships, you know. Done pretty good."

"That's nice." She reached over and stroked his cheek. "I told Rodney about Imani. About finding a puppy in her bed."

Hamish's eyes grew too bright, tears limning them. "He told me. I'm sorry I wasn't there for both of you. I should have tried harder to find you. He told me about our great-granddaughter."

"Yes. Isn't that *somethin'*? Three grands with seven greats between 'em. They all good kids, too. Good daddies to their babies."

"I wish I'd been here for it all." He sniffled back tears.

"You must have a bunch of kids and grands of your own now."

Hamish shook his head, his tears finally spilling. "No, I never did. Never met the truly right woman to have kids with. No one ever compared to you. Not really. My biggest regret is letting you walk away that night."

Badger hated not being able to leave them alone but he didn't want Corrine's fragile state to deteriorate. After another few minutes, Badger also knew they needed to wrap things up and let Corrine rest ahead of dinner time.

"We're gonna go now, Corrine," Badger told her. "If ye want to remember what we talked about today, ye can. But ye

won't tell anyone else about it. All right?"

"All right." She smiled at them. "Thank you for visiting me today."

Hamish blinked back more tears and leaned in, kissing her. "Thank you for letting us visit."

She reached up and cupped his cheek again. "You gonna see go her, aren't you?"

"I want to, yes. She's my daughter. My only child. I want her in my life, if she'll have me."

"Do you think she's gonna hate me?"

Badger gently squeezed her shoulder again. "Now don't ye worry about that, Corrine. It's all fine, and no one's hatin' anyone. Mebbe think about takin' a short nap, because yer tired."

"Okay." She settled back in her recliner and promptly fell asleep.

Hamish stared at her for a moment, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. "How long do you think she has?"

Badger took a deep breath. "Dunno. She's frail, but healthy other than the Alzheimer's."

"If I'd claimed her as my mate, would it have slowed things?"

"Perhaps. But if ye didn't feel a mate bond with her, that wouldn't be very fair to either of ye now, would it?"

"I guess not." He stared at her for a long moment.

"And no, yer not claimin' her now, either. Talk about cruelty. There's no guarantee that would help her mind or her health. Just because yer feeling guilty doesn't mean ye have a right to decide somethin' like that for her. She can't consent in this state. Maybe even ten years ago I would've thought about lettin' ye, but not now. Do ye even love her?"

He stood and returned the chair to where he'd moved it from the table. "I feel guilty I wasn't there for them. I did

feel...something for her. I think we could've been happy together.”

“Well, had ye been, like as not there woulda been other issues to deal with beyond not havin’ a mate bond with her.” Badger arched an eyebrow at him. “Like mebbe yer brother? Wouldn’t be fair to make her cut off contact with her kin over fear of him trackin’ ye now, right?”

“True.”

They returned to the rental car, Badger not breaking the dark, swirling silence engulfing Hamish. Badger knew this had to be emotional for him and gave him a moment to process.

Finally, Hamish looked at Badger. “I want to be in their lives. That’s my daughter, my grandsons, my great-grandkids. I want to know them. They need me.”

“Well, Imani and Bebe definitely need ye.” He fastened his seatbelt. “We don’t yet know if anyone else is a shifter. Problem is, we don’t know how Imani will react to the news about any of this. She may not want ye in her life at all, and again, that’s her right. I can’t use Prime to overwhelm her and force her to love ye. And yer forgettin’ the ones who *really* need ye more than anyone else right now.”

He scowled. “Who?”

“Tamsin and her little one.” He pulled out of the parking lot and into traffic. It was just as easy to drive to Tampa rather than waiting for a flight tomorrow morning. They’d be there in under eight hours. He’d sent Ken an e-mail that he was returning, but no other details.

Like that he’d located Hamish and was bringing him, too.

“Right now,” Badger said, “Tamsin needs all the trusted loved ones she can close around her. Mebbe ye can’t turn the clock back and reclaim those lost years with Imani and Corrine, but ye can damn sure help Tamsin and Maisie Rue with their new life. She’s hurtin’ somethin’ fierce. Duncan and I weren’t even sure at first if we’d be able to keep her alive. I think she’s turned the corner now, but having someone like you to lean on? Actual blood family who gives a damn about

her? That will go a long way to giving her something to look forward to.”

Hamish nodded. “Of course. Anything I can do.”

“And then there’s Ken. He’s your nephew.” He started winding his way through streets, heading toward the Interstate. Traffic was heavy but once they made it south of the Atlanta metro area, it would taper off.

“Do we even know if they’re still alive?” Hamish asked. “Bryn and Callum?”

“We do not. My guess is this many years on, probably not. Then again, I been wrong before.”



BADGER HAD JUST PULLED over north of the state line for a gas stop when he received another text from Peyton.

Flying into Tampa 11:30pm. Can you pick me up?

I can, but I’m in Valdosta now, heading to Tampa. Got Hamish with me. Do ye mind hanging out at the airport? Or I could get Ken or Duncan.

Peyton quickly replied.

No, I want you, and don’t tell anyone I’m flying in except Hamish. Come straight there to pick me up. I’ll wait for you at the airport. Text me when you’re almost there and I’ll meet you curbside at arrivals.

Badger acknowledged it and slipped his phone into his pocket.

Long ago, he’d accepted not asking questions of his Pack Alpha in certain situations.

Like this.

If Peyton had a reason to keep his arrival secret, Badger certainly wouldn’t disobey a direct order from him.

After he pumped gas, Badger plugged in his phone's navigation app and they hit the road again. "We got a slight detour now."

"Where to?"

"Ye get to meet the Pack Alpha tonight. We're gonna pick Peyton up at the airport before we head to Dewi's."

"Why?"

Badger laughed, shrugging. "If I was supposed to know that, he'd a told me. And he didn't. So I guess we'll find out at the same time, won't we?"

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

THE NEXT MORNING, Dewi was having trouble sleeping. She awoke an hour before dawn and realized after lying there for at least thirty minutes that she wasn't going back to sleep.

That's when she finally processed that she smelled coffee.

