



CLAIMED
BY THE
DRAGON
DADDY

ROXIE RAY

Claimed By The Dragon Daddy

A Single Dad Shifter Romance

Dragon Rebels

Book 2

Roxie Ray

Contents

1. [Evan](#)
2. [Mariah](#)
3. [Evan](#)
4. [Mariah](#)
5. [Evan](#)
6. [Mariah](#)
7. [Evan](#)
8. [Mariah](#)
9. [Evan](#)
10. [Mariah](#)
11. [Evan](#)
12. [Mariah](#)
13. [Evan](#)
14. [Mariah](#)
15. [Evan](#)
16. [Mariah](#)
17. [Evan](#)
18. [Mariah](#)
19. [Evan](#)
20. [Mariah](#)
21. [Evan](#)
22. [Mariah](#)
23. [Evan](#)
24. [Mariah](#)
25. [Evan](#)
26. [Mariah](#)
27. [Evan](#)
28. [Evan](#)
29. [Mariah](#)
30. [Evan](#)
31. [Mariah](#)

[Claimed By The Dragon Daddy.](#)

Chapter 1

Evan

The worn path beneath my boots was familiar. The crunch of gravel. The scent of summer grass. I'd walked this trail countless times. Could do it in my sleep. What surprised me was that even after seventeen years, this forest deep in the Carey clan lands still felt like an old friend welcoming me home.

Home. Is that what this was?

“How much farther?”

I turned and saw Mariah standing at the bottom of the rock I'd just scaled, arms crossed as she gave me a dubious look. This last leg of the trail was particularly steep. I stretched out my hand and grinned down at her.

“I offered to give you a ride.” However, when Mariah thought of straddling me in dragon form, she insisted she could handle the hike.

Her eyes narrowed on my fingers, then she moved to the top of the rock before calculating her distance. “I'm starting to think I made the wrong choice.”

I chuckled, turning, then swinging my legs back over the rock, dropping nimbly to my feet in front of her, offering my back. “Climb on and I'll carry you up.”

Her brown eyes widened, a small gasp escaping her lips. “I'm still not used to that. You were never like this back in the city.”

“Like what?” I arched and stepped closer, slipping an arm around her waist as I pulled her to me. I brought my nose to her neck and breathed her in. She smelled like sunflowers and summer, and my dragon stirred in my subconscious. He and I were both hyperaware of everything about her these days. Ever since the kidnapping, my dragon had grown more insistent. The desire to claim Mariah as our mate had sprung forth unexpectedly, and I wasn’t sure how to handle it.

She shook her head, fingers trailing up my arms as she mumbled, “Just this... untamed dragon beast.”

I burst out laughing, pulling back slightly and staring at her. “Untamed dragon beast?”

Mariah smirked, winding her arms around my neck and guiding my head back down. “I mean, you just jumped off a boulder and offered to scale it again with me on your back.”

“Or I could just fly us to the top,” I said. “The offer still stands.”

She looked even more wary at that prospect, the smile dropping from her face as she glanced at the boulder again. “You really think you can carry me up there?”

“I’m starting to think I should be offended. I’m not much of a dragon if I can’t carry my own mate through any obstacle.” The minute the words left my mouth, I froze.

I’d dismissed the intensity of my feelings for Mariah in the beginning, but as more time passed, I couldn’t ignore it. After the kidnapping, I’d known for sure: she was my mate. And I had no idea how she might feel about that.

“What did you say?”

I turned quickly and bent down, gesturing for her to climb on. “I’m offended. Were you just pretending all this time to be impressed by my dragon?”

Mariah’s warm laughter echoed off the rocks as she ran her hands over my shoulders before wrapping herself around them. “I think you know the answer to that.”

I reached back and gripped her thighs as I stood, then she wrapped her legs around my waist.

“Damn right I do.” I wouldn’t say Mariah had tamed the beast, yet my dragon seemed more settled since she’d come into my life. I once had to fuck my way through an endless string of women just to keep him at bay in a city where shifting wasn’t allowed. Now I had the only woman that mattered.

If she’d caught my little slip, she didn’t let on, and relief washed over me. This was something we needed to talk about, but I wanted to make sure I handled it correctly. I loved this woman with my entire being. The idea of overwhelming her with something as huge as the mate bond when we already had so much going on didn’t seem right.

In a matter of seconds, I was back atop the rock, but I didn’t lower Mariah to the ground. I continued along the winding trail, enjoying the feeling of her legs around me.

“You are different out here, though,” she said. “You’re more at ease. You let yourself relax.”

Relaxation was hardly what I’d call it. With Tomas Hawthorne still out there, waiting to make his next move, I’d been more on edge than ever. I’d die before I let him take Mariah from me again. Or Sofia.

“It’s because I don’t have to work so hard to keep my dragon suppressed. Shifting and flying regularly with the clan means I don’t have all this pent-up energy.” Not that it was helping with the growing need to protect Mariah in any way I could—like claiming her.

I had to keep reminding myself Mariah was safe here with me on these lands. The entire clan would protect her, and Hawthorne knew better than to breach our borders. That didn’t mean I wasn’t hypervigilant.

I glanced over my shoulder at my mate, taking in the way her hair floated on the breeze, the way her eyes sparkled with a light that’d disappeared in the days after she escaped from Hawthorne. The memory haunted me: her trembling form, the

vacant stare when I rescued her from my sworn enemy. But with each day that passed since bringing her here, I saw more of the fierce, determined woman who'd stolen my heart.

Seeing her like this, smiling and laughing again after everything she'd been through, filled me with a sense of gratitude that she was okay, and relief flooded each morning when I woke to find her safe in my bed. When I caught her laughing with Abi or cooing over Sofia, my heart swelled, grateful for the normalcy that was slowly seeping back into our lives. Well, as much normalcy as could be expected.

Despite the lingering threats, despite the looming presence of Tomas, Mariah was healing, and her resilience astounded me. As if she'd sensed where my thoughts had turned, she rested her head on my shoulder, murmuring, "It's been three days, Evan."

Her words carried an unspoken question, a fear that'd taken root since we first called Jax. He'd been roughed up, the object of his father's wrath once Tomas discovered it was Jaxon who helped Mariah escape. Jax promised to contact us again with more information, but we had yet to hear from him, and my patience waned with each passing day.

"I'm not sure when we'll hear from him, Mariah," I confessed, my words heavy with skepticism I couldn't shake. Honestly, I couldn't be sure if we'd hear from him at all.

Mariah stiffened. "This again? How many times do I have to tell you we can trust Jax?"

I tried to hold in a sigh when I stopped before the last bend and lowered her to her feet. Mariah might be convinced Jaxon was on our side, but he had a long way to go to prove it. I was grateful he'd aided in Mariah's escape, but there was so much we didn't know. I simply wouldn't risk putting Mariah in danger due to misplaced loyalty.

There was a mixture of challenge and empathy in her face when I looked at her. I rubbed her arms gently up and down.

"Mariah, I owe him one," I said. "Jaxon got you out. He risked his neck to make sure you were safe." My chest

tightened as I spoke, the idea of Mariah trapped in Tomas's cold clutches still a vivid nightmare in my mind. "That means something to me, but that doesn't mean we can forget who he is. Whose *son* he is."

My words hung between us in the air, a stark reminder of the situation we faced, very different from our teasing just a few moments ago. Those moments were the ones which really mattered.

Sebastian and I wanted to take Tomas Hawthorne down for the last time. But I wasn't alone in my skepticism. The clan leader and I both had our doubts. What was really motivating Jaxon? Why did he help Mariah, inviting his father's wrath onto himself?

I'd been on board when Mariah reached out to him to see if he could help, even if I hadn't liked the way he'd spoken to Mariah one bit. He was entirely too forward and familiar with the woman who belonged with me. I'd go so far as to say he was flirting with her, something that had me grinding my teeth even now, but I'd still been willing to see how he might be of use.

Until we learned of his parentage.

Finding out Jaxon was Tomas Hawthorne's one and only son had killed my initial hope. Instead, I questioned his motives. Was this part of some grand, unseen game Tomas was playing?

"I hear you, Evan." Mariah never wavered. "I understand where you and Sebastian are coming from. But I still think—no, I *believe* Jax is trustworthy. He gained nothing by helping me escape. If anything, he put himself in danger since Tomas treated his own son as a punching bag when he found out." Her eyes flashed in anger. "I don't see that as a sign of someone who's our enemy."

As we stood there, bathed in the heat of the Texas' afternoon sun, I admired Mariah, even if we disagreed. She had a way of seeing the best in people, a way of cutting through the uncertainty and finding the underlying truth. It was one of the many reasons I loved her. Hell, she'd seen

through my own walls all those months ago and seen me for who I really was. But we had to tread carefully around these uncertain waters. As long as Tomas loomed in the shadows, that meant questioning everything, even the actions of those who seemed like our allies.

“Mariah.” I didn’t want to alienate her, but I also needed her to understand. “There’s still so much you don’t know about this world. About our dynamics, our politics. All of that comes into play here with the Hawthornes.”

“Then, tell me.”

Her eyes shimmered with curiosity, but deep down I wished to shield her from the most complicated parts of my life. I knew better than that, though. Mariah wasn’t one to shy away from challenges or be kept in the dark. It was only fair I let her in. She was willing to face so much just to be with me, and she needed to know how things worked.

I tightened my grip on her hand and led her around the corner where the trees stopped, and a massive rock jutted out. Keeping my eyes on her, I pulled her forward, loving the look of awe on her face when she saw the panoramic view of the Carey clan lands spread out before us.

Her mouth dropped open as she took it all in. It was only when she looked down that she looked uncertain.

“Come.” I laced my fingers with hers, guiding Mariah forward a few feet before sitting down on the wide, flat surface of the outcropping.

She sat down next to me, shaking her head. “I can’t believe this view. Why have you not brought me up here before?”

I grinned and leaned over to kiss her cheek, wrapping an arm around her. “There are even more places I want to show you. We just haven’t had time to explore all of them yet.” The land was vast.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, just taking in the view, but eventually Mariah’s curiosity got the best of her. “So, what were you going to say? About the clan politics.”

I scooted a bit closer, wanting to feel her body pressed against mine. “In our world, Jax’s situation isn’t that different from mine. Both of us are sons of powerful alphas, and both of us are illegitimate.” Mariah stiffened as I ran my fingers over her hand.

“I know what you’re thinking. It might not matter much in the human world, but the shifter world is different. We take tradition seriously, especially when it comes to succession. In most cases, the title of clan alpha is passed from father to son, but our roles aren’t automatically given to us just because of blood ties. Being an illegitimate son doesn’t guarantee succession. In fact, it’s practically unheard of in the clans. But there are also cases where even a legitimate son isn’t guaranteed succession.”

That’d been the case with Lucas and me. The fallout were severe, and while we were working to repair the damage that was done when I was banished, it wasn’t easy.

Mariah squeezed my hand, knowing exactly what I was thinking, offering strength and comfort.

I took another deep breath. “My point is alphas must prove their worth. Tomas could be testing Jax right now.”

Mariah frowned. “Testing him?”

I grimaced. “Yes. Jax might be willing to do anything to prove himself to his father, even if it means setting us up.”

“Do you really think Jax would go through all of this, even getting beat up, for some... grand scheme?” she said, her tone wavering between disbelief and dread.

I told her the truth. “I don’t know—I really hope not. Despite what you think, I *want* to believe we can trust Jax, but we can’t be blind. We need to be prepared for any scenario, especially with the custody hearing coming up.”

She fell silent at that. The future of our family hinged on this custody hearing. The court date was coming, and while I refused to entertain the possibility that we wouldn’t prevail, we had a hard, uncharted path ahead of us.

I squeezed her hand, a simple reassurance that despite the uncertainties and danger, there was one thing I was sure of: our love. No matter what tangled webs Tomas or Jax or anyone else might weave, I knew we'd face them together and come out on top.

Mariah was my mate, and I would fight until my last breath for our future. For our family's future.

Her eyes shone with such sincere love that it struck a chord deep within. She leaned in close, reaching up and threading her fingers through my hair as she closed the distance between us, bringing her mouth to mine. My pulse quickened at the feel of her lips. I brought my hands to her hips and pulled her closer, lifting my mate and settling her over my lap.

The kiss was soft, sweet, a slow dance of desire, love, and passion. Our breath mingled, our hearts beat in sync. The world around us dissolved into a blur, her kiss the only thing that mattered, the only thing I needed.

My dragon roared to life, but I fought to shove him back down, needing to remain in control. I pulled back from the kiss, swallowing hard. Mariah studied my face, her fingers tracing the lines, that touch leaving a trail of warmth. Her eyes held a question.

“What did you mean earlier?” she finally said. “When you called me your mate.”

I closed my eyes, resting my forehead against hers. “So, you *did* hear that.”

“What is that?”

I cleared my throat, not sure where to start. “There's a lot to it. I'm more than happy to explain, but the gist is that it's a shifter's version of marriage.”

There was a hell of a lot more to it, but without knowing how she'd react, I didn't want to scare her. Mariah had a hard enough time coming around to a relationship in the first place.

“Marriage?” Her eyes widened.

“If that’s what you want,” I hurried to add. “There’s no rush. I know it’s soon, but—”

“We may not have been together long, but it’s been long enough to know I love you.” Love. Mariah’s lips curved into a smile, and I marveled that this incredible woman *loved* me. It’d seemed too good to be true when she’d first said the words, but I’d never tire of hearing them.

“And I love you.” I kissed her once more, and it hit me all over again how very lucky I was.

We stayed out on the ledge, watching as the sun made an arch through the sky. Mariah rested her head on my chest, and I brought my arms around her, holding her tightly. It’d been a day for big conversations, but I could sense there was something else she wanted to say.

I stroked my hand up and down her back. “What are you thinking?”

When she looked at me again, her eyes were full of concern. “I’m just thinking about what you said about succession. I can’t help but wonder, what about you? Things have changed. Sebastian wants you to succeed him, once again, even if it’s not tradition.” I could sense her hesitation when she whispered, “What happens next? Is that what you want?”

“They banished me, Mariah,” I said. “Despite the revelations, despite the truth being out, that history remains. While the clan seems to have accepted me now, I’ve spent half my life away from this place. Becoming the alpha... it just doesn’t feel like who I am anymore. Then there’s Lucas, who was born and raised here, who knows the clan better than I do. Lucas should be the successor now.”

“Yes, but what do you *want*?”

Honestly, I didn’t know what I wanted, other than a life with this woman, raising our beautiful daughter together. I shrugged, not really sure how to answer. It’d been a question in the back of my mind since Sebastian told me the role was

still mine for the taking. Her next question, however, cut through the noise.

“How do you *feel* about all of this?” she said. “You’ve been so worried about me that we haven’t taken the time to talk about you. How are you adjusting to everything you’ve learned about your family?”

“It’s a lot to process,” I said. “But in hindsight, everything fits. It all makes more sense.” I sighed and smiled. “It’s stupid I didn’t realize sooner, really, considering I share Sebastian’s entire face.”

Mariah laughed. “Well, it is kind of obvious when you put it that way,” she said, her eyes sparkling.

Her lighthearted words eased my confession. “I was alone for a long time. Now, knowing I have a family... I have a strange sense of comfort.”

Her hand came to rest on my cheek. “Evan.” Her voice was a sweet whisper as she repeated the words that she’d said so many times before, a balm to my soul. “No matter what happens here, you’re not alone anymore. You have me.”

With that, she pulled me in for another kiss, a promise sealed between us, a beacon of hope amid the chaos. We’d get through all of this, eliminate the threat the Hawthornes posed, win the custody suit then the three of us would start fresh. Beginning a life together was more than I’d ever hoped for.

We parted, our eyes locking once again, and Mariah smiled. “Let’s go see how our girl is doing.”

Our girl. She was always calling Sofia that these days, and it only made me love her more. Sofia was ours in every way that counted. We were our own little family unit now. I’d pushed the custody suit to the back of my mind these past weeks as we dealt with Tomas, but the truth of the matter was it was quickly approaching. We’d soon have to face the Hawthornes in a courtroom.

It took a while to traverse our way back down the trail, but as we finally emerged in the clearing and strolled back toward the house, a surprising sense of tranquility washed over me.

Despite the looming threat of Tomas, these fleeting moments held extraordinary significance.

They were what we were fighting for.

“Mariah,” I said, pausing and drawing her closer to me. “I hope you know how much I appreciate you. Your strength, your unwavering faith, every challenge you’ve faced head-on.” I shook my head. “I can’t explain how grateful I am that you’re in my life.”

Surprise flickered in her eyes, quickly replaced by overwhelming warmth. Her smile was soft, radiant, filling me with such deep love that I hadn’t even known I was capable of before she came into my life. I pressed my lips to hers in another tender kiss, a silent vow that I’d go to the ends of the earth for her.

As we drew nearer to the alpha mansion, its three-story brick facade stood out among the other homes in the clearing. The late afternoon sunlight glinted off the windows like a beacon, calling us home, and the white columns framing the entrance looked so familiar. Some days it didn’t feel as if I’d been gone for half my life.

When we came around the house, we found Abi perched on the edge of the back porch, deep in conversation with the youngest member of our little family. Her attention was solely focused on Sofia, the little girl who, at seven months old, was fast transforming from an infant into a bundle of energy and joy. She was more responsive, her gurgling babbles slowly taking the shape of what would soon be recognizable words. Her chubby little hands were becoming more dexterous, eagerly reaching out to explore the world around her, and her features, once a picture of innocent naivety, were now expressing her unique personality.

Sofia’s squeal of delight when she caught sight of us approaching rippled through the quiet afternoon, her happiness softening the tension in the air. Her bright hazel eyes sparkled with excitement, her tiny hands reaching out, fingers opening and closing. Mariah bent down to oblige, gathering Sofia in her arms.

“And how have you been, little one?” Their bond felt so palpable. Sofia’s wide grin spread across her face, her giggles floating in the air as Mariah showered her with kisses and tickles. Sofia’s gaze shifted to meet mine. In those eyes, I saw a world of hope and love as her smile broadened. Then, so clearly and distinctly that there was no mistaking it, she made a sound that took us all completely by surprise.

“Dada,” Sofia babbled, stretching her hands out and reaching for me.

The shock of hearing my little girl’s first word rooted me to the spot as my jaw dropped. All my worries seemed to fade away, and a thrill of pure joy coursed through me. My daughter, *our* daughter, had just said her first word.

And it was my name.

Looking at Mariah, I found the same surprise and joy in her eyes. There was something profoundly moving there, a mixture of pride, love, and a hint of overwhelming emotion.

Beside us, Abi was marveling at Sofia’s first spoken word. Her eyes were wide, her mouth open in surprise, her usual composure thrown off-balance by this significant moment. “Well, would you look at that!”

Sofia had spoken her first word, and it was the name that bound us together. The name that signified a role I was only beginning to fully comprehend: Dada.

