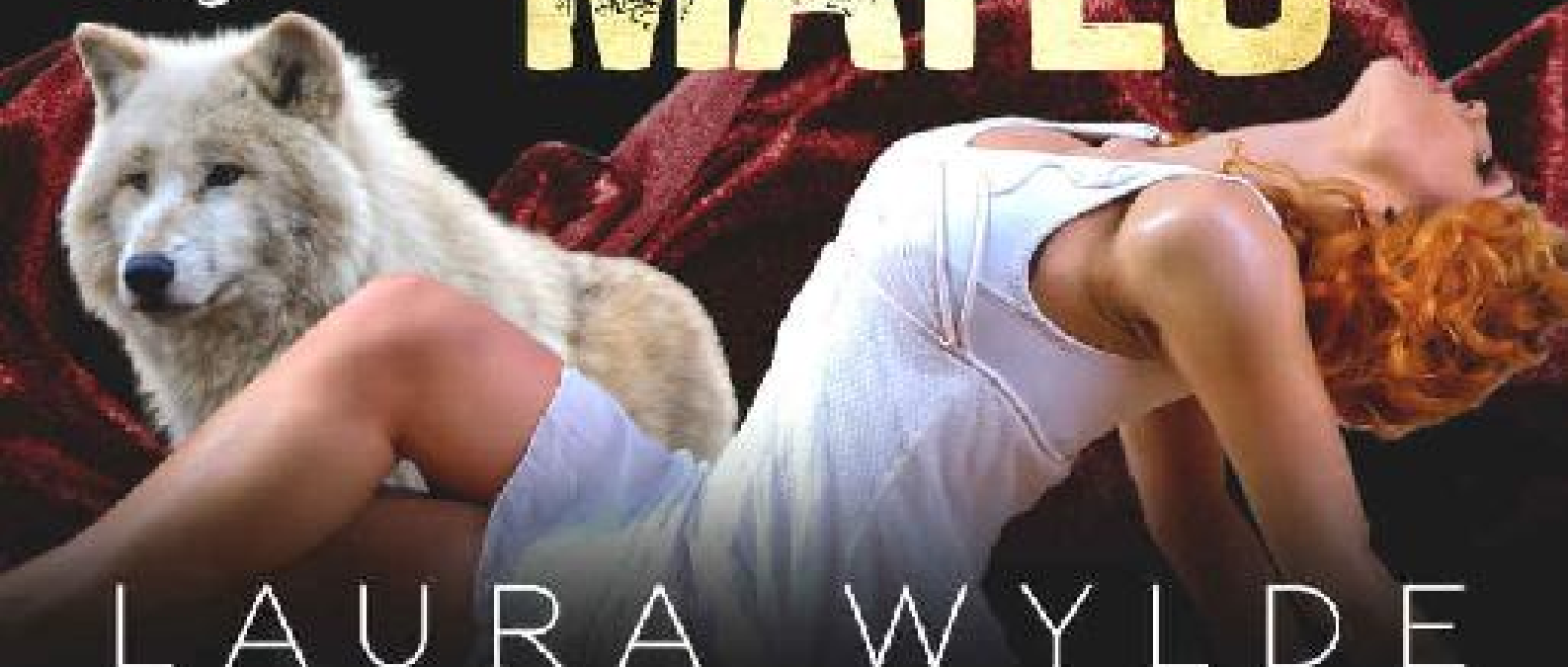




Captured
by her **MATES**



LAURA WYLD E

CAPTURED BY HER MATES

LAURA WYLDE

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LILY

I find myself sitting at the worn out counter of my regular dimly lit bar, nursing my usual vodka cocktail at the end of a *very* long week. The air is thick with the scent of stale beer and a mixture of conversations, punctuated by the occasional burst of laughter. The *Surly Mermaid* establishment is far from what others might call ‘elegant’, with its cracked leather stools and flickering neon signs casting an eerie glow on the patrons. Yet, I always say that it holds a strange allure, a place where misfits and seekers of solace can come to lose themselves in the haze of alcohol and camaraderie... if that is what they want, which I definitely don’t. Not tonight anyway.

Slowly sipping my drink, I observe the scene before me. The bouncers, burly figures dressed in black, look bored at the entrance, their watchful eyes occasionally scanning the crowd for troublemakers. Not that troublemakers really bother with this place.

Despite the gruff exterior of the *Surly Mermaid*, the staff manage to maintain an unspoken order, keeping the worst of the riff raff at bay. It might not be the kind of place my grandmother would approve of, but it has a certain raw authenticity that resonates with me.

Swallowing the burning hot liquid, which I hope will wash the week away, I gaze out of the grimy window, my apartment building visible just across the street. The convenience of having my safe space within sight allows me to indulge in this solitary habit without concern. It’s early evening, the golden light of dusk still clinging to the sky. Weekends are usually the

busiest at the bar, a mix of regulars and newcomers seeking refuge, especially during tourist season.

As if on cue, a trio of guys sidle up to the counter, each flashing a confident smile in my direction. They're like characters straight out of a clichéd scene, their intentions written across their faces like an open book. They exchange glances, clearly vying for my attention. I meet their advances with a polite but dismissive smile, turning back to my drink.

I want to be alone tonight. Why can't anyone seem to get that?

"Lily Crowe, is that you?" Internally I groan. Shit, this isn't a stranger after all. This is a voice I know all too well, and one that I'm definitely not in the mood for. "Damn girl, I haven't seen you since high school. You have gotten *fine*. Hasn't she gotten hot, boys?"

"Brandon, hi," I shoot back through gritted teeth. I *hate* running into people from the past. I'm not one for reminiscing and having a good time with people I left behind long ago.

"I mean, you always had those piercing blue eyes, right? And that smile to die for, but your red waves are longer now." I pull away as he tries to touch me. "And your body is smoking."

"It's a dress, not a yes," I remind him, recalling the way he used to always assume showing off legs meant a desire for attention. But that was in high school. Shouldn't he have grown up a bit now? "Thanks for the compliment, Brandon, but I'm happy to just drink alone."

"Pfft, no one is happy to drink alone. Don't be a bore."

His friends crowd around me, but I don't feel threatened. Not with Alex standing behind the bar. In my peripheral vision, I can see him wiping down a glass with practiced efficiency, but with one eye on me, ready to jump in whenever I need him to. Just like always.

He waits for a moment, trying to see if I'm into these guys, but as he shoots me a wink, admiring how hot Brandon is –

which I suppose objectively he is, he's just an ass that's all – and I don't respond in kind, he's next to me in a heartbeat.

“Hey, guys, I think it's time to move along.” As his dark hair falls across his forehead and he grins, Brandon is struck. Alex is a hard man to argue with. He exudes an easy confidence, and not someone to be messed with. “There are plenty of other people here tonight. But my girl isn't interested in you. Like she said, it's a dress not a yes. Head over there, will you?”

When the coast is finally clear, I turn my stool to face Alex and I raise my glass in a subtle toast, before I knock the rest of it back, enjoying the burn this time around.

“Another one, please, if you don't mind. Same again. A double this time.”

“One of those weeks, huh?” He wiggles his eyebrows playfully. “I know how it is. You can have as many as you want. Mostly because it isn't far to walk you home. Plus, if you're sitting here drinking then I can tell you about my amazing date with James last week.”

That lights me up a little. “I forgot to ask you all about James. Oh my God, tell me more.”

My own love life might not be the most successful, but that doesn't mean I have a heart of stone. I *love* living vicariously through other people, especially Alex. He has a wild love life, always adventuring with new and exciting guys. I settle in to hear his new tale.

“Well, we went to the opera for this date. It was a fancy one. So much fun, and James was holding my leg throughout the whole thing, which was super sexy, and then we went out to a dessert place afterwards to feed one another ice cream...”

Urgh, I could groan with jealousy. Why do I never meet a guy who makes me feel all sexy and excited like that? I can't even remember the last time I even went out on a date, never mind did something all classy and romantic like that. What is it with me? Why do I only seem to attract the low life guys

who don't actually want to get to know me? What am I doing wrong?

It's only when Alex stops right in the middle of his story and backs away that I start to sense a new presence beside me. A different one this time, a shadow with a newness attached to it.

"Ryker, what can I get you?" Alex's tone changes completely. "The usual?"

Ryker. Now that's a name that resonates through the corridors of my mind. Nervously, with butterflies flapping violently in the pit of my stomach, I follow Alex's eyeline to find *him*.

Tall and commanding, he carries himself with an air of confidence that's impossible to ignore. His jawline looks like it's been sculpted by the hands of a master artist, a testament to the chiseled perfection that nature has bestowed on him. But it's his eyes that hold the power to transfix, a mesmerizing shade of gold that seems to pierce through the layers of my soul.

I've seen his face before, captured in the pixels of news articles and glimpsed on television screens. The mystery that shrouds him only deepens the intrigue I feel, the strange fascination that has rooted itself in my thoughts ever since his name first crossed my consciousness.

And then, in the quiet between heartbeats, he turns to face me, even shooting me a rare smile. I just *know* that he doesn't do that for everyone. The air around us seems to still, the noise of the bar fading to a distant hum as his gaze locks on mine. A magnetic pull draws me deeper into the depths of his golden eyes, and for a moment, the world ceases to exist beyond the space we occupy.

His lips curve up further, his enigmatic smile popping two super sexy looking dimples. It's a gesture that holds a promise of secrets and untold stories.

"May I buy you a drink?" His voice is a rich timbre, a velvet melody that resonates within me.

I can hardly believe the surrealness of the situation – the man I have watched from afar, a distant figure in a world of headlines, is *here*, standing in front of me, offering a simple drink. A surge of emotions wells up within me, a blend of anticipation and curiosity that eclipsed any doubt or hesitation. This is nothing like Brandon hitting on me, and Alex knows that. He knows me well enough to sense that I want this even from a million miles away.

Without a second thought, I find myself nodding, my voice steady despite the internal tumult. “Yes, of course. That sounds lovely. Another cocktail, please.”

As he signals to Alex, the world around us resumes its motion, the chatter and laughter filling the void left by the silence. Ryker’s gaze lingers on me, as if he holds an understanding of the connection that had formed between us, one that transcends mere chance.

Alex approaches with a drink in hand, placing it before me with a knowing smile. He’s as excited for me as I am. *Not* that I’m expecting anything other than this drink, but hey... it’s fun to fantasize. Ryker’s drink materializes beside mine, the two glasses like a symbolic bridge between our worlds as they rest ever so lightly against one another.

“Thank you,” I murmur, my eyes meeting Ryker’s again, feeling the warmth of his gaze seep into me, awakening a sense of longing and possibility. “I appreciate it.”

He inclines his head, a silent acknowledgment, and for a moment, our words remain suspended in the air between us. There’s an unspoken understanding that we had reached a juncture, a crossroads where paths converged, guided by an inexplicable force. I don’t think I have *ever* felt anything like this before, with any guy. Is it just because Ryker is so hot and I kinda know him? Or is there actually something more simmering between us?

I need to find out, and for that, I need to talk... maybe even flirt.

“So, Ryker, right? What brings you here tonight?” Was that a tremble in my voice?

“Yeah, that’s right.” He narrows his eyes at me. “And you are...?”

“Lily. Lily Crowe.” I nod just the once. “Nice to meet you.”

He smiles like I’m cute, like I’ve impressed him with my naïve sweetness, which definitely isn’t the impression I want to give. If destiny has given me a shot to talk to Ryker, then I at least want him to walk away from me with a good impression.

“So, erm, are you really as charming as you seem on TV?”

Oh fuck, what was that? My God, I’m an idiot. A heat burns up through my body and hits my cheeks hard. That is going to make me look more silly than ever.

But much to my surprise, his lips quirk into a half smile, and his golden eyes seem to hold a flicker of amusement. I hope this is a good thing. It has to be, right? “Charming? Well, I suppose I’ve picked up a trick or two along the way. But what you see on TV isn’t always real.”

His voice is laced with a velvety undertone that zig zags through me like a soothing melody.

His reaction emboldens me, and I decide to take it a step further, allowing my gaze to linger on his chiseled features for a beat too long. “And here I was, thinking that charming strangers in dimly lit bars was my specialty. You’ve certainly raised the stakes.”

Ryker’s laughter, a rich and mellifluous sound, brushed against my ears like a caress. “I don’t know, Lily. You don’t seem like much of a stranger to me.”

As our eyes meet again, a current of desire pulses beneath the surface, a magnetic pull that draws me closer to him. His presence is a wildfire, consuming my thoughts and igniting a blaze of attraction I have never experienced before.

Determined not to let my own nerves dampen the spark, I lean in slightly, our faces now just inches apart. “Well, I would like to be even less of a stranger to you. You intrigue me.”

His gaze holds mine, unwavering, and a flicker of interest dances in his golden eyes. “Oh? And what, may I ask, do you find so intriguing?”

I swallow hard, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks all over again, but for a different reason this time. Ryker’s presence is an intoxicating force, and the confident flirtation I intend to spill out seems to escape me, leaving me a little tongue tied. “Well, you seem like an interesting man. I would like to know much more about you.”

Ryker’s eyes flicker with a hint of mystery. “Well, I’m happy to show you... *everything*.”

A thunder cloud bubbles underneath the surface, about to let off steam at any given moment. I don’t even know what to do with myself. With every heartbeat, the connection between us deepens, and the energy between our bodies charges with a palpable tension. I’m hooked. Officially. I don’t know what this man has done to me, but I’m addicted to him.

The air around us crackles with an electric tension, a potent cocktail of flirtation and intrigue that seemed to weave its way through every exchange between Ryker and me – even Alex notices. Now the playful winks he sends my way are reciprocated in turn.

As the night progresses, our words became bolder, our glances more lingering, and the promise of something unspoken seemed to hang in the air like a whisper carried by the wind.

Amidst the dim lights and the thrumming pulse of the bar, a pivotal moment arrives way before I’m ready for it. Last call is announced, which means it’s time to leave this beautiful man behind... or so I think. The sparkle in his eye seems to suggest that he feels differently.

“Lily, do you maybe want to get out of here?”

Time seems to slow as his words hang in the air, the unspoken implications washing over me like a tidal wave. The invitation, so laden with possibility, dangles before me like a delicate thread, ready to be seized or gently released.

I mean, this is Ryker! What am I supposed to do?

My heart races, the pulse of anticipation echoing in my chest as I meet his gaze. The decision lies in that moment. Whether to venture into the unknown with a man who has ignited a fire within me, or to hold back, allowing the allure of the bar's familiar comfort to prevail.

With a mixture of nerves and exhilaration, I feel a smile tug at the corners of my lips. "You know, Ryker, the prospect of leaving this bar with a mysterious man who's fascinated the world does sound rather tempting."

A hint of satisfaction dances in his eyes, a spark of recognition that acknowledges the weight of our unexpected connection, found in the strangest place of all. The *Surly Mermaid*. "Mystery and temptation seem to be my companions," he muses, his tone soft yet filled with intent.

With a simple gesture, he settles our tab, much to Alex's delight – I just *know* that he's going to want all the details later on – and he stands, extending his hand toward me.

As I place my hand in his, I feel a surge of exhilaration and a whisper of uncertainty. The decision is made, the uncharted path chosen, and with each step we take away from the bar, across to my apartment, the excitement builds by the moment.

"Huh, you live here?" Ryker purrs as I pull out my keys. "Convenient."

"Well, it is for me. I don't usually bring people back with me."

I don't want him to get the wrong impression of me, but at the same time, I don't want to sound like a dork either. But it doesn't seem like Ryker is paying much attention to my words. The moment the door clicks behind him, he swings me around to face him, bringing our lips very close together. Feeling his breath on my tongue makes my whole body crackle with electric tension.

Ryker's hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing over my skin with a gentleness that contrasted the fire that blazed in his eyes. I'm surprised. I didn't know he could be so... sweet.

And then, his lips meet mine – a sweet collision that sends shockwaves through my body. Time seems to stand still as our mouths move together, a dance of exploration that holds the tender vulnerability of a first kiss. The sensation is a blend of electric fire and gentle caress, an intoxicating mix that consumes my thoughts and leaves me breathless.

His lips are unexpectedly soft yet demanding, his kiss a blend of urgency and tenderness that erupts fireworks in the pit of my stomach. I need more, so much more.

He pulls back ever so slightly, and Ryker’s intense gaze holds mine, sending waves of desire rippling through my core. I lift my arms up automatically, knowing what Ryker wants without him even needing to ask. The soft fabric of my dress slides gently against my skin as Ryker tugs it upwards, revealing parts of me that I never expected a man like this to see.

“You drive me crazy, you know that?” His words dance on my skin. “You are gorgeous.”

Now that is so much better than ‘hot’ coming from Brandon’s mouth. Especially because his eager fingers are now gliding down my sides, caressing my curves, and eliciting gasps of pleasure that I haven’t ever heard come from me before.

He’s getting a little too handsy, and while it feels amazing, I should tell him everything.

“I’m a virgin!” The words blurt out of my mouth before I’m really prepared to speak. Shit, that wasn’t how I wanted to tell him.

He takes a little step back from me. “Do you want me to stop? To go?”

I shake my head emphatically. “No, not at all. I just... I thought you should know.”

To show him how much I really do want this, I take control. I grab the waistband of his jeans and yank him back to me, with my eyes locked on him the whole time. I don’t take my eyes away as I unbutton him, allowing my fingertips to

graze over his rock-hard abs before reaching the waistband of his briefs. The smell of his masculinity fills my senses, making me even more excited.

“Don’t stop there,” he murmurs hoarsely, placing a firm hand on my shoulder to hold me steady while he removes the rest of his clothing. Piece by piece, revealing all of him to me.

As the last threads of material fall away, Ryker stands revealed in all his glory – broad shoulders, lean muscles, and a chest bearing faint traces of scars from past battles. Intrigued by these remnants of his life, I let my hands trace them curiously, feeling the power beneath his skin.

“You truly are a sight to behold,” I breathe out, entranced by the contrast between his vulnerability and strength. “This is what I mean about being intrigued by you.”

I can’t explain it with words, but I hope he understands.

Ryker takes my hand, guiding it to his erection, which throbs hungrily, seeking release. Gasping audibly at the size and heat of his manhood, I can’t resist reaching up to caress his thick length. I marvel at how my small touches seemed to reverberate throughout him, fueling the fire further.

In response, Ryker wraps a hand around my waist, drawing me closer so that our hips align. But then everything seems to happen in a rush, in a blur I can’t control. Our hands are everywhere, exploring every inch of each other’s bodies, heightening anticipation for the moment when we will finally come together fully, and I will know what it’s like to be with a man.

Each touch sends lightning bolts through my body, heightening desire beyond anything I’ve ever known. It’s like a dance of sensuality, teasing and pleasuring until I can’t bear it anymore.

He crashes on the bed, letting me know that we’ve reached my bedroom, and waits for me eagerly. I lower myself into his waiting embrace, sliding my eyes closed as his lips find my neck, kissing, nipping, and sucking softly until goosebumps cover my skin.

By the time my panties are gone and I can feel him teasing my entrance, I can't handle it anymore. I buck my hips desperately, driving him inside me, surrendering easily to the intoxicating rhythm of our thrusts. The first time he plunges in to me, he does so softly and gently, teasing my body until dizziness consumes me, but it isn't long before passion gets the better of us and we can't stop clinging to one another.

The friction becomes more intense as Ryker touches my body expertly, making me feel everything all at once. I'm soaring into space, drowning in the endless waves of bliss that just never seem to stop coming. It's like a tsunami has hit and there's nothing I can do to stop myself from drowning in it.

Shit, this was worth waiting for. This was a man worth holding on to my virginity for twenty four years of my life. He's perfect, and at least in this one glorious moment, he's all mine.

RYKER

The morning sun filters through the curtains, casting a soft, warm glow across the unfamiliar room. I lie in bed, the sheets tangled around me, wrapped in the afterglow of a night filled with temptations I never should have caved to. But I did. I couldn't seem to help myself.

Beside me, Lily stirs, her features softened by the tender light, reminding me of what intrigued me about her in the first place. She's so sweet, so nice, so intriguing... and maybe that's why I broke the mission. *Not* that I want to think about the mission right now.

Finally, she opens her eyes, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips, a silent acknowledgment of all that unexpectedly transpired last night. I turn my head to face her, my gaze tracing the delicate contours of her face. The lovely face that immediately captivated me last night, knocking me off kilter completely, stirring my heart in ways I wasn't expecting.

"Good morning," I murmur, my voice a low sleepy rumble.

Lily stretches and yawns, her movements carrying a sense of comfort and familiarity. A little cat like, if you ask me. "Morning," she replies, her voice carrying a similar sleepy edge.

With a sense of curiosity and anticipation, I prop myself up on one elbow, my gaze fixed on her. "So, what's on the agenda for today then? I bet you have a busy day ahead."

She looks at me, her eyes sparkling with a mix of mischief and genuine affection. “Well, I’m going to head home to see my father first. Then, I thought I’d swing by the mall, maybe do a little shopping. Nothing too exciting. Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering if there’s any space in your day for me.”

Surprise widens her Bambi like eyes. “You want to spend more time with me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I offer her a one shouldered shrug. “We had a good time, right?”

“Well, you don’t seem like the ‘stay for breakfast’ kind of guy.”

“I don’t think you know everything about me,” I tease as I tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Maybe you should take the time to know *me*, not who you think you’ve seen online.” Lily looks a little offended, which isn’t what I intended. “Anyway, I have a feeling that our paths will cross again sooner than you think. You haven’t seen the last of me.”

The words hold a promise, and I hope Lily gets that. This isn’t just a fleeting moment, but the beginning of something more – a journey that has only just begun.

“I like the sound of that,” she gasps. “More time with Ryker Hawthorne. Who would have ever thought it? I think that’s something I can definitely get on board with.”

Guilt tugs at my heart strings. If only she knew what I was really doing. But I don’t want to think about that right now. I want to focus on Lily’s lips, I want to kiss them as much as I can before I’m forced to get the hell out of here and on with my day.



I SET MYSELF THIS MISSION. IT SHOULDN’T HAVE BEEN SO HARD to follow, but I fucked it up. The closer my Dodge Viper gets me to home, the more aware of that I become. I told myself that this would be a straightforward objective that held the potential to reshape the delicate balance of power in the world

of organized crime, especially for me. It was going to put me on top. Right on top.

All I needed to do was use last night to capture Lily Crowe to force her father to start doing things differently. Alistair Crowe can't stay at the top of this city forever...

I wasn't expecting to have so much fun talking to Lily. I didn't think anyone could get under my skin like she did. I certainly wasn't really thinking as we fell into bed together...

But I'm not going to let that throw me off. I can still do this. I can still capture Lily. It might be a little more complicated now. But hey, after getting to know her a little bit, maybe she will even be on board with what I need to do. She might get it.

She talked a little about her father this morning, but I didn't push things to see what her relationship is like with him. But Alistair Crowe is a horrible guy. She can't *really* like him, can she? I'm sure we can sort things out once she's spent some time with me.

The sleek lines of my sports car glisten under the dim morning lights as I pull up to the imposing mansion that my crew affectionately refer to as "our lair." The air is thick with the scent of power and secrecy, a fortress that stands as a testament to the influence we wield in the underworld. Power that I *will* expand, no matter what.

As the engine's purr fades to silence, I step out of the car, my senses immediately catching the undercurrent of tension that seems to linger in the air. Maddox, my trusted right-hand man, approaches with a nod of acknowledgment. His presence is a reassuring constant, a reminder that in the world I navigate, loyalty is paramount.

"Boss," he greets, his voice a low rumble that mirrors the seriousness of our operations. "We've got some updates on the target."

I nod, the mission resurfacing in my thoughts like an unwelcome guest. I don't know what I want to do about Lily now. I definitely feel very different about everything. Last

night, instinct ignited between us, a primal attraction that defied explanation – the kind that left me yearning for her even as I grappled with the consequences of my mission.

It makes me wonder if the unthinkable has happened. What if she is my mate? I've not spent years searching for the one I'm bonded to or anything, so I don't know what I'm seeking out exactly, but that felt *different*, and I don't know why.

“How did it go?” Maddox's voice drags me back to the present moment.

“Yeah, good. I...” I need to respond evasively so he doesn't pick up on these new found feelings circling around me. “I saw her. The target.” I swallow hard. “I don't think she's going to be too hard for us to capture. I think once we make our move, Alistair will be caught in a corner...”

“Well, we're ready to move forward whenever you give the word.”

I meet his gaze, my resolve firm even as doubts nip at the edges of my thoughts. “We'll have a meeting about it today and sort out a date and time. This needs to be done ASAP.”

Basically before I talk myself out of this.

Maddox's nod is an affirmation, a testament to the unspoken understanding that binds us. My alpha commands are law, but I'm pretty sure Maddox would follow me whatever.

“I will gather everyone up in the conference room now then. Make sure we're all prepared.”

I know what Lily is doing today and where she'll be at all times, so realistically, today would be the perfect opportunity. The only problem is it'll make me look like a real asshole, won't it? The worst of the worst. Lily will get all the wrong ideas and assume I only slept with her for that information. I don't know how I'll be able to let her know otherwise. Yeah, that won't be the easiest chat to have when she's my hostage.

I smile and nod at Maddox, knowing that he'll help me make the right decision. I mean, this is the guy who saved my

life. I know he would do anything for me. As Maddox heads inside, I let my mind wander a little, pushing Lily to the back of my mind while I recall *that* day. The one that changed my life forever and made me the man I am today...

The sun had dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across our make shift camp. Tired soldiers shuffled about; their weary faces illuminated by the faint glow of campfires. Amidst the hum of whispered conversations, I sat alone, lost in contemplation, staring into the dancing flames, replaying memories that refused to fade.

Maddox, my comrade in arms, had been more than just a fellow soldier to me, even *before*. We had weathered storms of both bullets and uncertainty together, creating an unbreakable bond that transcended the boundaries of camaraderie. From the moment we first stood side by side in boot camp, there was an unspoken connection between us that only deepened as we ventured onto the battlefield. I didn't know what I would do without him there... which I suppose is the same now.

Our first deployment was marked by trepidation and raw nerves. The foreign land we found ourselves in was alien, unforgiving, and haunted by the echoes of those who had fought before us. But amidst the chaos and uncertainty, Maddox was a steady presence. His calm resolve and unyielding determination served as an anchor for me, grounding me in the midst of chaos.

It was that calm resolve that I relied on when, all of a sudden, a storm hit us. A storm of enemy fire pinned us down and trapped us in a maze of crumbling structures surrounding us.

Bullets whizzed past, accompanied by the ominous symphony of distant explosions, shattering the quiet we had all been enjoying every so often. Just as I thought I was too exposed and wouldn't stand a chance, Maddox surprised me. Without a second thought, he charged forward amidst the hail of gunfire to shield me from harm's way.

"Don't worry, Buddy." He shot me a wink in the middle of one of the most terrifying experiences of my life. I will *never*

forget that wink. “We’re going to be okay.”

If I close my eyes for long enough, I can still see his silhouette etched against the smoke and fire, his determination a beacon of hope in that bleak landscape. He dragged me to safety, his strength surprising even himself. His actions that day were nothing short of heroic, a testament to the unwavering loyalty he held for those he fought beside. Especially me.

I’d trained for that, we all had, but there was no way to prepare myself for a moment in action. Of course, I was stronger after that. I’d faced the worst and survived, so nothing was stopping me from doing the same again. But I will *never* forget what Maddox did for me.

I step inside my mansion, which stands as a monolith of opulence, a testament to my position in this clandestine world. Its grandeur is overshadowed only by the secrets it holds within its sprawling walls. As I head through the ornate double doors, a familiar sense of both weight and purpose settles on me.

Ascending the marble staircase, I make my way to the conference room, a place that has seen countless strategies devised, alliances formed, and fates decided, just as it will today. The room itself is bathed in a dim, ambient light, emanating from an intricate chandelier that dangles from the ceiling like a silent guardian.