Mmm. Coffee. Badger must be home.

Honestly, she'd collapsed early last night, so exhausted, and they could have re-enacted the Charge of the Light Brigade downstairs and she would have slept through it.

Ken was still sound asleep, so she eased herself out of bed—not gracefully but at least without piddling herself or waking him—and padded into the bathroom. Then she grabbed Ken's robe, pulled it on over the sleeping shirt she'd worn to bed, quietly let herself out of the bedroom, and headed downstairs. Instead of going to the kitchen, she went into the office first to grab her laptop. She could sit at the breakfast counter and go through e-mails and do some work.

She set the laptop on the counter and walked over to the large coffeemaker. The coffee was hot but the carafe looked like it was missing a couple of servings.

Badger must have already been into it.

Opening the cabinet...

Where's my damn mug?

She had a large, stainless thermal coffee mug she preferred to use, which held two regular cups of coffee and had a snap-on lid that meant less chances of her spilling it.

She looked in the dishwasher, just in case it was in there, but no.

Shit. Did I leave it in the car? It wasn't in the office—

That's when the woman appeared in the dining room doorway, looking down at her phone. In her other hand—

She's got my fucking coffee mug!

Dewi had already taken three angry steps toward the woman when a few delayed thoughts finished processing and dropped into her brain.

Strange woman.

In my house.

No gun on me.

It all processed at the same time she realized there was no way she could make it to the pantry or cabinet where she had hidden guns stashed, or back over to the knife drawer.

Unarmed it is.

“WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU AND WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING IN MY HOUSE?” Dewi screamed as she launched herself at the woman. If she got a hand on her she could Prime her and then—

The woman's head snapped up and, faster than Dewi had counted on, she spun away from Dewi, out of her grasp, the coffee mug flying at Dewi's head.

Dewi batted it away. “That's *my* goddamned coffee mug!” Dewi screamed as it landed somewhere behind her on the floor.

The stranger, who looked to be close to Dewi's age and had long, naturally red hair pulled back in a slightly messy braid, held her hands up as she backed away from Dewi.

“Whoa whoa whoa, Dewi, listen! I don't wanna hurt—”

Dewi let out an enraged howl and charged her again but the woman, who wasn't pregnant and who wore jeans instead

of a bathrobe that was getting in her way, managed to dart away from Dewi again.

“Just *listen* a minute, would ye? I’m—”

Ken thundered into the kitchen at that moment, naked, a 9mm in his hand. “What the *fuck*?”

Dewi grabbed the gun from him and aimed it at the woman. “Down on the fucking floor! *Now!*”

“Listen to me!” the woman said. “I’m—”

“DEWI, *STOP!*” a man’s voice roared, and she didn’t even have time to process who it was before she felt the force of the Prime order stop her in her tracks. Then a hand grabbed the gun, shoving it down, toward the floor.

Peyton.

“What the *fuck*? What the fuck are you doing here? Who the fuck is she?”

The woman had backed up, hands up. “I tried to tell her—”

“SHUT UP!” Peyton roared, pointing at the woman.

Dewi was then aware of Badger, Duncan, and—

“Who the fuck are *you*?” Dewi screamed at the strange man. She tried to turn but Peyton wouldn’t let go of the gun.

“Dewi, *freeze!*” Peyton ordered. He finally wrested the gun from her, hit the safety, and ejected the magazine and chambered round in what looked like almost one smooth movement. He gentled his tone. “They’re friendlies. Stand down.” He touched her shoulder. “Please!”

She felt him release her from his Prime hold. “What the fuck is going on?”

Peyton turned to the woman. “Please just stand there for a minute and let me tell her, okay?”

The stranger blew a stray strand of hair out of her face. “You’re not the one she almost shot over a feckin coffee mug! I’ve heard of wakin’ up grouchy but that’s just daft! Guess they’re right about Florida people being gun nuts.”

“What the hell’s going on?” Ken asked.

That’s when Dewi finally processed Ken was naked.

Apparently, the strange woman did, too. She smiled and perked up. “Oi, you’re a tasty snack, ain’tcha?” She grinned. “Bet yer a real ride!”

The growl erupted from Dewi’s throat and as she turned to launch herself at the stranger, Peyton grabbed her arm. “Dewi! *No!*”

“That’s my *fucking mate*, you cunt!” Dewi screamed at the woman.

She held up a hand. “Ah, sorry. My bad. Apologies. Didn’t see the rings at first, just the nice pecker.” She had an accent, maybe Irish?

But Dewi was too busy trying to break free of Peyton’s latest Prime order so she could disembowel her and play in her entrails to devote brain cells to identify her accent.

“Badger, Da, a little help here, please?” Peyton called. Then he pointed at the woman. “You are not helping.”

The woman started to answer and apparently thought better of it and instead shrugged.

Badger and Duncan stepped around the strange man and helped ease Dewi away from the strange woman.

“Short version,” Peyton said, “is Dewi, this is Aisling Walsh.” He tensed like he didn’t even want to say the next four words. “She’s your new Enforcer.”

That got her attention. “My new *what the fuck?* My new *Enforcer?* What in the actual *shit*, Peyton? Did I ask for another Enforcer? No. I most certainly did not.” She managed to point in Aisling’s direction but Badger and Duncan weren’t going to let her charge her again. “And I *damned* sure don’t want a woman who stole my coffee mug and is ogling my mate to be one of my Enforcers!”

“It didn’t have a name on it!” Aisling said. “And neither did yer man there. And, to be fair, he is starkers.”

Dewi nearly tripped trying to get the bathrobe off. Duncan finally helped her with it and handed it to Ken, who pulled it on.

Then Ken wrapped his arms around Dewi from behind. “Honey, *please*, let’s let Peyton talk, okay?”

Peyton returned the single round to the magazine, inserted it into the gun, laid it on the counter, and then took a deep breath. “By the way, Ken? Good reflexes,” Peyton said. “How you doing?”

“Thanks, and I’ve had better mornings. Thanks for the warning, by the way,” he snarked. “I thought you said you weren’t flying back until tomorrow?”