In that moment, everything else was insignificant. My concerns about Jax, the fear surrounding Tomas, even the complex politics of the shifter world and what they meant for my future—they were all background noise compared to Sofia’s milestone.

Mariah passed Sofia to me, and as we stood there together, a renewed sense of determination hardened within me. This was what mattered. Our little family. More than ever, I wanted to rid us of the threat the Hawthornes posed, to start our life anew, to claim Mariah as my mate, and create the life of our dreams. But first, Tomas had to be handled.

Sofia giggled, reaching up and touching my face. “Dada.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, vowing to stop at nothing to ensure our family's safety.

Chapter 2

Mariah

I held my phone, my stomach twisting in knots as I stared at Analise's name. My finger hovered over the screen, and I hesitated before I took a deep, deep breath. This wouldn't be an easy call for a multitude of reasons.

Analise was going to lose her shit when she learned everything that'd happened in the past couple of weeks. I really wasn't looking forward to rehashing it, either. The memories of my kidnapping were still so fresh, and while the initial trauma was subsiding more with each passing day, Tomas Hawthorne still haunted my nightmares.

The man was greedy, power hungry, and held no moral code, and until he was no longer a threat, there'd be a part of me that remained on edge.

I couldn't keep putting Analise off, though. I'd avoided her calls for a week now, only communicating by text that I was coming down to Texas to support Evan while he dealt with some family business. She'd already had her doubts about my being with Evan, and telling her his mortal enemy kidnapped me would seal the deal on her disapproval. My thoughts drifted back to my conversation with Evan earlier.

"Analise cornered me at the club last night," Mason had told us when he'd called this morning for his regular updates with Evan. "She's demanding to know what's going on."

Sofia and I were up in the third-floor office that Sebastian had converted for Evan to work remotely in while we stayed on the Carey clan lands. I wasn't sure how long we'd be here,

but Evan still had business to attend to. While Mason could oversee the day-to-day management of the Dragon's Den and their other clubs back in New York City, Evan was required in many of the high-level decisions. He held meetings most mornings in the converted office down the hall from Sebastian.

"What did you tell her?" Evan looked at me and put the phone on speaker.

Mason sighed. "I tried to brush off her concerns, but she's been paying attention. She noticed how we upped security at the club and asked what that was about. I told her it was because of an increase in crimes in the area. She didn't buy it, but I didn't think it would go over well if I told her we were afraid Tomas might decide to make it a target."

I moved Sofia on my hip. "Understatement of the year." She'd already made it clear she thought my relationship with Evan was dangerous.

"I just left it at that," Mason said. "But I thought you should know. She's been in a mood, and she won't let this go."

"We'll figure it out," Evan said, running his fingers through his hair, giving me a faint smile.

The two of them discussed things for a few more minutes, then Evan ended the call, looking at me with wariness in his dark eyes. "Mason's right. You're going to have to tell her, Mariah."

I dropped into a chair across from him and sighed. "I know."

I just knew what she was going to say. I loved my best friend dearly, and I knew she was only looking out for me, but I simply didn't want to have the same conversation again.

"Is there a reason you're avoiding this?" Evan looked at me. "I know how much Analise means to you. She should know the truth."

Sofia squirmed, so I lowered her to the floor, where she started crawling around, slowly but surely. It wouldn't be long before she was speeding all over the place.

“I agree. She deserves to know the truth. It’s just that Analise...”

“What is it?” Evan moved out from his desk to sit in the chair beside me, reaching for my hand.

I pursed my lips, not sure how he’d take this, but I supposed he deserved to know the truth as well. “Analise hasn’t been very supportive of our relationship lately. She thinks being involved with you is too dangerous.”

Evan frowned, and the muscle in his jaw ticked, but then he leaned back and sighed. “She’s not wrong. Look what happened.” He spread his arms wide. “Tomas never would’ve come after you if it weren’t for me. I’ve questioned myself a hundred times these past weeks, too, knowing you’d be safer if you weren’t involved with—”

“Evan, no.” I leaned forward, gripping his hands. “Don’t say that. Don’t even think it.”

I’d had my own doubts about our relationship, even questioning if it was worth it at one point, but I’d worked through it, and I knew Evan was worth it all. I wasn’t happy about the threat Tomas posed, but I also wasn’t willing to walk away from the man I loved because he had enemies.

“I love you, Evan.” I squeezed his hands tighter, searching his face. “I’m safe now. We belong together.”

He leaned forward, cupping my jaw and stroking my cheek. “I know,” he whispered, but then his eyes darkened. “That doesn’t mean I’m okay with putting you in harm’s way.”

“You aren’t,” I assured him. If anything, Evan was even more protective of me now than he’d been before. “But now you see why I’m not eager to have this conversation with Analise.”

He pulled me into his lap. “It will be okay. She loves you. She just wants what’s best for you.”

I reminded myself of those words now as I stared at my phone. Analise was coming from a place of love and concern. Tired of putting it off, knowing it had to be done eventually, I

tapped her name on the screen and brought the phone to my ear.

“What is going on down there?” she hissed, picking up on the first ring.

“Hello to you, too,” I responded, bracing myself. Mason was right. She was in a mood.

“I was starting to think you were avoiding me,” she said, her irritated tone making it clear that’s exactly what she still thought. “Things aren’t adding up. Mason increased security at the club right when you left town to be with Evan. What aren’t you telling me?”

I sank down on the plush four-poster bed that Evan and I were sharing in his childhood bedroom. “That’s why I’m calling. There are some things you need to know.”

There must have been something in my tone because Analise flipped from irritation to worry in a split second. “Are you okay? Because I’ll be on the first plane out if something has—”

“I’m fine,” I assured her, though it was only a partial truth. Physically, yes, I was fine, but it would take longer for me to feel completely back to normal. I cleared my throat. “Remember that day after Evan first left for Texas, when I asked if you wanted to get a massage with me?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I went to dinner afterward. When I left the restaurant, Tomas was waiting for me.”

“What do you mean, waiting for you?”

“He was waiting to...take me.” I forced the words out, my face twisting as I whispered, “Tomas kidnapped me.” I braced for her reaction.

“He *what?*” she screeched, and I had to pull the phone away from my ear. “What the actual fuck, Mariah? Are you serious? If this is some kind of joke...”

“I wish I was joking, Ana,” I said quietly.

“Where are you now? Are you safe? Where is Evan? I swear to God, I’m going to kick his ass.” Panic colored her words.

“I’m okay, I’m okay.” I had to say it several times before she stopped ranting. “If you listen, I’ll tell you everything. But I’m only going to say it once, and I’m struggling to get through it right now, so can you please, please listen to me?”

Analise huffed out a frustrated breath. “Yes. I just feel like I’m about to lose my mind now. I need to see you to know you’re okay.”

I punched the button on my phone to switch to a video call, and a second later, Analise’s worried face filled my screen.

“See, I’m okay.”

She pursed her lips, her eyes darting all over my face. “Where are you?”

“I’m in Texas, at Evan’s family home. We’re safe, out on clan lands where no one can get me,” I promised.

“Tell me everything.”

So, I did. I told her about how Tomas cornered me outside the restaurant, how he’d had a gun, how he’d forced me into a car, threatening Ana’s own safety if I didn’t comply. She let out a snarl at that.

I told her about Jax, how he’d tipped off Evan and helped me escape, and I told her about everything that’d happened since.

“So, now what? I mean, this guy needs to be behind bars.”

If only it were that simple. “I agree, Analise. But this is out of the hands of human law.”

“It’s not,” she insisted. “You’re a human, and he kidnapped you. Shifter laws and politics don’t apply when they mess with humans.”

She was right on that point, but Evan and Sebastian were plotting and planning, coming up with a solution to take Tomas down once and for all. This was so much bigger than

kidnapping. He'd used me as a pawn, which pissed me off, but Tomas was dangerous and needed to be dealt with in a way human law enforcement simply couldn't undertake.

"Evan and Sebastian are going to take care of him," I assured her.

"That's Evan's father?"

"Yes." I'd told her most of the details about Evan's family situation. "He's a very powerful alpha dragon—perhaps the most powerful. I promise nothing is going to happen to me."

Analise let out a sigh. "I think you need to come home. Being there on that shifter land, surrounded by dragons... I just don't think that's safe, either, Mariah."

"No one here would ever hurt me. This is Evan's family. His clan." I didn't have a doubt in my mind the Careys would go to bat for me. They'd welcomed me here as if I were one of their own, even if I was still struggling to feel at home there. "This is the safest place I can be."

"I don't know." Analise's face twisted with doubt. "I've been worried about you, Mariah. For a while. You know this. But now? I'm genuinely scared. There are red flags everywhere. You know you can just walk away."

"It's not that simple, Ana, and you know it. I... I've fallen in love with both Evan and Sofia. They're the family I've always wanted. I can't just walk away. I don't want to."

My future was with Evan, wherever that might lead.

"I'm not okay with this." She jutted her chin out and glanced away, not looking at me through the screen.

"I know," I said gently. "The fact that you're looking out for me means the world, but I need you to trust me on this. This is where I want to be."

Her eyes widened. "You're not coming back to New York?"

"That's not what I meant. Of course, I have to come back. New York is where our lives are. Evan has his business. I have you. It's my home. And then there's the matter of the custody

case. We'll be back. I just meant that, right now, I need to be by Evan's side, so that means being here for a bit." Until we figured out what to do about Tomas.

"So, what about your future? Everything we talked about with going to school, pursuing a career. It's not like you're the nanny anymore. Are you even getting paid?"

That might need to be a conversation to have with Evan. Before the kidnapping, I'd questioned that myself, but then I hadn't thought much about it after. We'd briefly touched on me going to school and pursuing my own dreams, too, but that's about as far as it had gone. We needed to sit down and have a talk to better define what my role was in his and Sofia's lives now.

"We're figuring that out."

Analise shook her head. "I stand by what I said. I think being involved with Evan is risky and dangerous, but it's clear I can't convince you to come home. And maybe you're right. Maybe staying there for now is the safest option, but don't forget you're your own person, Mariah. You still need to think about your own goals. Don't let your life become so wrapped up in this man that you forget yourself."

The words were a familiar echo of my own thoughts. I'd already had a glimpse of that path. While I ultimately knew I wanted to be with Evan, it was a solid reminder that I had to figure out how to balance my desire to have a family with independence.

"You're right," I said. "I know what I want now. I'm going to really start looking into programs and schools."

"Well, that's something," she said begrudgingly, then her expression sharpened. "But if you keep anything else like this from me again, Mariah, so help me..."

I smiled. "No more secrets. I promise."

We chatted for a few more minutes, with Analise catching me up on what she'd been up to since I left town. When we ended the call, I flopped back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling as I reflected on what she had said.

It was time I stopped putting my future on hold. There were so many uncertainties in my life right now. I had no idea when Jax would make contact or what would happen with Tomas. Sebastian wanted Evan to take on the role of alpha, which he kept saying he didn't want. But as the days passed and I saw him and Sebastian together, I wondered if he'd change his mind.

I couldn't believe how easily he fit in here for one. Evan seemed like a city guy through and through, but watching him here with the other dragon shifters, and seeing him with his family made me realize there was another, wilder side to the man I loved.

If he ultimately decided he wanted to stay here, would I choose to as well? I couldn't imagine a life without Evan and Sofia.

And then there was mating, which seemed like a serious commitment.

I sighed. All of those things were hypothetical, up in the air, when I needed some kind of stability, some direction. I couldn't just wait around letting my life play out in a way that was dependent on others' choices. I didn't know how long we'd be here, but I needed to live my own life. I just wasn't sure how.

I stood up out of bed and checked my watch. Sofia was napping in the room across the hall. I didn't know when she found the time, but Abigail had already converted it into a nursery for Sofia. The little girl had everything she could possibly need.

I still had a little time before she woke up, so I decided to take a short walk. As soon as I stepped out into the heat of a Texas summer, though, I questioned if it was the best idea. Just a few minutes into the walk and I was sweating. Still, the fresh country air was refreshing compared to the city.

My conversation with Analise played itself back in my head as I walked, and my resolve to do something for myself grew. I was turning to head back to the house when I spotted Evan making his way toward me along the trail.

I squinted, shielding my eyes from the sun as I took in his muscled physique, his broad shoulders, and his massive biceps. The yellowed rays gleamed off his skin, and my heart skipped a beat when he lifted his gaze to mine, our eyes locking. A slow smile curved his lips, and my heart beat double-time.

“What are you doing out here in this heat?” he said as he drew closer. “Most people down here choose this time of day to have a glass of iced tea inside and relax.”

I shrugged. “I just needed to do some thinking.”

He eyed me with curiosity as he reached my side and took my hand. “How did the conversation with Analise go?”

Turning, we fell into step with each other, our fingers lacing as we walked hand-in-hand. “Could have been better. Could have been worse.”

Evan chuckled. “Sounds par for the course. You want to talk about it?”

I glanced sidelong at him, studying his profile. His firm jaw and straight nose, the full lips that’d tempted me from the day I first met him. He was always there for me, no matter what. Evan was a rock, and I realized then that I’d been carrying so much of this burden on my own. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

I told him the details as we walked, not leaving anything out this time, and now that he knew Analise’s feelings on the matter, it felt good to discuss it openly.

“She’s worried about me. For my safety, mostly, but she’s also afraid that I’m not living my own life. I have to admit, Evan,” I said, sneaking another glance at him, “that thought has crossed my mind more than once since this whole fiasco with Tomas began.”

Evan knew exactly how afraid I’d been to get involved with him in the beginning. I’d sworn off relationships, vowing never to depend on a man like my mother always had, and resisted our attraction as long as I could. Ultimately, I’d let him in on the reasons why.

Evan stopped, turning to face me. “You know I support you in whatever you want to do, Mariah. I have to agree with Analise here.”

“What?”

Evan shook his head. “Not about leaving. That’s the last thing I want, and I’ve made my feelings for you very clear. We belong together, Mariah. But we talked about it this before—your desire to go to school, to build something for yourself. I thought it was a good idea then, and I still think so now. I want you to pursue your dreams.”

“But we have no idea what the future holds,” I said. “We don’t know how long we’ll be here, when we’ll have enough information to make a move on Tomas.”

Evan reached up and placed his hands on my shoulders, squeezing lightly before running his fingers down my arms and back up. “No, we don’t know how long we’ll be here, but that doesn’t mean you have to wait around. You can look into schools, even take some online classes. You’re so much more than just my daughter’s nanny, and you have been for a long while. It’s time you did something for you. Abi is more than happy to help take care of Sofia and give you time to yourself. We’re equals in this, Mariah, and I want you to live your own life.”

I swallowed a lump forming in my throat. He was so understanding. So supportive. We’d been through hell these past few weeks, thanks to the Hawthornes, but we’d come through it even more connected, our relationship surviving each test, emerging stronger for it.

As I wrapped my arms around his neck, I pressed my body on his, my lips brushing his mouth. The kiss was soft, sweet, an expression of how grateful I was to call him mine. But the minute I opened my mouth and Evan slipped his tongue inside, a shock of heat swept through me that had nothing to do with the afternoon sun beating down on us.

“What are your plans for the rest of the afternoon?” Evan sounded raspy, full of yearning as his hands came to my hips, his fingers gripping me tightly.

“Sofia will be waking up from her nap soon...”

Evan grinned, letting go of me before pulling his phone from his pocket and tapping out a quick message.

He gave me a wink, then took my hand again, pulling me toward a grove of trees. “Like I said, Abi is more than happy to help. She’ll keep an eye on Sofia until we make it back.”

“Back from where?” I had a pretty good idea what he was thinking, though. I recognized that hungry gleam in his eyes.

He didn’t respond, just dragged me along behind him into the trees along an overgrown path. A few moments later, he stopped at the base of a tree, looking up and pointing.

“I used to come here when I wanted to get away from everything. My own little private childhood escape.”

I looked in the direction where he pointed, seeing an old treehouse up in the branches, then glanced at him dubiously. “And we’re here because?”

His dark eyes flashed gold. “Because I have the overwhelming desire to make you scream my name right now, and I’m pretty sure you don’t want the whole household hearing when you do.”

“Oh, really? And how might you get me to do that?”

His scent was overwhelming as he pulled me in closer. “I have so many ways.”

I bit my lip at the promise in his voice, and the next thing I knew, he was spinning me around, slapping my ass as we walked up to the tree trunk. Someone had nailed old planks into it and built a ladder to the treehouse.

We scrambled up the tree, giggling like a couple of horny teenagers, and if I was being honest, that’s exactly how I felt. Life had been so tense lately, and knowing we had the afternoon to just be, to take time for each other, made me feel light and free—something I hadn’t felt in far too long.

The minute we were inside, Evan was reaching, pulling me close, slipping his hand under the hem of my shirt. He

sprawled his large hand across my lower back, pressing me tight. I gasped when I felt how hard he was.

Evan's lips curled in a knowing smile when my arms wrapped around him, fingers digging into his shoulders. "Who knew how convenient it was to have grandparents at the ready?"

I laughed. "I'll take it."

Before I could say anything else, Evan's mouth was on mine, his lips hungry and demanding. I moaned into his mouth as he swept his tongue over mine, and white-hot lust blazed a path down my spine.

Evan scooped me up in his arms, not once breaking the kiss as he backed me up against a wall, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, grinding on him. I ran my hands over his thickly corded arms, down his sides, then slipped them under his shirt, tracing the ridges of his carved abs.

He sucked in a sharp breath as I let my touch drift lower, cupping the bulge in his pants with one hand while the other toyed with the button of his jeans. His head dropped back when I slipped my fingers inside and brushed them over the top of his swollen tip. His cock throbbed, and I sighed in anticipation.

"Fuck, baby," he groaned, reaching for my shirt and pulling it up and over my head in one smooth motion. Then his hands were on my breasts, his fingers inside the lace of my bra to tease my nipples. I whimpered, needing more, needing all of him.

"I want you now," I breathed as he shoved the cups of my bra down, lowering his head to lap his tongue over first one nipple, then the other. My whole body shivered with pleasure.

"Impatient, are we?" he said, his breath causing my skin to erupt in gooseflesh.

I wriggled my hips against him. "You have no idea."

He grabbed his shirt and yanked it over his head, discarding it before unclasping my bra and tossing it aside as well.

Then he was pressing me back into the wall. My nipples ached for more attention as they brushed along his hot skin and Evan sank his teeth deep into my neck. His fingers dug into my hips as he practically growled, the sound wild, feral, and so damn sexy.

He kept me pinned in place, then reached between us, slipping his fingers inside my shorts, dragging his fingers through my folds.

“Fuck,” he bit out. “So wet for me.”

My breath went ragged as he ran his fingers along my seam, then focused his attention on the bundle of nerves which had me writhing. I protested when he lowered me to my feet, stepping back, but my disappointment was short-lived when he unbuttoned his jeans and slid the zipper down, his long cock springing free.