Around the mahogany table, figures await, each representing a piece of the puzzle that’s our operation. At the head of the table sits Colt, an imposing figure whose presence is as loud as his voice, never mind his roar. His massive frame seems almost out of place amidst the polished elegance of the room, but his fire filled eyes speak of an unyielding determination – a determination fueled by a sense of justice that burns brighter than any anger that simmers within.

Colt’s reputation preceded him. His loyalty is fierce, especially for a wolf, and his rage is legendary. He wears his emotions on his sleeve, like an unpredictable storm waiting to be unleashed. But I know how much of a good guy he is, and

I'm glad to have him on my team always. I shoot him a smile and get a sharp nod back.

To Colt's right side is Novak, a study in contrasts. With his lean frame and quiet demeanor, he's the antithesis of Colt's imposing presence. Novak's gaze is sharp and observant, his eyes ever watchful, taking in the details that often go unnoticed by the rest of us. His fingers tap rhythmically on the table, an indication of his affinity for numbers and patterns – a skill that has saved us from countless brushes with disaster.

Despite his quiet nature, Novak's influence on our endeavors is immeasurable. His insights and calculations are the foundation our plans are built on, and his calm disposition acts as a counterbalance to the tempestuous energy that often swirls around us. He's the one who keeps us grounded, who reminds us that amidst the chaos, logic and reason are our greatest allies.

As I take my seat at the table, the room seems to hum with a sense of function. By the time Maddox joins us, we're ready to get down to the nitty gritty of what we're going to do with Lily. Beautiful Lily, whose body will *not* leave my mind. Even with everything else going on around me. I kinda just wish that me and her could go out on a date, that I could spoil her and treat her like the goddess she is. I want my mate to feel loved and happy. Unfortunately, right now, she is a means to an end. I just hope that she understands...

"So, what's going on?" Colt demands. "We're making our move today, right?"

I sigh heavily. "Well, I *do* know where she's going to be today..."

Colt's eyes light up like a damn Christmas tree. Novak's eyes narrow, like he's trying to calculate exactly what this means for us. I glance towards Maddox who nods at me, encouraging me to continue, to spill all the details that I have. I guess it's now or never. If I hold on to this information I have, my pack will get it out of me anyway. They always do.

"Lily will be with her father this morning, but she's headed to the mall afterwards." The web of deceit that I'm currently

unraveling wraps tightly around me. “So, I suggest that we get her then. We go for her at the end of her shopping excursion, when she’s making her way back home, that’s when we strike. Sooner rather than later, right?”

I nod to myself, trying to convince myself that what I’m doing is the right thing. I have to act on my instincts, even if it doesn’t feel good. I don’t usually have a conscience about this sort of thing, but then I’ve never gotten all mixed up in something this complicated before. Something that involves a woman I’ve slept with. My mate.

Nods of agreement sweep through the room like a silent wave, an unspoken consensus forming among us. It’s a delicate balance we’re treading – timing will be everything if we want to get one over Alistair. He’s a sharp eye and a bastard when he wants to be.

But we can do it. We can make this dance work for us and put Alistair in his place. My fists curl up with anger as I think about his smug face. I can’t wait to wipe that smile off him. Much as I adore Lily, she’s the key to all of this.



BY THE TIME THE SUN DIPS BELOW THE HORIZON, CASTING long shadows across the quiet street, we’re ready to snap into action. The world has shifted to a different rhythm, one governed by secrecy and calculated movements. The plan is in motion, and the pieces are slowly falling into place with a precision that sends shivers down my spine.

In the darkness, two black Escalades are parked, their imposing forms hidden in plain sight. In one, I sit alongside Maddox, our eyes fixed on the road ahead, hearts pounding with a mixture of tension and anticipation. Beside us, Novak and Colt occupy the other vehicle, their eyes sharp and vigilant too, seeking out the same shock of red hair as I am.

Lily’s street is a canvas of suburban normalcy, starkly contrasting the hidden currents of intrigue that swirls beneath the surface. We watch and wait, our breathing in sync with the

rhythm of the night, our senses attuned to every sound, every flicker of movement.

The cab we have been tracking finally emerges around the bend, its headlights slicing through the darkness. A scene of orchestrated chaos is about to unfold, and I can't wait for it. My heart skips a beat as I try to prepare myself for what's next. Lily... it's all about Lily.

As the taxi nears, Colt's Escalade pulls sharply forward, cutting off the cab's path, while I execute a precise maneuver to block it from behind. Just as we planned, the vehicle is stuck.

It's go time.

Time seems to stand still as Maddox leaps from our vehicle, his movements fluid and purposeful. He's a force of controlled power, his presence commanding as he approaches the taxi driver's side. The driver, unsuspecting of the role he just played in our intricate game, is caught in the spot light of danger.

Maddox's gun gleams ominously in the dim light, its cold metal a stark reminder of the power we hold over the situation. The taxi driver's eyes widen in shock as he feels the cold barrel press against his temple. The gravity of his predicament settles in, his body rigid with a mix of fear and compliance. We already know that we don't need to worry about him.

And then, the door on the other side of the taxi swings open, revealing Lily, her face a mask of surprise and terror. She fights against Maddox's immediate grip, her voice piercing the night air with a desperate scream for help – not that anyone can hear it. It's a moment of raw, unfiltered emotion, a glimpse into the depths of her fear.

I can't stop the guilt from flooding me, overwhelming me. I need Lily, and I want her on my side, but I don't want to do *this* to her. This sucks, especially when I've seen how alive and alight she looks when she's drowning in pleasure. I much prefer that expression on her face.

But this has to happen. That's what I keep reminding myself. We need this.

Luckily, Maddox is unyielding, his grip unbreakable as he forces Lisa out of the taxi fully. Her struggles only serve to highlight the control he holds, his strength a counterpoint to her vulnerability. As he guides her towards our waiting vehicle, the shadows seemed to gather around us, concealing our movements in a shroud of secrecy.

I see Maddox dip lower and speak into her ear. I wonder what he's whispering in her ear. Is he making this worse? I wish I could hear him.

I watch from behind the wheel, my heart heavy with the weight of the role I played in this charade. Lily's screams are a sharp reminder of the consequences of our actions, a reminder that the lines between right and wrong have long blurred. But it's a reminder we can't afford to heed – not now, when the final act of our plan is in motion.

This is all about Alistair anyway. She's just an unfortunate consequence of all of this.

“Get in. Right here,” Maddox growls through gritted teeth as he shoves Lily in the car. He settles her into the back seat of the Escalade as her struggles fade into weary acceptance. “Sit still. I need to strap you in. This might be a dangerous ride.”

Just as it looks like Lily might meet my eyes, Maddox ends the tension of the moment by shoving a giant burlap sack over her head, blocking out her vision. Relief flows icily through my veins because now I don't have to see how much I've upset her. I know the hate is coming, like a giant tidal wave, but that doesn't mean I'm prepared for it.

“Let's go,” Maddox snaps as he slides back in the car beside me. “The other Escalade has gone.” He's careful in not saying Colt and Novak's name, not that it'll make much difference. She's going to know us soon enough. “We need to get back home, okay?”

The engine's gentle hum fills the car's interior, a counterpoint to the heavy silence in the air. My grip on the

steering wheel is tight, the leather cool beneath my palms, yet my heart burns with an unease that matches the weight of the night itself.

Lily is a victim of circumstance, a pawn in a larger game that she can't possibly comprehend, even if she has grown up under her father's spell. I don't suppose she knows everything that he does, but this incident might mean she will find out. Just another reason why she might go on to hate me... but that won't change the fact that she's my mate. Nothing will. It might just take a little longer to get us to a good place, that's all. I can wait. To have another night like we did last night, I will wait forever. I just hope I don't have to...

LILY

Darkness envelopes me as the car moves through the night, my world reduced to the muffled sounds of tires against tarmac and the steady rhythm of my own racing heart. I've been thrust into a situation I don't understand, and I have no idea why.

My shopping bags are still in the cab, which probably shouldn't be the first thing I think of, but I need something steady and normal to concentrate on so I don't lose my mind. I mean, this is the craziest thing I have ever had to suffer, and the terror actually hurts my stomach.

Bound hands and a burlap sack shroud my senses, and my attempts to free myself have proven futile. The rough fibers of the sack scratch against my skin as I struggle, my voice echoing inside my head, any cries of defiance stifled by the cloth covering my mouth.

My emotions swing like a pendulum, from anger to fear to confusion. That man – the one with the gun – has shattered the illusion of safety I have built around myself, leaving me vulnerable and trapped. With each passing moment, the reality of my situation sinks in deeper, a heavy weight that settles in my chest.

My father, I realize starkly. This has to be related to him. Alistair Crowe, who might just be 'Dad' to me, is a criminal overlord in this city, having everyone scared of him. I always thought him being related to me would protect me from things

like this, but I guess not. Being a member of the Crowe family makes me terrified from the inside out.

With another burst of energy, I continue to struggle, my attempts at resistance fueled by desperation. I kick the back of the front seats, my frustrations finding voice in the sharp thuds reverberating through the vehicle. My voice is a muffled symphony of protests, my shouts stifled by the confines of the stupid burlap sack, but I have to try.

“Let me out of here, will you? Let me go. I can’t give you anything.” Is that the right way to go? “Or... wait, I have money. I can give you money if that’s what you need. Or my dad can...”

But no one listens, the silence from my captors a chilling reminder of my powerlessness. *Not* a place I like to be. The car moves forward, its path unknown, its destination likely somewhere I have never been before. My heart races, my mind speeds to fill in the gaps of the narrative that has unraveled so abruptly. Who are these people? And what do they want from me?

“Just let me out here. I can walk. No one needs to find out about this...”

With each passing moment, my resistance ebbs, the futility of my efforts etched into my consciousness. I fight to control my breathing, to quell the fear that threatens to consume me if I let it. The weight of the situation bears down on me, but I don’t know how to confront it.

By the time the car stops, I have run out of protests. The sudden stillness is still jarring though, I don’t like it one bit. My heart pounds in my chest, a frantic rhythm that echoes the uncertainty of my situation. The thick burlap sack still covers my head, shrouding me in darkness, but even without sight, I sense that a new chapter is about to unfold. And not a good one.

The muffled sounds of movement surround me, voices murmuring in hushed tones. I know that my captors are preparing to take me out of the vehicle, to lead me into the unknown. Panic surges within me, a visceral reaction to the

idea of being confined in an unfamiliar place, hidden from the world, so they can do whatever they want to me...

No way, not on my watch. I can't let that happen. No matter what.

My instincts kick in as the car door opens and hands reach for me. My bound hands flail against my restraints, my body wriggling as I fight against the impending capture. The struggles of a cornered animal fuel my defiance, and I kick and squirm, a tempest of resistance in the midst of the horrible evening that has swept me off my feet in a really bad way.

"I won't go! Let me go!" I cry out, my voice muffled by the cloth that covers my mouth. My words are a battle cry, a declaration of my refusal to be contained. Fear mingles with determination, and for a brief moment, the darkness of the sack seems to intensify, closing in on me like a cage.

But my captors are unyielding, their grip unbreakable as they tug at me. The ground beneath my feet shifts as they guide me out of the car, my world now a cacophony of sensations – the cool night air against my skin, the sound of footsteps on the road, the thudding of my heart...

I don't give up the fight though. My body remains a whirlwind of resistance. I lash out and scream, my movements fueled by a frantic need to regain some kind of control. I've been thrust into a nightmare, and every instinct within me screams for me to fight, to defy the hands that seek to lead me into the terrifying abyss that I might not be able to get out of.

With a final surge of effort, I fight against the hands that hold me, my voice a muted cry of defiance. But even as my struggles weaken, my spirit remains unbroken. The fight within me is a testament to my unwillingness to be silenced no matter what's happening to me. I won't easily be trapped in a narrative that has been written without my consent.

But eventually, my resistance becomes a flicker in the night and they get the better of me. They lead me into the unknown building until I hear a door click locked behind me, making my heart sink. I guess this is really happening then, whatever *this* is.

“In here,” a gruff voice hisses as I’m shoved into a smaller space. A room, I assume. I can almost feel the walls closing in around me. “Now, I’m taking off the sack.”

“You want me to see you?”

Of course I want the sack gone, I hate the damn thing. But once it is, and I lay eyes on these people, enough to be able to identify them, then I won’t get out of this alive.

“I’m not too worried about you being disappointed if that’s what you mean.”

His arrogance rolls off of him in waves as he snatches off the sack. It takes me a couple of seconds to blink enough to let the light settle on my retinas. To see the bald headed muscular man who has brought me here for whatever reason. There’s a twinkle in his piercing green eyes, like I should recognize him or something, but I don’t. Who the fuck is this and what does he want?

“See? Not disappointed, are you?” He offers me a blasé one shouldered shrug. “Told ya.”

“What *is* this?” I snap as I pull at my hands a little. The bonds that restrain me dig into my skin a little too hard, a constant reminder of my vulnerability. But I won’t let *him* see that. Silently, I writhe and twist, desperately trying to free myself from the unforgiving grip of their restraints. My heart races as I cling to the tiny flicker of hope that still burns within me.

“Colt is the name,” he barks. “If you need all the details about me.”

“I don’t know if you expect me to say my name.”

“Lily Crowe. I already know everything there is to know about you, sweetheart.”

I scowl at the sneer that seems to be permanently etched on his face. As he edges closer to me, his cold eyes bear into me, a mix of irritation and amusement dancing within their depths. He tries to reach for me, but I pull away, refusing to be touched.

“Oh I see, you don’t want to be freed.” He chuckles throatily. “You kinky, huh? You like being tied up? I bet that’s something Daddy would love to know about you.”

“Huh, so this *is* all because of my father then.” I roll my eyes in an over-the-top dramatic fashion. “Great, just what I need to end this already shitty day. Just fucking perfect.”

I let him touch me this time, burning in the strange adrenaline running through my veins. I don’t like the feel of him, but at least he really does seem to be freeing my wrists. I could use the opportunity to move. Whatever freedoms I can get, I will take.

“There, isn’t that better? If you just be a good girl for me, then...”

But he doesn’t get to finish that sentence. Before he can say another word, I swing with all the force that I can muster. My fist connects with his jaw in a resounding crack, the impact reverberating through my knuckles. It’s a punch fueled by desperation, anger, and a sheer refusal to bend and I hope this Colt guy feels all of that.

Colt’s head snaps to the side, a look of shock replacing the arrogance that was there moments before. He stumbles back, his balance disrupted by the unexpected force of my blow. I hadn’t anticipated that my strike would be so potent, but I’m glad for it. The pain in my knuckles is a small price to pay for the momentary advantage it has given me.

Breathing heavily, I watch as Colt regains his footing, his hand moving to his jaw where a red mark is already forming. His eyes glint with a dangerous mixture of fury and new found respect. I know that this is far from over, that my defiance has only stoked the flames of their determination to break me. To get to my father. Urgh, it’s so annoying.

As Colt’s hand drops from his jaw, he straightens, a malicious grin spreading across his face. “Feisty one, aren’t you?” he growls, the words carrying a dangerous promise.

I brace myself, the echoes of my defiance still ringing in the air. I might have been trapped in a room with this thug, but

my spirit remains unbreakable. They don't know who they're messing with here. They might think of me as little Lily Crowe, my father's weak daughter, but I will show them otherwise. Just because I don't want any involvement in their world, doesn't mean I don't know how to defend myself when need be. I can fight back if I need to.

"Hey, Boss," he cries behind himself, teasing me more. "I like this one."

Though the blow was hard, it doesn't stop him from grabbing hold of my wrists and snapping handcuffs around them. Before I know it, I'm chained up to a freaking bed like a God damn animal. Just as I'm coming to terms with this, he snaps something else around my neck. Another chain, another way to fix me in one place, to control me.

The necklace lays snug against my skin, a stark contrast to the fear coursing through me. I reach up to touch it, feeling its iciness against my fingertips. I hate it.

Colt steps back, leaving me suffused in the eerie stillness. I strain against the cold metal chains that bind me to the bed, their unyielding grip sending a shiver of fear down my spine. My heart races in my chest as I try to make sense of the situation.

"Better," Colt calls out, mirth flooding his tone. The enigmatic figure who suddenly emerged from the depths of darkness, stands before me. His silhouette seemed to meld with the shadows, making it difficult to discern his features. But that doesn't stop me from hating him. "Much better."

"Why?" I finally manage to choke out, the word hanging heavy in the air between us. "I mean, I know that this obviously has something to do with my father, but why *this*."

I mean, this seems like an overreaction. They have the numbers, it isn't like I'm getting out of here with any ease. There's no need to go this far.

Colt's lips curve slightly, a hint of a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Some questions are better left unanswered,"

he replies cryptically, his voice a low rumble that sends a shiver down my spine.

I tug at the chains again, feeling the weight of desperation settling in. The room seems to close in around me, the walls whispering secrets I can't decipher. The collar around my neck constantly reminds me of my vulnerability, a stark contrast to the strength I always pride myself on.

I step towards Colt as the chains tumble along the ground behind me. I can walk, but not too far. I'm not getting out of this room any time soon. Colt retreats, cracking the door open behind him. A slither of the world beyond comes to light, making my heart skip a beat.

A new trio of figures stand before me, their forms silhouetted against the soft glow of the corridor lights. One of them, all too familiar in a horrifying way.

"So, this is Maddox," Colt says, introducing me to my new enemies as if we're at a freaking dinner party or something. "You might remember him. The one with the gun."

Maddox steps forward, his presence exuding an air of authority, just like he did when he had the gun. I have to admit I prefer him without a weapon. Tall, dark, and commanding, he possesses a rugged handsomeness that makes it easy to understand why someone might be drawn to him. His strong jawline frames piercing sky blue eyes that hold a hint of something hidden, a depth that begs to be explored... that I want to explore, which I *know* makes me sound crazy.

"And Novak. I don't think you have had the chance to meet him yet."

This Novak creeps slightly behind Maddox, his stance more reserved. His dark tousled hair and intense hazel-brown gaze gives him an aura of mystery, a magnetic pull that defies logic. His features concoct a mixture of strength and vulnerability, as if he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. I cock my head to one side as I study him carefully.

"And, you might already know this face too... Ryker."

This is the real kicker. Fucking Ryker. The man I spent the sexiest night of my life with before my world was upended. Like an idiot, I thought that he wanted to spend more time with me to date me. I thought I would have sexy fun stories to share with Alex... but I was being used. Ryker wanted to know what I had planned for the day because he wanted to do *this*. Not to date me.

I should have known. I always attract the worst of the worst.

But still, his presence ignites a fire within me, a rush of memories that mingles with the uncertainty of my current situation. His messy mousy blond hair and a mischievous grin that plays at the corners of his lips makes it impossible to ignore the connection we had forged. Because we did forge it, I didn't imagine that. I knew it. His golden eyes hold a spark of something familiar, a glimmer of recognition that draws me in. Or it would if I wasn't trapped here.

Lust surges through my veins, mingling with the fear and confusion that threatens to drown me. Each man possesses a distinct allure, a physical presence that resonates deep within me. It's as if my body responds to them on a primal level, a reaction beyond my control.

I know this is absurd, yet I can't stop the internal battle from raging on.

I swallow hard, pushing aside the whirlwind of feelings that threaten to engulf me. No matter their physical appeal, these men are dangerous, their motives unclear. I can't afford to be swayed by their allure. But as their gazes hold mine, a realization settles in – escaping their grasp will be a battle, not only against my captors but against the tangled desires they've awakened within me.

“What is going on?” I snap through gritted teeth, aiming my question at Ryker the most since me and him spent the night together. “Is this why you were at the *Surly Mermaid*?”

It doesn't matter, or at least it shouldn't. It's obvious that I was being used, but I still want to hear him say it. I want him to say that our night meant nothing.

“This isn’t personal,” Ryker replies with a shrug. “You know that.”

“*This* might not be, but you know what I mean.”

A heat burns through me as I can feel all eyes on me. I don’t know how much more of this shit I can take. It’s humiliating. He knows that he took my virginity. I glare at Ryker, my fists clenched at my sides, trying to keep my composure despite the storm of emotions raging within me. His casual demeanor only fuels my anger, the way he’s standing there as if none of this matters, as if he didn’t just shatter something inside me.

Has he told the others? Do they know about us? I kinda want them to know so we can discuss this openly. I jut my chin out and hold my head up higher, ready to be more specific.

“Are you telling me that sleeping with me was just some part of your plan?” My voice trembles with a mixture of fury and hurt. “I was honest with you, Ryker, and you did this.”

Now all eyes are on him. Good. Fuck him.

Ryker’s jaw tightens, his gaze flickering for a moment before he looks away. “Look, things aren’t as simple as they seem. I had my reasons.”

I scoff, the bitter taste of betrayal in my mouth. “Oh, I’m sure you had your reasons. Maybe I was just an easy mark, right? A way to get at my father.”

He doesn’t respond, and the silence between us is heavy with unspoken truths. The ache in my chest deepens, and I take a step closer, my voice low and intense. “You know, I wasn’t just some pawn in your little game. I’m a person with feelings.”

The air might as well be sucked out of the room because the tension is so thick. The other guys might not have known before, but they sure as shit know now. But with one slight flick of his hand, they all do exactly as he commands, like they are pawns in his game too, and they back away, leaving us

alone in this horribly small confined space where I'm all chained up.

Ryker finally meets my gaze, his expression a mix of frustration and regret. "I never said you weren't a person with feelings, and I never meant for things to get so complicated. But there are things at play here that you can't possibly understand."

I shake my head, my frustration boiling over. "Don't patronize me, Ryker. I deserve to know the truth. I know this is about my father, and I know what he's like..."

"So, you need to let this happen because it'll all be right in the end."

"Is that supposed to make it better?" I retort, my anger giving me a temporary surge of strength. "You could have told me, Ryker. You could have given me a choice."

He looks genuinely conflicted now, his earlier façade crumbling. "I know. And I'm sorry for that. I never meant for you to get hurt."

"So what happens from here?" I wave my arms around, making the chains clank dramatically. "Huh? Are you just going to leave me here like this?"

He steps closer to me, so close I can breathe him in again. I know I should back away from him, but I don't really want to. I guess I like being all caught up in his presence, even in this situation. How sick is that? There must be something twisted in my brain, and it all got messed up the moment Ryker stood next to me at the bar. I kinda wish that hadn't happened that I had just spent the night listening to Alex talking about his date with James before staggering home a little tipsy and very much alone.

"You know, your time here doesn't have to be bad. I can make sure you're comfortable and maybe even have a good time." He ignores my scoffing. "If you behave yourself."

Any witty retort that plays on my lips falls away the moment our eyes lock in together and he shoots me a playful wink. I hate that this is happening, but there's something about

Ryker's charming appearance that makes my heart ache for him. I don't want to be this weak, especially not to a man who has just kidnapped me, but there is just something about him. I force myself to look away, but I'm sure he can still hear my heart hammering in my chest. I'm not getting away with it today. Ryker knows exactly what he's done to me, and he is probably fucking loving it. Urgh, this is a nightmare. One that I can't wake up from however hard I try.

NOVAK

The dimly lit room exudes an air of hushed tension, punctuated by the soft clinking of glass and the rich scent of cigars that linger in the air of Ryker's well-designed home bar. I'm perched on a barstool, my fingers tracing the rim of my whiskey glass as I watch the interplay between Maddox and Ryker unfold before me. The success of our mission, the capture of Lily, hangs heavy in the atmosphere, mingling with the uncertainty of our next move.

Ryker leans casually against the bar, his fingers wrapped around a crystal tumbler of amber liquid. The low light casts shadows on his face, accentuating the lines of weariness that tug at his features. Across from him, Maddox reclines in an armchair, a cloud of fragrant smoke curling upwards from the cigar gripped between his fingers. Their camaraderie is evident, a testament to years of shared experiences, but tonight it's laced with the gravity of our situation.

"Getting Lily was a damn good move," Maddox rumbles, his voice gravelly as he exhales a plume of smoke towards the ceiling, his eyes following the smoke as it goes. "But we've just scratched the surface. The hard part's ahead of us."

Ryker's eyes narrow slightly, his gaze steady on Maddox, almost as if he's studying him. "Yeah, I know. We need to leverage her to get to Alistair."

I take a sip of my whiskey, letting the liquid burn down my throat as I absorb their words. Lily – once an elusive figure – now sits in one of the back rooms chained to a bed, a high

stakes pawn in this treacherous game we find ourselves entwined in. She's the key to putting an end to all of this, and to Ryker coming out victorious, getting exactly what he wants.

Ryker swirls the contents of his glass, his mind undoubtedly churning with plans, strategies, and contingencies. "I've been working on an approach to get to her father. Alistair's shrewd, and he'll be cautious. But we have an advantage – his daughter. A proud man like that will never stand for *us* having Lily trapped here. He'll do whatever it takes."

Maddox leans forward, his cigar stubbed out in an ashtray as he focuses on Ryker. "What's your plan, then? Come on. We need to act quick, don't we? Now that we have Lily and everything."

Ryker's gaze flickers toward me, a subtle acknowledgment that this decision affects all of us. "I'm going to arrange a meeting with Alistair. Tell him he needs to back down if he ever wants to see Lily again. Let him know what'll happen otherwise." Those words hang in the air. No one wants to think too deeply about that because it's unlikely to come to that. "The full moon is on the rise. We can make use of that. Shift and bathe in the moon's glow before we go, making sure we're as strong as possible before we face that man."

I watch Ryker closely, admiration mingling with caution. He's driven, focused on getting what he wants, and willing to put himself on the line to achieve it. But the risks are immense, the stakes higher than ever. Lily's life hangs in the balance, and if anything goes wrong, we don't know where it'll leave any of us. I want to vocalize that, but I also don't want to put a dampener on the mood.

Maddox's gaze sharpens, his brows furrowing as he scrutinizes Ryker. "And what if this goes south? What if Alistair smells a trap?"

Okay, so I guess one of us is going to address the elephant in the room, even if it isn't me.

Ryker's lips press into a thin line, his resolve unwavering. "Then we adapt. We're not going to let this fail. We won't let

this go wrong. This is our best chance yet.”

A heavy silence settles over the room, the weight of our collective determination palpable. We’re a mismatched trio, bound together by circumstance and necessity. The future is uncertain, a tangle of risks and possibilities, but we’ve come this far.

I drain the last dregs of my whiskey, setting the glass down with a soft clink. Rising from the barstool, I step closer to the conversation, my voice edged with determination. “We have to make sure we do this right though. We can’t afford the risk. I mean, what if Alistair just kills you?”

“Then you kill her. An eye for an eye. You know how it is.”

Though Ryker says it sternly, I can tell he doesn’t want it to happen. It’s the way his eyes show the sadness his mouth doesn’t carry. I don’t know what happened with the two of them, but Lily hinted at something which definitely makes this all the more intriguing. I know Ryker has always been willing to do whatever it takes, but this might be a step too far.

Ryker’s gaze remains fixed on the table, his hands clenched into fists. “It won’t come to that, not if we plan meticulously. Alistair’s weakness lies in his arrogance, and we’ll exploit it.”

I exchange a knowing glance with Maddox, whose fingers drum a nervous rhythm against the side of his glass. “Ryker’s right,” he says, his voice a mix of determination and doubt. “But we can’t ignore the possibility that things might not go as smoothly as we hope.”

Ryker finally looks up, meeting each of our eyes in turn. “I know the risks. We all do. But this is our only shot, and like I keep saying, we can’t afford to back down now.”

Alistair’s name hangs in the air like a curse, a reminder of the darkness that has loomed over us for far too long. If we want to rule this place, and I know Ryker needs that as badly as he needs to breathe, then this is what we need to do. We need to make his dreams come true. As his pack, that’s our

mission in life, and even I have to admit that life will be better with us on top.

With the conversation concluded and nothing more to discuss, I quietly extricate myself from the huddle of determined faces, leaving Maddox and Ryker to get another drink. I don't want us to forget that we have a real human being locked away in that room. We have to care for her as best we can – not only to prevent an inevitable blood bath.

My thoughts wander as I scan the kitchen for the ingredients I need to make what might not be a lavish feast, but that I hope will keep Lily as content as she can possibly be. I need to show her some humanity in the chaos that surrounds us. We aren't all monsters. It's just this situation.