“Plans changed.” Peyton ran his hands through his hair. “Aisling, this is Dewi, your new boss and my little sister. Also head of the expanded Pack Council. This is her husband and mate, Ken. Now that you know who he is, I suggest you show a lot more respect, because he’s also in the chain of command over you. That’s Badger Williams and Duncan Lister—both of them over you in terms of hierarchy—and this, for everyone who doesn’t know yet, is Hamish Lewis.”

Okay, *that* got Dewi’s attention. She and Ken both turned and now Dewi had time to really *process* his appearance.

Yep, he looked like the picture, maybe a few years older.

“Holy shit!” she said.

Peyton pointed at the spilled coffee mug. “Someone please clean that up and make Dewi some coffee before she gets even more homicidal. Dewi, Aisling, follow me and please don’t kill each other.”

Dewi bared her teeth at the woman but followed Peyton as he led the way to the office, then indicated for both women to proceed. He stepped in after them and closed the door, rounding the desk, where he sat in Dewi’s chair. Dewi remained standing, and so did Aisling.

“Dewi, please let me explain,” he said. “Aisling comes highly recommended from Trevor Clarke. I tested her myself, and she’s good. Every bit as good as Beck or anyone else.”

“Still got bruises on my bruises,” Aisling muttered.

“Any of them on your fucking mouth?” Dewi quipped.

“Listen, pup. I’m old enough ta be yer mammy.”

“That’s not a ringing endorsement!” Dewi shouted back.

“Stop!” Peyton glared but kept going. “She’s going to start working with Tamsin. It looks like Tamsin will be here for quite a while. I’m going to expedite construction of new houses on the property we just closed on, so we can start consolidating our presence and close ranks.”

“We have Tamsin under control,” Dewi said. “There’s no room in the house for another person. Not with the nursery.”

“Brianna and Da’von can stay with Malyah and Joaquin for a couple of months. They live close by. I want Aisling to move into that house once Tamsin gets to know her better. Not right now, in a few weeks. She also needs Bebe, Dania, Laura, and Lucia to get to know her because she’s going to be their teacher. And—”

Dewi scoffed. “*Seriously?* You’re going to trust the woman who actively ogled my husband’s dick to teach those babies?”

“*And,*” Peyton tried again, “she’s going to be working with Imani, once we break the news to her. And Lu’ana and Reggie, because we need to see if Reggie can shift, too. Aisling’s an Alpha, and I’m convinced she can do the job.”

Dewi finally took the time to actually sniff the air. “She’s not a wolf. Or a corgi.”

“She’s an Irish Wolfhound.”

Dewi stared at him. “I’m sorry, she’s a *whut* now?”

“You heard me,” he said.

Dewi stared at her. “You’ve *got* to be kidding me.”

“Well, what’d you expect?” Aisling shot back. “An Irish Setter?”

“Well, actually, yeah,” Dewi said. “I kinda did. You’ve got the hair for it.” She looked at Peyton. “I need *wolves* for

Enforcers, Peyton.”

“Mateo’s a human,” he pointed out.

“And Mateo’s mated to an Alpha wolf *and* works *with* him.” Dewi shook her head. “I’m not running a dog kennel.”

“Lickarse!” Aisling snapped.

Dewi’s eyes widened. “Putá!”

Aisling stepped forward. “Gobshite!”

Dewi squared off with her. “Coño!”

“*Enough!*” Peyton roared, silencing both women. “You know what? I don’t give a fuck, flying or otherwise, if you two like each other. This isn’t how I’d hoped this introduction would go, but fuck it, we’re beyond that point now. Aisling, you’re assigned to Florida, and you *will* do what Dewi says. She’s your boss and the buck stops with her.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “You just Primed me!”

“Damned right I did.” His voice dropped into a growl. “Because I’m the *fucking* Pack Alpha.”

Dewi propped her fists on where she assumed her hips were. “*Ha!*”

Peyton turned on her. “And you *will* try to get along with her and treat her fairly!”

She realized what he did. “Motherfucker! Did you just Prime me, too?”

He smirked. “Perk of the rank, kiddo.” Amusement bled from his features. “This is too serious for me to wait you out, Dewi. I’m sorry. I *get* it; you two are going to be like gasoline and a burning road flare and you didn’t get off on the right foot with each other. Suck it up, as you like to tell people you have to deal with.” He looked at Aisling. “Please wait outside for a moment.”

She glared at both of them but stepped outside and shut the door behind her.

“Why am I even Head Enforcer if you’re going to overrule me like this?” Dewi asked.

“The only reason I’m overruling you is because these are extraordinary circumstances and I need you to understand that. Believe me, this isn’t my preferred way of handling things but Aisling has scented the fucker.”

“Faegan Lewis?”

“Exactly.”

Dewi glared. “Meaning she *lost* his trail, so how good a tracker can she be?”

Undeterred, he pressed on. “Plus she’s single, doesn’t have kids to worry about, and was the best choice of the available people to bring over. Trevor and Elaine like her. They’ve known her and her family for years. And she’s a woman, so hopefully Tamsin will feel comfortable with her. We need a woman to work with Imani, and the kids. You are going to be too busy with the baby to give Imani the time and focus she’ll really need, and while Tamsin is great with the kids we need someone with a little more backbone or Imani will run right over them, shifter or not. Tamsin’s an omega. And Aisling’s fifty-five. Meaning she’s older than Beck, believe it or not. Older than *me*. She’s seen things and she has valuable real-world skills that we might need that our people don’t have.”

“You sound like she’s going to be here long-term.”

“She is. I have information that Faegan might try to make his way to the US. If he does, I need someone to help protect Tamsin and the kids who’s actually scented the guy up close and personal, and you haven’t.”

“Uh, Tamsin has!”

“Yeah, and if Tamsin smells him it means you and your Enforcers have fucked up and let him get too goddamned close to her and her baby!”

She jabbed a finger at him. “Well, if you’d have let me go to the UK at the start of all this bullshit, and—”

“Dewi, *please*, stop.”