I licked my lips as I stared, knowing just how good it'd feel to have him buried within me. But first...

I went to my knees, wrapping my fingers around his thick girth, flicking my tongue over the tip again and again.

“Damn, baby.” He threaded his fingers through my hair. “You’re going to make me cum if you keep that up.”

I looked up, locking eyes with him as I grinned. “Isn’t that the point?”

His chest rumbled as he made that growly noise again. “Not until you cum first... and not until I’m deep inside of you.”

Then he was grabbing me by the elbows, spinning me around and yanking my shorts to the floor. I arched my back and pushed my ass toward him as I braced my hands on the wall.

Evan dragged his hands through my wet folds once more, and I watched from over my shoulder as he brought his fingers to his lips, licking them clean. The sight had me pushing back again, and this time his cock brushed against my entrance.

“Please, Evan.” I wasn’t afraid to beg. “I need you.”

His eyes were solid gold now, something that happened when he was experiencing intense emotions. Right now, they made it crystal clear just how much he needed this.

Taking his cock in his hand, Evan teased, rubbing it back and forth against my pussy. Just when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, that I might die if he didn't fuck me right now, he thrust his hips, slamming his cock deep inside.

I cried out his name as he bottomed out. "That's right, baby. Scream as loud as you want. There's no one around for miles," Evan said smugly.

It was a kind of freedom we hadn't experienced often—not with a baby in the house. We were always afraid of waking Sofia up, so to be as loud as we wanted was its own turn-on.

Evan gripped my hips while I braced myself against the wall, holding my body in place as he thrust into me hard and fast, over and over, until we were both panting, the sound of our skin slapping together mingling with moans of pleasure.

When he reached around, rubbing his fingers in fast circles over my clit, I exploded, my body contracting around his cock, clamping down as my orgasm tore through me. My head fell back, and Evan's mouth was on my shoulder, his teeth scraping as he growled through his own release, a sound so primal, so animalistic, I wouldn't have been surprised to find wings sprouting from his back.

Completely spent, we collapsed against the wall, and I only remained standing thanks to his arm around my waist, holding me up.

"God, you're perfect," he murmured against my ear. His cock twitched inside, sending a fresh wave of pleasure through me as aftershocks wracked my body.

I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair as he kissed my neck. Not for the first time, I felt a connection to this man that went beyond explanation. It wasn't just love or passion that drove us together. There was something deeper, and it was how I knew that no matter what we faced, I belonged with this man.

He owned my heart and soul. And I was perfectly fine with that.

Chapter 3

Evan

The clock on the wall in my newly converted office ticked, the sound grating on my already frazzled nerves. Normally, a productive work morning put me in a good mood, ready to take on anything that came my way, but my life wasn't exactly going according to plan.

While I was managing the changes with working remotely, finding it surprisingly easy to keep the business flowing smoothly in my absence, my heart wasn't in it. I loved my business, loved running the clubs with Mason, loved watching the fruits of hard years of labor pay off. But my life no longer fully revolved around work as it once had. In the span of a few months, my priorities had changed.

Sofia and Mariah were everything to me now. They were my family. My world.

And they were still at risk with Tomas Hawthorne lurking in the wings.

I reached for the stack of mail that had been delivered earlier that morning. On top sat an official document from the court clerk's office in New York, stating that our first formal hearing was scheduled for next month.

I picked up the paper and scanned it again, sneering when I read Rosalind's name. We had a month to put together a solid case in the custody battle against Rosalind, even though the entire case was a sham. She was acting on her father's orders, had admitted she didn't even want a child, yet was still doing Hawthorne's bidding.

A growl rumbled in my chest as my fists clenched and squeezed the hearing papers. My focus needed to be on reining Tomas in, on shutting down his attempts to steal my child and hurt my mate. I had the best family lawyer in New York on my case, but it was still a thorn in my side.

I wouldn't fully rest until we'd put an end to Tomas's threats to the people I loved. As far as I was concerned, there was only one way to stop him for good.

The primal drive to protect what was mine coursed through me, and I surged from the desk, knocking my chair back with force. I felt canines pressing uncomfortably against my gums as my dragon rose to the surface, so I took several deep breaths, not surprised to find tendrils of smoke curling from my nostrils. It seemed my dragon was feeling just as possessive about our mate. The desire to fully claim her, to make Mariah mine in every way, was growing stronger with each passing day. Part of that came from the constant feeling of danger, knowing a threat loomed, putting her safety at risk.

I wouldn't make the same mistakes as before with Mariah's safety, yet I had no doubt Hawthorne was still plotting to use her against me.

When I'd come upstairs to my third-floor office today, I'd left Mariah in bed, where she'd been researching schools on her laptop. It thrilled me that she'd found something she wanted, something that would fulfill her on a personal level. It was a step toward that life we wanted to build together, where she was happy and at peace, and I could help make all her dreams come true.

That all started with eliminating Hawthorne from the equation. I glanced at the ticking clock again and realized it was time to meet with Sebastian to discuss just that. I picked up the chair I'd knocked over, then headed out the door and down the long hallway.

Sebastian's office was on the opposite end of the hall from mine. As I walked down the plush red runner spanning the length of the wood-planked floor, it struck me that my life had taken so many unpredictable turns. I never would've imagined

that I'd be back living here on the clan lands I'd been banished from so many years ago, and not only that, but working side by side with Sebastian, my alpha. My father.

It was still a lot to wrap my head around. Sebastian had offered some space after telling me he still wanted me as his heir, but it was something I hadn't let myself think about too much—not with Tomas being the priority. Besides, like I'd told Mariah, Lucas was here the whole time I was away. It made more sense for him to succeed Sebastian.

I knocked on the carved wooden door, entering when Sebastian said, "Come in."

He smiled as I crossed the sunlit room and sat in the chair opposite his desk. The truth that he was my father continued to hit me in the face every time I saw that smile, so similar to my own. It was unnerving to see so much of myself in him.

"Good morning, son." He eyed me, seeming to see right through my facade when he said, "You hanging in there?"

I rubbed my jaw, a gesture I'd noticed Sebastian made often as well. "I'm just tired of waiting around. It's been two weeks since we got Mariah back. Two weeks with Tomas going unchecked. I don't like so many unknowns." Agitation crawled up my spine. "I can't keep sitting on my hands. I need to do something."

"I get it. Believe me." Sebastian's dark eyes were gentle as he leaned forward, clasping his hands on his desk. "But one of the first rules of being an alpha is to know how to control your urges. To think past the primal instincts, control your dragon, and remain rational."

"Easier said than done when it comes to a threat toward my mate," I said through clenched teeth.

Sebastian sat back in his chair. "All the more reason to remain in control. You can't afford to slip, Evan. Not when so much is at stake."

He was right, and the rational part of me knew it, yet I was feeling more and more irrational with every passing day when it came to this.

“I received a letter from the courts in New York this morning,” I said, wanting to share what was on my mind. “The courts set our first hearing for a month from now. If I’m being honest, Sebastian, this whole custody battle feels like a distraction.”

He steepled his hands and pressed his forefingers to his chin. “How so? Tomas has much to gain by winning custody of Sofia. Seems to me it’s his end game. Having control of the heir to our clan would give him everything he wants.”

I ground my teeth together, my dragon snarling in the back of my mind. “But why go about it like this, following the human laws in the court system? It doesn’t seem like his style.”

“Tomas Hawthorne is a shrewd, cunning man,” Sebastian said, “with plenty of legal counsel on his side, both shifter and human. Whatever plans he has for Sofia, he’s also covering his ass.”

Rage stirred within, and I had to forcefully shove it down and take a deep breath. Just thinking about the plans that monster had for my daughter made me see red, the flames flickering at the edges of my vision.

I glanced at Sebastian, but he only watched me calmly, and if he was aware of what was going on inside me, he didn’t let on. There had to be a way around this custody suit. While my lawyer was highly competent, Tomas would’ve built a case with his own top notch legal team. I was under no illusion either that Rosalind was calling the shots. Tomas were using his own daughter as a game piece.

Still... Rosalind was the one who filed the lawsuit, and Rosalind was technically the one suing for custody. Which meant...

“Do you think we could get Rosalind to drop the custody case?” I said, wondering why the idea hadn’t come to me sooner.

Sebastian tilted his head. “I’m listening.”

“She doesn’t even want to be a mother,” I said in a rush, hoping I’d landed on something. “Everything she’s done has been on Tomas’s orders. What if we could convince her to drop the suit?”

Sebastian shook his head. “I’m not sure she’d go up against her father like that.”

“Neither am I.” I sat back in my chair, tapping my fingers on the arm as my mind worked.

I walked to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows and stared out at the vast clan lands sweeping out in all directions.

“Sure, she does anything he asks of her. But what if she’s tired of being used by her father? Maybe she’s acting out of fear rather than loyalty.”

I frowned as a memory surfaced of Rosalind running after us when we’d left the Hawthorne lodge, after he’d summoned me to bring Sofia to see him. She’d been in a near-panic. Desperate.

“What is it?” Sebastian said as he came to my side.

“When Mason, Mariah, and I took Sofia to see Hawthorne, after his summons, Rosalind was acting strangely. She seemed desperate for me to accept her father’s offer of mating with her and becoming the new Hawthorne alpha.”

Sebastian’s fists clenched. “How so?”

“She followed us out of the building, practically begging me to reconsider. Telling me it was best for Sofia, and to think of what it’d be like to grow up as a dragon without a clan.” I shook my head. “Everything she said, even the way she said it, was so out of character, like she was frantic at the idea of me refusing.”

Sebastian looked out now on the clan lands as well. “You think he has something he’s holding over her, so she’ll do his bidding?”

“I’m not sure,” I said slowly, the wheels still turning. “But it wouldn’t surprise me in the least. What do you know of Rosalind’s family history? When she first resurfaced, Mason

did a little digging and discovered the Hawthornes had adopted her. What's the story there?"

Sebastian moved back to his desk. "It's been years, and I don't know all the details, but I know Rosalind was passed from home to home a bit when she was young. Her biological mother died in childbirth, and her father was reported to have died of a broken heart not long after. Her mother had two sisters, and the oldest was Caroline, Tomas's mate. Caroline and Tomas took Rosalind in, adopted her, and raised her as their own. Well, for the first four years, anyway."

"What happened then?" I turned from where I was looking out the window.

"Caroline died. As she was the mate of a fellow alpha, I was informed of the details. Supposedly, the family was out on their yacht. Rosalind was playing and fell overboard. Caroline jumped in to save her, but she wasn't so lucky. She was pulled out to sea and her body was never recovered. She was presumed dead."

I stared at Sebastian, horror-stricken. "That's terrible. She lost her mother and her aunt?"

Sebastian nodded grimly. "That isn't even the whole of it. Tomas was rumored to have fallen into a deep depression after that. He blamed Rosalind for his mate's death and wanted nothing to do with her. He sent her away to live with her other aunt, Caroline's younger sister and Rosalind's only remaining blood relative. But she, too, died before Rosalind made it to adulthood. So, Rosalind ended up back with Tomas."

I crossed back to the desk and sank down in a chair. As much as I despised Rosalind, no one deserved so much death and heartache. "I don't even know what to say to that."

It was heartbreaking, yes, but it made me question Rosalind's role in this game even more. After living through that childhood, how was she so willing to give up her only child? Did she really feel nothing for Sofia? The entire pregnancy was a setup, a trap so I was right where Tomas wanted me, but after hearing about her past, I couldn't believe she was really so heartless.

I thought back to that day when I'd seen Tomas and Rosalind in the hall—the only time I'd actually seen them together. She'd been quiet, submissive even, and then when she'd chased after me, the panic was palpable. Maybe she felt she had no other choice but to obey.

“I don't think there's much love lost between the two of them. What if her loyalties don't fully lie with Tomas?” I mused, calculating, bits and pieces of a plan forming. “Based on what I've seen, she might be acting out of fear. That could work to our advantage.”

“The only way to know is to talk to Rosalind without her father around,” Sebastian said. “You know her better than I do. Any ideas on how we could get to her, away from Tomas?”

I did have one, but my mouth twisted into a grimace at the thought. Mariah had asked for days if we'd heard anything from Jaxon. I'd written him off as a possibility, and I'd been okay with that, too, as I simply didn't trust the man who'd lied about being Tomas's son.

“Jaxon might help.” I watched Sebastian closely as I said it, seeing my own doubts reflected in his expression, and I held my hands up. “Believe me, I wouldn't even suggest it if we weren't running out of options as well as time. But if he can help us get Rosalind to drop the case, I'm willing to take a chance.”

Sebastian nodded slowly. “Tread carefully here, son. You have to remain vigilant and watch for any signs indicating a bigger game. But I trust your judgment. It hasn't steered you wrong yet.”

I wasn't so sure about that. I'd left Mariah behind in New York when I came here, thinking I had to face the Careys on my own, but that was my biggest mistake yet. Mariah never would've been kidnapped if I'd had better judgment then, but I didn't say that out loud, either. I just reached for my phone and pulled up the text thread from when Jaxon helped us find the Hawthorne fortress.

I hesitated, grimacing when I recalled the familiar way he'd spoken to Mariah the last time we called. I already didn't

trust the guy, and that conversation flipped my protective instincts into high gear. If I had any other option, I wouldn't be doing this, but if Jaxon could help me get to Rosalind, it'd be worth it.

I tapped out a quick text and tried to keep it vague.

If you're serious about our previous discussion, I have an idea.

I hit send, then waited, staring at my phone until the message showed delivered. There was no immediate response, so I slid my phone back into my pocket with a sigh. "Now what?"

"We continue to wait, observe, and evaluate. This is a step forward, Evan," Sebastian said. "Try to be patient, hard as that may be. Why don't you go get some lunch? Maybe we'll have a response after that."

I thanked him, then made my way out of the office and downstairs to the second floor. I peeked into the room Mariah and I shared, the one I'd lived in so many years before, but found it empty. I jogged down another flight of stairs to the main floor, the sound of Mariah's laughter drawing me to the kitchen.

The sight of Mariah, standing at the island with a bright smile on her face, made my chest tight. She was here, she was safe, and I'd do anything necessary to ensure that.

I went and wrapped my arms around her before pulling her to my chest, pressing a hard kiss to her lips, deepening it when her lips parted on a tiny gasp.

Mine.

The word echoed in the back of my mind, a possessive claim by my dragon, but I felt it in my very soul as well. This woman was mine, and I refused to let anyone take her away again.

The sound of someone's throat clearing made me stop. "Don't mind me."

I pulled back from Mariah to find Lucas standing on the other side of the island, his arms crossed, and a smirk pulling at his lips. He laughed as I blinked back at him. I'd been so overcome by seeing Mariah that I hadn't even noticed my half-brother.

Glancing down at Mariah, I grinned as her cheeks turned pink, then I looked back at Lucas. "Sorry, I couldn't help it."

"I was the same when Cynthia and I first got together," Lucas said, tossing a water bottle up in the air and catching it nimbly. "I'll leave you lovebirds to it. I have a meeting with Dad now that you're done."

I nodded. "Make sure he updates you on the latest."

"Will do." Then Lucas disappeared around the corner.

I turned my attention back to Mariah, tightening my grip on her as I lowered my head down. "Where were we?"

Her hand pushed firmly on my chest as she gave me a pointed look. "You were just about to tell me what 'the latest' is."

I sighed, much preferring to lose myself in my mate, but she deserved to know. "I contacted Jaxon."

"What? When?"

"Just now, after I met with Sebastian. I sent a text, telling him I had an idea if he was still in, but no response yet."

Mariah tugged on my hand, leading me to the overstuffed white couches in the adjoining family room. "Where'd this come from?"

"I'm hoping he can help us secure a meeting with Rosalind, on her own, away from her family. Maybe I can convince her to drop the custody case." I sank down on the couch, pulling Mariah down onto my lap. She wrapped her arms around my neck as we settled into the soft pillows.

Her face was full of skepticism. "You really think she'd do that?"

“I’m not sure, but it’s worth a shot.” I told her what I’d learned from Sebastian about Rosalind’s family history. “She might be acting out of fear rather than a genuine sense of loyalty. If we don’t ask, we’ll never know.”

“True,” Mariah said, but I could tell that she wasn’t convinced. “You’ll let me know, right? When Jax gets back to you?”

A flash of jealousy coursed through me at the use of his nickname. My dragon prowled possessively across my subconscious. He didn’t like it, either.

“Evan?” Mariah said. She was sitting up now. “We already talked about this. You can’t keep me in the dark.”

“Of course, I’ll let you know,” I said, running my hand up and down her back. “I just don’t want you to get your hopes up. I’m still not sure if we can trust him, or if he’ll even get back to us.”

Mariah sighed, but she said nothing else on the matter, likely to avoid another argument.

I pulled her in close again. “How is your research going? Have you found any online programs you like?”

We’d agreed that going to school online was the best option for now, since we didn’t know how long we’d be here in Texas. It would give her something to focus on rather than waiting on an unknown timeline.

Mariah’s entire demeanor shifted, her eyes lighting up, bright with excitement. “So, I think I’ve narrowed it down to four different schools. All of them have online options, and all four have the early childhood education track that I’ve been thinking about, but they aren’t limited to just that. If I start out taking my general education classes, I could switch my major if I wanted to.”

“I thought you were pretty set on early childhood.”

Mariah nodded. “So did I, but the more I look into it, the more options I find. I always thought I’d work with kids, but I assumed it’d be younger kids, since that’s been my background. But I’m seeing so many possibilities now. I’ve

been reading a lot about school counseling, and it really appeals to me. There are so many kids out there that need someone to talk to. Someone who knows where they're coming from."

The passion was practically bubbling out of her, her excitement palpable. "I can't think of anyone better to fill that role."

It was the truth. Not only did Mariah have a way with people, she genuinely cared. She wanted to make a difference in people's lives. With her upbringing, she could relate to a lot of kids who might not have the family support they needed.

"You think so?" Her smile widened.

I bent and placed a kiss on her nose. "Absolutely. And whatever you ultimately land on, you'll be amazing."

Mariah snuggled in close.

"Where's Sofia?"

"Oh. Abi and Cynthia wanted to take her out for a bit and give me some time to myself."

I brushed my nose along her cheek. "If you ever need a break, all you have to do is ask. I don't want you feeling like you're the only one who can take care of Sofia. I'm here. Even if I'm working, I can step away if you need me, and apparently there are plenty of others who are more than happy to take a turn looking after her."

Mariah nodded. "I'm learning how to do that. It's hard. I mean, I feel like Sofia is my own child, so it's not like I'm looking to pawn her off on someone."

"You have no idea how much I love to hear you say that, but you also need to take time for yourself. We have family here to help."

"Yeah," she said thoughtfully. "I guess we do."