As I chop vegetables, my mind drifts back to the first moment I saw Lily getting out of that cab. I can't imagine how terrifying this must be for her – snatched away from her life, thrust into a world of uncertainty and danger all because of her father. It must be just terrible. I feel that.

My heart aches as I remember the tearful pleas she'd made when we'd first confronted her. I'd like to believe that we're doing the right thing, that there's a purpose to all of this. But even purpose can't erase the guilt that gnaws at me when I see her sitting there, a stark reminder of the lives we're affecting. Especially because I was immediately struck by her shock of gorgeous red hair, and piercing blue eyes that filled out with fear very quickly. I couldn't take my eyes off her lips, which I just know is oh so wrong considering she's our hostage. This is all such a mess.

Finally, the meal comes together – a simple pasta dish with a make shift tomato sauce. I plate it and carry it over to her room, my steps hesitant. I don't know how she will take this.

"I made you something to eat," I say, as I lightly tap on the door, but she doesn't immediately respond. "Lily, can I come in? I made you a plate of food."

Again I get nothing, so I decide to take a brave step inside. Lily's eyes lift up, warily meeting my own. The sadness ricocheting through her gaze hits me hard.

“I got you food,” I say once more, sounding a little silly now. God what is it about her that makes me feel like a total idiot? “In case you’re hungry.” I don’t know how she’s feeling.

“I’m starving,” she shoots back with laser like anger hitting me with each and every word. “I didn’t get anything to eat at the mall. I was planning on going to dinner later on.”

“Oh... well, I’m sorry about that,” I say quietly. “I hope this helps. It isn’t much, but...”

Lily takes the plate, her fingers brushing mine for the briefest moment. “Thank you,” she murmurs, a thread of vulnerability in her voice. “I really am starving.”

I sit across from her, watching her take a tentative bite. She chews slowly, her gaze never leaving the plate. The silence between us stretches, heavy and uncomfortable.

But then, something changes. Her eyes widen slightly, and she takes another bite, this time with more eagerness. It’s as if she has crossed an invisible threshold, a barrier that was preventing her from fully indulging in the simple pleasure of a meal. And once that barrier is breached, there’s no holding back. She knows now that I’m not trying to poison her, which is great. I hope this bridges the gap between us just a little bit.

As I watch, Lily’s initial caution seems to dissolve entirely. The fork moves almost mechanically from plate to mouth, and she eats with a fervor that speaks volumes. The food disappears rapidly, her focus solely on the nourishment in front of her. The sounds of her chewing and the clinking of utensils against the plate seem to echo through the room, a symphony of hunger and relief. She really must have been starving...

The tension in the room has given way to a sense of ease, a palpable shift in the atmosphere that makes conversation feel like a welcome respite. Lily’s gaze is no longer guarded; instead, her eyes hold a certain curiosity, as if she’s interested in me now. As I take her empty plate, I decide to take the opportunity to see if she wants to have a conversation with me, hoping to learn more about the person behind the apprehensive

façade. Who knows, I might even be able to distract her from everything that's going on around her.

“Do you know who you look like?” I click my fingers as I try to recall her name.

“Are you going to say Katie Knowls?” she asks a little bemused. “Because I get that a lot. Especially since that sci fi series she's in got big.”

“Right, right, that's it.” I laugh a little. “That's a compliment though. It's based on a book...”

“I know, I love it. It's always been one of my favorites. The world building and the intricate politics in it are just fascinating to me and I love the character writing.”

We continue to talk, our conversation flowing effortlessly from one book to another as we share a love for something together. It's a connection I wasn't expecting. But soon, we edge on to deeper topics, led by Lily, who seems to have a lot on her mind. I guess being kidnapped will do that to a person. It's an unexpected time to take stock of life.

Lily's expression grows more contemplative, and she seems to hesitate before finally speaking. “You know, growing up, I always felt like a doormat for my father. He had this way of making me feel like my opinions didn't matter, like I was always in the wrong.”

“Really? I didn't know...” Mind you, I've never known much about the Crowe family. This is definitely something more that Ryker has researched.

“It's not easy being the daughter of an alpha, you know?”

I listen attentively, my heart going out to her as she shares a piece of her past. “I'm sorry you had to go through that. That must be really hard.”

She shrugs, a small smile playing on her lips as she tries to play it down a little. “It's okay. It's made me who I am today, and I'm determined to never let anyone treat me that way again.”

I admire her resilience, and her ability to rise above the challenges life has thrown her way. It's clear that there's more to her than meets the eye, a strength that she carries with her even in the face of adversity. She might even be able to survive this.

"I never understand how people so willingly follow alphas." She cocks her head questioningly to one side. "Without always questioning it. Take you, for example. You seem very different to everyone else here. Anyone I've ever met actually. How did you end up here?"

"Oh well, that's a long story..." I start, but I soon realize that she's going to want to hear it anyway. And she shared with me, so I owe her that much. "I'm part of Ryker's wolf pack. They're more than just allies to me; they're family. They took me in when I was just a pup, lost and alone after my parents were killed in a battle over territory long ago."

That fact always weighs heavy on me, and leaves me wondering how different my life could have been if that never happened. If I didn't pretty much grow up alone.

"I see," she mutters as a quiet reply. "That must be why you're so loyal."

"Yes, that's right," I reply with a one shouldered shrug. "And I owe everything to Ryker's family. They accepted me, taught me, and raised me as their own. I'm willing to follow Ryker anywhere because he's more than just a leader. He's my best friend too."

Understanding dawns in Lily's eyes, and I can see a mix of respect and empathy in her gaze. "I had no idea. That's... quite a story. You have had a hard life too."

I chuckled softly, the tension of the moment easing. "I suppose it's not something that comes up in everyday conversation. I don't talk about it a lot."

Lily's lips curve into a genuine smile, the kind that reaches her eyes. "No, I guess not. Same with me. I don't talk about my home life either unless I have to."

There's a pause as we absorb the weight of the revelation, a new found layer of understanding between us. But then, Lily's expression grows more serious, a hint of concern in her eyes. "So, what happens next? With Ryker, with your pack?"

I lean forward, my gaze locking with hers. "We will negotiate with your father. Try not to let it become a blood bath. It won't be easy, but we have the strength of our convictions, and we're willing to face whatever challenges come our way."

Lily nods, her eyes holding a mixture of resolve and uncertainty. "And me? What's my role in all of this? Why do you need *me* to make my dad listen to you?"

I meet her gaze, my voice steady as I speak. "We're going to keep you safe. Whatever happens, you won't be alone. We won't let anything happen to you."

An eye for an eye – Ryker did mean that but it's certainly not something I will uphold. I didn't want to anyway, but after sharing some time with Lily, I know I can't.

A mixture of emotions flicker in her eyes – gratitude, relief, and a hint of something deeper. "Thank you," she whispers. "I appreciate you making me that promise."

As I watch her, I can't help but feel that our connection has deepened even further. I know her on a brand new level now, and she seems to know me too.

I hold Lily's gaze, the weight of the conversation settling between us like a shared secret. Her question about her role and her father's significance hung in the air, waiting for an answer that I hope will reassure her. I guess I haven't given her that yet.

"We need you to make your dad listen to us because you're the link that connects him to us in a way he can't ignore," I explain, my voice calm and measured as I go in deeper than I'm sure Ryker would like. But Lily needs this, so I will give it to her. To help keep her calm. "You're his daughter, and your safety is his priority. If he sees that you're with us but okay,

that we're treating you with respect and keeping you safe, he'll be more inclined to negotiate."

Lily's brows furrow, her expression a mix of contemplation and understanding. "So, you're using me as leverage?"

I shake my head gently, wanting to clarify. "Not leverage, Lily. We're not using you as a pawn. We're hoping that your relationship with your father can help us find a peaceful resolution. We want to avoid unnecessary conflict, not escalate it."

Ryker might see her as leverage and Colt too, maybe even Maddox, but not me. She's worth so much more than that, and I want her to know that I *see* her.

She seems to consider my words, her gaze distant as she processes the information. "It just feels... strange. Like I'm caught between two worlds, two sides that I never asked to be a part of. But thanks. Thank you for being honest with me. For treating me like a person, not just a hostage."

I offer her a sincere smile, our connection solidifying in that moment. "You're more than just a hostage, Lily. We'll do everything in our power to ensure that your choices are respected and that this isn't the worst time in the world for you."

The room's ambiance seems to shift, the weight of our conversation hanging in the air like a fragile balance. Lily's eyes meet mine, a mixture of emotions dancing within them. Her gaze seems to linger much longer than necessary, a silent question floating between us. I lean in slightly, my heart pounding in response to the intensity of the moment. And then, in an instant that feels both electrifying and surreal, Lily's lips meet mine.

The sensation is startling yet oddly familiar, as if an unspoken tension that has been building between us has finally found its release. The taste of surprise mingled with the flavor of something deeper, something that has been simmering beneath the surface of our interactions, fills me up and makes

me feel everything all at once. It's like I'm drowning in bliss, overcome with the intense fireworks that ricochet between us.

This shouldn't be happening. It shouldn't, but it is and now I never want it to end.

I'm momentarily frozen, taken aback by the unexpectedness of the gesture. But then, almost instinctively, my fingers find their way to her cheek, my hand cradling her face as I respond to the kiss. The softness of her lips against mine is intoxicating, and a rush of warmth spreads through me. I can't get enough of her. I don't think I have ever felt this way before.

Time seems to stand still as we kiss, the rest of the world fading into the background. In that moment, there are no labels, no roles, no mission – just two individuals connecting on a level that defies explanation. This really is incredible...

As the kiss deepens, a swirl of emotions courses through me. Surprise gives way to a hunger, a longing that I haven't allowed myself to acknowledge until now. Lily's lips are soft and inviting, and with each fleeting touch, a spark ignites within me – a spark that illuminates the depths of our connection. This is more than just shared interests, a gossamer thin bond. It's *everything*.

When we finally break apart, our breaths mingling, there's a shared vulnerability in our gaze. Lily's cheeks are flushed, her expression a mix of uncertainty and something else – an undeniable chemistry that was impossible to ignore.

"I... I'm sorry," Lily stammers, her voice soft and uncertain, her cheeks flaming red. "I shouldn't have... I didn't know... we just..."

I reach out, placing a finger against her lips to silence her. "Don't apologize. This isn't your fault. It's just... you know, one of those things."

Our eyes meet once more, and in that fleeting moment, a silent understanding passes between us. The kiss has unveiled a side of our connection that neither of us could have anticipated. But the jangle of her chains reminds me of what

we're doing here, why we're here, and what all of this is for. I shoot backwards. We can't do this; we shouldn't.

"I... I need to get out of here..." I stammer as I rise to my feet. "I should clean this all up. You know how it is."

She blushes brightly, which only makes me feel even worse. I need to get out of here before I end up doing something crazy. She's making me feel wild, animalistic. I feel like I'm losing my mind. The more I look at her, the crazier I become and that is *not* a good place for me to be. Shit, what have I done?

LILY**T** *he Next Night – Full moon*

I SIT ON THE BED IN THE SMALL ROOM, TRYING TO COME TO terms with what's happened to me. Yep, I'm still here, still in this room, still waiting to find out what's going to happen next. My senses are attuned to the world beyond the walls that contain me. The howls of distant wolves reach my ears, carried by the wind that whispers through the night. The sound is haunting yet strangely comforting, a reminder of the untamed wilderness that lies just beyond my reach.

My gaze shifts to the window – a narrow opening that offers a glimpse into the world outside. The window might be big enough for me to fit through, but it will be a tight squeeze if I even try. Not that I can because I have these hot damn chains clinging to me. I keep finding myself drawn to it, the yearning for a connection to the outside world tugging at me.

At night, the view through the window is always shrouded in darkness, the inky blackness of the night sky stretching infinitely beyond. The moon's silvery glow casts eerie shadows, and the howls of the wolves seem to echo through the night, a symphony of nature's untamed beauty.

The inkiness is different during the day. Then, the window offers a different perspective. The warm yellows of the sun spill over a distant stretch of green grass. The sight is a stark

contrast to the confined space of my room, with the walls closing in on me.

I hate this. I can't take it any longer. I need a way out.

Tonight, the full moon casts its silvery glow through the small window of the room, painting the space with an ethereal light that gives me a little glimmer of hope.

I take a deep breath, my heart pounding with anticipation and an underlying desperation. The full moon is my chance, my moment of release from the bonds that hold me captive. Instinctively, I close my eyes, summoning the power within me to shift into my wolf form where I will be able to shatter these chains and run before Ryker and his pack can do anything else to me.

But as the moonlight bathes me, I feel nothing change. Panic stirs within me as I focus on the transformation, on the sensation of fur replacing skin, of bones reshaping. But there's nothing – no shift, no release. It's as if an invisible barrier is holding me back, thwarting my attempts to break free. What the hell is going on here? Why have my powers seemed to shrink to nothingness?

Frustration and confusion churns within me. Shifting is a part of who I am, a fundamental aspect of my nature. I've always been able to harness the energy of the moon to shift, to embrace the wildness within me. But now, in this crucial moment when I need it more than ever, that connection has been severed, leaving me trapped in human form.

The implications of this realization are staggering. Fear whispers at the edges of my mind. Is this some kind of curse, a hex placed on this room to deny me my abilities? The weight of my situation intensifies as the realization settles in, and I feel the walls closing in on me.

With a sigh of resignation, I open my eyes and gaze out the window, the moon's glow a constant reminder of the power that has eluded me. But in the midst of my frustration, a new sense of determination wells up within me. I can't afford to dwell on what I can't change.

Change gears, I tell myself. There has to be another way. The moonlight can no longer be my source of liberation, but that doesn't mean I'm powerless. I have other skills, more knowledge, and the support of my pack. Even if they aren't here right now.

I turn my attention to the room itself, examining every detail. The window, the door, the walls. I need to find a vulnerability, a weakness that I can exploit. I know that waiting for rescue isn't an option. I have to be proactive. I have to make an escape route if I want to get out. Tonight, preferably, because Ryker and his pack will likely be shifted and out running the woods.

My eyes settle on the window. It's a potential escape route, but the challenge is evident. The space is tight, and squeezing through it might not be possible. But what else can I do?

I quickly scan the room, searching for any objects that can help me. My gaze lands on a wooden plank leaning against the wall. It's part of a make-shift shelf that has been left behind. An idea takes root in my mind. If I can use that plank to widen the window just enough, maybe, just maybe, I can squeeze through to get away. I'm willing to try anything at this point.

With a surge of determination, I move towards the plank and grip it firmly. Using all my strength, I begin to work on removing the nails that hold it in place. It's not easy, and each nail seems to resist my efforts, but I refuse to give up. The sound of the nails coming loose echoes in the room, a rhythmic symphony of hope and determination.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, I manage to free the plank. With a glance at the window, I realize that it might work. I position the plank against the frame, wedging it in place. It's a tight fit, but I can see the wood starting to give way, just a fraction.

I take a step back, my heart racing. It's not a perfect solution, but it might be enough. I move towards the window, wedging my fingers between the frame and the plank, pushing with all my might. The wood groans in protest, but then,

finally, there's a moment of triumph – the window widens just enough for me to squeeze through.

Adrenaline surges through me as I realize that I've created my own escape route. If I can get these chains off me, that is. Shit, I didn't think about that. I pat myself down frantically, searching for anything to help me, when my hands find something in my pocket. A small, inconspicuous tool that holds the promise of liberation. A simple hair pin! The moon's silvery light glints off its metal surface as I examine it, my fingers steady with a mixture of resolve and hope.

With my heart pounding and nerves zig zagging in the pit of my stomach, with a singular focus, I insert the hair pin in the lock. The metal protests as I manipulate the pin, my hands guided by a mixture of skill and intuition. The seconds stretch to minutes as I work, each slight movement of the hair pin, a dance of finesse and precision.

Finally, I feel the lock give way, causing a rush of triumph to surge within me. The chains fall away from my wrists, the sound of their release a whisper of freedom in the stillness of the room. My wrists have been marked by the imprints of the restraints, which is just wonderful – a horrible reminder of all that I've been through. Just what I need.

My fingers flex as I rise up to my feet, my movements cautious yet filled with a new found vitality. The room seems to expand, the confines of captivity shrinking in the face of my new win.

With renewed determination, I maneuver myself carefully, using the plank as leverage to widen the window further, as far as I need it. It's a tight squeeze, and I can feel the rough edges of the wood scraping against my skin. But the pain is nothing compared to the exhilaration of progress.

Breathing deeply, I summon all my strength and manage to wiggle my way through the opening. It's a struggle, a dance of determination and effort, but finally, I find myself on the other side, free from the confines of the room and the horrible chains that had bound me in place.

I stand in the moon lit night, the wind whispering promises of freedom. My heart races with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. But I can't stay here and think for too long. Not if I want to get away before the men get back. This is my one and only chance.

The rush of cool night air fills my lungs as I sprint through the dense woods, the pounding of my heart echoing in my ears. Freedom is a tangible sensation, a fierce determination that fuels my every stride. The branches and underbrush seem to blur as I push myself harder, putting distance between me and the confines I just escaped. I don't want to go back there, no matter what.

My mind races with a mixture of emotions – adrenaline and a gnawing sense of urgency. The moon illuminates the forest floor in a silvery glow, casting long shadows that dance with the rustling leaves. My escape is fueled by the primal instinct to survive, to put as much distance as possible between myself and the dangers that lurk in the shadows.

But then, as if emerging from the very heart of the night, a sound slices through the air. A rhythmic, menacing noise that reverberates through the ground. The heavy, resonant thud of paws hitting the earth sends shivers down my spine. I instinctively slow down, my gaze darting around as I search for the source of the sound.

A feeling of dread settles over me as I realize I'm no longer alone. I know I have to face whatever approaches, to confront the danger that stalks me. I turn to face the unknown threat over my shoulder, my breaths coming in shallow gasps as I prepare myself for a fight.

Emerging from the darkness, a figure materializes. An enormous, majestic wolf, its eyes gleaming with an intensity that ices up my veins. The creature isn't sprinting towards me with devious intent; it's watching from a distance, observing me with a curiosity that feels almost... calculated. Its massive form moves with a fluid grace, each step deliberate and unhurried. I can feel its gaze upon me, a weighty presence that seems to strip away any pretense.

As the distance between us closes, I finally come to a halt, my chest heaving with exertion. I face the enigmatic wolf, my senses on high alert, ready to defend myself if necessary. The wolf's eyes hold a wisdom that transcends mere animal instinct, and a strange connection seems to pass between us. One I can't place just yet.

Fear spikes in my core, a cold, gripping sensation that seizes hold of my every thought. Every bit of knowledge I have on my fellow wolves races through my mind, mostly how we become feral monsters under the full moon's influence, how our senses are heightened, and our instincts become primal. I should've known better than to run on a night like this, when the moon holds sway over us. Running is a mistake, one that might have deadly consequences.

But when else was I supposed to go? This is all a nightmare.

Panic surges within me as the danger of my situation hits me like a thump in the face. The creature before me is no ordinary wolf; thrice as big as my own wolf. My instincts scream at me to flee, to put distance between myself and this enigmatic presence, but I can't seem to make my body comply.

Eventually I move a little, but only to stumble back, my heart racing in my chest, as the wolf draws closer. Its eyes gleam with an intensity that makes my blood run colder. My breaths come in ragged gasps as I try to process the gravity of the moment.

I know that under the full moon's spell, we wolves can be unpredictable, even dangerous. We're more likely to attack, to give in to the wildness that resides within us. The very traits that make us majestic and fierce in our natural states can become deadly when instincts take over.

This is why my father has always warned me to stay in during a full moon. A warning that I've never taken seriously and never heeded properly until now.

Finally, I manage to let out a scream. One so loud that my voice echoes through the trees, as the wolf circles around me, hungrily running its eyes all over my body. It moves with an

eerie grace, its movements fluid and deliberate. My back hits a thicket of trees, and without a second thought, I begin to climb one of the firmer looking ones that seems sturdy enough to support my weight. I hope... because if this tree fails me, I don't know what will happen.

Adrenaline courses through me as I ascend the tree, each branch a lifeline that offers me temporary refuge from the menacing presence below. My fingers tremble as I grip the rough bark, my gaze never leaving the wolf that paces beneath me, ready to devour me at any given moment.

The moon casts an otherworldly light on the scene, shadows dancing like phantoms across the forest floor. My heart thunders in my chest, a primal rhythm that matches the wildness of the night. The wolf's movements are a blend of curiosity and calculated exploration, its every action a testament to the dichotomy between man and beast.

And then, with a sudden and unexpected movement, the wolf leaps on to its hind legs, its forepaws extended upward as it stretches out its back. The sight is mesmerizing and surreal; a creature of the night caught in the moon's glow, its form elongated as it arches its spine.

The fear that has gripped me seems to meld with fascination, a strange mix of emotions that defy logic. In that moment, the wolf isn't a mindless predator; it's a living being, just like me.

A shiver tears down my spine as the wolf's eyes lock on to mine. Its gaze holds a depth of understanding.

It doesn't want to kill me, I realize. So, what does it want?

Fear still clings to my senses, but beneath it, a seed of understanding begins to take root. The wolf's movements are too deliberate, too measured, to be driven solely by aggression. I need to see if there is something I can do, even if begging is embarrassing.

"Please," I implore, "whoever you are, please don't hurt me. Find the remnants of humanity within you, and set me free. I haven't done anything wrong. Please, let me go."

The wolf circles the tree once again, and time begins to stretch too thin for my liking. I take refuge in the tree, seeking safety from the creature that both fascinates and terrifies me, but as the wolf's presence lingers beneath, I realize that my elevated position doesn't guarantee my escape.

With a sudden surge of movement, the wolf bounds toward the tree, its eyes never leaving mine. Panic surges within me, my fingers gripping the branches as if my life depends on it. I wait, breathless, to see what's going to happen next.

And then, as if in response to some unspoken cue, the wolf changes its course. It moves away from the tree, its powerful form a shadow in the moonlight. My heart races as I watch, waiting for an opportunity to present itself, an opportunity to escape.

My breaths come in shallow gasps as I evaluate my chances. My mind races, calculating the risks and benefits of making a run for it. I suppose I don't have a choice in the matter. With my heart in my throat, I finally seize the moment. I launch myself from the tree, my muscles propelled by a surge of adrenaline. The forest floor rushes up to meet me, and I stumble forward, my feet hitting the ground with a soft thud. The surge of adrenaline fuels my every movement as I dart between trees, my heart pounding in my chest. I'm focused on putting as much distance as possible between myself and the wolf that could easily tear me apart.

But in an instant, everything changes. Before I can process what's happening, a powerful grip closes around my neck, like a vice that snaps shut with unwavering strength. Panic surges within me, my breaths halting as I jerk to a stop.

It's not a wolf's jaw that holds me captive; it's a man's hand – firm, unyielding, and clutching me by the scruff of my neck. As the realization hits me, a surge of fear and recognition courses through my veins. It's Colt – my captor, the one I lashed out at not so long ago...

I swallow hard before attempting a feeble struggle against his grip, but his hold is unrelenting, his fingers digging into my flesh with a pressure that sends shockwaves of pain

through my body. I feel like a helpless prey, caught in the grasp of a predator all over again.

Colt's eyes bore into mine, his expression a mix of determination and something else, something unreadable. He doesn't speak as he drags me back through the woods, each step a reminder of the power he holds over me. It's as if he's a force of nature himself, an immovable object that refuses resistance.

My mind races as we move, my thoughts a tumultuous storm of questions and anger. Why did he have to come after me? Why not just let me go? The silence between us is heavy, pregnant with unspoken tension and the weight of the mess we find ourselves in.

The journey feels endless, every step accompanied by the echo of my racing heartbeat. We reach the familiar confines of the room where I have been held captive, the same room from which I fought so hard to escape. Urgh, this is so disappointing, I could cry.

Colt releases his grip on my neck, allowing me to stumble forward. My breathing is ragged, my body trembling from the adrenaline still running through my veins. I turn to face him, my voice hoarse as I finally speak, the words a mix of accusation and desperation.

"What's the point of this? Why not just let this come to an end?"

Colt doesn't offer an answer. Instead, he simply focuses on tying me back up again. "The others will be back soon. This is going to be an issue, you know."

"Hmm, yeah, I know." I can almost feel the weight of their judgment on me already.

"I might have to punish you for what you have just done."

"Punish me?" Is he teasing me? I kinda feel like there might be something going on here. I still have the sensation of his thick calloused hands all over my body which is unnerving. "How?"

He steps back and runs his eyes all over my body. “Strip for me. That’s what you need to do.”

Strip? I should refuse. The refusal sits on the edge of my tongue ready to explode free, but it doesn’t come. Instead I find my fingers slowly peeling my clothing off, succumbing to the tantalizing demand. I want to see how this is going to play out especially because Colt’s eyes are becoming hungrier with desire by the moment.

What is it about these men that makes me act totally out of character?

Colt mutters something under his breath as the rest of my skin explodes free, but I can’t pick out the words. I follow his command though as he wiggles his finger at me and before I know it, I’m lying across his lap, my bare ass up in the air.

“You will have to accept this punishment for running away,” he continues, with that teasing light tone still dancing on his tone. “You can’t do this again.”

Anticipation floods through my body and I tense up because I have no idea what’s going to happen. Colt has all the power over me and my body, and that makes me nervous... but oddly excited as well. Again, I’m left wondering what the hell is going on here.

Oh! I let out a little squeal as a sting heats up my left ass cheek. I was *not* expecting that. Is he spanking me? Well, that’s... something. The next time his hand connects with me, I’m more ready for it, and prepared to enjoy it. This isn’t something I ever thought I could enjoy, but here we are...

“Wait!” I cry out before he smacks me again. “Just one thing... tell me something...” He pauses, sounding as breathless as I feel. Is he enjoying this as well? Now that’s thrilling. I definitely shouldn’t like that as much as I do. “Why can’t I shift in here?”

I don’t think Colt is going to tell me because he never says anything, but he does, much to my surprise. “It’s the collar. The one around your neck.” He tugs on it as if I need a reminder. “It’s silver. You can’t shift with it on.”

Before I can ask any more questions, his hand connects with my ass once more, taking the air right out of my lungs. All I can really do is collapse into his lap, and see where this sensation will take me.

MADDOX

The first rays of morning sun filters through the window, casting a gentle glow across the room. I enter Lily's room, a plate of food balanced carefully in my hands. Each day, she's been brought her meals, a small gesture of care amidst the chaos surrounding us. But today's offering is different – it's more special, more deliberate.

The plate is adorned with a feast that goes beyond the usual fare of toast or cereal. A full breakfast spread greets her eyes; bacon, eggs, beans, sausages, all cooked to perfection, with a slice of buttered toast, roasted tomatoes glistening with flavor, and other delectable accompaniments. The aroma wafts through the air, which I hope calms her down.

I approach her with a small smile, setting the plate down on the bedside table. "I thought you might enjoy a heartier breakfast today," I say, my voice carrying a touch of genuine concern.

Lily's eyes light up at the sight of the meal, gratitude evident in her expression. "This looks amazing," she replies softly, her voice tinged with surprise and appreciation.

I settle into the chair beside her bed, watching as she picks up her fork and begins to eat. There's a sense of contentment in the room, which surprises me. I thought she'd be feistier, like she has been with Colt. As she savors each bite, I find myself drawn to the simple pleasure of sharing this moment with her because I can really study her beauty here.

I can see why Ryker likes her, because Lily is a red haired bombshell. I find myself drawn to her like a moth to a flame. I watch her features, loving the delicate blend of softness and strength. Her eyes contain a mesmerizing hue that shifts between shades of green and blue like a forest illuminated by sunlight. I can't get enough.

Then my eyes draw down her face. Her lips hold a natural curve, sometimes teasing with a hint of a smile that conveys a playful and confident side. Every movement she makes is a dance of elegance and grace, and her presence commands attention without her needing to ask for it. Her figure is a work of art, sculpted by a combination of genetics and a spirit that's unafraid to embrace her own identity. She's gorgeous, I'm struck by her. I don't know what to do about that. Not only because Ryker likes her, but because she's our captive as well. This isn't ideal.