It wasn't a Prime order, but the weary desperation in Peyton's tone—something she'd never heard before, pulled her up short.

“What aren't you telling me? You want me to blindly follow orders but you know damned well that's not me and never has been. You wouldn't want a Head Enforcer who's like that, anyway. So cough it up, bro.”

“Someone is actively trying to sell information about shifters to a foreign entity to use them to develop bio-weapons. And there's a good chance they've already captured shifters and are actively experimenting on them.”

Dewi's eyes widened. “Holy shit,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“Who?” she asked.

“If we knew that don't you think I would have already mulched them and told you?”

“Oh. True.”

“The other thing is, like it or not, you're going to need a little time off after giving birth. Having one more Enforcer on hand isn't a bad thing.” He held up a hand when she started to argue. “You're not a goddamned superhero, Dew! And no one expects you to be. Would you let yourself be normal for five goddamned minutes, please? Most people are ecstatic to take time off after having a baby. You're acting like it's punishment! You are literally the only one being hard on yourself about this. No one will think less of you for taking a month or more off to recover.”

“A fucking *month*? No. *No* way. I don't have that kind of time!”

He rounded the desk to stand in front of her, his hands on her shoulders. “I'm not going to Prime you,” he said. “I'm asking you—no, *begging* you—as your brother, *please* take time off after the baby's born. Go easy on yourself. Let Ken and Badger and Da give you their opinions, and actually believe them when they tell you things, okay?”

“Why is this so important to you?”

“Because you’re my baby sister and I love you. Your position as Head Enforcer is safe. Not because of who you are, but because of how good you are at your job. And not a single damned person in this entire pack will begrudge you working behind a desk for a while. Instead of inventing things people aren’t thinking, much less saying, how about listening to your Pack Alpha, huh?”

“Do you plan to take time off from being Pack Alpha when your baby’s born?”

“Dewi, that’s not the same thing, and you know it. My job doesn’t stop because I’m a dad. It didn’t for Dad, and it didn’t for Duncan.”

“Really? Because my job doesn’t stop, either.”

“Yeah, but you have capable, qualified, trustworthy people who can fill in the gaps while you’re off your feet.” He smirked. “Unless you’re saying you want to step in as acting Pack Alpha while I take paternity leave and let Badger or someone fill in as Head Enforcer?”

She shook her head. “No fucking way. I already told you I don’t mind being the expanded pack council Alpha, but I don’t want the whole shebang. You and Trent get your asses busy and one of you make a Prime Alpha pup. I don’t want it.”

“Why?”

“Why?” She scoffed. “Because I don’t! I’d be stuck behind a desk most of the time doing boring, shitty paperwork. I have enough of that as it is.”

“By all rights, the next in line to rightfully be Pack Alpha is you. You’re my sister, and you’re a Prime.”

She shook her head again. “Nope. *Not. It.* Don’t want it, can’t make me. Da, or Badger, or any number of others would be better. I’m surprised you didn’t hand it over to Badger back then.”

“He didn’t want it, Dew. Dad was his best friend, and he was Dad’s second. But he knew he needed to focus on raising

you. Trent was oldest but took a knee because he wasn't a Prime."

"You could have raised me and appointed Badger Pack Alpha. You're a Prime."

He sighed. "Dewi, that's not how things worked out. But if you're so eager to decline the promotion, why do you think Badger would be eager to take it when he's already declined it?"

"Look, we're getting into the weeds with hypotheticals, dude. You're still a baby in shifter years. Practically a kid. You've got a lot of years ahead of you."

"So did Dad." Peyton perched on the edge of the desk. "If something ever happens to me, it should be you who takes over."

She fought the urge to growl. "I barely have a handle on the shit I have to do, okay? I feel stressed as fuck and terrified of screwing up and costing an innocent person their life. I have enough to deal with. I can't handle it magnified on a continental scale with logistics even more nightmarish than the ones I already deal with."

"And this is why we want you to be able to take time off so we can see you, Dewi." He sighed, looking haggard. "I want you and Ken to come visit. You can do your job from Idaho, okay? We have phones and video conferencing. And if Aisling's here, that's another set of hands, right?" He held her hands. "You're my little sister, and I love you, and would you *please* come visit us? We *miss* you."

"What about Tamsin and Nami and everyone?"

"They can come too! They don't have to stay as long as you if they don't want to. At least give us two weeks. Please? You all can even drive if you want to, and Hamish said you can stop over in St. Louis at his place. It's more than big enough."

"Why didn't you ask me first about Aisling?"

He took a breath. "Several reasons. Trevor asked me to evaluate her and if I found her skills more than adequate, to

bring her over to watch Tamsin. He knows her family and trusts her. And she scented Faegan, knows what he looks like. And I have to declare Pack Alpha business for some of it. There are moving pieces that I can't tell you about, and some that I won't tell you about. Not yet. I am giving you everything that you need to do your job, and you have to trust me when I say it's good enough for now. When I can tell you everything, I will. Or if situations change and you need more, I'll tell you then. But I have my reasons for not telling you everything. Those reasons have nothing to do with how good you are at your job and everything about I need to make sure to silo certain information in a way that keeps people safest."

She blinked. "Siloed?"

"Yeah. And the sooner you stop fighting me for every inch of damned ground and start accepting my word when I say your job is not in jeopardy, the easier *my* job will be. Please?"

She reached out to him to take her hand, and he did.

She spoke through their Prime connection. "*What's the real reason, Peyton? For her specifically, not the causes you can't tell me?*"

He hesitated before answering. "*She lost her father and two of her older brothers in the Troubles. She spent twenty years in the military over there. She's a crack marksman and skilled in hand-to-hand combat and guerrilla warfare techniques. She was an instructor, and we're going to need our pack members trained to defend themselves and the kids.*"

He hesitated and she waited him out. "*And she's an expert in making, deploying, and disarming improvised explosive devices.*"

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Ken

KEN CLEARED his throat when Peyton, Dewi, and Aisling disappeared into the office. “So. Coffee, anyone?”