We spent the rest of the afternoon together, Mariah showing me the programs she liked most, and when Sofia returned with Abi, we took her out on a walk. While we enjoyed the time together, there was still a sense of

anticipation hanging over us. We were in limbo, waiting to hear from Jaxon before we could make our next move, just like we'd been all week.

It wasn't until just before dinner that we finally got the call.

Sofia was practicing her crawling and making her way around the bedroom. She was catching on faster than expected, and Mariah and I were having to further baby-proof the room at every turn.

As soon as my phone rang, Mariah looked up with wide eyes. "Is it him?"

I pulled it from my pocket and nodded. Mariah scooped Sofia up and placed her in the playpen, watching me expectantly.

I met her gaze, then answered the call. "What have you got?"

"Hello to you, too," Jaxon said. "Is this always how you speak to people, or should I consider myself lucky?"

"Put him on speaker," Mariah said impatiently when a tiny growl rumbled in my chest.

I stared at her and tried to keep my composure, but there was just something about him that rubbed me the wrong way. I'd asked him once before why he was helping us, the night he'd told us Mariah's whereabouts, and he'd said Mariah made him smile. That wasn't enough for me to place my trust in the guy. In fact, it was the exact opposite.

"You heard the lady," Jaxon said in my ear, and I bit back a smartass retort before putting the call on speaker as she'd asked.

"Jax? Are you okay?" Concern flashed in her eyes. "Has he hurt you again?"

"I'm fine, love," he said. "But I'm touched that you care."

I gripped the phone tighter. "Are you still willing to help us?" I said.

“That’s why I called. Sorry it took a while. Tomas has been paranoid ever since he found out about Mariah’s escape. He’s been watching me like a hawk, but fortunately, he doesn’t know about this phone. It’s a burner. I’ll likely be switching to a new one soon to keep him off the trail.”

“You were supposed to be in contact with proof that you’re on our side,” I said. “Yet that proof never came. How do I know we can trust you?”

Mariah rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you tell him your idea and go from there?”

I grimaced, wishing she could see how dangerous it was to give someone so close to Tomas our trust. But we’d had this conversation one too many times already, and I *did* need Jax’s help on this. I didn’t have much of a choice.

“I want to speak to Rosalind,” I said. “Alone, without Tomas’s knowledge. If you can arrange that, maybe I’ll trust you.”

“We think Rosalind might just be acting on orders from Tomas,” Mariah cut in, giving me an irritated look. “We want the opportunity to talk to her face-to-face, to see if she can be reasonable about this custody case.”

Jaxon laughed. “While I appreciate that you think my sister has a heart, you’re wasting your time. She’s spoiled and selfish. Anything she does is only to benefit herself. And as for being reasonable...” He scoffed. “You’ve met Rosalind, right?”

Mariah sighed, frowning as she bit her fingernail. “Yes, but we were still hoping to talk to her about the case. Our first hearing’s coming up.”

Jaxon sighed. “What a mess. She doesn’t even want a kid. Honestly, I can’t count the number of times she said she’s afraid of ending up with custody.”

“She said that?” I demanded. That played perfectly into my hand. “Maybe we can use that to our advantage. If she’s worried she’ll actually win, maybe we can convince her to drop the case.”

Mariah nodded.

“That might be a good angle to take,” he said. “No guarantees, though. She’s unpredictable and will only act if it serves her own purposes... but it’s worth a shot.”

“I agree,” Mariah said. “Can you arrange it?”

“I’ve told you before, love... for you, anything.” My knuckles turned white as I gripped the phone. “In this case, though, the perfect opportunity is already in front of us. Rosalind is leaving tomorrow for a little getaway. If you want to talk to her alone, your best bet will be to catch her while she’s away.”

“That’s perfect,” Mariah said, grinning up at me.

“I need to do some work and get the details for you, but I should be able to have it within a couple of hours.”

“Thank you, Jax,” Mariah said.

“We’ll be waiting,” I said, then ended the call.

“Do you think this could be it?” Mariah said, looking up at me hopefully. “Do you really think we can get Rosalind to fold?”

“I can’t be sure,” I said, wishing this was open and shut. “But it’s the best opportunity that’s come along. It would be foolish not to try.”

“I want to come.”

I wrapped my arms around her with a chuckle. “That doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

She blinked up at me. “You aren’t going to argue and tell me to stay here?”

I tightened my arms around her. “While I can’t say I love the idea of you being near her, I’m pretty sure talking you out of coming is futile.”

She grinned. “You’re finally learning.”

I laughed at that.

“Maybe I should be the one to talk to her,” she said.

“What? No. I draw the line at that.”

“Please, hear me out.” Mariah stared up into my eyes, bringing her hands to my face. “She might respond better by talking to me. It’s clear the two of you can’t speak without it devolving into a fight. She’s being used as a pawn. Now that we have more insight into the situation, I think Rosalind might listen if I can relate to her, woman to woman. You can be...” she paused, angling her head as she looked at me, “...a little alpha. Maybe a gentler approach would go over better.”

The idea of Mariah speaking to Rosalind on her own made all my alpha instincts flare to life, ready to go to the ends of the earth to protect what was mine. But the rational side of me knew Mariah had a point. Rosalind wouldn’t listen to a word I said. While she wasn’t Mariah’s biggest fan either, their past wasn’t nearly as tumultuous. After all, this was an issue of motherhood and womanhood—something I’d never be able to relate to like Mariah could. We might only get this one chance, and we needed it to work.

It wasn’t an hour later that I got the text from Jaxon. It was an itinerary, including flight and hotel information for Rosalind’s getaway. Our window would be short—only a couple of days to locate her and get her to talk.

“What is it?” Mariah asked.

I glanced up from my phone. “Looks like we’re going to Miami.”

Chapter 4

Mariah

I woke well before the sunrise, my eyes popping open as the reality of what we were about to do sank in. We'd barely slept after Jax texted us, and instead talked to Mason, booked flights, and packed for a quick trip. It hadn't left much time for actual rest, but I wasn't tired. Not when we were about to embark on a journey that'd hopefully result in Rosalind dropping this custody case.

As I stretched my arms, I rolled to my side and found Evan already awake, his silhouette etched against the dim light trickling in from the bathroom as he sat on the edge of the bed. The sight of him, solid and unwavering, gave me a sense of calm in the face of what was ahead.

"Morning," I whispered, reaching out to run my fingers down his back. His skin was warm as always, and I was blanketed in his glow while he turned to me, bending to brush his lips over my forehead. The kiss was tender, a comforting gesture that felt like a promise: we were in this together.

I needed that comfort more than I'd realized. Despite my hopes that this meeting with Rosalind would prove fruitful, a small part of me still shuddered at the knowledge that I was willingly leaving the safety of the clan lands. I hadn't left since Evan rescued me from Tomas. I knew I couldn't hide out here forever, and I didn't want to, but it was still unsettling to know I'd be vulnerable again.

"You doing okay?" He studied me closely in the dim light. "You know you don't have to do this. You can stay here."

I sat up in bed and pursed my lips. “You know me better than that.”

Evan chuckled. “Indeed.” Then he grew serious. “You know that no matter what happens, I’ll be right there with you. I’ll protect you, Mariah, with my life, if need be.”

I sucked in a sharp breath at his words, at the fierce tone. “Evan, don’t talk like that. This is going to be fine, especially with the updates Jax sent. It’s as if there’s nothing to worry about.”

After Jax had sent Rosalind’s flight and hotel information, he’d followed up with more information about her security detail for the trip, or rather, the complete lack of one.

Evan squinted. “As long as this isn’t a trap.”

When we called Mason with updates, he and Evan argued over just how much we could trust Jax. Evan had suggested he was setting us up, wondering if the lack of security for Rosalind was a ruse on the Hawthornes’ part to lure us in. More likely, Tomas just cared that little for his daughter, and she wanted the privacy. It would line up with what we’d seen from him so far. It was heartbreaking, but maybe it’d help us convince Rosalind to stop giving into his demands.

“We’re the ones that reached out to Jax about this, remember? Not the other way around.” No matter how much I tried to assure him Jax was on our side, Evan wasn’t convinced.

He lowered his head again, his lips hovering over mine. “You can’t blame me for wanting to prepare for anything. I refuse to put you in harm’s way again.”

I smiled softly, resting a hand on his cheek. “No, I suppose I can’t.” That fierce protectiveness did set my mind at ease, knowing this was different from Tomas getting hold of me in New York. This time, Evan would be right there, waiting to keep me safe.

He kissed me slowly, deeply, finally pulling away with a groan. “As much as I’d love to stay here in bed, we have to get

moving if we want to make it to Miami on time.” His eyes gleamed as he stood up and grinned. “To be continued.”

We quickly got ready, rehashing the plan as we dressed. Mason was flying in from New York and would meet us at the hotel in Miami where Rosalind was staying. He and Evan were checking out Miami properties to expand their nightclub franchise earlier this year and would do so again while we were in town. It served as a perfect excuse for being in the city.

“Ready?” Evan said a few minutes later, standing in the doorway holding both of our carry-on bags.

I nodded, my stomach jumping with a mixture of nerves and anticipation, following him out and closing the door behind us. Muffled conversation and rustling noises drifted up to where we stood on the second-floor landing. When Evan and I descended the staircase, we found Sebastian and Abi in the living room in their robes, huddled close as Abi cradled Sofia in her arms. She smiled when we entered, full of warmth and affection, as always.

“There you are,” Abi said softly as Evan set our bags by the door. “I thought you might want to see Sofia before slipping away.”

We’d let them in on our plans last night. Sebastian arranged to have his private jet ready, and Abi jumped at the opportunity to look after Sofia while we were gone. As if she were right where she wanted to be, Sofia let out a groggy but contented coo.

I could feel the hesitation in Evan’s grip when he took my hand. I gave it a reassuring squeeze and caught his gaze. This would be the first time he’d been away from Sofia overnight since he’d discovered her on his doorstep. It wasn’t a long trip, but I understood his anxiety, and I felt it myself.

Sofia was the closest thing I had to a child of my own, and I loved her fiercely. My maternal instincts were kicking in hard, and somehow leaving her felt so wrong. She’d be in expert hands, but that didn’t make it any easier. I gave Evan an understanding smile.

Abi stepped toward us on seeing his hesitation. “Don’t worry about a thing, Evan. Sebastian and I have this covered. We’re more than capable of taking care of our granddaughter for the weekend.”

The words hung in the air, and I saw in the depths of Evan’s eyes a reflection of the impact her words made. While she’d referred to Sofia as her granddaughter before, there was something about this moment, about leaving our little girl behind under the care of her grandparents, that really solidified how much had changed.

Evan wasn’t on his own anymore. We weren’t even just a little family unit of three. We were a part of something bigger, and a real family stood behind, supporting us. It was something I’d never truly had before, and I had to swallow the lump in my throat.

Sebastian broke the stillness that’d descended as his hand came to Evan’s shoulder. “I know you’re still coming to terms with the truth, Evan.” His voice was strong yet gentle, firm yet kind, much like the man himself. “But never forget we’re your family. We love you. We love Sofia, and we’re here for you, son. No matter what.”

The weight of the moment took my breath away. Sebastian’s words stirred a well of emotions in me that also flickered across Evan’s face. He was still adjusting, but this would also take some time. I squeezed his hand in a gesture of support, and his grip tightened, his thumb brushing over my knuckles in a gentle caress. It was a silent thank you. An affirmation of our connection.

Clapping Evan on the back, Sebastian stepped back. “Sofia’s in excellent hands,” he said with a nod.

“Dada,” Sofia cooed.

Evan went to her, taking her in his arms and holding her close, whispering into her ear how much he loved her, and how much fun she’d have with her grandparents while we were gone.

Then he handed her to me, and I had to blink back tears. “Bye for now, sweet girl.” I hated the idea of being separated from her as well, but I forced a smile. We wouldn’t be gone for long, and I wanted to remain strong for her and for Evan. “We’ll see you soon.”

I pressed a kiss to her squishy cheek, then handed her back to Abi. Neither Evan nor I could tear our gazes from her as we said our goodbyes and walked out the door into a morning still devoid of sun.

We glanced at each other as determination settled over Evan’s features. It was time to act. Time to put things in motion and hopefully change the mind of a woman who, until now, had been our enemy.

* * *

As the plane descended into Miami, I was immediately struck by the vibrant panorama of azure water stretching toward the crisp white sands, palm trees swaying in the ocean breeze. The skyline of high-rise buildings gleamed in the bright Florida sun. This was my first time in Florida, and the beauty of Miami was nothing short of awe-inspiring. I was used to living in a bustling city by the sea, yet everything here looked so different from New York, so tropical. Excitement thrummed through me at the possibility of exploring this new place after confronting Rosalind. Maybe we’d accomplish our business quickly and could take a little time for ourselves.

However, when we stepped out of the cool, air-conditioned jet, I was hit by a wall of heat.

“Wow,” I exclaimed as it seeped through my clothes, pressing down on me, the sun burning brighter here somehow. “Are there two suns in Miami or what?”

Evan chuckled. “Welcome to Florida.” He grinned, slinging an arm around my shoulders.

A sleek, black private car was already waiting for us by the curb, the chauffeur holding a sign that read *Guerrero*. He opened the back door as we approached, taking our bags from

us and loading them into the trunk. Once we'd settled into the plush black leather seats, Evan pulled out his phone to double check the latest text from Jax. He'd sent it just as we were boarding the jet to Miami. Somehow, he'd managed to hack into Rosalind's account and found her schedule.

"It's too easy," Evan muttered, wariness radiating from him in waves.

"Believe me, Evan. If I thought I was at risk, I'd be the first one calling this off." I knew just how cunning the Hawthornes could be, and the last thing I wanted was to fall into Tomas's sick hands again.

According to her schedule, Rosalind would visit the hotel's spa in just a few hours. I glanced at Evan's phone.

"I should corner her in the spa," I said. "If she's getting a treatment, she can't just run off. I'd have a captive audience," I said with a grin.

He studied me for a moment. "I'm still not thrilled about you confronting her alone," he said yet again. "We can find another way."

"I can handle it," I said. I appreciated his concern but had a feeling that Rosalind was more likely to listen to me than Evan breathing dragon fire down her neck. "This is our best option."

Evan ran a hand through his hair in agitation. "But if it doesn't work, I'm stepping in," he said. "I can be...persuasive when necessary."

"It won't come to that," I said, hoping I sounded more confident than I felt.

As the car navigated the bustling streets of Miami, I leaned on Evan, drawing strength from him for what lay ahead. His warmth and the steady beat of his heart made for a soothing rhythm in the car's quiet interior. He kissed the top of my head, fingers gently entwining with mine.

"I'm here for you, Mariah," he said, his breath tickling my ear. "Always."

Before long, the car pulled up to the hotel. I took a deep breath and mentally readied myself. We stepped out of the car, the opulent building looming before us. The driver collected our bags for us, and together, we stepped through the glass doors and into the foyer.

I stopped just inside as I took in the grandeur of the hotel. The towering marble columns, gilded moldings, and sparkling crystal chandeliers were the epitome of elegance and sophistication. The lobby was full of lush, exotic plants, and the murmurs of refined conversation were muted by the cascade of a nearby indoor waterfall. A light floral fragrance perfumed the air from the dozens of arrangements scattered about.

It was a world away from anything I'd ever experienced, and that was saying something given the clients I'd worked for over the years. A shiver of excitement coursed through me.

We walked over to the check-in desk, where a uniformed attendant greeted us. While Evan handled the formalities, I glanced around, still marveling at our surroundings. Everything was grand, from the plush velvet couches to the shiny marble floors underfoot. When Evan finished checking us in, he handed me a key card with a wink, then his phone buzzed in his hand.

"It's Mason," he said, scanning the message quickly. "He's already waiting for us in the lobby."

We glanced around, but the lobby felt massive, and it took a few minutes before we found Mason near a set of grand glass elevators, with a cup of coffee in his hand, and a relaxed smile on his face.

He stood up and looked at me as we approached. "You're sure about this?"

I shook my head and laughed. "Between the two of you mother hens, I'm surprised I'm allowed out at all."

"Not going to apologize for keeping you safe," Evan said, bringing his hand to my lower back. "Let's go upstairs and go over the plan. We still have a little time."

Once inside the glass elevators, Evan pressed the button for the penthouse floor, swiping the required key card for access. The elevator doors slid open and welcomed us directly inside. The suite was expansive, a study in elegant minimalism. A grand living area was tastefully decorated with modern, sleek furniture, and the plush cream sofas looked inviting and comfortable. Three floor-to-ceiling glass walls offered a magnificent view of the Miami skyline, with the ocean providing an impressive backdrop.

Adjacent to the living room, a fully equipped kitchen boasted state-of-the-art appliances. The dining area held a long, polished wooden table, able to accommodate a dozen people, while a stunning, intricate crystal chandelier hung above us.

I turned in a circle and looked at Evan in disbelief. “This is a bit over the top, don’t you think?”

He chuckled, coming over and wrapping an arm around my waist. “It’s not every day I get to bring my girl to Miami. I wanted to make it count.” He winked, clearly enjoying my reaction. “Let’s go check out the bedroom. Mason, yours is down that hall.”

Mason carried his bags to his room as Evan led me into the master bedroom. It was a haven of luxury, with a king-sized bed dressed in the softest linens I’d ever seen, plush pillows, and an inviting duvet. Tasteful artwork adorned the walls, and the lights were soft, creating a warm, relaxing ambience. There were floor-to-ceiling windows here as well to make the room feel open and airy.

The ensuite bathroom was as large as the bedroom itself, with a freestanding tub sitting under a window which looked out onto the city. There was also a walk-in rain shower and his-and-her sinks. It was incredible, and if it weren’t for my meeting with Rosalind, it would’ve been a perfect place for a romantic getaway.

As I wandered back out into the main living area, I saw Mason grabbing some water bottles from the fridge. “Want one?”

“Sure.”

He tossed it to me, and I took a long drink. Evan took a seat at the table, gesturing for Mason and me to join him.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said as we sat around the large table. “If you’re going to talk to Rosalind, it would be helpful for you to understand some pack politics, especially surrounding the hierarchy. It might help you better relate to her.” He sighed. “I still don’t like the idea of you going in alone, but I can see the benefits of you talking to her alone in this case. If she sees you as another woman who can sympathize and understand, it might convince her.”

“Seems like you think she’ll listen.”

“We’ll see. You know I can’t stand the woman, but if you think you can get through to her, it’s worth a shot. Honestly, it might be our best one.” Evan leaned back, crossing his ankles as he spoke.

“How so?”

“Pack politics are intrinsically tied to bloodlines and power,” he said. “In a lot of ways, it’s an archaic system, especially when it comes to the position of daughters within the hierarchy. You can relate to her in a way I can’t.”

“Daughters?” I said, frowning as I played with my water bottle cap.