Shit, I don't think I have ever felt this way about anyone before.

By the time she takes her last bite, I suck in a sharp breath, preparing myself for what's next. I know she isn't going to like it, but I need to say it anyway.

I clear my throat gently, breaking the comfortable silence that has settled over us. "It's time for you to bathe," I said, my tone gentle yet resolute.

She scoffs at the thought. "You're going to bathe me? You are joking, right?"

"Lily," I begin, my voice gentle yet firm, "last night reminded us that we can't afford to let our guard down. You tried to run away, and almost escaped, and after what happened, I can't risk leaving you alone. None of us can. We can't lose you now. Not at this pivotal moment."

She meets my gaze, her eyes a mixture of understanding and reluctance. Her vulnerability is palpable, a stark contrast to the vibrant spirit she usually exudes. "I can't shower alone?"

“I know it’s not ideal, and it might feel like your freedom is being restricted further,” I continue, my tone softening as I seek to bridge the gap between us. “But after your attempt to run, I have to ensure your safety as well as the safety of everyone involved.”

The room is steeped in a tense silence, the weight of our conversation hanging between us. I can see the conflict within her, the struggle to reconcile her desires with the stark reality of our circumstances. I wouldn’t want to be bathed either, but I also didn’t run.

“I don’t regret trying to run,” she barks at me. “Even if I was punished for it.”

“You were punished?” I snap back. “We didn’t discuss that.”

A pinkness stains her cheeks which adds way more mystery to this. I want to know what Colt did to her, but I don’t feel like she will say anything.

“Yeah... so I guess I would like to be bathed.” Her change of the subject puts me on edge. Whatever Colt did must have been so bad that she’s willing to strip down in front of me. But I can’t focus on this because it’s my job to bathe her.

“Okay, so come with me then. It’s time.”

I peel off her chains, preparing myself for a punch that doesn’t come, and I lead her to the bathroom, making sure I only offer her a gentle touch.

Once the water starts running into the bath, the atmosphere in the room shifts. A delicate tension hangs in the air as I set about preparing everything that she might actually need for a wash. The soft light filters through the window, casting a warm glow that envelopes the room. The scent of soap and warm water begins to fill the air as the water shimmers with the soft glow of the room.

“Okay, it’s ready now. It’s time to get in.”

Lily glares at me, making me turn around while she undresses herself. The door is locked behind us, so I know she won’t run anywhere, so I don’t really know why I’m nervous.

My heart is absolutely pounding against my rib cage, making it hard for me to breathe. There's a tremble racing through my body as I can sense her taking her clothing off behind me.

"Are you ready?" I cry out once the tension gets too much for me. "Can I turn?"

"Can I at least get in the water first? Or am I allowed no dignity whatsoever?"

I wait until I hear the splash in the water before I finally turn to see her. Most of her body is covered by bubbles, but that doesn't stop the nerves from zig zagging right through me. Luckily, Lily's eyes are closed so she doesn't see me watching her.

"You know what's weird?" Lily's voice breaks through the silence, jolting me from my thoughts as I'm about to settle on to the toilet lid. "You guys are all so different. I can't imagine you being friends. I don't know how you managed to form a pack."

"What... what do you mean?" I stammer back, not sure I want to hear this.

"Well, Ryker and Colt, they are the embodiment of strength and resilience. But something underneath their gruff exteriors seems to mask them, protecting them."

I can't say much about that. I mean, I know she's right, but I don't know how much they would like me to talk about them behind their back to our captive.

"But Novak, on the other hand... he's the gentle soul of the group. He's been really nice to me. Making me feel comfortable in this horrible situation."

I purse my lips tightly together, refusing to say a word. I might seem like I'm strong and in control of everything, especially when I'm charging at her with a gun and demanding that she get in the car... but there's so much more to me than that.

"You though..." Her eyes snap open and she stares at me, like her eyes are boring into my soul. "I don't know much about you, Maddox, which is strange since I'm naked here in

front of you.” She giggles and blushes all at once which sets me on edge. “Tell me about you.”

“What do you want to know?” I shift uncomfortably. I’m not used to talking about myself and it isn’t a position I like to find myself in much.

“Everything. I want to know all about you.”

Oh God. “Erm... well I’ve always had this thing for painting.”

Lily widens her eyes, curiosity glinting in her gaze. “Painting? That’s unexpected.”

A soft chuckle escapes my lips. “Yeah, I guess it is. But ever since I was a kid, it’s been one of those things that really relaxed me, no matter what’s happening around me.”

She studies me for a moment, her lips curling into a gentle smile. “I can imagine that. Painting can be pretty therapeutic. I’m no good at it, but it is something I enjoy. Have you been painting much recently? I would love to see what you can do.”

I feel like she’s saying that not because she’s trying to win me around so that she can escape, but because she actually cares. If only I had something to show her.

“Not exactly...” I hesitate, “...since I left the military and ended up here with Ryker, things have been... different. I haven’t had the time to paint as much as I would have liked.”

Lily’s brow furrows in understanding. “Different how?”

“With what we have going on here.” I make a sweeping gesture with my hands. “It keeps us very busy, you know? Not much time to put paint to paper.”

“Well that’s a real shame. I would love to see what you can do.”

Her words send a spark of warmth through my chest, a flicker of hope that perhaps my passion for painting isn’t entirely lost amidst the challenges of our new reality. The thought of sharing my art with someone, of letting them glimpse the world that exists within my mind’s eye, is both exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

“Yeah, well, maybe things will change. Maybe I will have the time at some point.”

She reaches out for the shampoo and squeezes a little out in to her hand.

“Mind if I help?” I offer, my voice gentle as I take the bottle from her.

Lily turns her head to look at me, a surprised smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “Oh, I didn’t expect that. Sure, if you don’t mind.”

She’s not the only one shocked. I don’t know why I’m doing this either, but I’ve started now, I can’t stop. I move closer, kneeling beside her as I dip my hands into the basin filled with water. With careful strokes, I begin to wet her hair, the strands darkening as they absorb the moisture. The sensation of the cool water against her scalp seems to relax her, a soft sigh escaping her lips.

For a while, there’s nothing but the sound of water trickling and our quiet breathing. The intimacy of the moment is unexpected, but it makes my heart sing.

“Thank you,” Lily murmurs, her eyes closed as she leans into the sensation. “This is strangely comforting. I don’t think I’ve ever had my hair washed before. Not that I can recall.”

I rinse the soap from her hair, the water cascading down in rivulets. Lily opens her eyes, and the gratitude that shimmers within us speaks volumes. It’s as if we’ve exchanged more than just water and soap; we’ve shared a connection that transcended words.

“You know, you could wash *more* than just my hair,” she declares, with a cheeky glint in her now open eyes. “The rest of me needs washing as well. And you did say that you’d bathe me.”

Is she joking? I can’t tell if she’s joking or not, which makes me very nervous. Hesitantly, I slide my hands down to her shoulders, and she doesn’t flinch, which I guess means she really does want this. Especially because she’s moaning like she actually really likes this.

“You have the best hands,” she murmurs, delight dripping off her tongue. “Seriously.”

Am I really doing this? I guess I am. My hands travel down even further, despite the way my heart is absolutely hammering against my rib cage. The feel of her soaking wet skin under my fingers is absolutely electric. Especially because her eyes are fixed firmly on mine the entire time. My touch might be light, but the way her body starts writhing under the water lets me know that she’s flaming with desire, possibly even more so than me.

Ryker likes her, I have to remind myself as my head starts to spin and I lose control. Plus she’s our hostage. Alistair’s daughter. I can’t... I can’t even think about this...

But yet I also can’t stop. My hands are edging lower down her body, watching as her back arches and she guides my hands to where I really want to touch her.

I don’t know how it happens, not really, I guess I really have lost control of myself. My eager fingers find their way between her thighs until I’m stroking her bare skin, witnessing her squirm with pleasure. That hooded deep desire in her gaze is almost too much for me to handle.

“Do you like that?” I whisper, my voice dark and husky.

“Yes,” she murmurs, her voice trembling with excitement. Her voice catches in her throat as I tease her entrance, finding my way to her most hyper-sensitive nub. My thumb brushes against her clit, sending waves of pleasure coursing through her body. She arches her back, crying out as the pressure builds inside her. My heart feels like it might erupt out of my chest.

I have never seen such a beautiful sight as Lily like this, submissive to my touch, her eyes closed tightly as she rides out the sensation. She’s wild and animalistic as she blooms and sets free, allowing a side of herself to erupt that she seems to be very inexperienced with. Fuck, I’m hardening against my trousers, threatening to explode.

We've crossed a line here. One that there's no coming back from. I'm supposed to be bathing her, not sending her to dizzying new heights of pleasure. How the hell did we even get all caught up in this? As Lily sinks down into the glorious post orgasmic bliss, I know the reality of this hasn't hit her yet. But it will. I need to back away before it does.

Oh God, does she have to be so beautiful? She's making my heart hurt.

As the minutes tick by while Lily relaxes, the realization settles in: soon, I'll have to take her back to the reality she desperately wants to escape. The memory of the chains that bind her to this place cut deep into my conscience. All I want to do is send her away.

"I suppose it's back to bed for me, huh?" she declares in almost a teasing tone, but I can sense the intense heaviness of her words. "We can't mess around like this all day long."

Even if we want to... I want to say, but I don't. I don't think that's a good idea when we've already made such a mess of things. Reluctantly, I step forward once more, the distance between us narrowing as I offer her a towel. The touch of her fingers against mine sends shockwaves through my senses, an electric jolt that momentarily overpowers my thoughts.

I'm never going to recover from what just happened. Ever.

"Thank you," she murmurs, as she rises upwards, allowing me to see her in all her glory this time around, as if I need my imagination to spin even more. I can't take my eyes off her as she wraps the towel around herself with a grace that makes me ache for her more.

As she turns to gather her scattered clothes, I watch the shadows dance on the walls, each flicker reflecting the inner turmoil that consumes me. I *could* just let her go here. I could betray everyone, all the people who have cared for me my whole life, and let Lily free. Maybe I could even run away with her, if that's what she wants to do...

But the idea of my best friends and my pack turning their back on me is too much to bear. So I continue on with what I

don't want to do, but what I know I need to.

The walk back to her room is a silent one, punctuated only by the soft padding of footsteps against cold stone. The corridor feels longer this time around, the walls closing in around me as though they, too, are privy to the gravity of the moment. I'm making a choice here, and I'm not happy about it. I don't know how I'm ever going to get over this...

We reach the door, its imposing presence a stark reminder of the boundaries that separate our worlds. Lily's gaze meets mine, a mixture of resignation and understanding. Without a word, I reach for the key hanging at my side, the cool metal biting into my palm as I push the door open.

The chains sit before us like a horrid reminder of what's next. Lily doesn't make a fuss as I connect her back to the bed where she's held prisoner, but that doesn't mean I like it. Seeing her so vulnerable and trapped really tugs at my heartstrings.

Once she's locked in place, I stand back for a moment, willing myself to speak all the words that need to be said, but unfortunately, nothing comes out. It's as if the words are trapped by an invisible ball lodged in the base of my throat.

I can't do it, I shouldn't be here, I need to go.

I can't even muster up a goodbye before I leave, which I'm sure really sucks. Lily must hate me as I spin on my heels, closing the door behind me. I walk quickly, needing to get away fast before anyone catches me. I can't talk to a single soul right now. My thoughts are a tempest, a chaotic swirl of emotions that I struggle to rein in. Among the tumultuous currents of my mind, Lily's image lingers like a fragile dream, ethereal and maddeningly captivating. There's no way I'll be able to act normal in front of the other guys. They know me well enough to know when something is up and I can't express the truth. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Finally, I make it. In the safety of my room, I can breathe once more. The soft glow of a lone lamp casts dancing shadows on the walls, mimicking the conflicting emotions within me. I pace back and forth, the scent of damp earth and

pine clinging to my clothes, a constant reminder that us wolves needing territory is why we're in this mess.

I sink onto the edge of the bed, burying my face in my hands as if the darkness can somehow shield me from the tumultuous storm within. How has my heart betrayed me so, straying into forbidden territory? Lily is not just an innocent bystander caught in the crossfire of our struggles; she's become a beacon of light, a reminder of the goodness that still exists beyond the shadows we inhabit. The only problem is, that light might shatter us all apart. If Ryker finds out...

Urgh, it doesn't even bear thinking about, so I return my thoughts to *her*.

The scent of her hair, the warmth of her laughter, the sweetness in her eyes. It haunts me, igniting an unfamiliar ache that resonates deep within. It isn't supposed to be this way. I can't allow myself to want her, to be captivated by the gentleness in her eyes and the courage in her voice. I mean, even if it weren't for everything else, she's way too good for me. Light where I am dark. Good, where I am caught up in a world of bad. I can't bring her into that.

I curl my hands up to fists, frustration and longing warring within me. I want to protect her, to shield her from the storms that rage in my world. I've seen what this life can do to people, how it can twist them into something unrecognizable. I can't let that happen to her. But even as I resolve to keep my distance, my thoughts keep drifting back to her, like a moth drawn to a flame.

I lean back against the cool wall, closing my eyes and trying to block out the chaos of emotions that threaten to consume me. I can still feel the soft feel of her skin underneath my fingers, the arch of her back as I made her feel good in this hell. I can still hear the sound of her laughter, the way it cut through the darkness like a ray of sunlight while we talked about books and movies.

I sighed heavily, the weight of my desires almost suffocating. I know what I have to do. I have to keep my distance to protect her from the darkness surrounding me.

Even if it means breaking my own heart in the process. It's the only way to keep her safe, to keep us both from falling into the abyss. Not only that, I have to think about Ryker and the mission at hand. I don't want to be the one to fuck that up. I can't. Not when me and my best friend have been through so much. I have to support him forever. I need to.

LILY

T *hat night*

THE ROOM IS CAST IN AN EERIE HALF-LIGHT, SHADOWS dancing like specters on the walls, as if they are privy to the storm brewing within me. I guess it's night time, which means another day has passed with me trapped in this hell. My thoughts are a tumultuous whirlwind of conflicting emotions, all surrounding these men.

Ryker, the alpha of this pack, the man whose touch still haunts my dreams. The man I know I should hate, but that remains at the forefront of my mind in an exciting way anyway. I close my eyes, trying to suppress the rising tide of emotions that threaten to engulf me. I'm *not* going to cry because of him, I refuse. Even after everything that he's done to me. He doesn't deserve that. No one deserves my tears.

I always thought that Ryker carried an air of authority and intensity, traits that had drawn me in from the start. That was why I was obsessed with him when I saw him on the news. No matter what the reports were, even when it was because of his dangerous lifestyle, I thought that he was dark and mysterious. Exciting too, which was why I allowed myself to cave to him easily.

That night was a blur of passion and abandon, the heat of our bodies fueled by the idea that we might not see one another again. Or at least I thought so. When he suggested that

we might date, I didn't really believe him. How could someone like *him* want me? Little did I know he wanted me because of who my father is, and to do this to me.

Desire, frustration, resentment, the volatile mix that simmers within me burns bright, but it doesn't overshadow everything. The magnetic pull I still feel toward him is infuriating, a reminder of the vulnerability that lies beneath the layers of defiance I've carefully cultivated. I loathe how he can still stir my senses, how his presence can send ripples through my carefully constructed resolve. But of course, he isn't the only one.

Novak. The name itself seems to evoke a sense of calm, a respite from the tumultuous currents that churn within me. His presence has been a constant amidst the chaos, a steady anchor in the storm that has become my reality, which is why I have come to rely on him in ways I never expected. His sweet smile has become one of the highlights of my day.

With a sigh, I let myself sink deeper into the pillows, closing my eyes as if to shut out the world for a fleeting moment. Novak's unwavering kindness; it's a beacon of light in the darkness that has become my existence. The way he looks at me, as if he can see past the walls I have erected, as if he can glimpse the real me beneath the surface. And I kinda want him to...

And then there was that kiss – a memory that dances at the edge of my consciousness, a whisper of soft lips against mine, a moment of connection that took me by surprise. It was a simple, sweet gesture, a fleeting touch that held within it a promise of something more.

But what more can happen between us? Seriously? Soon they will kick me out of here and never think of me again. But I will be left with the endless imprints on my mind.

Of course, I can't forget the fiery moments I've had here too, all with Colt. The fire of his presence burns through the cold veneer that has become my armor. The memory of that strike, the sharp sound of my fist connecting with his jaw – it

was an explosion of frustration, a release of pent up emotions that had found an outlet in the heat of the moment.

But even as anger surged through my veins, so did something else. Something more tumultuous, something I have yet to understand. Because despite the violence, despite the stark clash of our wills, Colt was the one to find me and bring me back here when I'm sure he's sick of me. He could have let me go and never had to deal with me again. But he didn't...

He brought me back to *punish* me. If we can call it that. I don't know how I should feel about the spanking, but it's been on my mind endlessly. It was a clash of dominance and defiance in the moment. It was a twisted dance, a push and pull of desires and boundaries that left me reeling, questioning my own reactions. Did I like that? I really did like it. I like *him*, I think.

As I contemplate why I might feel this way, I realize that Colt's presence in my life has awoken something within me. A thirst for authenticity, a yearning to embrace the messy, raw edges of who I am. His fire has illuminated the darkness that has settled over my heart, and in doing so, has ignited a fire of my own. One that might not be so easy to put out.

Just like Maddox, and what he's done to me as well. What an unexpected treat the man with the gun has become. I never would have thought that he could be so nice... but he has been, he really has. The memory of him tending to me, his care evident in every gesture as he washed me, lingers in my mind like a fragile whisper. In the moments the water cascaded over my skin while he was touching me, there had been a fleeting sense of normalcy and excitement, a fleeting taste of what life might have been like if circumstances were different. How things could have been if we'd met under better circumstances so we could just be together maybe.

I mean, we have a lot in common, so it really could be a thing. If it wasn't for the kidnapping. Oh, and the other men of course. I'm weirdly attracted to them all.

As the night wears on, I let the rhythm of my breathing guide me, grounding me in the present moment. The desires

might still linger beneath the surface, but I have to navigate this labyrinthine world with a clear head, refusing to let my heart's whispers lead me astray.

As if on cue, the door swings open, reminding me about the outside world, revealing Ryker dressed in a sleek black suit that seems to accentuate the intensity in his gaze. His presence is like a bolt of lightning, electrifying the very air around him. My heart pounds in my chest, a mix of anger and defiance surging through my veins as I bolt up into a sitting position.

Before I can even fully process his appearance, instinct takes over. My muscles coil with tension, and in an instant, I'm on my feet and sprinting towards him, fueled by a fury that has been building for far too long. My fists clench, my jaw sets with a fighter's spirit, determined to confront him, to demand answers, to shatter the chains that bind us to this twisted dance.

He got me in this mess, and he needs to be the one to get me out of it.

But reality crashes back down on me like a tidal wave. The chains, those cruel reminders of my captivity, yank me back with brutal force, halting my charge in its tracks. The impact is jarring, the metal links biting into my skin like the cruel talons of a predator, imprisoning me once more in a web of confinement, nearly causing me to tumble back in a pathetic heap on the floor.

"Enough, Lily," Ryker's voice is a low, controlled growl, an echo of the power he holds over me. He approaches, his steps unhurried despite the tension in the air. "Did you really think you could break free that easily? Come on, you've been here long enough to know that won't work."

My breath comes in ragged gasps as I struggle against the chains, my heart pounding, not just from the physical effort, but from the clash of emotions that threaten to overwhelm me. Anger, fear, frustration, they swirl together, a maelstrom of feelings I can barely contain. How *dare* Ryker speak to me like this? How can he tease me when I'm in such a mess?

“You can’t keep me here forever,” I spit out, the words punctuated by a raw edge of desperation. “You can’t keep this up forever. Have you even bothered to meet with my father yet?”

The chains rattle as I strain against them, a wild, primal frustration coursing through me. My gaze locks with his, a volatile mix of anger and determination. In that moment, it’s as if the chains are a physical manifestation of the binds that shackle my soul, the conflict that wages within me. Fucking Ryker, what the hell is he playing at?

“Lily,” Ryker starts, his voice a mere whisper, laced with a complex array of emotions – regret, earnestness, and something that resembles hope. “Listen to me.”

I meet his gaze, my expression guarded, my heart a tangle of unresolved emotions. My name hangs between us, like a bridge waiting to be crossed, a bridge that will take us to the heart of the truth that has remained elusive. He *needs* to be honest with me now, he has to be.

He takes another step forward, his gaze locks with mine, a fire of determination burning in his eyes. “I need you to understand,” he begins, his words measured, as though he’s carefully choosing each one. “That things aren’t exactly going the way I planned.”

I watch him, waiting, allowing the space between us to be a canvas upon which his intentions can unfold. There’s a heaviness in the air, an unspoken tension that hangs like a fog.

“After that first night together,” he continues, his voice carrying a weight of its own, “I didn’t want things to be like this. If it were up to me, I’d have abandoned this whole plan a while ago.”

My brow furrows, confusion knitting my features. Ryker’s admission is unexpected, a crack in the façade of the leader who has seemed so unyielding. It’s as though a curtain has been drawn back, revealing the vulnerability beneath.

“So, why haven’t you abandoned it then?” I demand, needing an explanation.

He draws a deep breath, his eyes never leaving mine. “But things changed. Your father... he’s become too powerful for his own good. His reach extends far beyond what we imagined, and if we don’t put a stop to him, the consequences could be catastrophic.”

The weight of his words settles on me, the truth of his revelations sinking in. I don’t know much about what my father is up to, he never tells me, but I know it’s never good, and if what Ryker is saying is the truth, then I guess someone needs to do something. The more power that man gets, the more danger he puts everyone in. Even my mother being killed by his rival when I was only twelve years old didn’t change him. Not for the better anyway. Everything after that only seemed to make him worse. But I don’t know if I like what’s happening anyway. I don’t want to be trapped here, and I also don’t want Ryker to be the one to confront him. It’s too dangerous!

“I know this isn’t what you signed up for,” Ryker’s voice holds a note of apology, a glimpse of the understanding he has for me. “I want you to know that every decision I’ve made, every action I’ve taken, it’s been with the intent of protecting our pack, of protecting you too.”

Protecting me? That doesn’t make too much sense. The air is charged with an electricity that matches the storm brewing within me as I face Ryker, the man who has become both an enigma and a force of undeniable influence in my life in the short time that I have known him.

“I don’t understand,” I finally manage to spit out. “I don’t feel protected here.”

“Hmph,” he scoffs barely acknowledging me. “But you are.”

Fury courses through my veins, a seething anger that seems to consume all rational thought. Is he dismissing me completely? I won’t let that happen.

“How can I feel protected?” I snap out, trying to swallow the bitter pill that this conversation has become. “When you made me feel special just for some power play?”

The words are sharp, a blade honed by the rawness of my emotions. My gaze bears into his, a mixture of accusation and disbelief. Ryker's expression remains steady, but there's a flicker of something deeper in his eyes – a glimmer of regret, a shadow of understanding.

“It wasn't just that,” he replies, his voice soft yet resolute. “I didn't expect to like you as much as I did. Instantly, I was struck by you, and I haven't been able to get you off my mind since.”

Well, what the hell am I supposed to do with this information now? He *likes* me? My God, my heart stops beating as I let that sink in a little. I find myself grappling with a strange contradiction. I'm not hurt in the way I could be. This isn't hell, I guess...

The emotions that should have accompanied such a revelation are muddled, a puzzle I can't quite solve. How else would I have crossed paths with the others – Maddox, Colt, and Novak – if this didn't happen? How would I have felt all those things if this never happened?

The thought brings me up short, forcing me to confront a truth I'm hesitant to acknowledge. Ryker's actions, however misguided, have set in motion a series of events that have introduced me to a cast of wolves who have changed the trajectory of my life. It's as though destiny has unfolded in the most unexpected of ways. How can I hate him for that?

But then Ryker ruins everything by scoffing all over again, dismissing me in a way I hate. The air is thick with tension, the aftermath of our conversation lingering like a storm cloud over the room. Ryker's scoff becomes a spark, igniting the fire of my anger once more, a flame that threatens to consume me whole. But this time, it's different. I refuse to let my emotions be dismissed or belittled. I won't let Ryker make me feel like I am nothing.

As the echo of his scoff reverberates in the air, I feel a surge of something raw and primal within me. It's as though a dam has burst, releasing a torrent of frustration and fury that I

thought I locked away. The further it burns up in my body, the more irritated I become.

Ryker approaches me, his expression a mixture of apprehension and resignation, as if he knows what is about to unfold. But my rage is a tempest, a force that demands to be reckoned with. Without hesitation, without giving him a chance to speak or deflect, I raise my hand and slap him across the face, enjoying the feel of my body connecting with his like this.

The sound is a thunderous clap, a physical manifestation of the anger that has built up within me. Ryker's head turns with the force of the blow, but he doesn't retaliate. There's a resignation in his eyes, a silent acknowledgment of the punishment he knows he deserves.

The slap was a release, a cathartic explosion of emotions. But it isn't enough. The rage still simmers, a molten core that refuses to be quenched. I raise my hand again and strike him once more, the impact sending a jolt of pain up my arm.

He doesn't move, doesn't react beyond a flicker in his eyes. And so, I strike him again, the sting in my palm mirroring the intensity of my emotions. It's as though each slap is a form of retribution, a demand for him to feel the weight of my anger, the frustration of being manipulated and controlled, and being left helpless in this God damn room.

The charged atmosphere in the room seems to thicken with each and every slap, the tension between Ryker and me a living, breathing entity that refuses to be ignored. His unflinching gaze holds mine, a silent challenge that seems to ignite the air around us.

It's as if the energy of our emotions has taken on a life of its own, spiraling into a vortex of conflicting desires. Without words, without hesitation, I close the distance between us, my steps purposeful, my heart pounding in my chest. It's a reckless act, driven by the intensity of the moment, the tumultuous whirlwind of emotions that has brought us to this precipice.

And then, it happens. Our lips meet in a clash of longing and intensity, a kiss that seems to bridge the gap between anger and desire. The taste of him is both familiar and foreign, making me want more. My hands trail his body, my fingers mapping the contours of muscle and strength. The physicality of the moment is intoxicating, a heady rush that drowns out everything else. It's as if the touch, the kiss, are a manifestation of everything we can't say with words.

As our bodies press together, the heat of our connection seems to spark a fire that blazes within me. The old saying 'A girl never forgets her first' flashes in my mind, the truth of it resonating in the depths of my being. This is uncharted territory, a moment that will be etched into the fabric of my memories while I'm here. Stuck under this man's control and power, which is a really strange place for me to be when all I want to do is overpower him...

I can't help but throw myself into the kiss. Ryker's unflinching demeanor only seems to fan the flames, his unyielding strength a magnet for the chaos that swirls within me.

But as the kiss deepens, as our bodies press closer, I feel a flicker of something more beneath, something that we will always share.

"Listen," his voice is a hushed murmur, heavy with a mixture of determination and apprehension as he pulls apart. "There's something I have to do tonight. It's... complicated."

I nod, barely able to form words as I wait for him to continue. "Hmm, yeah I guessed as much. I didn't think that suit was just for me."

"I'm meeting with your father," he reveals, the weight of the confession settling between us like a heavy shroud. "And I... I plan to use you as leverage against him."

My heart skips a beat, the implications of his words crashing into me like a tidal wave. Use me as leverage? Against my own father? That seems fucked up.

“How?” The question is a whisper, a fragile thread of sound that barely escapes my lips. Does he know that my mother was killed in front of him – if the rumors are to be believed – and he didn’t care? What makes Ryker so sure that he will care about me?

“I think us having someone he cares so much about will change his mind.” He seems to sense my hesitation. “I didn’t want to keep you in the dark,” he hisses, his eyes pleading for understanding.

“What do you want from me then?” I finally manage to find my voice, the words quivering with a mixture of vulnerability and fear.