Badger let out a weighty sigh, picked up the 9mm, and handed it to him. “Better go put this away, lad. And put some clothes on. We’ll clean up the coffee and get Dewi set up with her morning brew.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, Ken?” Badger said, and he turned to the old shifter. Badger nodded. “Damned good reflexes, lad. Ye come a long way from a year ago, aye?”

Ken hated the weight of the gun in his hand, but it no longer made him want to throw up when he handled one, either. “Yeah, I guess I have.”

By the time he returned to the kitchen, this time in sweatpants and a T-shirt, Badger and Duncan had more coffee brewing and had poured Ken a mug, fixed just like he liked.

And they’d washed Dewi’s mug—which was fortunately undamaged—and prepared her a cup of coffee. He’d noticed Aisling standing by the office door on his way back down but he hadn’t looked her way or even acknowledged her.

That was definitely a...weird sensation, having another woman making comments like that about him.

Not a good weird, either.

I’ll make sure to give her a wide berth.

He didn’t want Dewi to kill the woman, and from the wave of rage he’d sensed from Dewi, that’s exactly what she might have done had she got hold of Aisling.

Although, to be fair, she’d surprised Dewi, *before* coffee, *and* drinking out of Dewi’s coffee mug. That was three strikes against her right out of the gate.

Peyton had already warned Ken before he left the UK that he was bringing someone back to add to the Enforcer team specifically for Tamsin and the kids—and Imani—but he'd been short on details.

Hamish sat at the counter, also working on a mug of coffee.

Ken stood there, staring at him for a moment. “Ken,” he said, offering his hand.

The man wearily smiled and shook with him. “Hamish. Everyone else thinks I’m Earl, though, so if you hear me called that, that’s why.” He’d gone back to using an American accent.

“You’re my mother’s uncle.”

He nodded. “So Badger told me.” He leaned back in his seat. “I guess I have lots of relatives I didn’t know about. Including grandkids and great-grandkids. And before you ask, no, I didn’t know Corrine was pregnant. And I feel terrible about it. But I would also like to get to know you, if you wouldn’t mind?”

“No, I don’t mind. I have a feeling things will be even more hectic than usual around here for a few weeks while the new normal shakes out.” He rounded the counter and walked over to Badger, holding his hand out.

Always fast on the uptake, Badger held hands with him. “*Are we absolutely sure about that Aisling woman?*” Ken asked.

Badger smiled. “*She’s a little rough around the edges, but she’s fifty-five, a combat veteran, and I think Dewi will warm up to her. Eventually. This was not the ideal meeting.*”

“*Gee, ya think?*”

“*Well, to be fair, ye coulda not come down stark nekkid.*”

“*I wasn’t thinking about being naked when I heard Dewi screaming.*”

Badger chuckled. “*Again, kind of a whole reversal of how ye got together, eh? She had to rescue ye from Beck, and now*

ye came to her rescue. Good on ya, lad.”



Dewi

Peyton called Aisling back into the office. “Let’s please start over,” he said. “Dewi Bleacke-Ethelbert, please meet Aisling Walsh.”

Aisling nodded and held out her hand. “Dia duit!”

Dewi had started to reach to shake her hand but stopped. “Did you just fucking call me a witch?”

“What? Are ye daft? No! I—”

“Dewi,” Peyton wearily said. “It’s an Irish greeting.”

“I *heard* her call me a witch with my *own* goddamned ears, Peyton!”

“Badger! Duncan!” he screamed.

Seconds later, the men appeared in the doorway.

He pointed at them. “Aisling, say it to them, please? Because Dewi’s not going to believe me.”

Aisling looked at them. “Dia duit!”

Badger and Duncan looked at each other in confusion. “Okay,” Badger said. “What’s the problem, then?”

“Tell Dewi what she said,” Peyton told him.

“She said *hello*. My Gaelic’s rusty, and she’s got an Irish accent, but that’s what I heard.”

Duncan nodded. “Same.”

Dewi’s face heated. “It sounded like she called me a witch.”

Duncan and Badger looked at each other and burst into laughter. “You didn’t teach her any Gaelic, did you?” Duncan asked Badger.

“*Gaelic*? I was lucky to teach her *manners*!”

“You. All. *Suck*.” Dewi pushed through them and stomped upstairs, slamming the bedroom door shut behind her.

Then she sideways flopped onto the bed, grabbed a pillow...

And *screamed* into it.

“Dewi—”

“AaaahhhHHHHHH!” she screamed, flopping over at Ken’s voice, where he now stood in the closet doorway. Then she fell back, laughing...

Except then she realized she was sobbing in Ken’s arms, because he’d crawled into bed with her and was now holding her.

About ten minutes later she lay there, blowing her nose on his bathrobe and finally able to speak again.

“What the fuck is wrong with me?” she asked.

He nuzzled her head, something he’d been doing a lot of while he patiently held her. “You woke up exhausted, too early, with no coffee. Some strange woman in our house who sounds like an escapee from the set of *Derry Girls* scared you and threw your own coffee mug at you, I showed up naked with a gun and she catcalled me, and then your mean old big brother wouldn’t let you shoot or disembowel her. And you’re tired of being pregnant.” He kissed her forehead. “That cover the bases?”

She sniffled. “Yeah. *And* he’s forcing me to hire her.”

“I think he already hired her, sweetheart.” *Nuzzle nuzzle nuzzle*. “And I’m not saying you aren’t justified in feeling upset over that, but murdering her is a little overkill. No pun intended.”

That got a snort out of her. “Do you have your phone?”

He reached over and plucked it from the nightstand.

“Can you please look up ‘hello’ in Gaelic?”

“Irish or Scottish?”

She glared at him. “Am I the only one in this house who doesn’t know Gaelic?”

“I had a lonely childhood and a good cable package. I watched a *lot* of BBC America.” Still, he pulled up a video and showed her.

“*Huh.*” She grumbled. “Okay then. I owe her an apology, I suppose. About that, at least. Not apologizing for her being in my house and getting attacked when she had *my* coffee mug.”

“*And* made a pass at your man.”

“That’s *right!* I—” She stared at him, at the adorable smirk curving his lips, and then took a breath.