He nodded, his eyes fixed on mine, steady and serious. “Yes. Unfortunately, many alphas don’t value their daughters as they should, and they can’t carry on the bloodline the same way sons can. They can’t become alphas, they can’t lead. This often leads to them being overlooked.”

I frowned, remembering Rosalind’s bitter demeanor and her father’s clear disregard for her when we’d first visited them at the lodge near the Hawthorne clan lands. “You mean to say that’s why Tomas treats Rosalind so horribly?”

“Other than him being a total jackass? Yes,” Evan said. “It’s clear he sees no value in having a daughter, other than what she can provide for him, and he’s willing to use her to get to me. According to Sebastian, his mate died saving Rosalind,

and he likely blames her for that loss. He has no proper heir, which is why he's making all these power plays.”

“What about Jax?” I said, not understanding why he wouldn't just name Jax his heir if he was so desperate for one.

Evan paused, his gaze drifting off into the distance. His jaw tightened, the muscles flexing as he ground his teeth. I reached out, resting a hand on his arm. He glanced at me, his expression softening slightly. Jax had done nothing but help us so far, so why didn't my mate like or trust him?

“Jax's situation is complex,” he said finally. “Remember when we talked about illegitimate sons?” I nodded. “Historically, it's very rare—practically unheard of—for them to be named heir. My situation is the exception to the rule. Aside from that, Jax and his mother were outcasts, like I was for most of my adult life. They didn't belong to a pack, and creating one of your own is far easier said than done.”

Mason nodded, putting in his two cents. “It also takes a lot of money to buy pack land and to prove you can provide as an alpha. It's not just a title; an alpha is responsible for the wellbeing of the entire community. That means providing jobs, building schools. Essentially, they're the backbone of the clan.”

Evan leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “And that's why having an heir is so important. They're the ones who will keep the clan thriving once the alpha is gone. But because Jax's mother wasn't Tomas's mate, he's just as unimportant to Tomas as Rosalind.”

“But Jax is an alpha, right?” I said. “Doesn't that give him some value in Tomas's eyes?”

“Perhaps,” Evan conceded. “But with no clan to inherit or lead, his status as an alpha means little to Tomas.”

“How does Sofia fit into this, then? If daughters can't be heirs.”

“The Carey clan is different. Sebastian has less qualms with bucking tradition. Tomas would rather have Sofia in his

own clan as a pawn. Whether she can inherit his clan or not, she'll inherit the Carey fortune.”

I sat back in the couch. The complexities of pack life, the subtle and not-so-subtle power plays, the weight of responsibility—it was all so intriguing, and also terrifying. The way Tomas used people for his own agendas was disgusting, but despite it all, I wanted to know more, to better understand this part of Evan’s life.

Without thinking, I found myself saying, “Have you ever considered starting your own clan?”

Evan blinked. His usual confident demeanor wavered, replaced by a vulnerability I’d only seen a few times before. He stared at the table, his fingers absently tracing the grain of the wood as I watched him, waiting for his response.

“I thought I wanted to be alpha once,” he said at last. “But it’s not as simple as it seemed at the time.” He sighed. “What I do want is for Sofia to have some sense of clan life, and I believe she’ll find that with Sebastian’s people.”

He paused, his fingers settling over my own.

“I don’t think I want to lead,” he said quietly. “I want a simple life. A life where I can focus on my daughter... and my mate.”

Evan’s eyes locked onto mine, and the intensity within them caused my breath to hitch. Those three words made my heart flutter, and Mason, who’d gone quiet, subtly excused himself, returning to the kitchen to give us a moment alone.

We’d barely spoken of this, and I didn’t understand the full implications of being Evan’s mate. Still, warmth spread through my veins at the thought of belonging to him in such an intimate way. I wanted to dive deeper, to explore what it meant for us and for our future. But a glance at my watch made me curse under my breath. We’d have to finish this conversation another time.

“I need to get to the spa soon,” I said. “How do I use this to convince Rosalind of our offer?”

Evan offered me a small smile. “That’s my girl. Always thinking strategically.” He gently squeezed my hand. “We remind her she’s not alone, that she’s more than just a pawn in her father’s game.”

A few minutes later, the three of us headed back down the elevator. With my nerves slightly wrecked, Evan and Mason escorted me toward the spa, their watchful eyes scanning the area. Evan wore a stern expression, and the muscles in his jaw twitched as he held my hand. I’d thought I was prepared for this, but now that the moment was here, my nerves made a reappearance.

“Mariah,” Evan said, stepping closer and turning to face me as we stopped several yards from the spa entrance. He placed his hands on my cheeks and whispered. “You’re sure about this? You can change your mind and no one will think any less of you for it.”

Despite my nerves, I nodded, going up on tiptoes and brushing a kiss across his lips. “Evan, I’ll be fine. It’s a spa, not a battleground.”

He let out a small laugh, though his eyes were full of worry. “Just remember, we won’t be far. If anything goes wrong, we’ll be there in a heartbeat.”

“Thank you, both of you,” I said, turning to include Mason in our conversation.

With one last lingering glance, Evan released my hand and stepped back, allowing me to enter The Oasis—certainly an apt name. I checked in at the front desk, and an attendant escorted me to a private dressing room where a thick white robe and slippers were waiting. The attendant was still there when I emerged in my spa attire, and she smiled serenely as she led me down a hall into a treatment room.

When the doors closed behind me, I allowed myself a moment to bask in the serenity, the soft notes of ambient music and the scent of essential oils whisking away any lingering unease. If there was any better place to have this conversation, I wasn’t aware of it.

For the first half-hour, I relaxed into the luxurious experience, sitting in a massage chair while getting a soothing facial. I savored every second of it. This was a welcome respite from the storm that might await me, and I'd no intention of squandering it.

After the facial, the same attendant led me into the salon, where I knew Rosalind was currently scheduled for a pedicure. If my timing was right, she'd be soaking her feet at this very moment, with nowhere else to go.

I stepped inside as Rosalind's eyes lifted casually, clearly not expecting to see me standing before her. She jerked upright, nearly dropping her mimosa.

"Well, well," she said with a drawl, recovering quickly, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. "Look who we have here."

"Rosalind," I said with a small smile. "Fancy meeting you here."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Oh, please, I'm not surprised you found me."

I shrugged, keeping my tone casual as I took the spa chair next to her. "Coincidence, actually. Evan is here on business, and I came along. After everything that happened," I said, forcing a shaky laugh. "You know, with the kidnapping? He thought I deserved a little pampering."

Rosalind's eyes flickered with unease at the mention of the kidnapping, but she tried not to display any other emotion. Silence fell between us, save for the soft splash of water as our feet shuffled against the basins. I watched Rosalind. She might act as if she didn't care, but her eyes couldn't hide the turmoil.

"I didn't know about any of that until it was over," she said bitterly. "I wasn't there. By the time I found out, you'd escaped and thrown everything into chaos."

I took a deep breath, gathering my courage. That was my cue. It was now or never. "Are you seriously okay with this, Rosalind? With everything that's happening? The things your father has done?" I lowered my voice, taking a risk when I said, "The way he's using you?"

She scoffed, a harsh, brittle sound which echoed around the salon. “Of course not,” she snapped, her gaze sharp on mine. “Do you think I wanted to get pregnant? To ruin my figure and endure months of misery?”

I fought to hide my grimace. How could she think that way about giving life to such a precious little girl? I would never understand but still needed to keep her talking.

“Then, why did you?”

She glared at me. “Like I had a choice.” She sighed, a hint of vulnerability creeping into her tone for the first time. “My father was furious when he found out the baby was a girl. He acted like it was my fault. He still wanted to use her, of course, but he was convinced things would’ve gone smoother if I’d given him a male alpha heir.” She sneered. “That’s all he’s ever wanted.”

Evan’s story from earlier popped into my mind, and impossibly, I found myself feeling sorry for this woman.

“But he didn’t think about what I wanted. As usual.” Rosalind’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I never wanted kids. He said I wouldn’t have to raise the baby. But now things aren’t going his way, he’s forcing my hand with the custody case. He’s telling me I’ll have to be a mother now.”

I felt cold fear at the thought of Rosalind taking Sofia from us, but I tried my best to stay focused. “Why? What’s this really all about, Rosalind?”

“It’s about Evan. What else could it be? My father is convinced that if he gets Sofia, Evan will follow. That’s what he really wants: the power he’ll gain having Evan under his thumb. He knows how protective Evan is of her, and he believes Evan won’t want to be separated from his child. He’ll do whatever’s necessary to be with her, including giving in to his demands.”

Her words hung in the air. It was true, Evan would never let Sofia go. If it came down to it and the Hawthornes won custody, would he bend to their will? Would he give Tomas exactly what he wanted?

“Why are you telling me this?” She was being so forthcoming, I wondered if Evan were right and this was a trick.

But when Rosalind looked at me, her hazel eyes, so similar to Sofia’s, flashing with desperation, I knew she was being genuine. “Because I want out, Mariah.”

I’d expected venom, hatred, pettiness. What I hadn’t expected was honesty. I watched Rosalind, her face pinched with the stress and the pressure she was under. This was a woman trapped in a situation she didn’t want to be in, just like we’d suspected. I wanted to push her for more, but I needed to play this part very carefully. What happened next would be vital to getting her on our side.

I waited patiently, and when she spoke again, I barely contained my sigh of relief when she opened up to me.

Rosalind’s gaze dropped to the soaking basin, her toes idly swirling in the water around her feet. “I have someone I’m in —” She cleared her throat. “Someone I’m interested in. But with all this bullshit going on, we can’t really be together. Having a baby on my hip won’t help matters, either.”

I swallowed hard as I thought of what to say next.

“So don’t,” I said, watching her closely as I carefully played my next card. “Don’t take custody. You could drop the lawsuit, run away with your lover, start fresh.”

Her lips twisted into a bitter smile. “I can’t, Mariah. I can’t just leave.” She looked defeated, her shoulders slumping.

“Why not?”

She hesitated before speaking, and when she did, her eyes flickered with anger. “This man, my boyfriend... he works for my father. He’s in too deep, knows too much, and my father would never just let him leave. Believe me, I’d love to pack up and leave everyone far behind, but I can’t. I won’t leave without him.”

“And you can’t be with him now?”

“It’s all in secret. My job right now is to lure Evan into the fold, and a boyfriend complicates that in my father’s eyes.”

The pieces were finally falling into place, the intricacies of Rosalind’s predicament clearer. I took a risk and hoped my next words wouldn’t make her put her guard back up.

“What can we do to help you, Rosalind?”

She looked genuinely taken aback. “Why would you want to?”

This was it, the moment that would make or break our plan. I leaned forward. “It’s simple. Evan loves Sofia. He’ll do anything to keep her safe. To keep her with him. So, tell me,” I said, my tone firm, hoping she saw what I was offering. “What do *you* need to drop this lawsuit?”

Rosalind watched me a moment longer, her eyes widening as she realized what I was getting at. Her lips parted as if she wanted to say something, but then she snapped her mouth closed again.

Frustration threatened to creep up while I watched and waited, not wanting to push my luck. She mulled over my words, and a spark of hope flickered to life when she looked at me once more.

“Here’s what I need you to do...”

Chapter 5

Evan

I drummed my fingers on the tabletop of the chic indoor café across the wide hallway from the spa. Mason and I were supposed to be catching up on business, preparing for our meeting with the realtor this afternoon to check out a few potential properties for the new club, but I could barely focus on what he was saying. My eyes were glued to the spa entrance.

“Earth to Evan,” Mason said, snapping his fingers in front of me. “Are you listening at all?”

“Uh, yeah, sounds good,” I said. It felt like an eternity since Mariah had gone into the spa. Every minute that ticked by was torture. My dragon writhed beneath the surface, demanding I go find my mate and keep her safe, and if Mariah didn’t come out soon, I might do just that.

“Look, I get how hard it is to let her go in there without you.” Mason’s words were in a low, warning hiss, his eyes wary. “But you look like you’re about to explode out of your goddamn skin. Get yourself under control.”

It was true. It was taking all my willpower to keep my dragon locked down tight. The last thing I needed was to lose control and shift here in public. Besides, breaking the law wouldn’t give me any bonus points in the custody case.

“The best thing you can do for her right now is to keep yourself under control. Let’s focus on this.” Mason tapped the image on his tablet. “What do you think about the location near the college?”

I nodded and exhaled hard. “You’re right. Let’s go over the details again.” I forced myself to pay attention, but my heart wasn’t in it, not when Mariah was off with the daughter of my mortal enemy.

The minutes crawled by, but I eventually spotted her stepping through the gilded doors of the spa.

“There she is,” I breathed, shooting to my feet.

The Miami sun filtering in through the domed-glass ceiling highlighted the golden threads in her hair. Her face was flushed, a wide smile on her face, and she was practically glowing with an excitement that was palpable from where I stood.

Overwhelming relief surged through me, cutting through the nerves that’d gnawed at my insides since she disappeared behind those doors. The wait was grueling, and it felt like days had passed instead of just a couple hours.

Now that I could see she was safe, I grinned when I saw the sparkle in her eyes. Something had gone right.

I strode toward her, barely containing myself, and pulled her into my arms, holding her tightly.

“What happened?” I pulled back just enough to search her face. “It’s good news? Tell me everything.”

Laughter bubbled up as she reached up and rested a hand on my chest. “Easy, now.” She glanced around at the people milling about the hotel. “Let’s talk once we get back to the room. There’s a lot to discuss.”

Mason joined us before we hurried toward the glass elevators. It was clear she’d made some headway. My eagerness to hear what she’d discovered was only matched by the sense of relief that she was back by my side. I slipped my hand into hers as the elevator doors whooshed shut. I was more than a little impressed with how she’d handled the situation, remaining cool and collected the entire time. She’d been more composed than me, that was for sure.

The significance of what she’d done wasn’t lost on me. If things went as well, as I’d hoped, this could potentially alter

the trajectory of our lives.

I tugged Mariah closer to my side, a surge of pride coursing through me. She'd thrown herself into the midst of this, putting on a brave face and confronting Rosalind for the sake of our daughter, for our future.

The magnitude of what she'd done, the potential ripple effect it could have on our lives, made me love her even more. She was my other half, my mate, and I couldn't wait to claim her and make her mine in every way. Dealing with Rosalind brought us one step closer to that future.

The moment we stepped into the penthouse, my patience gave out. I gripped Mariah's arms, my eyes searching hers. "What happened? What have you learned?"

A smile slowly spread across her face, a look of accomplishment bright in her eyes.

"Something went right," she said, bouncing on her toes in an excited voice.

Mason's curious eyes flicked between us. He looked just as eager to find out as I did.

Mariah smiled at him. "Would you mind grabbing me something to drink?"

Mason nodded and immediately headed toward the kitchen.

Once we were alone, I couldn't contain my excitement any longer and pulled Mariah into a tight embrace, then kissed her forehead and smiled down at her. Mariah blushed, biting down on a pleased smile. Mason came back with bottled water and some trail mix, and I released Mariah as we all took seats around the table once more. Anticipation filled the air.

"Okay," Mariah said after she took a drink, her eyes bright when her gaze locked with mine. "There's a lot more going on with Rosalind than I expected. The long and short of it is, she wants us to help her boyfriend, a dragon named Porter. If we can ensure his safety, she's willing to drop the custody case."

The simplicity of her words didn't sync with the weight of the problem. "What?" The disbelief was palpable. "Just like that? It feels too simple."

"That's what I thought at first, too," Mariah said. "But Porter works for Tomas. Rosalind believes her father is in the dark about their relationship, but she wants out of all of it. She wants to leave her family and clan behind and start a new life somewhere else with Porter. But she thinks her father would never let him leave..." She paused, biting her lip.

"He won't let him leave alive, you mean," I said, understanding the implication behind her unspoken words. My hands balled into fists as an undercurrent of anger coursed through me.

The thought of Tomas manipulating and controlling the lives of so many people around him, using them as mere pawns, made my blood boil. It was what he did, I knew that, but the bitter tang of reality gnawed at me more than ever. Sofia's future was at stake here, and I refused to let her be part of his sick games. We had to fight back against this man and his agenda, not just to protect ourselves and our future, but also to fight for those who couldn't do it themselves. Who knew how many people Hawthorne had trapped into working for him, threatening them to remain loyal?

"Exactly." I wondered if she was remembering her time as his captive. She shook her head, then continued. "So, if we manage to get Porter safely away from Tomas, it might get Rosalind to stand up to her father and drop the custody suit. At least that's what she made me believe."

I was desperate for this to be the solution, but I also knew how conniving and manipulative Rosalind was. "Did she seem genuine?"

A pause stretched out as Mariah's gaze held mine, and she seemed to search for the right words. After what felt like an eternity, she finally nodded. "She did, Evan. She's not exactly mother of the year, but her concern for Porter's safety seemed sincere."

"Mother of the year? What does that mean?"

Mariah's eyes were sad when she spoke again. "She was honest about her desires, her regrets, her fears. All useful information, and exactly what we need... but I couldn't get over the way she spoke of Sofia. I still can't."

"Sofia?" I couldn't keep the worry from my voice.

Mariah's expression turned colder. "She was dismissive, Evan. Completely. She jumped at the possibility of not having custody. Said having to raise her was never part of the plan." Her words hung heavy in the air as she shook her head.

"I can't imagine what it'd be like to not want to be Sofia's mother," she said in a soft voice. "To not feel that connection with her. To see Sofia as a thorn in her side instead of the precious baby that she is."

I knew Rosalind didn't have a mothering instinct—she'd dropped our child on my doorstep, after all—but this dismissal of Sofia still stirred an icy rage within me. The thought of our little girl being discarded, being treated as a mere pawn in this twisted game, was nauseating. Yes, we wanted the Hawthornes to drop the case, and Rosalind was playing right into our hands. But that didn't change her actions, and my protective instincts when it came to my daughter flared up.

Smoke billowed from my nostrils as I fought to contain my fury. Mariah exchanged a glance with Mason, then gently placed her hand on my arm in a plea for calm.

"I get it, Evan," she said, a soothing balm on my anger. "But let's focus on the bigger picture here. We need to understand the enemy to defeat her."

"You're right," I said, still fighting to shove down my fury, to keep my dragon at bay. "What's the next step? Did she say anything else?"

"As much as I don't like the woman, Rosalind is trapped in this just as much as we are. She spoke of her father's demands and his control. She doesn't want custody of Sofia, doesn't even want to be a mother, but Tomas is forcing her hand. He seems to hope that if she wins custody, you'll come around to his way of thinking eventually."

Another huff of smoke poured from me, and I squeezed my eyes shut, keeping my focus. “And the boyfriend... this Porter. Do you know anything else?”

She nodded, her eyes full of concern as she regarded me. “It sounds like he’s pretty deep with Tomas and knows secrets Rosalind believes her father doesn’t want getting out. Tomas won’t let him leave, and Rosalind won’t go without him.”