He takes a deep breath, his gaze wobbling curiously. “I’m coming to you to ask what you think of the plan. If you’re on board with it, it might just work. But if you’re not... I’ll find another way. I won’t force you into this.”

Urgh, well what am I supposed to say to that? It’s my only chance at freedom. But now I’m confused as to what freedom will look like. Where will I go? Back home? The thought of returning home is a chilling specter that looms over me. The mansion’s opulent halls hold memories that are both tender and nightmarish, and the idea of once again being ensnared by my father’s oppressive influence sends shivers down my spine.

And then, there’s the alternative, an option I hadn’t dared consider until now. The four men who have become a paradox in my life: both captors and saviors, disciplinarians and companions. They have shown me kindness, tenderness, and a strange sense of belonging. The unsettling mix of emotions I feel around them is a confounding puzzle I struggle to solve. Could I stay here with them? Not as a victim anymore, but as someone who belongs?

I guess only time will tell with that one.

“Ryker...” I venture, my voice tentative because I have to be honest. It’s the only way. “...using me against my father... it won’t work. He cares more about power than he does about me.”

A wry smile tugs at the corner of Ryker's lips, his gaze holding mine steadily. "Funny, isn't it?"

I furrow my brows, puzzled by his response. "What's that?"

He chuckles softly, the sound carrying a mix of bitterness and revelation. "I used to be just like him until I met you."

Before I can respond to this heavy statement, Ryker does something else surprising. With a determined yet gentle touch, Ryker's fingers move to the bindings that have held me captive for far too long. The sensation of the chains slipping away feels both liberating and unnerving, like shedding a skin I have worn for an eternity.

"What are you doing?" I ask him cautiously, sucking in a breath as he unclips the neck chain, his breath tickling all over me.

"You're free to move around the house now," Ryker's voice is soft, his words laced with a solemnity that matches the weight of the moment.

Freedom. The word echoes in my mind, a tantalizing concept that once seemed unattainable. Yet, as the reality of it settles over me, a surge of conflicting emotions rises within. The thought of fleeing, of running as far and as fast as my legs can carry me, teases at the edges of my mind. But even as the thought lingers, it's swiftly quelled by a different desire, one that tugs at my heart with an insistent pull.

The urge to stay is a bewildering contradiction, a paradox that defies the logic I have clung to for so long. The four men who have kept me captive have also shown me a world beyond the mansion's walls. They have shown me affection. It's a twisted form of care that has burrowed its way into my heart, making me question the very foundation of my beliefs.

"I know you might be tempted to run," Ryker murmurs softly, as if he can see right into my brain, "but I want you to know that if you choose that path, you won't make it far. We'll find you."

In that moment, with my eyes locked in on his, I make my choice. The thoughts of escape are silenced by the yearning to belong, to be a part of something new.

The chains that once bound me are now replaced by the ties of choice, a paradoxical freedom that's uniquely my own. That feels so much better, although I still don't know where it will lead me.

RYKER

The tension in the air is palpable as I make my way to the meeting point – Alistair’s bar – my footsteps echoing through the dimly lit alley. The shadows seem to dance around me, a fitting backdrop to the perilous game I’m about to play. Every instinct screams at me to turn back, to reconsider my decision to meet Alistair Crowe alone. But sometimes, the path to victory requires daring leaps into the unknown.

My crew were vehemently against this decision, their voices a chorus of caution and concern. They argued that facing Alistair Crowe, a man with a reputation for ruthlessness, was foolhardy, especially without their backup. But as I step further into the darkness, driven by a mix of determination and intuition, I can’t help but feel that the risks are worth the potential rewards.

Alistair Crowe, a name that carries weight and dread in equal measure. He’s a man shrouded in mystery, a puppet master who pulls the strings of a shadowy empire willing to do anything for power and territory. Rumors and whispers have painted him as a man devoid of compassion, a calculating figure who prizes power above all else. But as I navigate the labyrinthine path to our meeting spot, my thoughts are centered on a different facet of this enigmatic man.

Lily. His daughter, the pawn in this dangerous game. The threads of connection between us are far from conventional, and yet they are undeniable. The way she had spoken of her father, the layers of pain and abandonment in her words – they

are fragments of a much larger puzzle. I know better than to underestimate the depth of a father's love, no matter how twisted his actions might seem. And that is something I will use to my advantage.

As I enter the secluded room, the scent of cigars and aged whiskey hangs heavy in the air. Alistair Crowe sits at the head of the table, his posture composed, his expression unreadable. The weight of his gaze bears into me, a silent assessment that's both unnerving and expected.

The tables have been arranged for an undisclosed gathering and everyone immediately turns to face me. They look like soldiers aligning themselves against an approaching threat. The sight is both ominous and calculated, a silent message that I'm entering a realm of power dynamics that I have to navigate with care. But I did expect this, right?

The eyes of Alistair's men lock on me, their gazes fixed and unwavering. The tension in the air is palpable, a blend of apprehension and readiness that swoops above us like a storm cloud. Their fingers dance near the triggers of their weapons, a silent reminder that their loyalty lies with their employer, their fingers itching to unleash the deadly force that rests in their hands.

Despite the hostile tableau surrounding me, there's a subtle nuance to the situation that does not escape my attention. No one points their weapon directly at me, the barrels of their guns aimed just slightly off target. It's a calculated move, a clear message that I have to behave just as Alistair wants me to. There's no messing around here. Not that I came in thinking there would be.

I walk further into the room, my steps measured and deliberate. My gaze locks onto Alistair Crowe, who's smiling at me with a composed demeanor that belies the tension that crackles beneath the surface. His expression is a mask of control, an artful display of authority that he wields like a weapon. He really is something else, isn't he?

"Ryker," Alistair's voice cuts through the charged silence, his tone a mix of indifference and curiosity. It's amazing

really, how he can hold himself back in such a way.

“Alistair,” I shoot back, my voice even and unruffled.

The stand-off quickly becomes a dance of intentions, a careful choreography of power and threat. The room itself seems to be holding its breath, the very walls aware of the weight of the moment. As I continue to approach, the eyes of Alistair’s men remain fixed on me, their fingers still hovering near their weapons, ready to act at a moment’s notice.

Alistair’s gaze never wavers, his eyes lock on to mine with an intensity that sends a chill down my spine. There’s something within that gaze, a hint of recognition, a silent acknowledgment of the complex tapestry that connects us. We are both players in this extremely dangerous game, each driven by motives that are not as black and white as they seem.

“Alistair,” I finally speak, my voice carrying a quiet confidence that matched his own. “We both know why I’m here, don’t we?” I take a seat opposite him.

His lips curve to a subtle smile, a mixture of amusement and something deeper that eludes my understanding. “Indeed, we do. Because you’re playing a dangerous game, am I right?”

“As are you,” I retorted, my gaze unyielding as I jut my chin out angrily. “I mean, this is your flesh and blood we’re talking about, isn’t it?”

Alistair Crowe’s eyes flicker, a shadow of something crossing his features before he schools his expression once more. “She means nothing to me.”

The words are a lie, a façade that neither of us believe. Lily might believe that her father has abandoned her, that his heart is a cold and empty void. But I know that beneath the layers of manipulation and power, there’s a flicker of humanity within him. A glimmer of a father’s love that refuses to be entirely extinguished.

And if I’m wrong, and he really doesn’t give a shit, then he’s going to have to think about how this looks, right? It doesn’t make him look strong to have his own daughter

whipped away from him, right from under his nose, and for him to do nothing about it.

“Cut the act, Alistair,” I growl, my voice a low and steady challenge. “You might be able to fool the world, but you can’t fool me.”

For a moment, his façade wavers, and I catch a glimpse of something raw and unguarded in his gaze. It’s a fleeting vulnerability, a chink in his armor that exposes the truth he desperately wants to bury. Lily is not a mere pawn to him, a disposable piece on the chessboard of his machinations.

“You think you understand me?” he sneers, the walls of his defense rising once more. “I take it you haven’t heard the story of my wife.”

I say nothing, because, truth be told, I don’t know much about his past. Alistair’s gaze remains fixed on me, his eyes an enigmatic mix of calculation and detachment. The room seems to shrink around us, the weight of his presence suffusing the air with a chilling intensity. My heart races with anticipation as I sit before him, leaning my elbows on the table.

“There was a time, years ago, when a rival crossed me. A young rival, a bit like you.” He chuckles but no one joins in. “He sought to challenge my hold over certain territories, to prove himself a force to be reckoned with. He wanted to send a message.”

“I... I see,” I stammer because it seems like he expects me to say *something*.

“He came to my home, my sanctuary,” Alistair’s voice remains strangely steady, his gaze distant as if reliving a memory. “He killed her right in front of me. My wife. The person I had chosen to share my life with, in an attempt to take control of the situation.”

The room feels colder, the weight of Alistair’s words settling over us like a shroud of darkness. The story he tells is of unfathomable loss, a testimony to the depths of cruelty and power that defines the world we inhabit. But he says it as if he’s ordering lunch.

“It was a message, you see,” Alistair continues, his eyes locking onto mine with a chilling intensity. “A message that in this world, emotions are weaknesses, vulnerabilities that can be exploited. My daughter, Lily, she is no different. She’s a pawn in a game far larger than any of us. I don’t know what you think you’re going to achieve with this little game, but I can assure you it won’t work. I am *not* going to lean into what you want from me.”

The implications of his words hang in the air, a lingering reminder of the truth I’ve grappled with since I first met Lily. The revelation of his own tragic past is a calculated maneuver, a method to underscore the ruthlessness he believes necessary to survive in this world.

“Do you think I care for her?” Alistair’s voice turns icier, his gaze unyielding. “You might believe she’s my weakness, but she’s simply a means to an end. A way to keep my rivals in check, to maintain the balance of power. If I can lose my wife, I can lose anyone.”

I look at him, the pieces of the puzzle coming together in a way I had not anticipated. Alistair’s demeanor is a mask, a shield he has forged to protect himself from the pain of a world that has stripped him of his humanity. The story he just shared is not just a tale of personal tragedy – it’s a manifesto of survival.

Finally, as the echoes of his words fade, I know it’s time to play my hand. My gaze meets his, a silent challenge exchanged between predators. I lean forward, my voice carrying a quiet intensity as I break the silence that has settled over us.

“Alistair,” I begin, my tone measured and unyielding. “We have your daughter. She’s ours, kidnapped by us.” I need to rile him up as much as I can, to crack this cold façade of his. “She’s safe for the time being, but I can’t promise you that it will last if you continue to play this dangerous game. Pretending you don’t care won’t make the pain any less intense when she’s killed.”

He regards me with a mix of intrigue and skepticism, his wolf bristling underneath the surface. I can sense how strong his wolf is, but that won't stop me. "So, what do you want from me, Ryker?"

I take a deep breath, my voice steady as I unveil my proposition, a proposition that holds the potential to shift the balance of power in our world. "I want you to back down from this aggressive expansion. I want you to start settling down, consolidating your resources. I'm the big dog in this territory, Alistair, and I don't like sharing."

Alistair's expression remains guarded, his fingers tapping a rhythm on the table. "And what do I get in return for this concession?"

He can't seriously be backing down already, can he? No way, not in front of his men. This is more of his game playing, and I'm happy to keep on toying with him.

"Your daughter's safety, for one. And a guarantee that the power struggles will ease. You'll have a chance to live a life where you don't constantly have to look over your shoulder."

Alistair's lips curl into a bitter smile, a mixture of amusement and disdain. "And if I refuse?"

My response is a quiet yet potent ultimatum, a challenge that cuts through the layers of pretense. Even every simple man with a gun in here will understand it. "If you refuse, Alistair, you'll find that the risks outweigh the rewards. The consequences will be dire for both you and your daughter."

The room seems to vibrate with tension, a battleground of intentions and power dynamics. Alistair's decision weighs in the air, a precipice that will determine the course of our future interactions. He needs to play this game right or it's game over for everyone.

"What makes you think I won't kill you where you sit?"

I laugh out loud, letting the sound of mirth ricochet through the whole room. "Because, Alistair, if you do something that stupid, your daughter won't live to see the morning. And you can say as much as you want that you don't

care about her, and maybe you don't, but you wouldn't want to look like a weak man who sat back and allowed his daughter to die, would you?"

I cock my head to one side as Alistair's façade falters, his composure giving way to a flicker of genuine fear that dances in his eyes. For a fleeting moment, the veneer of power and control that has shrouded him crumbles, exposing the vulnerability beneath. I'm sure I'm not the only one who sees it. But no one else reacts, so I make sure that I don't either.

His voice becomes a low rumble, tinged with a mixture of resignation and desperation. "You're playing a dangerous game, Ryker. But make no mistake, we're not going to let this go. I'll send all my forces after you and your pack until my daughter is safe."

"You would rather fight than settle down?" I mock. "That is a surprise."

The room seems to close in around us, the air heavy with the weight of an impending storm. The threat he poses is not to be taken lightly, a reminder that this battle will not be resolved easily or quickly. Alistair's conviction is unwavering, his determination matched only by the ruthlessness that has earned him his reputation.

"Then it seems we're at an impasse," I continue evenly, my voice a measured reflection of his own resolve. "So be it."

Alistair's lips twist into a sardonic smile, a manifestation of the chaotic dance we're doing. "This war will go on for eternity if it has to, Ryker. But know this: you will pay."

His words are both a threat and a promise, a declaration of the long and bloody struggle that awaits us if I leave this room with the way things are. But I'm not ready to leave just yet. Not when I have someone back at home worth making this work for.

I meet Alistair's gaze with a resolve born from conviction. "I'm aware of the consequences, Alistair. But sometimes, the cost is worth the fight."

His lips tighten into a thin line, the mask of indifference cracking under the weight of our exchange. The battle lines have been drawn, the pieces set in motion. We are two alphas locked in a battle for supremacy, each driven by our own agendas.

“You’re a stubborn one, Ryker,” Alistair concedes, his tone a mixture of begrudging respect and veiled warning. “That stubbornness might end up getting you killed.”

“Same could be said to you,” I remind him, a flicker of a smile touching my lips. “But sometimes, it’s the stubborn ones who reshape the world.”

Speaking of reshaping the world, I consider the person I want to change the way things are for.

In my mind’s eye, I see Lily, the woman who has become more than a pawn, more than a player in this dangerous game. She’s the beacon of light in a world that often embraced darkness, a figure that stands as a testament to the complexities of the heart. My thoughts shifted beyond the immediate conflicts, beyond the power struggles that threatened to consume us all.

I envision a life beyond the battles, beyond the ceaseless clash of dominance. It’s a life filled with laughter, with the patter of children’s feet echoing through the halls of a home that’s both sanctuary and refuge. The image of Lily’s smile, unburdened by the weight of her past, fills me with a sense of purpose that transcends the chaos surrounding us.

As Alistair continues to bark about the war that looms ahead if he carries on the way that he is, my thoughts remain firmly fixed on Lily and on the life we could build together, on the love that could flourish even in the midst of adversity. I picture moments of tenderness, of stolen glances and shared secrets, of nights spent wrapped in each other’s embrace. It’s a world that exists far beyond all of *this*.

Alistair’s words wash over me, each threat a hollow echo against the vivid dreams that have taken root in my mind. The images of a future with Lily, a life filled with love and warmth, persist even as his voice grows louder and more

intense. His threats are like a storm that raged outside a sanctuary of my own making.

As the verbal barrage reaches its crescendo, I find myself standing from the table, the urgency of the moment driving me to action. My gaze sweeps across the room, briefly catching the eye of a waitress who had set a drink on the table. I reach for the glass, the cool liquid a temporary respite from the turmoil of the conversation.

Taking a sip, I turn my attention back to Alistair, his face contorted by anger and determination. But in the midst of his tirade, his threats and boasts, I maintain a sense of composure, an understanding that my motivations extend beyond the immediate exchange.

“I’ll give you a few days to think it over,” I state firmly, my tone unwavering. “But you better hurry. The clock is ticking.”

Leaving the room, the echoes of Alistair’s voice still reverberate in my ears. The weight of his threats and fury linger, a constant reminder of the dangerous game that has been set in motion. As I step away from the confrontation, his shouts and screams form a discordant symphony that fades into the distance, but they don’t affect me. Not as much as they should. Of course it would have been so much easier for Alistair to just agree to my demands, but I kinda knew that would never happen. I knew a fight would come. I just didn’t know it would hold so much significance and that I would have so much weight pressing down on me.

With each step I take, I find myself replaying the exchange in my mind. The exchange was more than just words. It was a declaration of intent, a line drawn in the sand that will determine the course of our future. I can’t deny the heaviness that settles in my chest, the realization that the path I have chosen is fraught with uncertainty, danger, and sacrifice.

For Lily, most of all. She is going to hate this. I’ll also probably get an ‘I told you so,’ but I still don’t believe her father doesn’t care. It’s all a lie. I’m sure that after losing his

wife, the idea of losing Lily will kill him. Thankfully, it won't come to that, but I want him to know it could.

As the sounds of the city envelopes me, I walk on, my thoughts a whirlwind of emotions and calculations. The clock is ticking, just like I said, and every second that passes carries us closer to a moment of reckoning. If Alistair is going to fight, and to come for us, then we need to be ready for it. All of us have to be on alert so *no one* gets hurt. It isn't just Lily I need to protect, but my best friends and pack as well. They need me to be strong for them.

Amidst the tumultuous currents of my thoughts, a familiar figure emerges. Maddox. Memories of battles fought side by side, of shared struggles and victories, flood my mind. He's been there when I needed him the most, a steadfast presence in the chaos of war. Now, as the tides of conflict shift once again, the roles are reversed. I need to keep him alive.

Then there is another person who has always relied on me. A young boy who entered my life as an orphan, seeking refuge and a sense of belonging. Novak's face, a blend of innocence and resilience, comes to the forefront of my mind. The sweet man who has always calmed me down when I've gotten too hot-headed for my own good.

I find myself wondering if Novak is truly ready for the challenges that lay ahead. The battles he faced in his young life are far from ordinary, but this conflict is unlike anything he has directly encountered before. If Alistair comes to us, he will have no choice but to fight.

Colt, I can depend on to want to fight. His fiery spirit has always burned bright. But he's also impulsive and might need to be reined in a little, if I can. So *we* aren't the ones to start the fight. I don't want that. It needs to be Alistair's silly choice, not ours. He needs to be the crazy one who shatters the peace because he's the bad guy here, not me.

This is going to get messy for sure. There's no doubt about it. The pieces are set in motion, the lines drawn in the sand. The storm of war looms on the horizon, its thunderous approach an undeniable reality that casts a shadow over our

world. The destinies of Lily, Maddox, Novak, Colt, and myself are intertwined, woven together by the threads of fate and circumstances. Alistair might be the one with our fate in his hands at the moment, but I'm not going to be defeated. The young buck who tried to challenge Alistair before obviously didn't win, but that won't be me. I'm no loser. No way.

LILY

The morning sun casts a warm glow through the dining room windows, illuminating the table where Novak and I are sitting. The room is filled with the comforting aroma of freshly cooked breakfast, a welcome respite from the intensity of the world outside. As I take a bite of my meal, the flavors dance on my taste buds, a simple pleasure that feels almost decadent in the midst of our uncertain times. As I sip my coffee, my gaze shifts to Novak. He's focused on his plate, his expression thoughtful as if lost in his own world. With a casual tone, I decide to broach a subject that has been on my mind ever since he left last night.

"So, have you seen Ryker this morning?" I ask, attempting to keep the question light. I don't know how much I'm supposed to know about him seeing my father. I guess I'll find out.

Novak's gaze lifts to meet mine, his eyes guarded for a brief moment before he offers a small, nonchalant smile. "Oh, Ryker? Yeah, he was up and about early. Said he had some things to take care of. I'm sure he won't be very long..."

I raise an eyebrow, his evasive response not going unnoticed. "Really? Any idea what those 'things' might be?" If this is related to my father, then I deserve to know, right?

Novak's smile remains, but there's a subtle tension in his posture. "You know Ryker, always busy with something. I'm sure he'll fill us in when he's ready."

I can't help but feel a sense of curiosity prick at me. Novak's usually open demeanor has taken on a guarded edge, leaving me with the impression that there's more to the story than he's letting on. But rather than pressing the issue further, I decide to take his lead and change the subject. Ryker will be back soon, like he said, and he will *have* to tell me what's happening.

"True, he does have a way of staying busy," I reply, my tone casual as I take another bite of my breakfast. "So, what are your plans for the day?"

Novak seems to relax slightly, the tension in his shoulders easing. "Just some training sessions with Colt and the others. You know, keeping ourselves sharp. For whatever might come..."

"And what might come?" I cock my head to one side curiously.

Novak's gaze meets mine, his expression thoughtful as he considers his words. He hesitates for a moment, as if carefully weighing what he can reveal. A fleeting glimpse of something in his eyes, a mixture of determination and concern, hints at the gravity of his unspoken thoughts.

My heart pounds with anticipation and ice cold fear.

He clears his throat, his tone slightly more somber now. "Well, you know, with everything that's been going on lately, it's hard to predict what challenges might come our way. We've faced a lot before, but starting a fight with your father... that's heavy."

I nod in agreement, understanding the weight of his words. My father will turn this into a real battle, and the war will be a formidable adversary, its unpredictability a constant reminder that our world could change in an instant.

I know I'm a captive, bound not just by the physical confines of my situation, but by the intricate web of circumstances that have led me to this point. Yet, despite the constraints, there's a dichotomy within me that's hard to ignore. I've been treated well by the guys, Ryker and the

others, and there's a growing familiarity, even a sense of camaraderie, that's woven itself into my experience. It's a contradiction that troubles me – my captivity juxtaposed against the unexpected connection I've formed with them. I don't know what any of it means.

The term "Stockholm syndrome" hovers at the back of my mind like an uninvited guest. It's a concept I'm familiar with, a psychological phenomenon where hostages develop a bond with their captors as a survival mechanism. Yet, there's something more complex at play here. A part of me acknowledges the possibility, the natural inclination to adapt to my circumstances in order to find a semblance of stability.

But there's also another part of me that resists this explanation. A part of me that believes in the sincerity of the connections that have formed, the moments of kindness and understanding that have been extended to me. A part of me wonders if genuine connections can flourish even under these strange circumstances. Not only do I feel like I want to stay here, but I want more.

Not only do I feel like I want to stay here, but I want more. It's a realization that's both exhilarating and terrifying in its audacity. The boundaries that once defined my world have blurred, and in their place, a landscape of complex emotions has emerged. I yearn for connection, for a bond that transcends the circumstances that brought us together.

Romance – there's a word that carries both weight and wonder. It's a yearning that's taken root within me, its tendrils entwined with my thoughts in unexpected and undeniable ways. And as I consider the individuals who have become a part of my daily existence, a rush of conflicted emotions courses through me.

Ryker, with his enigmatic demeanor and captivating presence, is an undeniable presence in my thoughts. His attention, his protectiveness, they hold an allure that's hard to ignore. But my desires extend beyond the confines of a singular connection. Novak, with his past and present intricately woven into his being, draws me in with his quiet strength and unspoken depth. Maddox, whose steadfast loyalty

and resilience have left an indelible mark, stirs a longing for intimacy that goes beyond friendship. And then there's Colt, whose fiery spirit and fierce dedication spark a fire within me that I can't quite explain. The feel of his hand on my ass... now that left an imprint!

I wrestle with the complexity of these emotions, the idea of desiring multiple connections that extend beyond the boundaries of convention. Can it be love if it's shared among more than one person? Is it even possible to navigate such uncharted emotional terrain without causing heartache and confusion? I've never heard of anything like it before, but is it impossible?

The idea nags at me, persistent and unyielding. It's a fantasy, I tell myself. A fantastical dream woven from the threads of my captivity, the closeness that proximity and shared experiences have fostered. But it's also something more. An expression of a yearning that's as real as the emotions that churn within me. If only I could ask Novak...

"Novak, do you ever think about romance?" I ask him, trying to be playful but the question comes off a little heavier than I meant. "Outside of *this*, I mean."

"I've been thinking about it all the time... recently."

I feel a flush rise to my cheeks, a mixture of embarrassment and exhilaration. "Oh, have you now?" I retort, trying to match his tone. I want to flirt, but I don't know how I should.

"Ever since a certain someone started staying here."

Huh, staying... that's one way to word it. Although it feels more that way now that I'm free from my shackles and able to walk around this place easily.

"Is that right?" I whisper, leaning in a little closer.

"Mhmm," he hums, his gaze holding mine. "That certainly is right."

The air between us crackles with anticipation, the unspoken tension hanging heavily as we dance on the precipice of something new. It's as if the world around us

fades, leaving only the electricity of the moment. We may have kissed once, but this feels very different.

With a daring smile, I play along. “Is that so? And what do you think of *this person*?”

Novak’s eyes darken, his playful demeanor giving way to something more intense. “I’ve been wondering if you’re as intrigued by me as I am with you. If you feel the same electric charge when we’re close. I’m wondering if you’re here because you like me.”

My heart skips a beat, his honesty both thrilling and vulnerable. It’s a question I’ve grappled with myself, the internal conflict between my desires and my sense of self preservation. But in this moment, as Novak’s gaze holds mine with a mixture of intensity and sincerity, I feel a surge of courage. I don’t know if I can tell him *everything*, but I can say something.

“Novak,” I say softly, my voice laced with a mix of uncertainty and determination, “I can’t deny that there’s something between us. I feel the intense electricity, too.”

His hand reaches out, his fingers brushing against mine, igniting a spark of connection that’s impossible to ignore. “I’ve felt it too,” he admits, his voice a whisper. “And I want to explore it, to see where it leads. That kiss... it wasn’t nearly enough for me, and I’m sure it wasn’t for you either.”

The words hang in the air, a declaration that resonates with the desires that have been simmering beneath the surface. In this moment, the war and the complications of our situation fade into the background, leaving only the raw emotion that binds us.

Novak’s gaze holds mine, a mixture of vulnerability and anticipation in his eyes. As if guided by an unspoken agreement, the distance between us narrows, the air charged with a potent mixture of desire and uncertainty. Time seems to slow, the world around us fading into the periphery as our focus centers solely on each other.

And then, with a hesitation that speaks of the weight of our emotions, Novak leans in. His lips meet mine in a kiss that's both gentle and electric, a connection that sends a rush of warmth cascading through me. The sensation is dizzying, intoxicating, as if all the longing and curiosity that has been building between us finds release in this single, fleeting moment.

My heart races, the intensity of our kiss filling the space between us. Novak's touch is tender, his fingers grazing my cheek before his hand finds its place at the nape of my neck, deepening the kiss with a fervor that matches the fire burning within me. His lips move against mine in a dance that's both familiar and entirely new, an exploration of uncharted territory that leaves me breathless. This kiss... there's something so much more in this one. It's like he understands the deep intensity of my feelings for him, and vice versa.

As we pull away, our eyes meet once more, the emotions that swirl within us mirrored in each other's gazes. Novak's voice is a soft murmur, his words a testament to the unspoken connection that's taken root between us.

"I've wanted to do that again for a long time," he admits, his tone a mixture of awe and honesty.

A smile tugs at the corners of my lips, my heart still racing from the intensity of our kiss. "Me too. Ever since our first kiss. We just haven't exactly had the chance."

The tension that once held us in its grip has transformed into a sense of liberation, a new found freedom to explore the depths of our emotions without the constraints of our circumstances. The war, our roles, and the complexities of our relationships with Ryker and the others momentarily fade into the background, leaving only the raw emotion that binds us. We could leave it here, make sure things don't get even more complicated, but that doesn't happen. Neither of us are prepared for that to happen. We grab one another once more, barely able to breathe as the kissing deepens with passion and our tongues dance. The sensation becomes increasingly addictive with every passing second. I can't get enough of

him. I grab his shirt and pull him until he's pressed right up against me.

Our bodies press tightly against one another, our hands roaming across skin, taking this one step further. As Novak continues to kiss me with an intensity that leaves me breathless, I find myself being swept away by the powerful surge of desire coursing through my veins. The feeling is intoxicating, and I know that I will not stop until I reach the peak of pleasure together.

Especially with this man who I can sense is new to all of this. He doesn't even need to tell me as much, I can feel it in his hesitation.