Held it.

Let it out.

“I’m *so* tired,” she whispered.

“I know, baby.” He tucked her hair behind her ears and then cupped her face in his hands. “I will go get your coffee, and your laptop, and make you a bagel with cream cheese. I’ll bring it up here, and we’ll snuggle for a little while and let you regain your center, and then we’ll respawn the morning from the last save point and try again. Okay?”

“I love you.”

“I know.” He smiled, and she finally felt like laughing for real with him.

He pressed a kiss to the center of her forehead.

“Sorry I blew my nose on your bathrobe.” It’d been laying in the middle of the bed.

“Hey, it’s laundry day, so no harm, no foul.”



NINETY MINUTES LATER, after a shower and getting dressed and with a second cup of coffee, the last of the cheesecake, two bagels with cream cheese, and six pieces of thick-sliced applewood smoked bacon in her, Dewi returned downstairs.

Everyone else—now with Beck, Joaquin, Martin, Stig, and Elliot, present—were gathered around the dining room table, and they all went silent.

She looked at them. “You didn’t need to bring in this many reinforcements to keep me from killing her,” she snarked at Peyton.

He smiled from where he sat at the head of the table. Only now did she realize how utterly exhausted he looked, too. “I wanted to hedge my bets, kiddo.” He stood and opened his arms to her and she let him pull her in for a long hug. “I’m sorry I didn’t warn you. It’s a long story, I haven’t slept in forty-eight hours, and happy almost-birthday and -anniversary to you. And Ken.”

“Did you remember or did Badger tell you?”

He laughed. “I remembered your birthday. I didn’t remember the almost-anniversary date.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too, Dewi.”

She took a deep breath and rounded the table, where Aisling warily stood.

Then Dewi held out her hand. “Hi. I’m Dewi. I don’t know a single word of fucking Gaelic.”

Aisling smiled and shook with her. Now that Dewi was looking closely at her and not trying to kill her, she realized the woman also looked exhausted. “Aisling Walsh. And don’t worry—I can teach ye.”

It turned out Peyton and Aisling had only waited up to speak to Dewi. Then Peyton took a guest room upstairs while Aisling headed out to the pool house to collapse and catch up on their sleep.

Badger and Ken already had a list of items to check off and arrange for Aisling—work phone, vehicle, and other items.

Duncan finally took a long look at Dewi and then pointed. “You. Upstairs. Nap. Don’t make me Prime you.”

She started to argue, then decided against it. “Yeah. Thanks.”

Ken followed her, snuggling with her in bed. “Go to sleep, honey. I’ll wake you up if we need you.”

“Okay...”

She woke up in mid-afternoon, had lunch, worked for about fifteen minutes on her laptop, and then fell asleep again sitting up in bed.

What the hell is wrong with me?

She did make it downstairs for dinner, and to discuss some business with Peyton, but then she was yawning so much he finally ordered her back to bed and she was so exhausted she didn’t even feel irritated by it.

Around 4:30 the next morning, Dewi awoke with her bladder feeling like it was going to explode.

Dammit.

Ken lay sound asleep next to her and the last thing she wanted to do was wake him up by wallowing around like a stranded manatee in her attempts to get out of bed.

Carefully, she managed to ease her legs around and over the edge of the bed, slowly scooting herself until her feet finally touched the floor.

Ahh.

Now she could roll herself over and push up with her arms.

And I didn’t even wet myself.

#winning

By this time, however, she was wide awake.

Finally caught up on my sleep. Yay!

Once she finished in the bathroom she grabbed Ken’s bathrobe and pulled it on over her T-shirt and headed downstairs.

Might as well eat something.

Even though she wasn't exactly hungry yet, she knew she would be soon.

Besides, she was feeling grumpy.

Grumpier than usual.

Even for her.

And achey and just...miserable.

And I've got approximately three-to-six more weeks of this bullshit. That was if she didn't go full term.

More if she did.

She rested a hand on her baby mountain as she used the other hand to reach for the stair railing.

No offense, little one, but I'm done with this being pregnant shit. Come whenever you're ready.

That's when a pain hit her, almost driving her to her knees. Gasping, she stumbled her way back to the kitchen where she grabbed the counter for support, and...

She looked down. *Oh, shit.*

Her first gasp was barely audible. The second was a little louder. Then the pain abated and she was able to draw in a full breath. "KEEENNN!"

Upstairs, she heard noises, and then Ken was there—naked and a gun in his hand—

And she started howling with laughter until the next pain hit her and she would have hit her knees if Ken hadn't set the gun down and helped her sit right there on the floor.

"Dr. Collins," she breathed. "Baby." She pointed at him. "Clothes."

He looked down, realized what she meant, and laughed. "Let me help you up and—"

"No. Call. *Now.*"

Ken grabbed the gun and started running for the stairs. "Badger! Duncan! Dewi's in labor!" By this time, the others had emerged and Aisling was the first one into the kitchen.

“Aw, feckin hell, hon.” She knelt next to Dewi, supporting her. “Just breathe.” She started doing the exercises with her.

“You...don’t have...kids.”

She grinned. “No, but I got twenty-one nieces and nephews between my brothers and sister because they apparently think we’re a good Catholic family, even though ain’t none of us been inside a church in decades except for weddings and funerals. I learned a few things.”

Dewi was so focused...

She didn’t even care Aisling was there. But then Ken returned—in shorts and a T-shirt and without the gun—and Badger, Duncan, Peyton—

Dr. Collins soon showed up and Peyton carried Dewi upstairs, while Ken and Badger and everyone set up what they’d prepared for a home birth, and then Ken focused on Dewi. The next few hours were a blur of pain and pushing, Peyton helping out with her pain, and filming for them, and in the end it was Ken on one side of her and Peyton on the other holding her hands as she gave that last push and then—

A little cry rang out through the room, making Dewi sob with relief while Ken kissed her.

“Congratulations,” Dr. Collins said. “Ken, want to cut the cord?”