Understanding dawned. “So, if we help Porter escape, he and Rosalind will run away together. Meaning she drops the lawsuit...”

“Exactly,” Mariah confirmed.

It seemed too good to be true. “Why didn’t Jax tell us about Porter sooner?”

Mariah shrugged. “Maybe he didn’t realize that was the real bargaining chip.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

“And if we’re wrong about her? If this is another one of her games?” I said, the doubt creeping in again.

Mason cleared his throat, getting my attention. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. For now, we focus on the facts at hand. This is a great start. We have an opportunity to get Rosalind to drop this lawsuit, Evan. We have to take it.”

And just like that, the path forward was clear. It was risky, it was uncertain, and we didn’t have nearly enough information to act on yet, but it was a chance to keep Sofia with us. A chance for us to be free of Rosalind, and I was willing to do whatever it took to make that a reality.

“Our immediate priority should be figuring out how to get to this Porter,” Mason said.

“Agreed.” Mariah radiated determination. She nodded and intertwined our fingers. “We can do this, Evan.”

“We can, and we will.” I said, my own determination ringing in my voice. Together, we would navigate the path that lay ahead. We had Mason, we had the Careys. I had to believe our love for each other and our unwavering commitment to

Sofia's safety would see us to the end of this. There was simply no other option.

* * *

The three of us discussed possible next steps while we ordered room service for lunch, then it was time to shift gears and focus on our other business here in Miami.

By mid-afternoon, Mason and I were navigating Miami's sun-drenched streets in a rental car as we went to meet with a knowledgeable realtor and see the potential locations we'd scouted for our new club. Mariah sat in the backseat, asking questions here and there as Mason and I discussed the properties, expressing a desire to know more about the business side of my life as well.

We arrived at the first property, with the blazing Miami heat pounding down relentlessly as we climbed from the car. Our realtor, a seasoned woman named Tabitha, was already waiting when we arrived. I knew we'd chosen well when she dove right into an insightful narrative of the property's strengths and pitfalls after joining us on the sidewalk.

Tabitha gestured to the three-story building in front of us, her hands in a dramatic arc as she spoke. "This property is located in a prime spot here in Miami. It's close to all the major clubs and has plenty of foot traffic from the nearby university." She paused for a moment, allowing us to take it all in before continuing. "Shall we go in?"

We followed her through the glass doors into a large vestibule, then the main space. It was much larger than the clubs we had in New York.

"The ground floor has two main spaces," Tabitha said, walking around the large room and pointing. "One that could be used as lounge or bar, and another that'd be ideal for a dance floor. There's also a small kitchen and bar area that could be renovated and expanded to have additional service options. Upstairs, you have two more large spaces that could

be used as private VIP areas, plus additional bathrooms and storage rooms.”

Mason and I exchanged glances. This place was exactly what we were looking for. We asked Tabitha more questions about noise ordinances, parking availability, security measures, and building codes until we were satisfied. Once we’d thoroughly checked it out, taking our time to really look it over, we went on to the next property. While it had a nice view of the beach, it didn’t even compare to the first option.

We thanked Tabitha for showing us around and promised to keep her updated on our decision before saying goodbye.

While walking back toward our rental car, Mason turned toward me, his eyes gleaming with excitement. “Do you see it? What that place could become with the right designer and renovations? This could really be something special.”

I grinned back at him, his enthusiasm infectious. With everything else going on, I hadn’t spent much time thinking about the future of our business, but seeing this property was even more motivation to get this situation with the Hawthornes resolved so we could get back to our normal lives.

Mariah had paid close attention all afternoon, observing everything. She’d been full of curiosity as we explored the properties. She hadn’t been involved in my business at all up until this point, and I had to admit, I could get used to having her by my side in this area, too.

When we made it back to our hotel, Miami’s vibrant nighttime scene was already coming to life around us.

“I’m impressed,” Mariah confessed once we pulled the car into the valet station. “I had no idea there was so much involved in choosing a location. The way you consider the vibe and energy of a place, it’s like there’s an art to it.”

I felt a surge of pride and affection. “You caught on pretty fast. Maybe we’ve got a budding businesswoman in our midst.”

Her immediate reaction was a playful roll of her eyes, but her lips curled into a smile.

Mason chimed in. “I second Evan, Mariah. You’ve got a knack for this.”

She laughed. “Yeah, right. I think I’ll stick to going to school for now. But I won’t deny, going along and seeing how you two work was interesting.”

We strolled into the hotel, feeling much more at ease than when we’d arrived that morning, our conversation punctuated by laughter rather than worry. The sun was setting on our day, painting the Miami sky in hues of orange and pink, and the future of our new venture shimmered with potential. We’d accomplished a lot today, but I wasn’t ready to call it a day just yet.

“What do you think about a night out on the town?” I suggested as we rode the elevator up to the penthouse.

Mariah’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“When do we ever get the chance to go out and live it up a little?” The answer was never. With my work schedule back in New York, and having an infant at home, we rarely went out on conventional dates—none at all since the threat of Tomas first loomed over us. I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity.

“I think I’ll bow out,” Mason said with a wink. “But you two should get out and enjoy yourselves.”

“I’d love to,” Mariah said, bouncing on her toes.

I chuckled, wanting to make this a night she’d never forget.

Once we were back in the suite, Mariah slipped into the bathroom to get ready for the night. I had a whiskey in the living room with Mason while I waited, going over everything we needed to do next regarding the property, but my mind kept drifting to Mariah, full of anticipation as I imagined her stepping out in the little red dress she’d packed just in case we got this chance.

When she finally emerged from our bedroom, the sight of her was like a hit of the finest scotch: breathtaking, even overwhelming, and I was left warm and a little light-headed.

Her dress clung to her like a second skin, accentuating every curve and amplifying her natural allure to a magnitude which had my pulse thrumming. The woman embodied every dirty fantasy I'd ever had about my nanny. Part of me wanted to take her right back into the bedroom and strip the dress off.

"You look..." I shook my head as I tried to find the words to express how fucking gorgeous she was.

She gave me a teasing grin, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Like a goddess? Ravishing? Irresistible?"

I'd all but forgotten Mason was there until he cleared his throat and excused himself. "You kids have fun tonight," he called out as he headed to his own room down the hall in the penthouse.

I was thick with desire then as I stood and prowled toward her, my eyes devouring every inch of my beautiful mate. "All of the above."

I reached for her, wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling her body close. The need to claim her, to brand her as mine forever, was a fierce wildfire threatening to consume me. "If I'm being honest, now I'm tempted to just keep you here all night. I promise you won't regret it."

A playful challenge glinted in her eyes as she traced my lower lip with her finger, sending electric shocks of desire coursing through. "Promises, promises," she teased, dropping into a seductive whisper that had my body on high alert. "You did say something this morning about continuing where we left off. We have the whole night ahead of us."

I groaned, a heady mixture of anticipation and burning need swirling in me. "You're going to be the death of me."

Her laughter rang through the room. "But what a way to go." Her eyes twinkled. "Are you ready to show me a good time?"

A growl rumbled in my chest. "You have no idea."

Somehow, I managed to leash my desire, but it still simmered beneath the surface. With Mariah by my side, dressed to kill and radiating a carefree energy I hadn't seen in

far too long, I had no doubt this would be an unforgettable night.

We rode the glass elevator down, catching the eyes of a small crowd as we strolled through the lobby and stepped out into the Miami night. The sun had set, but the city was still alight, pulsing with a vibrant rhythm that echoed the hammering beat of my own heart.

Mariah squeezed my hand, evidently taking everything in as we walked down the street. “It feels so alive, doesn’t it?” she said, her gaze sweeping over the neon buildings and the crowds of people milling about.

“There’s a different vibe than New York, for sure,” I said, leading her toward the string of clubs and restaurants that were the center of Miami nightlife.

Our first stop was a bustling Latin restaurant, where we indulged in a variety of tastes and textures. When Mariah savored her first spoonful of ceviche, she moaned and closed her eyes as the myriad of flavors exploded in her mouth.

“Mmm, it’s like a party on my tongue.”

I gave her a sly smile that let her know just what I was thinking about that tongue. “I’ll remember that later.”

Her cheeks turned pink, but that didn’t stop her from moaning again when she dived into the mole-marinated meat next. It was an utterly erotic experience watching her eat, and I had to remind myself I wanted to give her a night out, though all I wanted was to strip that dress right off and use my own tongue to taste every inch of her.

After dinner, the music from a nearby club beckoned us.

“Shall we?” I extended my hand, and Mariah grinned, taking it as we made our way inside, straight to the dance floor. The music pulsed with a driving beat, a rhythmic promise of the night that lay ahead.

Mariah swayed to the music, her body moving with a captivating grace as I held her close. Despite owning a string of clubs, we’d never been out dancing together. Not like this.

It was intoxicating feeling her move against me, and my body ached for her.

Her laughter was infectious as I spun her out and then right back into my arms. She was fluid, graceful, and I couldn't keep my hands to myself.

"You think you can keep up?" she said, a challenge in her eyes as she turned her back to me but kept her body oh so close.

"Watch me," I said with a grin, hands firmly on her hips. My fingers dug in tight as we moved together, lost in the rhythm of the music and the dancing, the world blurring around us as our bodies pressed against each other, so close I knew she could feel exactly what she was doing to me. With each driving beat of the music, my need grew, my hunger taking the reins.

"Mariah." I pulled her back, then leaned in close. "Do you have any idea the things I want to do to you right now?"

She sucked in a little gasp, biting her lip, lifting her eyes to mine. She felt the heat within me, too, and in that moment, I knew I wouldn't be able to contain myself much longer.

"Time to call it a night." I gripped her hand and led her from the dance floor, wanting to find a private place where I could give her what we both craved. Out in the night air once more, I let out a long sigh, keeping myself contained until we made it back to the hotel. But she didn't make it easy, not with the way that dress clung to her curves or how her back was exposed. We walked back, my arm wrapped tightly around her, the moon shining down on both of us. Mariah nestled closer to me, shivering as her eyes reflected the silvery light.

"Are you cold?" I said, willing to strip down and give her my shirt if she needed it.

She shook her head, her arms encircling my waist. "Just thinking about what's next."

Heat surged through me as my cock throbbed.

"Tonight was perfect." She sighed. "I needed this break from reality so much more than I realized."

I glanced at her, wishing our reality was a whole other story. We were making progress, though. Soon enough, we'd be able to live our lives without the constant threat of the Hawthornes.

“Not nearly as perfect as you.” I lowered my head, lips grazing her ear as I whispered, “And it’s not over yet.”

She shivered, looking up with so much desire that I nearly came undone. Slipping my hand into hers, I picked up the pace. We weren’t far from the hotel when we came across a fountain with colorful lights—another magical display in this city.

Mariah stopped next to it. “Do you have a penny?”

“You want to make a wish?”

She nodded, giving me an answering smile. “Things seem to be going our way. Wouldn’t hurt to have a little more luck on our side.”

After finding some coins in my pocket, I held them out to her. She plucked one from my hand then turned back to the fountain, closing her eyes, and all I could do in that space was stare at the utter beauty of this woman. My mate. Her hair fluttered in the light breeze, her skin like porcelain under the moonlight. Not for the first time, I asked myself how I’d gotten so lucky.

On a whim, I pulled my phone from my pocket and snapped a picture of her. When she opened her eyes and tossed the coin, with a smile on her face, I was still snapping away.

“Am I a model now?” she said with a giggle.

“Only for me,” I said with a growl. “Did you make your wish?”

She nodded. “Now, how about you get me back to the hotel and make it come true?”

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I swung her up into my arms and carried her the rest of the way, not caring at all if we caused a scene. My mate stayed in my arms as we moved

across the lobby, into the glass elevator, and I didn't put her down until we were inside the penthouse bedroom.

The second I kicked the door closed behind me, our mouths collided, hungry and devouring. I'd spent most of the night forcing my dragon down, keeping him at bay while I gave Mariah a night on the town. But all I'd wanted since the moment I'd seen her in that red dress was to peel it from her gorgeous body.

"Fuck," I groaned against her lips, my body aching for her, my cock so hard, all I could think about was sinking so deep inside her that we forgot about everything else in our lives. Right then, the two of us together was all that mattered.

I lowered her to the floor, running my fingers along the exposed skin of her back. She shivered, pressing even closer, her hands dragging up my chest, over my shoulders, and her fingers digging in when I gripped her hips.

"Evan," she moaned, her head dropping back.

The scent of her nearly overwhelmed me as I brought my mouth to the sensitive flesh where her neck met her shoulders. I scraped my teeth along her skin, feeling her fluttering pulse beat even faster.

Mine.

My dragon surged to the surface, the need to claim my mate stronger than ever. My canines pressed against the gums, fangs threatening to jut out as I licked my way back up her throat.

Mine.

I forced myself to break away, half-afraid I'd lose myself entirely and claim her then and there. As I lifted Mariah in my arms again, I carried her to the bed and let her sprawl there like a feast I was ready to devour.

"So fucking sexy," I growled. What did I do to deserve such a woman? I couldn't be sure, but I was determined to worship her body and show her just how much she meant to me.

“Evan, please,” Mariah whimpered as I stared down at her. She bit her lip and looked at my torso with pure lust in her eyes while I ripped my shirt off, stray buttons flying across the floor. I didn’t give a shit. I wanted nothing between us.

Her eyes widened, her pupils flared, and then I was reaching for her, grabbing the hem of her dress and pulling it up over her hips, her stomach, baring her tits. Another growl echoed through the room as I tossed the dress aside, leaving her in nothing but a lacy red thong. I hooked my finger in the fabric, then ripped that away as well.

A tiny gasp escaped her mouth, the sound sending my need into overdrive as I stared down at her naked body.

Without warning, my wings sprouted from the middle of my back, flaring out across the room, knocking over a lamp and butting up against the walls. The room wasn’t remotely big enough to contain their thirty-foot span.

Mariah stared at me, her mouth dropping open, but then she was reaching out gingerly, running a finger over the membrane of my wings. I shuddered, sensations I’d never felt before flaring up at her touch. My cock throbbed, and my dragon surged forth in my consciousness, demanding to claim our mate.

Mine.

Mariah averted her gaze afterward, then a mischievous glimmer shone in her eyes.

“Is this your dragon’s way of popping a boner?”

A loud guffaw filled the room as I processed her words, and then I was laughing so hard that I doubled over. This woman.

I shook my head and smirked. “I guess you could say that. You’re a very hard woman to resist, Mariah Bailey.”

“Then, don’t.”

A growl rumbled in my chest, and I wanted nothing more than to take her right then and there. But first I needed to do something about these wings.

It took supreme effort to get myself back under control. I had to close my eyes and focus just to retract my wings, and when I looked back at her, still sprawled before me on the bed, I nearly lost it once more.

She reached out and ran her hands down my chest, then went even lower. She made quick work of removing my pants, then I was crawling over her on the bed with nothing between us, exactly how I liked it best.

“I need you, Evan,” she breathed, her fingers gripping my cock as I hovered over her.

“You’re so fucking perfect.” I lowered my head, brushing a kiss over her lips, and while my dragon wanted to ravage and take, another part of me wanted to savor every second of this perfect night.

I stared into her eyes, settling between her legs, my cock resting right at her entrance. As our gazes locked, something passed between us: a connection, more intense than anything I’d ever felt before. It was as if I could sense her very soul calling out to mine. My love. My mate. The woman who’d come to mean everything to me.

She looked up at me then, and I wondered if she could feel it, too. It was the mate bond, weak and fragile, just beginning to blossom between us. I’d never experienced anything like it, and I marveled at the sensation. It made me want to claim her even more, to deepen that bond until our souls were entwined as one, connected in the most powerful way imaginable.

But I wouldn’t—not yet, anyway. Before she could question what was passing between us, I lowered my mouth to hers, kissing her softly. Sweetly. Cherishing this gorgeous woman and thanking fate for bringing her into my life.

I groaned when she brushed her fingers over my cock, teasing me, tempting me. I reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, trailing my fingers over her cheek, across her lips, down her neck. I cupped her breast, squeezing gently before flicking my thumb over her hard nipple.

“I love you, Mariah,” I said in a gasp, the words not nearly enough to express what I felt.

“Then, show me.” She writhed beneath me, her wet pussy brushing my cock, and it was all I could do not to slam into her to the hilt.

But I did want to show her what she meant to me. I wanted to make love to her, to let her know she was everything I’d always dreamed of.

“I never knew how much I needed this,” I said. “How much I needed you.”

She swallowed, love shining brightly in her eyes. I brought my mouth to hers again, this time kissing her deeply, long and lingering, and there it was again, that connection which defied explanation. I could feel her love reflecting back on me as we kissed, Mariah clinging to my body as if our lives depended on it.

I pulled back, watching her in awe, our eyes locked as I finally slipped inside her. Mariah’s warmth welcomed me home as she wrapped her legs around mine, her hands coming to my cheeks. Did she feel this, too? This unmistakable connection? This joining of not just our bodies, but of our hearts, our souls?

I sighed in utter satisfaction as I stared down at my mate, feeling her tighten and contract around my cock. We moved together, pleasure coursing through as I made love to her. I knew I’d go to the ends of the earth for her, and that I’d give anything and everything for my mate.

Chapter 6

Mariah

Evan, Mason, and I stood in the terminal just on the other side of airport security. Time to return home, though we were going our separate ways. It was bittersweet saying goodbye to Mason. His commercial flight back to New York was about to depart, and part of me wished Evan and I were returning with him.

“Take care of yourself, man.” Evan turned to Mason, embracing him tightly. “Don’t work too hard at the clubs. Hopefully I’ll be back soon enough.”

That was as specific as he could be about our timeline, and I felt reality start to settle on my shoulders once more. This weekend away was amazing, a reprieve from the craziness in our lives. It might have been for a mission to get information, but it soon turned into the most spectacular getaway, and a sorely needed one.

It were nice to pretend for a night that everything was normal—that Evan was just a man, and I was just a woman, with no shifter politics and greedy agendas at play. Just the two of us simply enjoying each other, and we really, really did.

“Take as long as you need. I’ve got things under control at home.” Mason clapped Evan on the back, then turned to me, his eyes softening. “Mariah, you were amazing. I’ll be sure to let Analise know how well you’re doing.”

I pulled him in for a hug. “Thank you. Look after her for me, will you?”

“I’ll do my best.”

We waved as he turned toward the terminal opposite of where we were headed, back to New York, back home, while we turned and made our way down the long, brightly-lit hallway leading to where Sebastian's private jet waited to take us back to Texas.

I felt a sense now of uncomfortable longing. We'd be back home in New York eventually, even if the future felt uncertain. We had our next steps ahead of us. Surely it wouldn't be long until we could get back to our normal lives. Despite missing the familiarity of home, though, I also couldn't wait to get back to Texas and the clan lands. Sofia was there, and all I wanted was to wrap her in my arms and kiss her squishy little cheeks.