Suddenly, Novak is on his feet, pressed tightly between my thighs, causing my breath to get caught in my throat. The sensation of his hard body pressing against mine sent a thrill of excitement through her entire being.

"I want you, Lily," Novak murmurs softly, his fingers tracing gentle patterns along her bare shoulders. The intensity of his words races down to my core.

I close my eyes, relishing the tender affection showered upon me by the man I've not so secretly admired for so long. I can sense the genuineness in his words, and it only serves to fuel the fire burning inside me.

"Me too," I mutter back, wishing I could express myself better. I have so much more that I really want to say. "You have no idea."

Novak begins to undress me slowly, taking his time to remove each piece of clothing and savor every curve of my body. My breath hitches at the sight of him, his muscles rippling beneath his shirt as he moves.

My eyes trace the lines of his arms, the definition of his abs, and the gentle trail of hair leading downward. Desire swells within me, an insatiable yearning for his touch. My hands shake as I undo the buttons of his shirt, my fingertips lingering on the fabric as it slips from his shoulders. Novak's

gaze follows my movements, his expression a mix of appreciation and raw hunger.

I then turn my attention to his jeans, working to unfasten the button and lower the zipper.

Novak assists me by stepping out of his pants, leaving him standing in nothing but his boxers. His eyes bore into mine, a mixture of lust and tenderness etched across his features. I return the look, my heart thumping wildly against my rib cage.

As if in a trance, we proceed to remove the rest of our clothes, letting them pool around our feet. By the time he kisses me again, there isn't a stitch between us.

The feeling of his skin against mine sends a wave of excitement coursing through me, my heart beat quickening in anticipation. He trails his fingertips along my cheekbone, caressing my jaw line gently. I respond by running my fingers through his tousled hair, reveling in the silky texture. As our fingers intertwine, the connection between us grows stronger.

Our hearts beat in tandem, the rhythm of our desire mirroring the tempo of our bodies. The passion between us seems to reach a fever pitch, the need for release almost palpable.

I move my lips toward Novak's ear, whispering, "Take me, please."

"Gladly. It's my first time..." he says, positioning himself on the chair in front of me. My heart beats faster. What a sweet gift he is about to share with me. He indicates for me to join in, another sign that he wants me to take control because he's new to this. I'm the sexy goddess in this scenario, the one who knows exactly what I'm doing. Now *that* is thrilling.

Confidently, I make my way over to him, swaying my hips as I go, and I sit on top of him, straddling him. As I start to move, slowly guiding him inside of my body, his hands trail lightly along my curves, lavishing me with gentle touches. I kiss him once more as our bodies finally melt together, our mouths moving in sync, our tongues dancing together in perfect harmony.

This feels different to being with Ryker, but just as thrilling.

As we thrust hard against one another, building the pressure of pleasure, our breaths grow heavier, our gasps echoing off the walls of the room.

Just as it feels like the passion between us is about to reach its peak, a new sound fills the room. The door opens, and a new face walks in to see what Novak and I are up to. *Maddox*. Maybe this should be enough to stop us from moving, but it doesn't. The sight of Maddox might throw me off guard, making my pulse pound faster. My body trembles with anticipation as his eyes widen with an undeniable curiosity.

He isn't leaving either, and there has to be a reason for that.

With a cheeky smile, I wiggle my finger towards Maddox, guiding him over to us. I don't know if insanity has taken a tight grip on me or not, but I want him, and I want him bad. While still fucking Novak, because this is definitely one of the most mind blowing experiences that I have ever had in my life and I'm not ready to give him up yet.

Maddox seems hesitant, and for one horrible moment, I wonder if he's going to leave me hanging. But soon he's intrigued by the powerful chemistry exploding between us, even with Novak here too, and he steps closer to us. To me, really, I don't think he's much considering Novak in all of this.

He gets close enough for me to grab him, and I finally close the gap, bringing his lips to mine. The taste of him while I have Novak buried deep inside me is electric. Even better than I suspected. It's confirmation that this chemistry is transcendent and much better when there is more of us. Right now, I just have two of the guys. What will it be like when I have all of them?

The kiss intensifies, and soon, I work on unbuttoning his trousers as well. If this is crazy, then I don't even want to be sane.

“Lily, what are you...?” Maddox starts, but as soon as his thick, throbbing erection has burst free and I’m holding him lightly between my fingers, all of that fades. His eyes hood over with a deep dark desire, and he seems happier to simply go with the flow.

So I do the same thing. My mouth is watering with desire, needing to taste him so I bring him close to my mouth, pressing my lips ever so lightly against his tip.

The groan that comes flying out of Maddox’s mouth as his head lolls to the side with desire, encourages me and makes me crave more. So much more. So I part my lips and let him slide in right to the back of my throat. My mouth stretches around him as I let him fuck my face.

The thrusts with Novak help with the motion in which I taste Maddox. Somehow, the whole thing comes together perfectly in a blur of pleasure that simply seems to wash over all of us. It’s like we’re locked away in our own little land and no one can affect us here.

This is magnificent, phenomenal, as I go flying over the edge into the never ending abyss of pleasure, I realize that a new side of me has been unlocked. A new desire that I didn’t know I had. I really am learning all sorts about myself while in captivity. It’s crazy, but in the best way possible. I want to keep on learning, to keep on exploring, to see how far this will take me...

“Hello?” All of a sudden, ice cold water is thrown over our heads by the sound of Ryker’s voice calling through the house. We all freeze, none of us quite sure what to do. It’s like an electric bolt has consumed us and frozen us in time while we wait in terrified anticipation.

I have been waiting desperately for Ryker to come back home so I can know that he’s okay, but not while I’m in a very compromising position like this. With Maddox *and* Novak. Not only will this kill Ryker, but he might kill all of us as well.

“We need to have a meeting. All of us, in the conference room now.”

“Come on,” Novak hisses in an urgent whisper. “You heard him. We need to go now. We can’t keep him waiting.”

I can’t meet anyone’s eyes as I dress in a hurry, because now I’m all conflicted once more. Only a moment ago, I was on cloud nine, soaring higher than air and sure that everything was right with the world, but now... well now I’m all confused and unsure again. Now I don’t know what to do.

What I desire isn’t conventional; it isn’t what most people want, and when I’m not all caught up in the heat of the moment, I can see how crazy it is. How mad these men will think I am. Maddox and Novak are right here with me, they got all caught up in the moment too, but they might not want to pursue this in the future...

Oh God, I have to get my mind off myself and my desires for a moment. Who knows what Ryker is about to tell us? I need to be ready for anything, especially when it involves my father. This could end in disaster.

COLT

The conference room feels heavy with anticipation as the four of us gather around the table, each of us bracing for the weight of the impending storm. Novak, Maddox, Ryker, and I exchange glances, the unspoken tension connecting us in a way that words can't convey. Ryker stands at the head of the table, his expression a mixture of determination and concern.

But my patience is wearing thin, the mounting pressure making it difficult to contain my emotions. I clench my fists, nails digging into my palms, and fight the urge to demand answers. Ryker looks stressed, weighed down by the responsibilities he carries, and I don't want to add to his burden. Yet, the need to know, to understand what's happening, gnaws at me like a relentless ache, especially when it isn't just our lives on the line here.

Ryker's voice breaks through the silence, carrying with it the gravity of our situation. "I called you all here because we're on the precipice of something significant. Alistair's reaction to our confrontation at the bar was just as we predicted. He's rattled, cornered. And that's exactly where we want him. The meeting went just as we knew it would."

My patience snaps, and I know I have to ask the question that's on everyone's mind. "What did he say about Lily?" My voice is edged with a sense of urgency. We need to know if our plan has worked and if Lily's safety swayed him even slightly. After all, that's why we're in this mess.

Ryker's gaze meets mine, his eyes holding a mixture of weariness and determination. "He's concerned, worried for her safety. He might not show it openly, but Alistair cares about his daughter. That's our leverage, and we need to use it to our advantage."

There's a collective exhale around the table, a mixture of relief and tension easing as we hear that our plan has indeed hit its mark. Lily is safe, and Alistair's vulnerability is the key to our strategy. I glance at Maddox, who has been protective of Lily from the beginning, and see a hint of relief in his eyes. I wonder if Ryker knows that as well, if he sees what I see...

Ryker continues, his tone measured as he elaborates on our next steps. "But don't mistake this for an easy victory. Alistair is dangerous, and he's not one to back down without a fight. He'll gather his forces, make alliances, and prepare for a confrontation. We need to do the same."

The room seems to close in around us as Ryker speaks, the reality of our situation settling heavily on our shoulders. Maddox's jaw clenches, a testament to his readiness for the challenges that lie ahead. Ryker's stress is palpable, a reflection of the immense responsibility he carries as our leader.

The fire burns within me, a fierce determination that refuses to be extinguished by the looming shadows of war. With every step I take through the compound, the weight of our impending conflict presses down on my shoulders, but it also fuels the resolve that courses through my veins. I'm ready for this battle, ready to face whatever challenges Alistair throws our way. But more than that, I want to know that we can succeed.

"So, we just train?" I demand as my hand balls up into a fist. "Prepare as we can?"

Ryker's eyes meet mine, his expression a mix of understanding and shared determination. "Training is just one part of it. It's about more than physical strength, Colt. We also need to strategize, to anticipate Alistair's moves, to outthink him."

I roll my eyes because I already know that. It's why our team works so well together. Because we all bring different things to the group. What I want to know is how we'll deal with it all.

But before the question comes flying out of my mouth, I spot a shadow in the corner, reminding me that she's here. *Lily*. She's in on this meeting with the rest of us, not quite a part of the team but not completely out of the loop either. She's on the precipice of everything.

The intensity of my thoughts, the fire burning within me, is momentarily quelled by her presence. She really is the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on. I can't get enough of her. The memory of her pink bare ass lying across my lap as I punished her has remained burning in my brain ever since that all happened.

I don't know what I'm supposed to feel for her, but I'm sure it isn't *this*.

I can't help but wonder why Lily doesn't seem upset at the thought of us fighting her father. Her demeanor holds a mixture of emotions, but I can't quite decipher the depths of her thoughts. I wish I could read her mind as she smiles, to see what she's hiding underneath.

"You're taking all of this surprisingly well," I venture, my tone gentle as I study her expression. I can almost feel Ryker's eyes burning through me, but it's too late now. I have said what I need to say. Those words are out there in the open. There's nothing I can do to take them back.

Lily's gaze meets mine, and there's a hint of something in her eyes – resignation, perhaps, or maybe even a touch of defiance. "I've spent my life in his shadow," she replies, her voice tinged with a mixture of bitterness and resolve. "I've seen the kind of person he is, the lengths he's willing to go to. I'm not blind to it. I know why this needs to happen."

I nod in understanding, but there's more to her words than meets the eye. There's a complexity to her relationship with her father, an underlying current of emotions that I can't quite grasp.

“You don’t want to see him succeed?” I ask, my voice soft, careful not to push too hard. Novak sucks in a sharp breath beside me, but I continue to ignore everyone else.

Lily’s gaze drops to the ground, her fingers tracing patterns on the surface of a nearby table. “I want him to pay for what he’s done. But I also know what he’s capable of. He won’t go down without a fight. I also know he doesn’t care what happens to me, so why should I care about him? Huh? It’s obvious or he would be trying to rescue me.”

Her words echo the sentiment that’s been circulating among us, the understanding that Alistair will fight tooth and nail to protect his own interests. But there’s more to Lily’s emotions, a complex web of resentments I’m only beginning to glimpse.

“I’m sorry,” I say, my voice carrying genuine empathy. “I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you. I’m sure it isn’t as black and white as you imagine.”

Lily looks up at me, and a vulnerability in her expression surprises me. “It’s a mess, isn’t it? My feelings are all over the place.”

I reach out and place a hand on her shoulder now that she’s close enough for me to do so. I bring her into the pack for a moment, a gesture of comfort and solidarity. “You don’t have to have everything figured out right now. We’re here for you, no matter what.”

A small smile tugs at the corners of her lips, a glimpse of the strength that lies beneath the surface. “Thank you. I know that much. I’m just... fraught.”

Lily takes a seat at the table with us as Ryker talks, her eyes dreamily shifting from one man to the next. Jealousy coils through me as I see her examining everyone like they are special to her. At least, that’s how I feel until I get a turn. When our eyes meet, she nibbles on her lower lip. It’s a small, subtle gesture that sends a shock wave through me, a jolt of awareness that intensifies the fire already burning within me. Shit, I am in heaven when I stare at her.

Ryker's voice carries on, outlining the strategic plans, the potential challenges, and the steps we need to take moving forward. His leadership is unwavering, his focus unyielding. Yet, as his words continue to wash over us, I can't help but sense Lily's distant gaze and the way it lingers on each of us. There's a mixture of curiosity and something else in her expression, an emotion that's both intriguing and enigmatic. Is it admiration? Is it something more? I find myself caught in the whirlwind of possibilities, unable to shake the electrifying awareness that we share.

As the discussion progresses, I steal glances at Lily from the corner of my eye, her presence a magnet pulling at my attention. There's a newfound tension in the air, a current of unspoken desires and uncharted territory. And when her gaze meets mine, something shifts between us, an acknowledgment that goes beyond words.

Ryker's voice starts to fade into the background as the intensity of the moment takes hold. Lily's fingers trace patterns on the table, her thoughts seemingly lost in the maelstrom of emotions swirling within her. And when her gaze turns to me once more, her lips parted in a way that's both innocent and enticing, I feel my heart race in response.

As the charged atmosphere between Lily and me hangs in the air, my heightened senses pick up on a new scent. It's subtle, yet unmistakable – a fragrance that's uniquely hers, mingled with traces of Novak's and Maddox's scents. The realization hits me like a wave, a sudden jolt of awareness that raises both intrigue and concern.

My gaze shifts to Ryker, who's been standing nearby, his expression unreadable as he watches us. His ability to perceive the same scents reminds me of the intricate dynamics at play. Ryker's feelings for Lily have been evident to all of us, even if they've remained largely unspoken. And now, with this new olfactory information, questions and concerns arise.

Is it possible that Lily's interactions with Novak and Maddox have taken a more intimate turn? Or is the scent simply a result of close contact, perhaps a touch or an embrace? The envious strings that tug at my emotions are

complex, a mixture of longing, curiosity, and the intricate web of relationships we've formed.

Lily's gaze remains locked on mine, her smile still present, yet I detect a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. She must be aware of the scents, aware of the implications they carry. It's impossible to ignore the fact that Ryker's keen sense of smell has likely picked up on this as well.

The unspoken tension in the room becomes almost palpable, a shifting energy that dances on the edge of understanding and uncharted territory. I take a deep breath, my mind racing with a mixture of emotions. Jealousy, envy – these feelings are human, even in the midst of the complex situation we find ourselves in.

As Ryker's gaze narrows, I see a storm of conflicting emotions flicker across his features. He's always been a master of control, but even he can't fully mask the emotions that this situation stirs within him. Has he sensed something? Or is he simply focused on the fighting?

Lily shifts in her seat, her fingers tracing patterns on the table once more. I can't help but wonder what's going through her mind, what emotions she's grappling with as our tangled connections become all the more intricate. I bet she has no idea what storm she's created.

"Novak, I need you to focus on gathering intelligence and contacting spies," Ryker's voice cuts through the charged atmosphere. Novak's eyes meet mine briefly before he turns his attention fully to Ryker, his expression serious. "We need to know Alistair's every move, every strategy. We can't afford to be caught off guard. Someone has to have an eye on him at all times."

Novak's understanding is evident as he nods in agreement, his commitment to the task unwavering. He's always been the sharp mind, the strategist among us, and I know he'll excel in this role. "Sure thing. That's something I can do."

"And Colt," Ryker's gaze lands on me, "you'll be in charge of fortifying our defenses, making sure we're prepared for any kind of assault. Weapons gathering too. And Maddox,

you need to train everyone up. Get everyone prepared for what might come, okay?”

Maddox’s eyes meet Ryker’s, his expression a mix of gravity and resolve. “I’ll make sure everyone’s ready. We’ll be a force to be reckoned with.”

As we each take in our assigned responsibilities, the sense of unity and purpose among us grows stronger. We may be facing an uncertain and dangerous future, but there’s a determination in the air that’s unshakeable. The fire that burns within us, fueled by the challenges ahead, is also a beacon of hope and resilience.

With a final nod, Ryker’s gaze sweeps over us, a silent affirmation of the trust he places in each of us. “We’ve overcome obstacles before, and we’ll do it again. We’re a family, bound by more than just circumstance. We’re bound by our loyalty to each other.”

The weight of his words settles over us, a reminder that we’re not alone in this fight. The compound comes alive with movement and purpose as we disperse to take on our assigned tasks. The flames of war and determination burn brightly within each of us, propelling us to the unknown. A fight with Alistair Crowe that we *have* to win.

But as the meeting comes to an end, all I can think about is getting a moment with Lily so we can talk. The complexities of our emotions, the unspoken tension that’s been brewing, are tugging at me, demanding resolution. I want to understand her thoughts, and her feelings, and I want to share my own. There’s so much that needs to be spoken.

However, my hopes are dashed as Ryker’s commanding voice breaks through the charged atmosphere once more. “Lily, come with me.” His words cut like a knife through the air, and I’m reminded once again of his protective role in her life.

Lily’s gaze flickers briefly in my direction, a mixture of disappointment and understanding evident in her eyes. And then Ryker’s hand rests on her shoulder as they begin to leave the room, their figures retreating to the distance.

My jaw tightens, a surge of frustration welling within me. I want a chance to speak with her, to address the undercurrents of emotion that have been simmering between us. The fire that burns within me, the desire to connect and understand, is as intense as ever. I sense the eyes of the other guys upon me, the men who have also touched Lily and know what it's like to explore her. My jaw sets. I can't stand this.

I have to get away. I need to shift and to run in my wolf form through the forest to burn off this excess energy and annoyance. The urge to let go, to lose myself in the rhythmic pounding of paws against the earth, becomes almost overpowering. With a determined set to my jaw, I make my way out of the house and into the depths of the surrounding woods.

The moon hangs high in the sky, casting a silvery glow over the landscape. The night is alive with the sounds of nature, a symphony of rustling leaves, distant calls of nocturnal creatures, and the steady beat of my heart echoing in my ears.

My muscles tense as I embrace the change, the familiar sensation of bones shifting and muscles rearranging. The transition is swift, a surge of power coursing through me as my human form gives way to that of the wolf. In moments, I stand on four legs, the world transformed through heightened senses and an instinctual connection to the earth.

With a triumphant howl that pierces the night, I launch myself forward, my body propelled into a sprint. The wind rushes past me, cool and exhilarating against my fur. The ground blurs beneath my paws as I let go of all thoughts and worries, my focus narrowing solely on the sensation of speed and freedom.

Each stride brings me deeper into the heart of the forest, the trees flashing by like sentinels as I race through the underbrush. The scent of pine and earth fills my nostrils, a grounding reminder of the world around me. In this moment, there's no room for the complexities of emotions or the uncertainties that plague my thoughts. It's just me, the wilderness, and the raw energy coursing through my veins.

The energy that fueled my annoyance and frustration finds an outlet in each powerful leap, each calculated turn. The forest becomes a playground, a canvas on which I paint the story of my emotions. The moonlight guides my path, casting a luminescent trail ahead.

As I race through the night, the fire that burns within me shifts, transforming into a different kind of intensity. It's not just about the impending battle or the tangled emotions – it's about the primal need for release, for connection to the untamed world around me.

As I run through the forest, the rush of wind in my ears and the pounding of paws against the earth, I sense a shift in the atmosphere. There's a subtle change, a presence that lingers just beyond the edge of my heightened senses. Another scent mingles with the pine and earth, a scent that's both familiar and foreign, a scent of another wolf.

My instincts kick into overdrive, a mix of curiosity and caution taking hold. I slow my pace, my ears twitching as I strain to pick up any sound, any movement in the surrounding underbrush. My senses are on high alert, every fiber of my being attuned to the world around me.

And then, from the shadows, emerges a figure. A wolf, much like myself, steps in to view. The moonlight catches in its fur, casting a soft sheen over the creature. Our eyes lock for a brief moment, a silent acknowledgment that speaks volumes.

In that instant, I understand. This isn't just any wolf. This is a sentinel, a watcher, perhaps one of Alistair's. Someone sent to keep an eye on us, to gather information, to gauge our movements and intentions.

A mixture of frustration and readiness wells within me. The realization that Alistair is already making his move, that the confrontation we've been preparing for is imminent, sends a surge of energy through my veins. The fire that had been quelled by my run through the forest reignites, a fierce determination taking its place.

I square my shoulders, my gaze unwavering as I continue to lock eyes with the sentinel wolf. There's a message in this

encounter, a message that goes beyond words. Alistair is making his presence known, a warning shot fired across the bow. The stakes are high, the tension palpable, and the battle that's been brewing is on the brink of exploding in to full blown warfare.

I feel a deep understanding in the silent exchange between our wolf forms. We're both warriors, both bound by loyalty to our respective packs. But in this moment, as adversaries, we're locked in a stand-off, a silent challenge that speaks to the larger conflict that's about to unfold.

As the sentinel wolf disappears back into the shadows, I'm left with a renewed sense of purpose. The fire within me burns not just for my desires and connections, but for the impending battle that will test us all. The night is still alive with the sounds of the forest, but now, beneath its surface tranquility, a storm is brewing. One that will reshape our lives and the landscape of the world we know.

I race back, my paws eating up the distance as I head towards the mansion to inform the others, forgetting about my need to burn off energy now. Each stride is a mix of urgency and determination, a reflection of the fire that still burns within me. The encounter with the sentinel wolf has added another layer of complexity to the situation, a reminder that the impending battle is not just a distant threat, it's already at our doorstep.

My heart races not just from the physical exertion, but from the weight of the information I carry. I can feel the adrenaline surging through my veins, the intensity of the situation urging me forward. As I burst into the compound, the scent of familiar faces and the energy of the crew hit me full force, grounding me in the reality of the moment.

I find Novak and Maddox, talking in hushed tones about things I don't even want to think about, as my voice cuts through the air sharply, forcing them to listen to me. "We can't afford to wait any longer. Alistair's forces are already moving."

“What happened?” Novak demands, his voice carrying the same urgency that courses through my veins.

“There was another wolf,” I reply, my voice steady despite the whirlwind of emotions within me. “A sentinel, I think. Watching us, keeping an eye on our movements. Alistair’s making his move.”

The tension in the room tightens, the weight of the situation settling over us like a shroud. Novak’s jaw stiffens, his eyes narrowing in thought as he absorbs the information.

“Already? Damn, they’re not wasting any time.”

Maddox’s expression mirrors the gravity of the situation as he addresses the crew. “We need to be ready. The fight is coming to us.”

LILY

The air hangs heavy with tension as Ryker leads me from the conference room to his bedroom. The weight of the impending battle and the tangled web of emotions swirl within me, leaving me adrift in a sea of uncertainty. It's a journey that feels like a silent passage through my own thoughts, a path that leads to a destination I can't quite define.

As the door to Ryker's bedroom closes behind us, the room feels both intimate and charged. I can't help but think about each man – Ryker, Novak, Maddox, and Colt – and how they've touched my life, the emotions they've stirred within me. Each one has left an indelible mark, a connection that defies explanation. A mark I just can't overcome.

Ryker's gaze is intense as he regards me, his eyes seeming to hold a thousand unspoken words. The memory of our shared moments, the first stolen kiss, the fire of our passion, washes over me. He was the one who took my virginity, who made me a woman in the most intimate sense. Our connection is primal and powerful, a dance of desire and vulnerability that has made me feel emotions I didn't even know I could feel.

And then there's Novak, whose presence has been a steady force in my life. The complexities of our emotions, the shared moments of longing and connection, have shaped something between us that defies easy categorization. I took his virginity, the tenderness and vulnerability that accompanied our actions, until Maddox turned it into something else. He's the one who has seen me in my most raw and unguarded moments, the one who knows the intricacies of my heart.

Maddox's memory surfaces, his gentle touch and understanding nature. He's the one who has held me in moments of vulnerability, who has offered solace and a sense of safety. His presence is a reminder that desire can be tender, that passion can be gentle.

And then there's Colt, the fiery and intense man who introduced me to more. A different kind of fire has marked our interactions, one that's fierce and passionate. He's the one who has shown me the exhilaration of breaking boundaries, the thrill of surrendering to primal instincts.

They're all so different, these four men who have touched my life in such profound ways. Each one holds a piece of my heart, a facet of desire and connection that's difficult to unravel. It's a puzzle of emotions, a mosaic of desires, and as I stand before Ryker, I'm confronted with the complexity of it all. I wonder what he will say if I ever tell him...

His hand reaches out, his fingers tracing a path along my cheek, igniting a shiver that travels down my spine. "Lily," he murmurs, his voice a low, husky whisper, "we're standing on the precipice of something significant. But I want you to know that you're not alone whatever happens. I need you to understand that I'm here for you."

His words hang in the air, a promise and a declaration that resonate deep within me. The fire within me burns not just for personal desires but for the unity of our pack, for the bonds that connect us. The men who have shaped my journey have also shaped the woman I've become.

As Ryker's lips brush against mine, the tumult of emotions quiets for a moment. Desire and uncertainty mingle in the kiss, a fusion of passion and longing. In this intimate moment, I'm reminded of the connections that bind us, the shared experiences that have sculpted our relationships. Does Ryker even know that I've shared myself with more than just him?

But as the kiss deepens, I can't help but think of the bigger picture – the impending battle, the challenges that lie ahead. Our desires and connections, as intricate as they may be, are woven into the fabric of the fight we're about to face. As

Ryker's arms wrap around me, pulling me closer, I'm reminded that the flames of desire and duty burn side by side, propelling us forward into the unknown. But the lie hangs between us. I should tell him, right? Do I owe him honesty?

Just because he hasn't always been honest with me doesn't mean I owe him the same...

I struggle to find an answer to what's running through my mind. The weight of emotions, desires, and the impending battle press down on me, leaving me in a state of internal turmoil. If I could have any of the four men, I'd be happy. Each one has left an indelible mark on my heart, each connection is a unique tapestry of passion, tenderness, and intensity. But how can I choose when all four of them are so perfect in their own ways?

As Ryker's kiss deepens, his hands moving with purpose, I feel the conflicting desires within me rise to the surface. The fire that has burned for each of them intensifies, a testament to the profound impact they've had on my life. But in this moment, with his lips against mine, I come to a realization. I don't want to have to choose.

Breaking away from the kiss, I look into Ryker's eyes, my voice steady despite the storm of emotions within me. "Ryker, I—" My words catch in my throat, the weight of the unspoken hanging in the air between us.

He regards me with an intensity that matches the fire in my heart, his thumb tracing a gentle path along my jawline. "Lily, I know that this situation is complicated, that the emotions we're all feeling are anything but simple. But you don't have to have all the answers right now."

He knows? He already knows? Hmm well that makes it so much easier. I guess I don't need to talk about everything right now. If he's aware of what's happened with me and his pack, then it takes one hell of a pressure off my shoulders.

As the kiss lingers, a moment of unity and promise, I can feel the complexities of our emotions swirling around us. The weight of desire, the bond of duty, and the impending battle all

converge in a cacophony of emotions that both bind us and threaten to tear us apart.

Ryker's arms hold me close, his touch both tender and possessive. His fingers brush against the nape of my neck, and for a fleeting moment, it's as if the world around us fades into the background. But beneath the surface of our embrace, I sense a shift, a change in the air, in his demeanor.

Breaking away from the kiss, Ryker's gaze locks with mine, a mix of intensity and vulnerability in his eyes. It's a vulnerability I've rarely seen from him, a chink in the armor of the powerful wolf king he's been. There's something he wants to say, something he's been holding back, and the weight of his unspoken words hangs heavy in the space between us.

"Lily," he begins, his voice a soft murmur that carries the weight of years of decisions and actions. "There's something I need to tell you, something I've been carrying since the moment I captured you."