Ken

He nodded and took the scissors, snipping where instructed. And then the doctor placed her on Dewi's chest and draped a light blanket over her while Ken kept blinking back tears.

Their baby.

Their daughter.

"She's gorgeous, Dewi," Peyton said. "You want me to duck out?"

"No, if Dewi's okay with it."

She laugh-sobbed as she held the baby. "Just don't look down there while Doc finishes whatever he's doing."

He laughed. "I'm not even looking down there when Gillian has our baby. Damn sure not looking at yours, sis."

The doctor got the baby cleaned up and checked over, pronounced her perfect, and then he and Peyton did leave them alone for a little bit.

"Well?" Dewi said to Ken. "Thoughts?"

"About what?" he asked. He couldn't pull his gaze from the baby's face. She was asleep in Dewi's arms, and gorgeous, and he felt like his heart might explode, it felt so full right now.

"Her name."

"I told you it's up to you," he insisted.

"And I told you this is one time I'm not making a unilateral decision."

"I like Lyssa Louise," he said.

"Then I think we have a name for the doc to put on her birth certificate," she said.

He reached over and stroked the baby's hand with his finger, smiling when her fingers curled around his. "She's

beautiful and perfect. Like you.”

“Well, she’s a prima donna, coming this early.”

They heard a knock. “Come in,” Dewi said.

Duncan’s head peeked through. “Is it okay?”

“Yeah. You and Badger and Peyton.”

They came in, crowding around the baby. “She’s gorgeous,” Peyton said. “What’s her name?”

“Lyssa Louise Bleacke-Ethelbert.”

“That’s beautiful,” Duncan said, his eyes tearing up as Badger clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s perfect.”

Many of their friends—adopted family—all stopped by to visit: Nami, Beck, Malyah, Joaquin, Da’von, Brianna. Tamsin stayed back at the house with Maisie, Bebe, and the other kids, with Carl and Mateo staying there on Dewi’s orders.

The evening finally came and it was once again just Dewi and Ken and the baby in their bedroom. “You did it, sweetheart,” he said.

“*We* did it,” she said, smiling. “Easy peasy.”

“So what’s the opposite of ‘easy peasy lemon squeezy’?” Ken asked.

He watched the baby nurse, fascinated that the abstract of becoming a dad had finally become concrete, real. After what felt like years and yet yesterday of knowing Dewi, and then her pregnancy—this was their new life and he couldn’t wait to see what happened next.

She shrugged. “I dunno. Stressed depressed lemon zest?—*oooh.*”

“What?”

She sighed. “Yeah, Joaquin is right to tease me.”

“Why?”

“Because you can zest a lemon, but you can’t zest a chicken.”

“Well, you *can*,” he said, “but the chicken probably won’t enjoy it. Not unless it’s kinky.”

Now, he realized Dewi’s laughter was the second-best sound in the world.

The first was their daughter’s first cry as she added to their family.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

PEYTON STAYED until the day after Dewi's birthday. With normal Pack business still going on, and Dewi trying to actually, ya know, take it *easy*, it wasn't until then that Aisling and Hamish finally went over to "the clubhouse" to meet Tamsin and Carl and Mateo and everyone else that they hadn't met yet. Badger, Ken, Duncan, and the others were either over at Tamsin's, or running errands.

Dewi was alone at the house with the baby. Dewi had just finished nursing Lyssa and was sitting behind her desk, because the baby had fallen asleep and Dewi took that opportunity to read a few emails before she headed back upstairs to take herself a nap.

Honestly? She was relishing the quiet. She didn't realize how much she'd needed it until she had it once again. Time alone helped her recenter herself, recharge.

And, yay! She could see her feet again!

Then she heard the gate chime on the intercom and didn't recognize it, at first, until she realized it was Aisling.

The woman was growing on Dewi, now that Dewi was able to get to know her without trying to kill her and realized no, the older woman had no designs on Ken at all. Because, for starters, Aisling respected Dewi's relationship. And secondly, it turned out Aisling was gay. Also, while Dewi didn't know all the deets yet, Aisling apparently endured a pretty shitty childhood of her own and it had forged her into who she was today.

But another reason Dewi had come to quickly like Aisling was realizing that, much like Dewi, one of her primary defense mechanisms was razor-sharp snark.

Dewi texted her to come in the front door, since she was home alone and didn't want to get up

A few minutes later, Dewi heard Aisling open the front door and she softly called out to the woman.

“In here.”

Aisling walked in and slumped into one of the chairs in front of Dewi's desk. When Dewi looked up she realized there was something akin to horror on the woman's face.

Immediately on alert, Dewi fought the urge to reach for a gun she wasn't currently wearing, and barely remembered to keep her voice down because of Lyssa sleeping in her arms.

“What happened? What's wrong? Why aren't you at Tamsin's? Is it the baby? Oh, my god, what happened? Why didn't anyone call me?”

Aisling didn't answer at first, but when she did, her quiet tone filled Dewi with an alien sensation—*fear*.

“I...” She swallowed and licked her lips. “Ma'am, I respectfully ask that you immediately release me from this assignment.”

“What? What the *fu-udge*?” *I'm really going to have to start watching my mouth.*

Now tears rolled down Aisling's face. “*Please.*” she hoarsely whispered. “I know I swore an oath, but I *beg* you—”

“Don't make me Prime you.”

Aisling brushed the tears from her cheeks. “I *can't* guard Tamsin, ma'am.”

A tight ball of dread filled Dewi's stomach. “And what the actual *fu-udge* with the formalities? Talk to me.”

Aisling drew in a ragged breath and softly sobbed. “While I haven't revealed or acted on it, I discovered I have a mate bond that will interfere with my job.”

“With who?” Horror dawned. “With Joaquin?” Aisling shook her head. “Beck? Da’von? Carl? Mateo? Who?” More head shakes. “Badger? Duncan?” Dewi gasped. “Not with Ken?” She felt the growl rolling from her throat. “Because so help me, I will rip your head off and shit—”

“*No*, ma’am. *Not* with any of them.”

Now Dewi felt confused. And she blamed her new-mom brain when she realized, *duh*, Aisling had already met most of them and it would have shown up sooner.