I sank into the plush seat, then closed my eyes and reflected on the weekend: the warmth of the sun, the vibrant energy of Miami's nightlife, the incredible food, dancing with Evan's strong arms wrapped around me.

But what I cherished most was our time alone together in the hotel room last night. The way he'd made love to me... there'd been an intensity between us I hadn't experienced before, going beyond what we shared physically. The only way I knew how to explain it was that it seemed as if our souls had intertwined, binding us together in a way that felt both exhilarating and terrifying, like Evan and I were closer than ever before, our connection deepening into something I didn't even know how to explain.

Had he felt that, too? I hadn't understood what it meant, but it must have had something to do with being his mate.

"What are you daydreaming about over there?" Evan's dark eyes searched mine as he leaned back in his own spacious leather seat. Sometimes I was still overwhelmed by the privilege and luxury that extensive wealth brought, but I wasn't complaining, either.

I smiled, reaching over to squeeze his hand. "Just thinking about our incredible weekend. It really was amazing, Evan. Thank you."

“You don’t have to thank me, Mariah.” He lifted our joined hands, his lips brushing softly over my knuckles as he held eye contact. “We needed this time together, away from everything else. It’s important to remember what we’re fighting for. I want to do more things like this with you. For you.” His expression grew serious. “And soon enough we’ll be able to. We’ll be free to live our lives however we want.”

Without the threat of Tomas and what he might do next hovering over us. I thought too much about that as the plane took to the skies, wanting to savor our little escape while I still could. The flight was uneventful, however, and we were back on the Carey clan lands within a matter of hours.

The familiar sight of the three-story brick manor made me smile as Evan guided the borrowed car into the driveway. From the front seat, I could just make out Sofia’s chubby fingers and precious face pressed against the front window, leaning forward from where Abi was holding her. I knew the moment she caught sight of us because her eyes widened with excitement, her arms waving about wildly. The second Evan cut the engine, Sofia’s excited screech filled the air.

When he opened the car door, Evans lips curved into a smile. “She missed us.” He chuckled, his eyes warm when he watched his daughter through the window.

“Seems like it.”

We’d barely stepped out of the car when the front door swung open and Sebastian strolled out, Abi and Sofia following right behind him.

“Dadadada,” Sofia babbled, already reaching for us with one hand as we approached. In the other, she clutched a little stuffed dragon toy, no doubt another of Abi’s purchases.

I laughed as Evan scooped her up in his arms and held her high in the air, spinning her around. She looked down at him, her nearly toothless grin so genuine and sweet.

“I missed you, too, little dragon,” Evan said, lowering her, then pulling her into his chest where he wrapped her in a tight hug.

Behind them, Sebastian and Abi looked on with fond smiles. Sebastian took a step forward, ruffling Sofia's auburn strands before his gaze met mine. "Heard you did well down in Miami."

I shrugged. "Just did what needed to be done."

Sebastian let out a small chuckle, shaking his head. "Modest, but I think it was more than that, Mariah."

I cocked my head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Sebastian said, leaning against the porch rail, "you put yourself in a potentially dangerous situation, knowing full well what could happen. That shows a lot of courage. It shows just how much you care about Evan, about Sofia, about all of us."

I looked over at Sofia, her hazel eyes staring up at me from where Evan still held her tightly. She held out her little stuffed dragon, babbling something totally unintelligible, but she sounded so enthusiastic. The truth was, I loved Sofia as if she were my own daughter, and after that heartbreaking encounter with Rosalind, I vowed once more that she'd never know what it was like to grow up without a mother. I'd be everything she needed.

I glanced back at Sebastian. "I can admit now that it's over, I was a little scared going in, but my determination to keep this family together and safe made it an easy choice. I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

Sebastian nodded. "Well, on behalf of the family, thank you, Mariah. We're lucky to have you."

As we began making our way into the house, Sofia reached for me, and I gladly plucked her from Evan's arms, holding her close. I didn't feel particularly brave or heroic, but being reunited with Sofia, feeling her innocent joy, I knew I'd do whatever it took to protect her time and again. She wasn't just Evan's daughter anymore, and she hadn't been for a long while. She was a vital part of my life, and I would fight for her to the last breath.

Sofia played with my hair, her giggles like tiny chimes. This love I felt for her was so profound, so powerful.

I'd known from the beginning of my relationship with Evan that I wouldn't be able to have a child of my own. With dragon shifters and humans unable to produce offspring, it was a truth I'd had to face out of the gate if I wanted to be with Evan. I loved him deeply and was more than happy to have our little family of three, but a part of me still silently lamented a dream I'd never see come true.

Still, as I held Sofia in my arms, I felt that dull ache ease a bit. Here was a child that I could love, protect, and that I could raise. She might not have carried my blood, but she carried my heart.

And that was enough.

Evan glanced at me when we entered the house, his eyes warm as he watched me with Sofia, seeming to understand the depth of my feelings at being reunited with her, even though it had only been one weekend.

"I'm going to meet with Sebastian and give him the full rundown of your meeting with Rosalind," he said. "We need to figure out what to do next, and I'd rather get moving on it sooner than later."

I nodded, my hand moving rhythmically over Sofia's back. "That sounds good. Let me know what you discuss?"

"Of course." Evan leaned in to kiss my cheek, then followed Sebastian up the stairs.

I turned to Abi. "So, how did she do? I was half-afraid she'd reach a new milestone while I was away."

Abi chuckled. "Nothing major, I promise. Do you need anything? Are you hungry? I just made some sandwiches and tea. We could take them out to the back porch."

"That sounds wonderful." With Sofia on my hip, I followed Abi to the kitchen and helped her carry the tea and sandwiches outside. When I put Sofia down, she immediately set about crawling and moving all around the back porch.

Abi set a tray on the table, then poured us both tall glasses of iced tea before we sat together on the swing.

“Look at her go,” Abi said, chuckling and nodding at Sofia. She was now making her way across the porch, a determined expression on her face as she headed toward a planter full of orange and red lilies.

“She’s getting the hang of it,” I said, my heart swelling with pride. I was so happy I’d been present for each of Sofia’s milestones. Even the tiny smiles and mundane day-to-day moments brought me an unparalleled sense of joy.

“Sebastian told me about Miami,” Abi said, her gaze steady on mine. “Well, as much as Evan told him. I’m sure there’s more, but I want you to know how much it means to all of us that you were willing to do this.”

I shrugged, picking at the rim of my cup. “It felt like the right thing to do.” And it was. We had a real lead now.

Abi smiled, but it was tinged with something I couldn’t place. “It takes a lot to put oneself in danger, especially for the sake of others. It shows just how much you care about Evan. And about Sofia.”

“I do care about them,” I said softly. “I love them both. More than I ever thought I could. Honestly, they’ve become my world. It’s more than I could have hoped for.”

Abi’s smile widened, her blue eyes warm with affection. “You’re a good woman, Mariah. Evan and Sofia are both lucky to have you.”

As I watched Sofia on the porch, her chubby little hands slapping against the wooden planks as she moved around, I felt a sense of peace wash over me. Yes, I was in love with Evan, and I loved Sofia, too. Maybe I didn’t need biology to be a real mother. Maybe all I needed was love, and that I had in abundance.

“Tell me about Miami,” Abi said, wrapping her hands around her glass of iced tea.

I took a sip of my own tea, a small smile playing at the corners of my lips as I lowered my glass. “It was nice.

Unexpectedly nice.”

“Unexpected?” Abi prompted, her eyes raised. “How so?”

I let my gaze drift off toward the trees. “I’ve always wanted to travel, but circumstances were never really in my favor. It was nice to get that chance this weekend, to see a new place.”

Abi smiled. “I can imagine.”

“It was a welcome escape,” I confessed, finding the courage to voice my feelings. “At least, once the conversation with Rosalind was over. Experiencing something new, exploring a new city. Not worrying about...everything.”

I expected Abi to nod, maybe even offer a few words of consolation, but she did more than that. “That’s the spirit,” she said, a bright smile lighting up her face. “Life is short, Mariah. It’s important to take these moments to enjoy it as much as you can. As parents, we have so many obligations that we often forget that.”

I blinked at her. Parent? Was that what she considered me to be? That’s how *I* felt, but it made me feel all warm and fuzzy for Abi to see me that way. Like I really was a part of this family.

“But even parents need a break,” she said, her gaze softening. “It’s okay to admit that we need some time to ourselves. To rejuvenate. To be...just us.”

Her words resonated, as it was truly wonderful to experience time with Evan away from everything else. I glanced at Sofia, still happily exploring the porch. She’d made it to the planter and was looking up at me as she reached a hand for the dirt, a drooling grin on her face. I stood from the swing to scoop her up before she could get a fistful of dirt, as it’d go straight to her mouth.

“I’m really glad you were able to enjoy some of the weekend,” Abi said, her gaze on Sofia now. “And if you ever need someone to look after Sofia, you know I’m always here. It’s been nice having a little one around the house again. Brings back so many memories.”

I found myself chuckling at that. “I bet it does.”

It was an unfamiliar thing to be talking about parenting as if it was a regular part of my life. But as I sat there with Abi and Sofia, it didn't feel strange or unusual. It felt right. I looked at Sofia, her laughter filling the air, and I knew I wouldn't trade this for anything. This was my life now. Chaotic, unpredictable, and utterly beautiful.

“I'm sure I'll take you up on that offer, Abi,” I said, running my hand over Sofia's silken hair. “Especially once my classes begin.”

Abi's smile widened. “Have you decided on a school?”

I nodded. “I think I have it narrowed down between two programs. I'm hoping to get my applications in this week.”

“How exciting.” Abi's gaze turned thoughtful as the conversation lulled. She looked at me, her eyes seeming to evaluate me. “You and Evan,” she said, taking another sip of tea. Her tone was careful. “Have you discussed what your future together looks like?”

The question caught me off guard. Evan and I had spoken on multiple occasions about our future, but we'd never really had an in-depth conversation. Maybe Abi could shed some light on that.

“Evan has mentioned the idea of my being his...mate,” I said, feeling a bit shy bringing up such an intimate topic. “If I'm being honest, I'm not even sure what all that entails. I still have so many questions.”

Abi nodded. “I'm sure you do. You're learning about a whole new world. Please, if you feel comfortable, ask away.”

The shifter world was still something of a mystery to me, even though I'd been living with an alpha dragon for some time now. Evan had been my guide through it all so far, explaining the ways of their world with patience and understanding, but this was something he'd been reluctant to get into.

“What happens when shifters claim each other?” I said in a rush, my curiosity getting the better of me.

Abi seemingly appreciated my boldness. “There are several layers to the claiming. Physically, when shifters claim their mates, they give them a claiming mark—literally. The shifter initiating the claiming rite bites his partner’s neck. This is symbolic of their promise to protect and care for each other. You are marked as the other’s in an unbreakable bond.”

I sat there and processed this new information. That sounded...intense. I absently rubbed my neck, wondering if it would hurt.

“Then there’s the metaphysical element to the bond,” Abi said. “Something that goes far deeper. When two dragons, or whatever the shifter species may be, claim each other, they forge a mate bond. It’s a spiritual connection that brings them closer to one another. The bond allows them to feel each other at all times. You have a heightened awareness of the other’s presence, their emotions and state of well-being.”

I imagined what it’d be like to have such a connection with Evan. Was that what I’d experienced last night? A hint of what was to come when he claimed me? If so, that was a lot to take in.

“Is a mate bond something stronger than a human marriage?” I said, thinking of the only frame of reference I had from my own world. That’s how Evan tried to explain it, if only briefly, as similar to marriage, but something that went beyond societal convention.

“In a way, yes. But the bond between shifters is stronger because it’s not just about love or commitment. It’s about two souls becoming one. Joined in a way I can’t explain. Once you claim your mate...that’s it. Forever. We don’t need to hold a ceremony, the intimate exchange is enough. But when shifters sense a new bond, there’s usually a celebration to honor the new mates. We had a mating ceremony for Lucas and Cynthia—something on par with a human wedding.”

A mating ceremony. It sounded nice. A way for the clan to acknowledge and accept the new bond.

“But what about...?” I gestured at myself. “I mean, I’m human. Evan talks about me being his mate, but do you know

of any humans and shifters mating? It can't be the same, right?"

Abi shook her head. "No, it's not the same. There are instances of humans and shifters mating, but the bond is never as intense. That doesn't mean it's any less meaningful," she rushed to add. "The bond goes deeper than love. And for a shifter to choose a human as a mate, that speaks volumes about their feelings."

Could Evan and I have a bond like that, even if it wouldn't be as intense? Would our feelings for each other be enough?

There was so much I still needed to learn about this world. But one thing was for sure: I was willing to take the leap for Evan, and for myself as well. If there was one thing I'd learned in my time with the Careys, it was that their world was full of love and warmth and family—something I'd been seeking all my life.

"You've given me a lot to think about, Abi," I said.

Abi chuckled, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. "Take your time figuring this stuff out, Mariah. There's no rush. Remember, the most important thing is what you and Evan want. Focus on that, and everything else will fall into place."

I felt her strength and compassion. I'd never had a true mother figure, but she fit the bill, and I was thrilled to become part of this family. "Thank you, Abi. I appreciate you telling me this."

She shrugged a little. "You're family now, Mariah. It's important you know these things. I'm here for you in any way you need. Evan may not be my biological son, but I've always loved him as if he were. His mother was my best friend, like a sister. I want you to know, Mariah...she'd be so happy to see the woman he's chosen to share his life with."

Her words stirred something deep inside me, and I blinked back tears, touched by her sincerity. "You have no idea how much that means to me."

There was a moment of silence, then Abi's gaze grew serious. "I hope I'm not overstepping my bounds here. Please

tell me if it's none of my business, but I have to ask..." She hesitated briefly, then plunged ahead. "Are you okay with the fact that you and Evan won't be able to have children of your own? Biologically, I mean."

I never really allowed myself to dwell on this for very long when it came up, knowing I'd always choose Evan if it came down to it. I loved Sofia and cherished her like she was my own. But the truth was, the thought of never being able to carry a child of my own did weigh on my heart, even as I worked hard to accept it.

"I'm still coming to terms with that," I said, blinking against the sting of tears in my eyes. "I love Sofia with my whole heart. I do. But..."

Abi nodded, understanding. "It's not the same as having one of your own. I get it, Mariah. You don't have to feel any guilt. I hope you know that."

There was no judgment in her eyes, only sympathy and understanding. It was a relief to talk about it, to admit my fears and doubts. This was one of the many reasons I was growing so fond of Abi. She was more than just a guide through the shifter world, more than a figure of strength for the family. She was a friend. An older female I could count on—something I'd never known before.

"You don't have to figure it all out right now," she said gently. "Give it time, Mariah. And remember, no matter what, you have us. You have me. We're family."

Her words brought me comfort. I didn't have all the answers yet, but she was right—I had time, and more importantly, I had a family who cared. I found my gaze wandering back to Sofia, who was now quietly playing with that stuffed dragon. My heart swelled with affection for the little girl who'd wormed her way so deeply into my affections. She wasn't mine biologically, but the bond I felt for her was as deep and powerful as if she were.

The sentiment Abi expressed for Evan was precisely how I felt about Sofia. And yet...

A tiny frown creased my forehead. Was I truly okay with never experiencing pregnancy? The morning sickness, the baby kicks, the labor pains, the first cry... all those moments I'd never get to experience firsthand. They were simple, everyday miracles that most women took for granted, but for me, they were ones I may never know.

Then there was Evan. How would he feel if I wanted to have a child, anyway? One that wasn't biologically his? We hadn't even begun to discuss such things, but now that the seed was planted, I couldn't shake it off. Would he be okay with a donor? Would he love a child not of his blood as much as he loved Sofia? It was a conversation we'd have to have at some point.

A knot of anxiety balled up in my stomach. These issues were complex, and the implications so far-reaching, I didn't want to think about them, or not yet, anyway. We had so many other things to take care of.

I needed to focus on the immediate future. I had school to keep me busy, and Evan and Sebastian would be occupied with working on taking Tomas down. Those were the important issues.

But despite my best efforts, the questions lingered long after I left Abi and took Sofia upstairs for her nap. I loved Evan with all my heart, but we had some big conversations ahead of us. I just had to trust our love was strong enough to see us through it all.

Chapter 7

Evan

Sitting across from Sebastian in his office felt so familiar, watching him in action, learning what it meant to be an alpha. The room was filled with the warm aroma of hazelnut coffee, bringing back memories from my teen years. The steady ticking of the grandfather clock punctuated the silence, an ever-present backdrop to our discussions.

Despite the seventeen years that passed since I left these lands, it felt just as comfortable to be here now as it was back then. It felt...right. For someone who'd spent much of his adulthood feeling alone, the sense of belonging here was unexpected, and meant more than I could say.

Sebastian bent over his mahogany desk, engrossed in the notes he'd taken once I'd given him a thorough rundown of our trip to Miami. I'd only told him Mariah had confronted Rosalind. When he'd heard the full extent of what she managed to learn, he was even more impressed.

"There's still one thing I don't understand." Sebastian glanced up. "Jax."

My jaw clenched at the sound of his name. "What about him?"

Sebastian shook his head. "He's Rosalind's brother. He must know about this Porter character. Why didn't he say anything before sending you to Florida?"

I leaned forward, bracing my arms on the desk as I met his stare. His question echoed the very suspicions I'd been wrestling with since we boarded the jet for home. If Jax knew

what it would take to get Rosalind to drop the custody case, why didn't he just lay it all out for us from the start?

Not for the first time, I questioned if this was an elaborate setup, but why? What did Jax stand to gain from helping us, other than sticking it to his dad? Maybe that was enough for him, but I just didn't like the guy.

"I've been thinking the same thing," I said. "What's his play here? I don't know if I trust his motivations."

Sebastian's eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing." I waved my hand, brushing him off. I didn't want to get into how I felt irrationally jealous when it came to Jax and his familiarity with my mate, how the need to claim Mariah was growing stronger every day. "I just want to make sure we aren't walking into a trap. Hawthorne loves his games."

He cocked his head, but before he could say anything else, a chime came from Sebastian's computer. He turned to face the screen. "It's Porter Holly's profile."

Sebastian had used his own resources to check out the man Rosalind claimed was her boyfriend, and they'd come back fast. Sebastian angled his monitor so I could see better, and together we read through the file.

Rosalind's story checked out. Porter was a dragon shifter, working at one of Tomas's string of casinos in Atlantic City—the largest one, it seemed—which meant it was a veritable gold mine. The file didn't list what Porter did for the casino, but I had no doubt whatever it was, Tomas filled his pockets.

"Look at this." Sebastian leaned closer to the screen, clicking rapidly through a labyrinth of folders and documents. He clicked on a folder marked *Personnel*, then let out a low chuckle when several documents labeled *Porter Holly Resignation Letter* appeared. "This guy's resigned from the casino, and not just once, but on numerous occasions. Yet every time, his resignation is shot down."