My heart skips a beat at the seriousness of his tone, the weight of his confession hitting me like a shockwave. As I look into his eyes, I see a mixture of regret and longing, a raw vulnerability that draws me in. I want to ask him *what* but the word doesn't come out.

"I've made decisions that I'm not proud of," he continues, his voice barely above a whisper. "And one of those decisions was to use you as leverage against your father. It was a calculated move, one that I thought was necessary for the safety of my pack."

His words cut through me, a mixture of understanding and pain swirling within my chest. The reality of his actions, of the choices he made, begins to take shape in a new light. For the first time, I see beyond the wolf alpha, the powerful leader, and glimpse the man who's struggled with the weight of his decisions.

As Ryker's hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing gently against my skin, he looks into my eyes with a sincerity that's both captivating and heartbreaking. "Lily, I need you to know that I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted to use

you as a pawn in this game. But in the midst of it all, something changed.”

The vulnerability in his eyes is mirrored in his words, and a sense of anticipation rises within me. What is he trying to tell me? What has changed?

A conflicted expression crosses his features, a battle of emotions playing out before me. “I wish things were different. I wish you weren’t Alistair Crowe’s daughter, that we could be free to be together, away from all of this chaos.”

His words resonate deep within me, a whispered confession that ignites a spark of hope and desire. The yearning in his voice mirrors the yearning in my own heart, a longing for something beyond the complexities of our world.

My hand finds his, our fingers intertwining as I step closer to him. “Ryker, I—” The words catch in my throat, the weight of the moment pressing down on me.

He holds me close, his gaze intense as he searches my eyes. “I can’t change the past, Lily. But I want you to know that I’m here, that I care for you. And as much as I try to fight it, the connection between us...it’s undeniable.”

Tears well in my eyes as I take in his confession, the vulnerability and sincerity in his words shattering the walls I’ve built around my heart. In this moment, I see Ryker not just as the wolf king, but as a man burdened by his choices, a man who’s yearning for something more.

“We need to be cautious,” he suddenly announces, his tone a mix of seriousness and something softer. “But I also realize that I owe you more than just secrecy and battle preparations.”

“Ryker,” I start, my voice carrying a mixture of uncertainty and determination. “I appreciate your honesty, and I understand the complexities of our situation. But I also believe that we deserve more than just stolen moments in the midst of chaos.”

His gaze holds mine, the intensity of his blue eyes like a magnetic pull. “What are you suggesting?”

I take a deep breath, my heart racing as I speak my truth. “I want more than just survival. I want to feel alive, to experience something beyond the shadows that have defined our interactions. I want a chance to be with you without the weight of the world on our shoulders.”

Ryker’s expression softens, a mixture of surprise and contemplation in his eyes. It’s as if my words have ignited something within him, a recognition of the same desires that have been burning within me.

“Lily,” he says, his voice carrying a note of sincerity, “I can’t promise you a normal life. The battle with Alistair, the struggles of our world; they won’t simply disappear.”

I nod, understanding the reality of our situation. “I know that, Ryker. But I believe that even in the midst of chaos, we can find moments of happiness. Moments that remind us why we fight, why we endure.”

There’s a pause, a charged silence that hangs between us, before Ryker’s lips curl into a genuine smile – a smile that’s both rare and heartwarming. “You’re right. We do deserve more.”

In that moment, the barriers between us seem to crumble, and a new path opens before us, a path defined by hope, desire, and the promise of something beyond the shadows. Ryker steps closer, his hand reaching out to touch mine, his touch igniting a spark of connection.

“I owe you,” he says, his voice a whisper that’s heavy with meaning. “And I intend to make it up to you. I want to take you out on a date. A real date.”

My eyebrows arch in surprise. “A date? In the middle of all of this?”

“Why not? As long as we’re careful, I don’t see why not...”

Nerves zig zag through my system but the glint in Ryker’s eyes excites me. I find myself nodding in agreement, even though this might be the dumbest thing we have ever done.

But why not? The way that things are, we might not be alive tomorrow, so I guess why not?



ONLY A FEW HOURS LATER, RYKER AND I VENTURE INTO TOWN. The world around us takes on a new hue, one colored by the possibility of a connection that extends beyond the chaos and uncertainty that has defined our interactions thus far.

We walk side by side, the air heavy with both familiarity and a touch of nervousness. It's a peculiar feeling, being in the presence of the man who once held me captive, yet now walking beside me with a sense of companionship. As we enter Ryker's section of town, the subtle shifts in atmosphere are palpable. This is his territory, his domain, and the unspoken respect of those around us is evident.

We meander through the streets, the town alive with the rhythm of daily life. The weight of our circumstances seems to lift as we move, and the sense of freedom is intoxicating. Our steps take us to a quaint theater, its marquee announcing an upcoming show. Ryker suggests we go in without hesitation, his eyes holding a mixture of excitement and genuine interest.

The theater's interior is dimly lit, the air thick with anticipation as the lights begin to dim. We settle into our seats, side by side, the soft glow of the stage casting a warm light on our faces. As the performance unfolds before us, I can't help but steal glances at Ryker, his profile illuminated by the soft glow.

There's a certain vulnerability to him, a side I've rarely seen. An appreciation for art, for culture, that I hadn't expected. In this moment, he's not just the alpha, the powerful leader, he's a man, a person with his own desires and interests. It makes me wonder why Maddox doesn't talk to him more about his desire to paint all over again.

Maybe I will be the one to bring that up at some point...

As the final act plays out on stage, the applause that follows is a testament to the talent before us. Ryker turns to

me, his lips curving into a smile. “I thought you might enjoy this,” he admits, a hint of uncertainty in his tone.

I meet his gaze, a genuine smile of my own tugging at the corners of my lips. “I did, Ryker. Thank you. That was *so* nice. Especially after being locked up for so long.”

Leaving the theater, we venture further into town, our conversation flowing effortlessly. The tension that once defined our interactions has been replaced by a sense of camaraderie, an ease that allows us to share thoughts and stories with an openness I never thought possible.

We find a cozy café for lunch, the scent of freshly brewed coffee and pastries filling the air. As we sit across from each other, the atmosphere is charged with a mixture of anticipation and a desire to delve deeper into this newfound connection. But still, there is something niggling at me...

I steal a glance at Ryker, his profile bathed in the soft light of the afternoon sun. There’s a peacefulness in his expression, a sense of contentment reflected in how he holds my hand. But as much as I appreciate the connection we’ve built, I can’t ignore the longing that simmers beneath the surface. Nothing has changed. Everything has only grown.

I want more. Not just a connection with Ryker, but with Colt, Maddox, and Novak too. The desire to have all four of them, to be with them together, takes root within me with an intensity that’s both surprising and undeniable. It’s a desire that extends beyond mere physical attraction –a yearning for a deeper connection, a sense of belonging, and a love that transcends the boundaries of convention. It doesn’t matter if I should want it or not, but I do.

The realization settles over me with a mix of clarity and determination. If there’s one thing life has taught me in the midst of chaos, it’s that I have the power to forge my own path. If I want something, then I should just reach out and grab it. See where life takes me...



IF RYKER HAS BEEN AWARE OF THE STRANGE SHIFT IN MY mood, he doesn't say a word. At least not until we're in his car, and on the way back to his home.

"Lily, are you okay?" Ryker asks, his voice laced with concern.

I meet his gaze, a mixture of emotions swirling within me. "Ryker, I've appreciated everything you've done for me. You've shown me a side of you that I didn't expect, and I'm grateful for that. But there's something I need to tell you."

His brows furrow slightly, a hint of uncertainty in his expression. "What is it?"

Wait. This doesn't feel right. I shouldn't be telling just Ryker. Not like this. This isn't just about me and him. It involves everyone. If I need to say this, then I need to tell everyone.

"I need to tell you to be careful..." I say lamely. "In case my father is already coming for you."

As the car moves through the night, the weight of my truth presses against my chest, urging me to open up about the desires and hopes that have been churning within me. But as my words tumble out, I can't help but feel that something is off. Something crucial is missing.

Ryker's brows furrow as he glances at me, his concern evident. "Be careful? Lily, I understand the situation is dangerous, but I assure you, we're prepared for whatever comes our way."

I chew on my lower lip, my thoughts racing as I try to find the right words to convey the depth of my feelings. This isn't just about cautioning Ryker. It's about something much larger, something that involves not just him, but everyone who has become a part of my life.

"Hey, can I play on your phone?" I lean forward to grab it. "Pick some music?"

I know that this is a sharp departure from what we're talking about, in his mind, but I know what I'm doing. I need to send a message to all the guys, to make sure we can all have

a meeting about this because I want to say it loud and proud for all of them to hear.

Ryker eyes me for a moment, his expression a mix of curiosity and a hint of amusement. “Sure, go ahead. Sorry, I didn’t know my music taste was going to be so offensive. But if you need something else, you go right ahead, I guess.”

I let out a laugh, trying to play this as a joke, but really, my brows are furrowed in concentration. This might be the most important message that I ever send, and I want to make sure I do it correctly. I’m hoping that life is going to change once we get back to the mansion and we have this meeting that everything will take a turn for the better.

Maybe we will still have to worry about my father and what he’s planning, but if I can find some happiness in this mess, then that’s what I need to do.

Ryker’s light-hearted comment brings a smile to my lips, even as my fingers dance across the screen of his phone. “Well, I guess I’ll be the judge of that,” I reply with a playful glint in my eyes, though my thoughts are focused on the message I’m crafting. “See if you like the same music as me.”

With a final tap, I send the message to Colt, Maddox, and Novak. The familiar “message sent” notification appears on the screen, and I exhale a shaky breath, my gaze shifting to Ryker who’s spotted exactly what I’m doing.

“What’s so important that you’re sending secret messages?” Ryker teases, a smirk playing on his lips. Intrigue flickers in his gaze. He knows I’m up to something.

“You’ll see,” I tell him with a playful wink, hoping he doesn’t push it too far. I really don’t want to explain yet. I want to wait until the perfect moment. I hope he can see this need burning in my gaze.

“Okay, sounds fun,” he replies cautiously, letting me keep the secret for a moment. “I’ll see.”

I change the music and settle back down into my seat, my heart racing as I try to plan what I’m going to say when this meeting occurs. I’ve never wanted something so badly in my

life and I really hope it happens now. Ryker is smiling, seeing this as something positive and I can only hope he's right.

And as I close my eyes, I feel a sense of hope wash over me. A hope that this journey will lead us to a place where love, understanding, and a shared commitment to each other's happiness will prevail, no matter what challenges we may face. We can face them together.

MADDOX

The air is thick with tension as I stand in the midst of what can only be described as a modern day army of warriors.

The metaphorical trenches we march through are the corridors of power. The battle we fight will be one of strategy and influence. These are not soldiers in the traditional sense, yet their demeanor and experience resonates with the disciplined might of a military unit.

Ryker's army, as I have come to call them, is composed of individuals who have once tread upon the real battlefields of the world. They hail from various corners of the city, united now by the cause of ultimate peace. Each face holds the story of battles fought, and scars earned – both seen and unseen. Preparing to fight for their own freedom...

Now, I stand at the helm as their leader and commander. The weight of the role is not lost on me; these men and women understand strength, strategy, and the cost of failure. They have traded in camouflage for tailored suits, combat boots for polished oxfords. But the glint in their eyes speaks of a readiness to wield pistols as effectively as they once did rifles.

In this assembly, there exists a duality that's both intriguing and emblematic of the task at hand. Some are wolves – fierce, relentless, and unyielding. Their instincts have been honed on the front lines, and now those instincts are focused on a different type of combat. The others, ordinary men and women, have adapted to the call of duty once again, knowing that what Ryker wants is right.

I paced back and forth in front of the assembly, my footsteps echoing in the room like the beat of a war drum. The faces of Ryker's army are focused and attentive, their collective gaze fixed on me, awaiting my words. I had shed the aura of camaraderie, stepping into the role of a drill sergeant – a role I had never thought I would assume. But the gravity of our mission demands it.

“Listen up,” I bark, my voice firm and commanding, cutting through the air like a blade. “This fight isn't going to be a walk in the park. Alistair is no ordinary adversary. He's cunning, ruthless, and he's not going to surrender easily. As long as Lily is in our grasp, he'll fight tooth and nail to get her back. Even if he likes to act as if he doesn't care about her.”

The room fills with an air of determination, an acknowledgment of the challenges that lie ahead. I see it in their eyes – the same fire that once burned on the battlefield, now rekindled for a different kind of warfare. They might not know Lily, they might not care about her either because they don't know her, but they *do* want peace. Everyone wants Alistair to back down.

“But let's be clear,” I continue, my words punctuated by the intensity in the room. “We've faced battles before, ones that have left scars. This fight might not be waged with bullets and explosions, but it's no less dangerous. We're stepping into the arena of strategy and influence. We're taking on a man who's used to manipulating the threads of power.”

I stop my pacing, locking eyes with each individual as I speak, making sure my words resonate with them on a personal level. This isn't just about a grand mission – it's about their dedication, their resolve, and their belief in what we are fighting for.

“Lily's safety is our priority,” I emphasize, my voice unwavering. “Alistair sees her as a means to control us, to bend us to his will. But we won't let that happen. He can't keep control of this city, using us all his pawns to get what he wants. It isn't right.”

A resolute murmur sweeps through the room, a chorus of agreement that underscores the unity that binds us together. I let my words hang in the air, the weight of their implications settling upon us all. This is more than a mission – it's a pivotal moment in the struggle for justice and peace. "Prepare yourselves. Rally your strengths. Work together."

As the room settles into a charged silence, thoughts of Lily flood my mind like a relentless tide. Her image is etched vividly, her smile juxtaposed against the backdrop of uncertainty and danger that surrounds us. I remember the last moment we shared, when Novak and I had that wild and exciting moment with her. Something so unexpected yet so exciting all at once.

I don't know if I will ever get to share a moment like that with her again, which is why it'll be committed to memory for as long as I live.

Amid the whirlwind of emotions and reflections, it's time to bring the focus back to the present, to the task that lies ahead. "All right," I continue, my voice commanding attention once again. "We've got work to do, and it starts with understanding our enemy. Alistair has got resources, influence, and a history we're going to unravel. We need to know him better than he knows himself. There's no room for assumptions here. We have to fight fire with fire."

I stride with measured steps, my gaze sweeping across the room, ensuring I have the undivided attention of everyone present. "But much as we need intelligence, we also need to train. We will split into teams, all working on our best fighting techniques. Wolf and man together."

Nods of agreement ripple through the assembly, but soon, questions begin to arise – logistical queries, strategic concerns, and the practicalities of our operation.

"Sir, yes, sir," everyone choruses in unison, their voices carrying the weight of their commitment to our cause. The words are more than a mere acknowledgment; they're a declaration of allegiance, a testament to the unyielding determination that binds us together.

The weight of the meeting and the resounding chorus of allegiance still hang in the air as I pull out my phone to check for messages. The words that greet me send a shiver down my spine: *“Need you back at the house, we have to talk.”* From Ryker. Uh oh.

My heart races as a mixture of anticipation and unease settles in the pit of my stomach. Instantly, my thoughts flash back to the actions me and Novak took the day before. The gravity of what we did crashes over me like a tidal wave, and suddenly, the very foundation of my commitment to Ryker and our cause feels as though it trembles.

The memory of that moment with Novak and Lily is vivid, the unspoken connection, the stolen glances, and the guilty excitement that coursed through us. It was an act born of impulse and emotion, a fleeting collision of three souls in a moment of vulnerability.

But now, as I stare at the message on my phone, a pang of guilt gnaws at my conscience. I have betrayed Ryker’s trust – not just as a leader but as a friend who once stood by him through thick and thin. And it wasn’t just about our actions; it’s the fact that Ryker has shown a certain fondness for Lily, a bond that I seemingly disregarded.

As my thoughts spiral, my sense of duty battles with my guilt. The urgency in the message can’t be ignored, and with a heavy sigh, I make my excuses to the members of *Ryker’s army*, explaining that something required my attention back at our home, and then I leave...



COLT

THE LATE AFTERNOON SUN SHINE HANGS HEAVY OVER THE abandoned parking lot, cloaking everything in an eerie stillness. Dim lamp lights struggle to be seen as they begin to make their appearance. I stand with a handful of Ryker’s

organization members, our forms outlined by the soft glow of cigarette tips and the glint of a hip flask making its rounds.

Laughter punctuates the quietude as we share stories, old war tales, and the kind of jokes that only those who have stared adversity in the face can fully appreciate. In this rare moment of camaraderie, the worries of our mission momentarily takes a back seat, replaced by the simple human connection that had brought us all together.

The atmosphere is relaxed, the tension of our earlier commitments temporarily forgotten. We lean against the hood of a rusted out car, make-shift seating for a motley crew of my friends. Smoke curls into the night air as someone bellows out another dirty joke.

But the tranquility is short-lived. A distant rumble breaks through the stillness, the sound of engines approaching. Heads turn as we collectively catch sight of the SUVs rolling into the parking lot, their imposing frames reminding us what we're really doing here.

The tension in the air is almost palpable as the figures emerge from the SUVs and move with a practiced efficiency. In the dim illumination, their silhouettes are sharp, each motion deliberate and purposeful. The air of intrigue has now evolved into a revelation that unfolded before our eyes.

Crate after crate is set down, and as the lids are lifted, the contents are revealed – an array of weaponry, gleaming dully in the scarce light. The sight is a stark reminder of the stakes we were facing, the battle that loomed on the horizon, and the urgency of our mission.

The men who remain throughout continue their work, methodically arranging the weapons in a precise formation. It's as if they are choreographing an intricate dance of danger, each movement a piece of a larger puzzle. Our focus shifts from cautious curiosity to a shared understanding that the arsenal before us is a manifestation of the preparation required for the fight that awaits.

Amidst the hushed murmurs and exchanged glances among my friends, the car's door swings open. Out steps a

figure that commands attention. A man, clad in a sharp crimson suit that seems to shimmer under the dim illumination. His yellow tie, a streak of vibrant color against the muted surroundings, draws the eye like a beacon. Tinted sunglasses conceal his gaze, lending an air of mystery to his presence. In his gloved hand, he holds a cane with a parrot shaped head, an unexpected touch of whimsy that clashes against the grim atmosphere.

The sight of him triggers a coil of tension to tighten in my gut. Memories, both distant and hauntingly near, surge to the forefront of my mind. Yet, as he begins to approach, a spark of recognition flickers in his eyes, and his lips curl into a faint smile that softens his stern features. The man who strides toward me isn't a stranger, but that only makes my heart pound faster.

Tick, tick, tick.

I can almost hear the clock as he approaches, each second tenser than the last. Who will speak first? What is he going to say? I hope this doesn't go sideways...

“You've gotten fat,” he finally quips as he nears, the words hanging between us like an unexpected chord in a familiar tune. “When did that happen?”

Fat? I glance down. We both know this is muscle. I've worked hard for this body. Despite the lingering apprehension, a smirk tugs at the corner of my lips. His comment is both a jest and a gesture of familiarity, which I'm not sure everyone else realizes just yet.

“And you've gone bald,” I retort, my tone light but tinged with an edge of playful accusation. “I see through the frilly hat you're wearing.”

For a moment, it seems like all the air has gone. No one quite knows how to respond to this. Until finally, laughter erupts from deep within us. We bend double, allowing the mirth to shine free. Eventually, once everyone else realizes that this is genuine laughter, they join in, too. There might still be a bit of uncertainty clinging to the air, but me and my brother, the arm's dealer, will soon dispel that. We always do.

We close the remaining distance with a few brisk strides, arms open wide to embrace one another. Eric pats me on the back as he has hold of me. "It's been a while."

"Too long," I agree, my gaze lingering on the man who had been both my confidant and antagonist throughout our tumultuous history. "I have to say, I'm enjoying the stylish entrance."

He spins to give me the full effect of the attire he's donning before it's time to turn our attention to the array of weapons he has brought for us to win this fight with.

"You know, arm's dealing is a dangerous game, Colt," Eric informs me with a warning gaze. I'm sure he's talking more about me and my life than his. But I listen intently anyway. "But it's also a game that requires strategy, negotiation, and calculated risks. Plus, you'd be surprised at the kind of connections you can make in this world."

"Sure, sure. Well make sure *you're* careful," I tease back, letting him know that I got the message. "Because we wouldn't want anything to happen to you. Anyway, why don't you tell me all about the guns we have here, so we can use them properly."

In the midst of our conversation, just as we're getting to the end of our conversation regarding the guns, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I retrieve it and glance at the screen, my heart skipping a beat as I read the urgent text message. It's from Ryker's phone, the message stark and demanding: "***We have to get together immediately. There's something important we have to discuss.***"

My mind races as I absorb the words. The fleeting moment of camaraderie with my brother is abruptly shattered, replaced by a chilling realization that the fragile peace already coming to an end, with Alistair really making his move towards us.

I meet Eric's gaze, a flicker of concern crossing his features as he notes the change in my demeanor. "Everything all right, Colt? You look like you've seen a ghost."

I hesitate for a brief moment, grappling with the decision before me. The urgency in the message is undeniable, and Ryker's involvement means that whatever's at stake is likely of grave consequence. I'm not going to ignore that, now more than ever.

"I'm sorry, Eric," I say my voice edged with regret. "Something's come up. I have to go."

Understanding dawns in his eyes, and he nods somberly. "No need to apologize. We'll see one another soon enough. I know how it is."

With a firm handshake and a nod of mutual respect, I turn and hurriedly leave, the echoes of our conversation lingering, but mixing in with whatever might be about to come next...



NOVAK

THE SOFT CHIME OF THE COFFEE SHOP DOOR ANNOUNCES MY entrance, and I step inside, a sense of familiarity mingling with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. The cozy ambiance envelopes me as I make my way to a corner table, the worn wooden chair creaking beneath my weight as I settle into it. My gaze is drawn to the scene before me.

Sitting across from me is a man of contrasts. His stature is compact and stout, almost at odds with the generous food spread surrounding him. Plates heaped with pastries, sandwiches, and a colorful assortment of snacks formed a veritable feast, the spread almost eclipsing the small table between us. His most striking feature is his hair – wild, curly tendrils of dark gray that seemed to have a life of their own, framing his face in a tangle of unruly elegance.

"I got you a coffee," he mutters almost under his breath. "Since that's all you ever have."

I sip my black coffee, its bitter warmth a stark contrast to the visual feast before me. As I observe the man's animated gestures and the occasional gleam of mischief in his eyes, a sense of unease overcomes me. Something about this doesn't feel right and I can put my finger on what it is.

"Doesn't that prick feed you?" I ask, my tone a mix of curiosity and exasperation.

The man sitting across from me grins, his cheeks bulging as he chews on a mouthful of fries. He swallows before responding, his expression unapologetic. "Feeds me good," he says with a wink, a glimmer of laughter dancing in his eyes. "Doesn't mean I don't like to eat."

I shake my head with irritation. I'm not here to watch this man eat. We have much more important things to discuss, and I'm sure this man knows this. This is why Ryker sends me to deal with the spies, because he can't deal with their asshole attitudes.

"Any word on the movement of the war?" he asks suddenly, his voice a hushed murmur that barely disturbed the quiet ambiance. Finally, we're getting down to business.

I lean forward slightly, my expression solemn. "We know Alistair is going to come for us. It's only a matter of time. I want to know what you have heard."

He offers me a one shouldered shrug. "Not much. Only that Alistair is planning retaliation against your pack. Something about his daughter."

The mention of Lily sends a pang through my chest, a whirlwind of emotions stirring within me. She's a name that carries weight, a presence that has shaped me ever since she came into my life and lingered in the corners of my mind, even as the chaos of the present demands my attention.

Lily took my virginity recently, an intimate connection that has left an indelible mark on my soul. Her laughter, the touch of her lips, the warmth of her embrace – it all rushed back to me in a flood of sensations, a testament to the profound impact she has made on my life.

And that's not everything. Maddox as well. Watching her fool around with Maddox at the same time as me unleashed something that I didn't even know was there. She really is the sexiest woman that I have ever known, and I can't get enough of her.

But I can't spend this meeting thinking about Lily or I will lose my damn mind.

"Anything specific?" I demand, anger now surging through my voice.

The spy studies me for a moment, his gaze assessing and unreadable. "I'll keep my ears open," he says finally. "If I hear anything substantial, I'll make sure you're the first to know."

His words offer a semblance of reassurance, a reminder that even in the midst of uncertainty, we have allies working in the shadows, piecing together fragments of information that might help us survive the storm that's approaching.

"Make it quick," I say, the urgency in my tone underscoring the gravity of the situation. "Colt has already suspected that there are wolves following us, watching our every move. We can't be too careful. Alistair pretends he doesn't care about Lily, but we know he does."

"His wife was killed right in front of him," the spy tells me darkly, as if I don't already know that. "And he's still carrying on. I don't know if anything can stop that man."

I nod, the weight of our shared knowledge pressing down on me. Alistair's past is marred by tragedy, his actions driven by grief and vengeance. But that very same determination, that unyielding resolve, also makes him a formidable adversary, one who won't hesitate to strike back with all the force at his disposal.

"We need to find out his plans," I declare, my voice resolute. "We can't wait for his next move to come to us. We have to be proactive."

The spy's gaze narrows, his expression contemplative. "I'll dig deeper, pull every string I can. But Alistair's network is vast. It won't be easy."

“We don’t have the luxury of easy,” I reply, a tinge of frustration in my voice. “We need to protect our own. Lily, the pack... they’re counting on us.”

The spy’s lips tighten in a grim line, his commitment to the cause evident in the unwavering set of his jaw. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Midway through his words, my phone vibrates on the table, drawing my attention away from the conversation. I glance down to see a text from Ryker, urgent and to the point: ***“Get back to the house for a meeting. Important.”***

My heart quickens as I read the message. The timing is abrupt, and the gravity of the situation is evident. I’m torn between the need to gather as much information as I can from the spy and the pressing call to return to the house.

“I’m sorry,” I interrupt, my voice edged with urgency. “I have to go. Something is happening.”

The spy gives a curt nod, his understanding apparent. “I’ll keep you posted. Go take care of what you need to.”

With that, I rise from my seat, my thoughts racing as I weave through the bustling coffee shop. The city seems to blur around me as I make my way back to where I’ve parked my car, my mind a whirlwind of possibilities.

As I navigate the streets, my thoughts are consumed by what this meeting at the house could mean. Ryker’s terse message suggests that whatever is happening is of significant importance. In a world where danger lurks around every corner, I can’t afford to ignore this summons.

My mind races through scenarios – possible developments in the ongoing conflict, new intelligence that might have come to light, or perhaps even a threat that hits closer to home. Whatever it is, I know I need to be there, to contribute what I can and to be prepared for the unexpected.

LILY

Ryker can barely keep his hands off of me when we get back home from our date. The electricity of the evening lingers between us, a current of desire that crackles in the air. Our lips meet in a heated kiss, a reminder of the passion that has always simmered beneath the surface of our connection.

But as much as I want to lose myself in his touch, in the promise of what lies ahead, I pull away gently, my fingers pressing against his chest. His breathing is heavy, his gaze dark with want, and I can feel the hunger in his touch.

“We need to stop,” I murmur, my voice thick with longing. “The others will be here soon.”

Ryker’s lips trail a path along my jawline, his touch lingering and fervent. “I know,” he whispers, his voice a husky murmur against my skin. “But it’s hard to think about anything else when you’re in my arms.”

I smile, a mixture of amusement and desire tugging at my lips. “Trust me, I feel the same way. But this is important. We can’t afford any distractions.”

With a reluctant nod, Ryker eases his hold on me, his fingers tracing a final caress down my arm. I step back, the magnetic pull between us still tangible as we regain our composure.

“Does this have anything to do with the secret messages you were sending in the car?” Ryker asks with a cheeky curiosity, his eyes dancing with a playful glint.

I chuckle, shaking my head at his perceptiveness. “Maybe,” I reply, a hint of mischief in my tone. “But all in good time.”

Ryker gives me a lingering look, his gaze heavy with unspoken promises. Then he nods, the seriousness of the situation settling over him. “Okay, then I’ll make sure everyone’s prepared.”