She couldn’t figure out who else was left. “Well then who the fuck is it with?”

Aisling finally met her gaze. “With Tamsin,” she whispered. “I felt a mate bond with *Tamsin*.”

THE END

<http://tymberdalton.com>

Keep reading for more information about the Bleacke Shifters series!

ABOUT THE BLEACKE SHIFTERS SERIES

When girl meets geek, the fur's gonna fly...

The Bleacke Shifters series (writing as Lesli Richardson) is set in Florida and based around Dewi Bleacke. She is a female Prime Alpha wolf shifter, and Head Enforcer for the Targhee Pack out of Idaho, sent to Florida when she was young for her own safety.

Now she's an adult and has found a mate. Ken isn't exactly her ideal specimen of a mate, but who can hold his own with Dewi.

What happens when a Prime Alpha wolf shifter ends up mating with a vegetarian computer geek?

Well, the fur's gonna fly.

The books in the series focus not only on Dewi, but other members of her family and pack as well.

Most of the books are MF, some include a MM relationship between secondary characters. There is also a BWWM relationship and other IR relationships between pairs secondary characters.

Series Tropes: wolf shifters, paranormal romance, urban fantasy, strong Alpha heroine, geeky cinnamon roll hero, fish out of water, pining, second-chance love, instalove, humor, family saga, blended families.

It is strongly recommended the books in the Bleacke Shifters series be read in order:

- 1) [*Bleacke's Geek*](#)
- 2) [*Geek Chic*](#)
- 3) [*A Bleacke Wind*](#)
- 4) [*Bleacke Spirit*](#)
- 5) [*A Bleacke Christmas*](#)
- 6) [*Geek-Speak*](#)
- 7) [*Bleacke Expectations*](#)

8) *Bleacke Moments*

The standalone novella *A Bleacke Meeting: A Bleacke Shifters Story* takes place between books 6 and 8 and can be read independently of the other books in the series.

There will be more books in this series coming soon.

Please visit the series page on my website for the most up-to-date information:

<https://tymberdalton.com/books/series-info/bleacke-shifters/>

OTHER TITLES

Sign up for my author newsletter, where I post info about both my Lesli Richardson and Tymber Dalton pen names, and never miss a new release or update:

<https://tymberdalton.com/newsletter/>

Writing as Lesli Richardson:

The Bleacke Shifter Series:

- 1) *Bleacke's Geek*
- 2) *Geek Chic*
- 3) *A Bleacke Wind*
- 4) *Bleacke Spirit*
- 5) *A Bleacke Christmas*
- 6) *Geek-Speak*
- 7) *Bleacke Expectations*
- 8) *Bleacke Moments*

A Bleacke Meeting: A Bleacke Shifters Story

The Great Turning Series:

- 1) *The Great Turning*
- 2) *The Great Turning: Into the Turn*
- 3) *The Great Turning: Future Ages*

Governor Trilogy:

- 1) *Governor*
- 2) *Lieutenant*
- 3) *Chief*
- 4) *Yes, Governor*
- 5) *Pet*

Determination Trilogy:

(Set in the world of the Governor Trilogy.)

- 1) *Dignity*
- 2) *Diligence*
- 3) *Desire*

Devastation Trilogy:

(Set in the world of the Governor Trilogy.)

- 1) *Dirge*
- 2) *Solace*
- 3) *Release*

Inequitable Trilogy:

(Set in the world of the Governor Trilogy.)

- 1) *Indiscretion*
- 2) *Innocent*
- 3) *Incisive*

Devout Trilogy:

(Set in the world of the Governor Trilogy.)

- 1) *Sacred*
- 2) *Profane*
- 3) *Penance*

Maxim Colonies:

- 1) *Jailmates*
- 2) *Farborn*
- 3) *Saudade*

- *Of Boardwalks and Bison*
- *Cross Country Chaos*
- *Poly*
- *Her Vampire Obsession* (Midnight Doms Series)
- *“His Vampire Morsel”* (*All Souls’ Night: A Midnight Doms Anthology*)
- *How Many Times Do I Have to Say I’m Sorry?* (Maudlin Falls 1)
- *Fierce Radiance* (Space Confederation 1)
- *Acquainted With the Night*
- *Whip Me, Beat Me, Make Me Write Hot Sex* (non-fiction)

- *Blow Sh*t Up!* (non-fiction)

[Click Here to Check Out My Coming Soon Page!](#)

[Click Here For All My Tymber Dalton Titles!](#)

Lesli Richardson is better known by her more prolific *USA Today* Bestselling Author Tymber Dalton pen name. Please visit her website for more info on all her titles under both pen names, including full book and series listings, trivia, character information, and more.

<http://www.tymberdalton.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author Lesli Richardson, who is better-known by her more prolific wild-child Tymber Dalton pen name, lives in the Tampa Bay region of Florida with too many pets of various species. She writes in a wide variety of heat levels and genres, from mainstream sci-fi all the way to scorching ménage.

The *USA Today* Bestselling Author (as Tymber) and two-time EPIC award winner is a part-time Viking shield-maiden in training who loves to shoot skeet and play D&D with her friends. She's also the author of over two hundred and fifty books and counting, including *The Reluctant Dom*, *Cross Country Chaos*, *Her Vampire Obsession*, the Bleacke Shifters series, the Governor Trilogy, the Determination Trilogy, The Great Turning Trilogy, the Suncoast Society series, the Love Slave for Two series, the Triple Trouble series, the Coffeeshop Coven series, the Good Will Ghost Hunting series, the Drunk Monkeys series, and many others.

She lives in her own little world, but it's okay—they all know her there.

She loves to hear from readers! Please feel free to drop by her website and sign up for her newsletter to keep abreast of the latest news, snarkage, and releases.

Honest reviews are always welcomed. They help with a book's visibility and can boost its placement on book retailer sites. Even a few lines about what you felt reading the book will help. Thank you so much, it's greatly appreciated!

Newsletter: <https://tymberdalton.com/newsletter/>

<http://www.tymberdalton.com>