“Get them in the conference room,” I insist. “I think that might be the best place for this to happen. I want to make sure that everyone hears what I have to say.”

“Is there anything else you need?” he asks curiously. “Before I go?”

My eyes lock in with his and I realize that I owe him more of an explanation than anyone. Because we connected first. I don’t want to tell him everything but I do want to be a bit truthful.

I take a moment to consider his question, the weight of truth and honesty pressing on me. While I can’t reveal everything, some truths deserve to be acknowledged.

“I want you to know that there’s more to this than meets the eye,” I say, my voice soft but resolute. “Our connection, it’s... it’s deeper than you might realize.”

Ryker’s gaze intensifies, his expression shifting from curiosity to a mix of seriousness and anticipation. “I’ve always sensed that,” he replies, his tone measured. “There’s something between us that goes beyond the surface. I’ve thought of you as my mate since I first met you.”

His mate... now that statement makes me feel everything all at once.

I take a step closer to him, our connection palpable in the air. “We connected first, Ryker. Before all of this,” I gesture around us, indicating the war, the conflict, the chaos. “And that matters. It’s a foundation that can’t be ignored.”

He nods slowly, as if processing the weight of my words. “I’ve always felt it too. But I also understand that there are things you can’t share with just me.”

A mixture of relief and gratitude washes over me. Ryker's ability to understand the complexities of our situation, to give me space while remaining steadfast, is a testament to the depth of our connection.

"I promise you, there's more to this puzzle," I reiterate, my gaze unwavering. "It will all make sense soon. That's why I want us to have this meeting."

His hand reaches out, cupping my cheek gently. "I trust you, even when I don't have all the answers. We're in this together, remember?"

Touched by his trust and loyalty, I lean into his touch, closing my eyes briefly. "Always."

As Ryker walks away, his form receding into the distance, I'm filled with an overwhelming need to express myself further, to lay bare the emotions that have been simmering within me. I hurry after him, catching up just as he's about to turn a corner.

"Wait," I call out, my voice urgent yet gentle.

He pauses and turns back to me, his eyes curious but patient. There's a quiet understanding in his gaze, a recognition that this is a moment that deserves to be heard.

"I need to tell you something," I begin, my heart racing as I search for the right words. "Something else. You... you've changed me, Ryker."

His brows furrow slightly, a mixture of surprise and curiosity crossing his features. He looks a little like I have knocked the wind from him. "Changed you? How?"

I take a deep breath, the weight of my confession settling over me. "I used to fear you, the intensity of your presence. But now... now, I don't want to run from it anymore. You've shown me a different side, a side that's full of loyalty, kindness, and unwavering support."

Ryker's expression softens, a warmth in his gaze that's both humbling and reassuring. "I'm glad," he says, his voice genuine. "You've changed me too, in ways I never expected."

I step closer, the space between us closing as I continue to lay bare my feelings. “The only thing I think of when I think of you now is the love swelling in my heart. You’re no longer a source of fear; you’re a source of strength and comfort.”

A tender smile tugs at the corners of Ryker’s lips, and I can see the emotions mirrored in his eyes. “I feel the same way. You’ve become the center of my world, the light in the midst of all this darkness. I didn’t know if I would ever be able to tell you that...”

As he reaches out to take my hand, I’m overwhelmed by a sense of completeness. The path that has brought us here, the challenges we’ve faced and the connections we’ve formed, all lead to this moment of raw vulnerability and shared understanding.

“I don’t want to lose you,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. “Not now, not ever.”

His grip on my hand tightens, his touch a silent promise. “You won’t. We’ll face whatever comes together, no matter the odds.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, a testament to the depth of my emotions. As we stand there, hand in hand, I realize that love – undeniable and unbreakable – has become the anchor in our lives. Amidst the chaos, amidst the battles we fight, this connection remains steadfast and unwavering. But my emotions are interrupted by a new presence joining us.

Novak bursts through the door first, his entrance abrupt and filled with urgency. “Boss? I got your message; what’s going on?”

The room is charged with a sudden energy as the other members of the pack follow Novak’s lead, their expressions a mix of curiosity and readiness. Their presence is a reminder that amidst our personal connections, our pack remains a united force bound by loyalty and determination.

Ryker steps back from me, his hand reluctantly releasing mine, and he offers a reassuring smile. “I guess it’s time to set up for the meeting then.”

I nod and watch all the men walk to the conference room, ready to hear whatever I have to say. I don't know how ready I am to be in the spotlight and to tell them all how I feel, but I have to try, and there's no time better than the present.

I step into the conference room, my heart pounding in my chest as I face the expectant gazes of the pack members. The room is charged with a mix of anticipation and curiosity, and I feel the weight of the moment settling over me.

Before I begin, my eyes find Ryker's, his presence a grounding force. There's reassurance in his gaze, a silent encouragement that emboldens me to continue. Taking a steadying breath, I clear my throat and address my pack.

"Thank you all for being here," I say, my voice carrying a blend of sincerity and vulnerability. "I know this is a little unusual and unexpected, but I was the one who called you all here because I have something I want to discuss with you."

I pause for a moment, allowing my words to settle among the group. My gaze shifts from one member to another, each face representing a unique aspect of our pack's dynamic.

"Ryker," I say, my voice steady as I meet his gaze, "your determination has always inspired me. You lead with your heart and your unwavering dedication to our cause. It's something I love and deeply respect. It's why I've fallen in love with you."

The air almost leaves the room as the other men think they have lost. They haven't given me a chance to continue on yet, so while Ryker's lips have curved into a smile, doesn't mean I can return the expression. Not quite yet anyway.

"Maddox," I continue, turning my attention to him, "your artistic temperament brings a different kind of light to my life. I have loved talking to you, and *feeling* you as well." It's unnerving to say this because I'm not sure how much Ryker knows, but he stays steely silent. "Which is why I have fallen in love with you as well."

A hint of surprise crosses Maddox's features, replaced by a genuine grin that speaks volumes.

“Colt,” I say, addressing the fiery spirit within him, “your passion and fire really excites me. I can’t stop thinking about you, and how you unleash a newness in me as well. I love you also.”

Colt’s expression softens, a mixture of appreciation and understanding in his eyes.

“Novak,” I conclude, meeting his gaze, “your sensitivity is a gift that often goes unspoken. Your empathy and understanding make you the one person I turn to when times are tough. Of course it wouldn’t be love if it didn’t include you as well.”

Novak’s gaze meets mine with an intensity that speaks volumes, a recognition of the sentiments shared. He nods just the once, letting me know that he gets it.

“And to all of you,” I say, my voice growing softer as I address the room, “I want you to know that I don’t want to choose. I don’t want to single anyone out. I want to be with all of you, because every one of you brings something unique and valuable to my life.”

Silence hangs in the air, the weight of my confession lingering. The room is still as my words settle among us, and I wait with bated breath to hear their answers, to gauge their reactions to the raw emotions I’ve laid bare.

Ryker’s smile widens, an unspoken understanding between us. Maddox’s eyes are wide with surprise, Colt’s gaze reflects a mixture of pride and a hint of bashfulness, and Novak’s expression holds a depth of emotion that’s difficult to put into words.

In this moment of vulnerability and shared truth, I’m reminded that love can take many forms, that connections are built on understanding, appreciation, and the courage to expose our most genuine selves. As the room stirs with reactions, I’m fortified by the knowledge that no matter the response, the bonds we share are unbreakable, and the path we’ve chosen is one paved with unity, acceptance, and love.

Ryker speaks first, his voice carrying a calm confidence that instantly puts me at ease. “I’m not surprised,” he says, his eyes fixed on mine, his tone steady. “I sensed it from the start.”

His words catch me off guard, and I find myself searching his gaze for any signs of negativity or discomfort. But all I find is acceptance, a deep understanding that transcends the boundaries of our connection.

“I smelled their scent on you that day,” he continues, his gaze unflinching. “Maddox and Novak. And it never bothered me. You’re your own person, with your own desires. What matters to me is that it’s my bed you’ll return to, my arms you’ll seek when the day is done.”

His words wash over me like a soothing balm, a reminder of the strength and depth of our bond. Ryker’s confidence in our connection, in his place in my life, is unshakable. He’s always been attuned to the complexities of my heart, and I find a sense of liberation in his acceptance.

“I felt the soul bond early with you,” he says, his voice low, carrying an intimacy only we can share. “And I’m not going to hold you back from whatever you want, from whatever brings you happiness.”

A warmth spreads through me, a profound sense of gratitude for the man standing before me, for his open heart and his willingness to stand by my side through every twist and turn. Even this unexpected twist.

“That’s why I call you my mate,” he adds, his eyes locked onto mine, his voice carrying a mix of devotion and reassurance. “Because in you, I’ve found a connection that goes beyond possessiveness, a bond that’s built on trust and understanding. And whether it’s just me or all of us, that bond remains unbreakable.”

His words pierce through the air, a declaration that carries the weight of his unwavering commitment. The room around us fades, and for a moment, it’s just the two of us, our souls laid bare and our connection stronger than ever.

Colt's response follows swiftly, his characteristic fire and determination evident in every word he speaks. "Well, hell, if we're all laying our hearts on the table, count me in too."

His declaration carries the same fervor that defines his every action, and his eyes have a fierce glint as he addresses the room. The energy in the air shifts, his unwavering commitment evident to all.

"I've always been a passionate guy," he continues, his voice ringing with conviction. "And I've always known that I want the people I care about to know just how much they mean to me."

His gaze flickers to each of us, a connection formed through trials and triumphs that can't be easily broken.

"I love this pack, and I love each of you," he declares, his voice unwavering. "Ryker, you're like a brother to me, and I've got your back no matter what. And you, too," he looks at me with a grin, "I've come to care about you more than I ever thought possible. You challenge me, you make me want to be better, and I'll be damned if I let anything come between us."

The room is alive with Colt's passion, his heartfelt words resonating with everyone present. His declaration is a reminder that our connections, our bonds, are what give us strength in the face of adversity.

He crosses his arms, his stance one of unwavering resolve. "So yeah, I'm in. I'm all in. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

A chorus of chuckles and nods follows, the tension of the moment dissolving into shared camaraderie. Colt's loyalty and openness paves the way for the remaining responses, a testament to the unity that defines our pack.

"I've always seen the world a bit differently," Maddox begins as he rises to his feet, his voice soft but unwavering. "But when you came into my life, you gave me a new perspective. You challenged my perceptions, and in doing so, you became a part of my art, my soul."

His words are like brushstrokes on a canvas, creating an image of his feelings that goes beyond mere words. The room is hushed, the weight of his emotions palpable.

“You,” he says, his gaze never leaving mine, “you’re like a muse to me. The way you move, the way you carry yourself – it’s all become a masterpiece in my mind. And in my heart.”

A swell of emotion rises within me, an understanding of the impact we’ve had on each other’s lives. The connection between us, once purely physical, has evolved to something deeper, something that transcends the boundaries of our individuality.

“I’ve fallen in love with you,” he admits, his voice quivering with the sincerity of his words. “And I know it might not fit the mold of what everyone expects, but it’s real, it’s profound, and it’s something I can’t ignore.”

His declaration hangs in the air, a testament to the unique nature of our connections. And then, with a tenderness that speaks volumes, Maddox steps closer and presses his lips to mine.

The kiss is a whirlwind of emotions, a merging of souls that goes beyond the physical. It’s a testament to the complexity of our relationships, the interwoven threads of trust, affection, and shared experiences.

As the kiss ends, Maddox pulls back, his gaze filled with a mixture of apprehension and hope. The room is still, the air charged with the raw vulnerability of the moment.

Novak’s response carries a depth of emotion that’s evident in every quiver of his voice, every tear glistening in his eyes. His sensitivity and empathy, traits that have always made him an integral part of our pack, are on full display as he steps forward.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice a gentle, heartfelt whisper. “Thank you for sharing your heart with us. It means so much. You have no idea.”

His words hang in the air, a palpable gratitude that underscores the significance of the moment. Novak’s presence

has always been a steady, calming influence, and now, as he stands before us, his vulnerability is a testament to the strength of our connections.

“I’ve always believed in the power of connections,” he continues, his voice steady but infused with emotion. “And the connection we share as a pack, it’s something irreplaceable, something that’s become an integral part of who I am.”

His gaze finds mine, a depth of feeling in his eyes that speaks to the bond we’ve cultivated. Novak’s empathy, his understanding, are like threads that weave through our relationships, binding us together in ways that defy explanation.

“As for me,” he says, his voice catching slightly, “I want you to know that I love you too. It’s not just admiration or loyalty. It’s a deep, profound love that has grown as we’ve faced challenges together.”

The room is quiet, the weight of his words resonating with everyone present. Novak’s emotions are raw and unfiltered, his tears a testament to the depth of his feelings.

“I may not always have the right words,” he admits, his voice carrying a mixture of humility and honesty, “but I want you to know that I cherish our connection, our bond, and the love that we share as a pack.”

His declaration is met with a collective nod of understanding, a shared recognition of the beauty and strength that can be found in vulnerability.

With a soft smile, Novak steps closer, his hand reaching out to touch mine in a gesture of connection and support. “We’re in this together,” he says, his voice steady, his gaze unwavering. “And no matter what lies ahead, the love we share will guide us through. Especially with your little secret.” He smiles as he pats my belly. “Because I can sense it. You’re having a baby.”

I suspected as much, but now it’s confirmed. I’m having a baby! With these men, this is the most exciting thing to ever

happen to me. Now I'm having the baby that will seal us together forever.

Ryker excitedly pulls me closer, his hands slowly roaming my body, right here in the conference room, I can't resist the temptation to reciprocate. Our passionate embrace grows fiercer with each passing second, the heat of the moment really sweeping me off my feet with the other men watching me. My body yearns for more, for all of them to touch me. I need to finally claim what I've been seeking out ever since I first met these men.

Slowly, Novak trails his lips down the back of neck, his touch sending waves of pleasure coursing through me. Maddox doesn't wait for long also. With nimble fingers, he begins to explore every inch of my skin, causing me to quiver with anticipation. The moment Colt's fiery tongue starts to travel all over my body, I lose my damn mind. This is even more intense than I expected it to be, and a great reward for being brave enough to speak my mind.

Tongues, fingers, touch, skin... it's everywhere. Our combined energies create a cacophony of sensual delight. I lose myself eagerly in the throes of passion, grateful that this will now be the rest of my life. I feel like I'm going crazy, but in the best way possible, and that I have also finally found a place that I belong. Right here, with my captors. Then men who wanted to trap me, but ended up freeing me.

As the waves of endless pleasure crash over me, washing away anything rational, I'm overwhelmed and overjoyed and willing to fight for this forever. Even if I have to take down my father in the process.

Because that man has no idea what love is, not like this. I'm so glad that I've found it at long last. This is worth everything that I've been through to get here.

RYKER

Bringing the Alistair situation to a close becomes a priority after everything that's happened recently. I don't want the war anymore, I can't fight. Everything that I wanted when I first took Lily has been transformed by the love that we feel for one another now.

It's time to put the animosity to bed before someone gets hurt. Over territory... I mean, how stupid is that? I can see it now because I have something more important in my life. Something worth fighting for, but in a different way.

I make the call, my voice steady as I give Alistair the location and the time to meet me, to talk about what's next. His gruff acknowledgment on the other end is a stark contrast to the confidence I once saw in his bar. This time, there's no cocky grin, no bravado, just a sense of purpose and a commitment to resolve the conflicts that have fueled our feud.

The appointed time arrives, and I find myself standing in the field, my heart steady in my chest. The wind rustles through the grass, a whisper of anticipation in the air. I'm not alone. My pack members stand nearby but just out of sight, a united front that stands as a testament to our strength.

Alistair's figure appears on the horizon, his steps determined as he walks toward me. His presence carries a mix of wariness and curiosity, his guard neither up nor down – just a sense of readiness for whatever might transpire.

As he reaches me, I extend a hand in greeting, a gesture that speaks of our willingness to find common ground. His

gaze meets mine, a mixture of suspicion and something akin to respect.

“What’s this all about?” he grumbles, his voice a low rumble that’s tinged with skepticism.

I meet his gaze without flinching, my resolve solid. “I’ve come to put an end to this, Alistair. The feuding, the tension – it’s only tearing the city apart, and I’m tired of it. I don’t want to do this anymore. I don’t want this stupid war to happen.”

His brow furrows, a flicker of consideration in his eyes. “And why should I believe you now? What’s changed? You kidnapped my daughter to make this happen. Now you’re the one trying to end it? That doesn’t make any sense to me at all.”

I draw a deep breath, my gaze steady. “Love has changed me,” I admit, my voice unwavering.

Alistair’s gaze narrows, his scrutiny unwavering. He’s a man of many layers, complexities that extend beyond the animosity that’s defined our relationship.

“Love? I don’t know if I believe that love can change anyone. Not in this world,” he says, his tone gruff but contemplative.

It’s then I notice the army behind him, just out of sight as well. But I can still catch a glimpse of them, which means he wants me to see. He wants me to know that I could die here.

“Well, love has changed me,” I continue with a one shouldered shrug. “Lily has changed me. She’s who I want for the rest of my life. She’s more important than anyone else.”

Alistair’s laughter echoes across the field, his amusement unrestrained and infectious. His reaction is not unexpected. I knew my proposition would catch him off guard. But as his laughter continues, I stand my ground, my expression unyielding and my determination solid.

“You expect me to give you, my daughter?” he manages to say between fits of laughter, his voice laced with incredulity. “You’ve got to be crazy.”

The sound of his raucous laughter starkly contrasts the gravity of the moment. His disbelief is palpable, his reaction a testament to the absurdity of my proposal. But as he continues to chuckle, my resolve doesn't waver. I'm here to put an end to the feud, to find a solution that benefits us both.

The laughter eventually subsides, replaced by an incredulous grin on Alistair's face. He wipes a tear from the corner of his eye, his amusement giving way to curiosity.

"All right, seriously," he says, his voice still carrying a hint of mirth. "What's the catch? What's in it for you? More importantly, what's in it for *me*?"

I meet his gaze, my expression unwavering, and I lay out my terms with a clear and steady voice, trying to ignore how happily he will throw Lily away if he gets something in return. But that's what I've been counting on, so I can't complain. "I'll relinquish any claim to the disputed land, and in return, I ask for Lily's hand in marriage."

Alistair blinks, his grin fading as his gaze locks onto mine. A mixture of surprise and contemplation replaces the amusement that had colored his features. The air around us grows heavy with the weight of the proposition, the gravity of my words underscoring the sincerity of my intent.

His laughter had obscured the true nature of my proposal, but now, as the silence stretches between us, it becomes evident that I'm not making this offer lightly. I'm laying it all on the line, forging a path that goes beyond rivalry and spite, and the impact of my words begins to settle.

"You're serious, aren't you?" he says, his voice quieter now, devoid of the earlier laughter.

I nod, my expression unflinching. "Dead serious. This isn't about power or territory anymore, Alistair. It's about finding a way to end the cycle of hatred that's consumed us."

Alistair's gaze holds mine, his scrutiny piercing as he searches for any sign that I might be bluffing. But he finds none. Instead, what he sees is the unwavering determination,

the commitment to change, and the hope for a future that's built on unity.

His raucous howling, his initial disbelief, it all fades into the background as he studies me. The tension between us grows, the gravity of the moment settling over us like a heavy shroud.

And then, finally, his expression shifts. The laughter that had characterized our meeting now replaced by contemplation, by something deeper. He studies me for a long moment, as if trying to unravel the truth behind my words.

"You really care about her, don't you?" he asks, his voice carrying a mixture of wonder and something akin to understanding.

I meet his gaze without hesitation, my affirmation clear and genuine. "Yes. And I care about ending this feud, too."

Alistair's eyes hold mine, the weight of our shared history evident in the depths of his gaze. For a long moment, the world around us fades, leaving just the two of us, standing in a field that's become a battleground for something far more profound than territory.

His laughter had been a defense mechanism, a shield against the unexpected. But now, as he looks at me, it's clear that he's grappling with a decision that goes beyond pride and rivalry.

I address him, my voice measured and calm. "Alistair, I understand that this proposition is unconventional, but it's also practical. Our rivalry has only weakened us both in the eyes of the other crime families. By uniting our houses, we'd not only put an end to the feud but also present a united front that's more powerful than either of us alone."

Alistair's gaze is steady, his expression pensive. He listens without interruption, a sign that he's genuinely considering the offer I've put on the table.

"You've always been a formidable opponent," I continue, my words carrying a note of respect. "But think of the strength

we could have as allies. No longer rivals, but partners who share a common goal.”

He leans back, his fingers steepled in front of him. His expression is contemplative, his silence an indication that he’s weighing the pros and cons, considering the implications of a partnership that goes beyond mere business arrangements.

“What do you gain from this?” he asks, his tone cautious but not confrontational.

I meet his gaze without hesitation. “A stable future for our families. A chance to rise above the chaos and turmoil that’s defined our relationship. And for me personally, the chance to be with Lily, to make amends for the past and build a future that’s not marred by hostility.”

Alistair’s gaze doesn’t waver, his scrutiny unwavering. It’s clear that he’s considering not just the practical benefits of the proposition, but also the emotional implications of a truce that goes beyond just business.

His questions come one after another, each probing deeper into the practicalities of the proposition. I respond to each inquiry with honesty and openness, addressing his concerns and laying out the plan for our unified future.

“We’ll subdivide the land we already own,” I confirm, my voice steady. “We’ll share resources and armies, pooling our strengths to create a force that’s unmatched by any other crime family in the city.”

Alistair nods slowly, his expression thoughtful as he processes the information. “I would be mad not to take this offer,” he muses, “because war will lead to death, and this leads to strength.”

As he holds out his hand for me to shake, solidifying this agreement, I finally start to see that this all can end in a positive way for all of us. I don’t want this life anymore. I’m done with the life of crime. All I want is my new family. But I want everyone to be safe, I want the fighting to end, and this hand shake signifies that.

Tomorrow will be a brand new, much brighter day, and I can't wait to see it.

EPILOGUE – LILY

Five Years Later

Heavily pregnant, I find solace in the tranquility of our countryside home. The air is filled with the sweet sounds of laughter and the joyous energy of our growing family. As I sit outside, my gaze fixed on the scene before me, my heart swells with a sense of fulfillment that goes beyond anything I could have imagined.

The twins, a reflection of the love between Novak and me, dart around the yard, their youthful exuberance contagious. Colt, always the playful one, joins in their game of catch, his laughter blending with theirs to create a symphony of happiness.

It's a picturesque scene, one that paints a vivid picture of the life we've built together. A life that's not confined to titles or conventional norms, but one that's defined by the connections we've formed, the love we share, and the family we've created.

A soft breeze rustles through the trees, carrying with it the whispers of our history, the trials we've faced, and the triumphs we've celebrated. And as I sit here, a radiant smile on my lips, I reflect on how far we've come.

Maddox and Novak, perched on the tree swing, embody the harmony that defines our pack. Their laughter rings out, a testament to the camaraderie that's formed through shared experiences and the bonds that have only grown stronger with time.

Ryker's steps draw my attention, and I turn to see him approaching. His presence is a balm to my soul, his smile a reflection of the contentment we've found together. As he settles beside me, his head finding a resting place on my growing belly, a sense of warmth envelops us.

"Gemma's finally asleep," he says, his voice a gentle murmur. The unborn baby responds to his voice, a playful kick against his cheek. The sight warms my heart, a tangible reminder of the life that's growing within me.

I reach down to touch his cheek, my fingers brushing against the spot where our child's movements are most pronounced. "They know their father's voice," I say, a mixture of awe and tenderness in my tone.

Ryker's gaze lifts to meet mine, his eyes filled with a mixture of wonder and love. In this moment, as the sun sets on another day, it's clear that our journey is far from over, that the challenges we've faced have only strengthened the bond between us.

"We've come a long way," he murmurs, his fingers intertwining with mine.

I nod, a sense of gratitude filling my heart. "And we're just getting started."

I glance at him, his profile softened by the fading light, and I let out a soft sigh. "You know, sometimes I feel guilty," I confess, my voice hushed in the stillness of the evening.

Ryker turns his gaze toward me, his eyes searching mine with a mixture of curiosity and concern. "Guilty? About what?"

I fumble for the right words, trying to put my complex feelings in to coherent sentences. "About taking you away from the life you loved," I admit, my voice tinged with a touch of sadness. "You were a part of the city crew, a life that you thrived in. And now, we're here, in the mountains, far from everything you knew."

Ryker's expression softens, and he reaches out to take my hand, his touch grounding me. "Lils," he says gently, using the

nickname that's reserved for moments of vulnerability, "I made this choice willingly. Being with you, building this family, it's worth everything to me."

I smile, a mixture of gratitude and relief flooding through me. His words are a balm to my guilt, a reminder that the choices we've made have been driven by a shared commitment to a future that's defined by love and unity.

"You dropped it all," I say, my voice quiet but filled with awe. "Your position, your reputation – everything. You chose to be here with me. With us."

Ryker's smile is tender, his thumb brushing against the back of my hand. "And I'd make the same choice again, in a heartbeat."

His sincerity washes over me, and the weight of my guilt begins to lift. The emotions that have been brewing over the past year, amplified by my latest pregnancy, find release in this moment of connection.

"You have your family here," he continues, his gaze unwavering. "Our family. Lils, you've given me something I never thought I'd have. A sense of belonging, a future that's filled with love."

Tears gather at the corners of my eyes, a mixture of joy and relief spilling over. Ryker's unwavering support, his understanding, are a testament to the strength of our bond.

"You've given me the same," I say, my voice catching slightly. "A chance to leave behind the past, to create a future that's defined by us, by our love and our unity."

As we sit there, our hands intertwined, I'm reminded of the journey we've been on. The challenges, the doubts, the moments of triumph – they've all led us to this point, a place of contentment and mutual support.

Tears glisten in my eyes, a reflection of the overwhelming emotions that surge within me. Without a word, without the need for elaborate explanations, Ryker and I lean in, our lips meeting in a gentle and heartfelt kiss.

It's a kiss that speaks volumes, a tender connection that goes beyond words. Our love, our commitment, our shared journey – it's all encapsulated in this moment of unity. As our lips touch, I can feel the depth of our emotions, the shared history that binds us, and the promise of the future we're building together.

As we pull away, our foreheads resting against each other, the weight of our emotions lingers in the air. The tears that had welled in my eyes now flow freely, but they're tears of joy, of gratitude, of a love that's deep and unwavering.

"I love you," I whisper, my voice soft and tremulous.

Ryker's gaze meets mine, his eyes filled with a mixture of tenderness and devotion. "And I love you, more than words can express."

In this tranquil moment, with the mountains as our witness and the stars above us, I'm reminded of the strength of our connection, of the journey we've embarked upon, and of the future that awaits us – a future defined by unity, love, and the unbreakable bonds that hold us together. As we hold each other close, I'm filled with a sense of peace, a certainty that no matter what challenges may come our way, our love will remain constant, an anchor in the stormy seas of life.

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I remain right where I am, almost as if I know he'll be coming to join me soon. I can sense a weird pull between us, even in the very full room. Mason makes his way around the room, shaking a few hands, but it isn't long before my prediction is correct, and this very powerful man is headed towards me with a fixed, intense stare. Holy shit, are my feet even touching the ground anymore?

“You are going to dance with me,” Mason declares as he takes my hand, bringing it to his lips for a gentle kiss. Even the lightest graze of his lips brushing against mine is more electrifying than anything I have ever experienced in my life. “Come on, let's go...”

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My father is having a party in our home tonight and I'm not allowed to be there. I have to be locked away in my bedroom like a child or a God damn princess in a fairytale. If I can't feel safe in my own home, then where can I feel safe? It's ridiculous and I hate it.

This whole debacle has even dampened the good mood I was in because of the mysterious man and the way he made me feel. If I close my eyes, I can still feel his lips on mine, his hands all over my body, the depth of him thrusting inside me until I simply couldn't control myself any longer. God, I wish I could do that every night. I wish I could have a normal life, not one that's controlled because my father is a kingpin of a crime syndicate.

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