I quickly scanned the documents. "Why do you think he's leaving?"

“No way to know for sure, but I can guess why he’s getting denied.” Sebastian rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “He knows too much. There’s no doubt Hawthorne is involved in illegal dealings. If Porter is high enough to get close to Tomas’s inner circles, which he has to be if he’s dating his daughter, then I’d bet Porter is right in the thick of it, meaning Tomas has him in a vise.”

If Porter was embroiled in Tomas’s illegal operations, the situation would be far more convoluted than we’d originally thought. Where did this leave us in the deal we were offering Rosalind? Moreover, where did Jax fit in? Was he truly on our side, or a calculating puppet master, pulling strings from behind the scenes?

Sebastian and I sat in silence, the weight of our discovery hanging in the air like a loaded gun. Porter was trapped, tangled in Tomas’s dark web, and we’d been tasked with setting him free. It was the most surefire way to secure custody of Sofia. I’d fight until my very last breath for her, but if Rosalind dropped the case, all the better. We thus needed to get Porter out of Tomas’s grip.

But how?

My phone rang, and I felt a grim sense of satisfaction when I glanced down. “It’s Jax.”

Just the man I wanted to have a word with. I met Sebastian’s eyes as I answered the call. “Jax. Perfect timing. As usual.”

“What can I say? I come through when I’m needed.” He sounded as arrogant as ever. “Rosalind just returned home. How did Miami treat you?”

He wanted to know what happened. I ran a hand through my hair, my gaze still on Sebastian. “Miami was... enlightening. We discovered some interesting stuff about Rosalind. Turns out she has a boyfriend. Porter Holly. Name ring a bell?”

A pause on the other end. “If you’re asking if I knew about Porter, the answer is yes, Evan. I did. But that wasn’t the only

purpose of your little adventure,” Jax continued smoothly. “You got the information, but you also let Rosalind know she isn’t alone in this. On a much more important level, this was about gaining Rosalind’s trust.”

“You don’t think you could have told us that beforehand?”

“Perhaps, but I guarantee Mariah’s reaction to everything my sister said was genuine. It was imperative for Rosalind to trust you. Now you know how to give her what she wants.” I could practically hear the arrogant smile on his face.

“It’s not so simple, Jax.” I gripped the phone tighter. “We know what Rosalind wants, but making that happen is something else entirely. From what I’ve learned, Porter is in deep with Tomas.”

“I’m well aware,” he said. “Look, I have to go, but I’m sending you an email. Print out the contents and delete it immediately. We’ll talk later.” Then the line went dead.

Sebastian and I sat there, the quiet hum of the air conditioning the only sound in the room. We needed to bring Tomas down, and as much as I didn’t like him, Jax was the key to doing just that.

The chime of another incoming email made me tense. Sebastian pulled the new message up on his screen, rapidly scanned the contents, and I watched as his grim expression turned into carefully contained rage.

“Son of a bitch,” he hissed, spinning his screen toward me.

It took me a minute to realize the words and numbers were the financial records from Tomas’s casino. My stomach lurched as I took in the staggering numbers, the magnitude of Tomas’s illicit activities hitting me like a brick wall. Money laundering on a scale that rivaled small economies was written out in black and white, a damning testament that shouldn’t surprise me in the least.

But it was hard to wrap my head around a scheme this large. Hell, this was an actual criminal organization that must have involved thousands of people and shifters.

“This is insane,” I muttered, my gaze locked on the screen, but the numbers didn’t lie.

I’d always known Tomas was a greedy bastard, never content with what he had and always going after more, whether money or power, but if he was running an operation of this magnitude...something wasn’t adding up.

“Sebastian,” I said slowly, watching him as the gears turned in my head. “Tomas’s fixation on you. It isn’t just about the money, is it?”

Sebastian let out a heavy sigh, but he didn’t waver when he met my gaze, his eyes harboring the shadows of wars fought long ago. “No, Evan. It’s not.”

His affirmation sent a shiver down my spine. A cold knot of dread formed in my stomach. What else was Tomas after if not money and power? The bastard murdered my parents. If there was more to it, I deserved to know. It was time to peel back the layers, to ask the question that’d been lurking in the back of my mind since this whole mess started.

“Sebastian,” I said, forcing myself to remain steady. “What exactly is the deal with you and Tomas? Did something happen in the past? Something that goes beyond what you’ve already told me?”

Sebastian leaned back in his chair, his gaze drifting past me as if he was seeing through the walls of the office and into a past I’d only glimpsed. He was silent for a moment, his face a study in stoicism.

He ran a hand through his hair, and when he looked at me again, his eyes were sad. “There isn’t some dark, sordid conflict,” he said. “At least not like you think. But Tomas and I do have a history. I supposed you could say it was a one-sided rivalry.”

I frowned, leaning forward again. “How so?”

“Back when my father was still alpha, when I was very young, Tomas was part of our clan.”

“What?” I shook my head. How was I just now hearing of this? “You’re serious?”

Sebastian nodded grimly. “But Tomas came by his greed naturally. His father decided he wanted to start his own clan. His own empire. But before that, Tomas and I grew up in the same group of kids. I was always better at everything: school, sports, leadership. My dragon was bigger and stronger.”

There was no pride or bragging in his voice. That wasn't how Sebastian operated. He was just stating the facts.

“His own father would comment that he wished Tomas was more like me, all the time—a terrible thing for any parent to say to their child—and it spawned a petty rivalry, one Tomas never got over.” Sebastian ground his teeth and shook his head. “Right down to your mother.”

I was shocked. “My mother? What does she have to do with this?”

“Just like every other boy in the clan, Tomas took a liking to Carlita.” His eyes softened slightly when he said my mother's name. “The Hawthornes were gone for years when I fell in love with her. When we fell in love with each other. But Tomas found out, and it was one more thing to hate about me.”

A ball of dread formed in the pit of my stomach. How deep did this go? “He killed her because of it?”

Sebastian looked away, staring out the window. “I can't be sure of that. I won't accuse him of something I can't prove. I do know he killed them all to get to you—for the power you possess.”

Power they still wanted in the form of my little girl. Rage, raw and white-hot, burned through me. This man killed the clan I'd spent the first half of my childhood with, the only family I'd known. My mother's clan. He murdered my mother. He'd kidnapped my mate and was after my daughter.

It took all the self-control I possessed to keep my dragon at bay, but as Sebastian's eyes flew to my fingers, to my talons digging into the arms of the chair, I knew it wasn't enough.

He pressed his lips together and made eye contact with me. I didn't know what I expected him to say, if I thought he'd be

shocked at my display, at my lack of control. But he didn't say anything, just watched, waited until I pulled it together.

Breathing deeply, I closed my eyes and recentered. This new element Sebastian just dropped on me was something I'd have to process, but for now it made my priorities clear. Keep Sofia out of his hands in the short-term, then take him down for good. It was time to put an end to Tomas's reign.

I sat back in my chair, cracking my neck as my talons retracted. When I opened my eyes, Sebastian was still watching.

“You good?”

I nodded once and pointed to the computer screen. “This is enough evidence to lock Tomas up for a lifetime.”

“It could,” Sebastian said with a grimace. He went back to clicking through the files. “In an ideal world. But money like this... it talks, Evan. Money can convince a lot of people to look the other way.”

I clenched my fists. “So, all these illegal dealings, they'll continue getting swept under the rug? What's the point of even having this evidence if we can't use it?”

“Who said we can't?” Sebastian turned to face me head-on, then a slow smile spread across his face. He pointed to a list of highlighted names on the screen. “These are our targets.”

I blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

“Tomas has money,” he said, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms. “But so do I. What's more important is I have influence. I have a reputation, both in the shifter world and the business world. He's been paying these people off to keep his dirty secrets. But what happens if someone offers them a better deal?”

I looked at the screen as understanding slowly dawned. If we could get to these people and find a way to turn them against Tomas, get them to consider what we had to say...

“He won’t have his shields anymore,” I said, a slow smile spreading across my face. “He’ll be exposed.”

Sebastian nodded. “Exactly. Once he’s exposed, he’ll no longer have a hold over Porter. Or Rosalind. She can drop the suit and disappear. It looks like Jax came through for us after all.”

The implications of Sebastian’s plan were still sinking in. It was audacious, reckless even, and there’d be no going back from this move. It would be considered an attack. But hadn’t Tomas already initiated an attack when he kidnapped my mate, threatening her life?

My blood boiled.

Tomas was a man of shadows, operating in secrecy, and if we turned the lights on and exposed his actions to the world, he wouldn’t be able to hide anymore. That was our chance to take him down for good.

“It’s a long shot, but it could work.”

“We don’t have a choice, Evan. We have to make it work.” His impassioned tone had me sitting up straight. “Son, I know I’ve made mistakes in the past. I’m humbled that you’ve given me a second chance. When I tell you that I will do whatever it takes to keep this family safe, I mean it. The entire Carey clan stands behind you. Tomas Hawthorne will not have Sofia.”

I held his gaze and saw how committed he was to me. To our family. My chest felt tight.

“Okay, then.” I stood and held my hand out. “We’re in this together.”

Sebastian rose, clasping my hand in his. Resolve echoed between us. We had a shared purpose. The next step had revealed itself. We would seek out anyone on this list and pick off Tomas’s cronies one by one.

“Let’s think carefully and meet back together.” Sebastian said. “Why don’t you go find that mate of yours and calm down a bit, hmm?”

I blinked. I'd thought he'd let the partial shifting slide but apparently not. His advice was solid, though. Being near Mariah settled me like nothing else.

"I think I will. Thanks."

I made my way downstairs, eager to let Mariah know we had the beginning of a plan—something solid when we'd been floundering in a sea of uncertainty. Before I even hit the second-floor landing, the sounds of music and laughter floated up, leading me down to the kitchen. When I turned the corner, the sight that greeted me made my heart soar.

Mariah was dancing with Sofia, spinning her around and around as she sang along to the song coming from a speaker on the counter. Sofia's laughter rang out in bright peals, and their shared joy lit up the entire space. Mariah continued to twirl Sofia around the room as if in their own little bubble of happiness, safe from any outside threats.

This was what I was fighting for. The two girls who meant everything to me. They were my entire world. It was these unexpected domestic moments that gave my life meaning. No matter what, Sofia would never feel the threat of Tomas Hawthorne hanging over her. I'd give her the life she deserved and show her how much she was loved.

Mariah must've sensed my presence because she turned, her eyes meeting mine. The smile that spread across her face was so radiant I couldn't speak. It wasn't just her stunning beauty, but the warmth, love, and kindness that was so much a part of my mate. I walked up and reached out, pulling her into my arms, Sofia giggling as she was sandwiched between us.

"Care to join us for a dance?" Mariah's eyes sparkled when she grinned at me.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," I said, pressing a kiss to her forehead. We danced together, Sofia between us, giggling and wriggling as she clapped her hands. I looked down at Mariah, my emotions so intense I didn't know what to do with them.

I wanted to tell her what we'd discovered, but I also didn't want to ruin this perfect moment with talk of Tomas. So, I held back. I'd wait for the right moment and not miss the perfect one right in front of me.

I pressed my lips to hers in a soft, lingering kiss. Pulling back slightly, I gazed into her eyes. "I love you so much, Mariah. More than you even know. All of this will be over soon. And when it is, there are things I want to talk to you about. About the future. About us."

A soft smile played on her lips as she nodded, her gaze never leaving mine. "I'd like that, Evan."

I would claim her, making her mine in every way just as soon as this was all behind us. Until then, I was going to enjoy the evening with my mate. As I pulled her closer, my arms tight around my two girls, I felt a renewed sense of purpose. We had a fight ahead of us, but for now, this was what mattered. This moment, this joy, this love. This was worth everything.

Chapter 8

Mariah

The moment I hit the submit button on my college application, a wave of energy rushed through me. Nervous? Yes. Excited? Undeniably. It was a new chapter in my life, one that promised independence and an identity beyond being Evan's mate or Sofia's nanny... or mother.

I loved Evan with every fiber of my being. He was my future. A rock I could depend on. But just because I could depend on him didn't mean I wanted to be dependent on him, either. I wanted to stand on my own, to have something to lean on if...

No. I shook my head. I wouldn't entertain the thought of something happening to him. It was too much to handle. It was the one possibility I hadn't let myself consider since Evan decided to bring Tomas down. But practicality dictated I be prepared for anything. Evan was an alpha dragon. The rightful heir to this clan, despite his reservations about it. He was deeply embroiled in this dangerous situation with the Hawthornes. Even if he never became alpha of a clan, his life would always carry an element of danger because of who he was.

Thoughts whirled in my mind, worry nagging at me now that I'd opened this can of worms, so I closed my computer and headed downstairs, seeking out Abi, once again, while Sofia napped, and Evan was still working upstairs. As someone who lived through this daily as the current alpha's mate, perhaps Abi could offer some clarity, or even reassurance.

“Abi, can I ask you something?” I said hesitantly when I found her reading a book on the back porch swing.

“Of course, hon.” She sat up and patted the swing cushion next to her. “You can ask me anything, anytime.”

She offered me a smile, and I was grateful for her presence all over again. Abi welcomed my questions, was there for me when I needed it, doing it all with her characteristic calm. She was a role model of what a mother should be—the type of mother *I* wanted to be.

I took the seat next to her, biting my lip as I tried to figure out how to talk about it.

“What’s on your mind?” she said when I struggled to find the right words. Maybe the best way to say it was to put it all out there.

“When shifters mate, is there a legally binding contract like there is in a human marriage?” The words hung in the air. All these questions about mates and marriage lately.

“No, there isn’t,” she said, shaking her head. If she was surprised by my question, she didn’t let on. “While shifters can choose to have a legally binding contract, you’ll find that most don’t have that desire. The claiming and subsequent mate bond is so much more than marriage. It goes beyond, connecting mates in a way that’s unbreakable.”

“But what about legalities?” I said. “I mean, I’ve heard talk of heirs and the like. But from what Evan has said, the line of succession isn’t always so simple. Is there really no legal claim?”

“Shifter politics are very different, Mariah, as I’m sure you’re learning every day. Mates can choose to file documents with a lawyer. Things like power of attorney, next of kin, and so forth. It’s an option, but most shifters choose not to take it simply because it doesn’t really come into play in our world.”

It was yet another curveball this world had thrown at me.

“If I may ask,” Abi ventured tentatively, “what is it you’re really worried about here? Our politics and way of life? Or are you worried about something happening to Evan?”

“Both?” I shrugged. “I don’t know. There’s just so much to learn. So many things I don’t understand. I’m trying. I want to know about this world and what it really means to be Evan’s mate, but it’s just so hard to reconcile the differences with the life I’ve always known.”

Abi reached over, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze. “The fact that you care enough to want to learn is all that matters, hon. It’s a lot. It will take time to fully understand.”

I realized she was right. I was learning. I was putting in the effort. I wanted to be part of Evan’s world, and I was trying my best.

“Thank you,” I said at last. “That means a lot.”

“Anytime.” Abi leaned in and hugged me.

This was all I’d ever really wanted. To belong. To be cared for unconditionally. To be a part of something bigger than myself. These people were becoming the family I’d always dreamed of.

I’d continue on my own path, too. School would be a welcome diversion, an escape back to reality, and back to a world that made sense. I knew it was going to be tricky navigating this new world and balancing my own aspirations, but I was committed to it, and excited to embark on a journey that was uniquely mine.

“I’ll let you get back to your book,” I told Abi, then went back in to check on Sofia.

Once she woke from her nap, I spent the rest of the day with Sofia, playing and enjoying being together again. But as the day wore on, I worried over some of the things Abi had said. Our worlds were so different. So far, we’d managed to navigate every difficulty, but things were becoming more serious. Evan was talking about claiming me while I was still figuring out exactly how I fit into his world.

I found myself in a corner of the kitchen, aimlessly shaking Sofia’s baby bottle when Evan strolled in, evidently finished with work.

“Hey, baby,” he said, slipping an arm around my waist and pressing a kiss to my forehead. “You okay? You seem distracted.”

I looked at him. “What do you mean?”

He nodded toward the bottle. “Looks like you’ve been shaking that for a while,” he said, smiling a little. I glanced down, only now noticing the small cyclone I’d created, the milk frothing and bubbling. As I let out a sigh, I set the bottle down on the counter, glancing over to where Sofia played contentedly in the family room.

He moved closer, his presence heating up our shared space. “What’s on your mind, Mariah?”

A million thoughts swirled in my head, but how would I put them into words?

Evan said he wanted me in his life, as his mate, but what did that *really* mean for us? As much as I was learning, it all felt so foreign.

I forced a smile. “It’s nothing, Evan.” I didn’t want to burden him with my confusion, at least not right now when there was so much already going on. He’d made it clear that we’d discuss it all once Tomas were taken care of.

“Nothing?” He looked thoroughly unconvinced.

“Okay, maybe not *nothing*. It’s just...the college applications. I submitted them this morning, and I guess I’m just anxious about the responses,” I said, choosing to share a smaller part of the storm within me. As excited as I was about starting this new chapter of my life, of having something that was entirely my own, it was causing a blend of excitement and trepidation I hadn’t expected. That just felt more manageable than the maze of questions surrounding our future.

“Are you sure that’s it?” he said gently. Those dark dragon eyes studied me.

I nodded. Something flickered in his face, but he didn’t press further. One of the many things I loved about Evan was his ability to sense when to push and when to step back.

Evan took the bottle, then lifted me so I was sitting on the counter, eye to eye with him as he braced an arm on either side.

“I know there’s more, but I won’t rush it. You can tell me when you’re ready.” He glanced out the window to the sky streaking with orange as the sun set, then he was quiet for a moment. “The full moon is tonight.”

I tilted my head. Where was he going with this?

“The clan will be gathering.” He looked tentative, searching, even. “I want you to join us.”

A clan gathering? There’d only been one other gathering since I’d arrived, and I’d stayed inside the whole time. I’d met a few shifters outside the family in my weeks here. It was impossible not to when living in the alpha’s home. They’d all been friendly. Curious, too.

But they’d all been in human form.

Unless I’d been mistaken, the clan usually shifted and flew together when they gathered as a group. I’d seen Evan in dragon form, and it was magnificent, but to see an entire clan of them, enormous, mythical creatures that could fly and breathe fire...

I felt light-headed. It was hard to imagine. Logically, I knew everyone that surrounded me was a dragon shifter, but seeing it was something else entirely.

“Our power is at its strongest on the full moon,” Evan explained, watching me closely. I wondered what he saw on my face as I tried to process what he was asking of me. “Flying under the full moon has regenerative powers for all shifter species. It restores our power and energy more than any other lunar sighting. I want to share this with you. I want you to be part of this and understand this part of who I am.”

“Evan, I...” I shook my head, my teeth sinking into my lower lip. Part of me was intrigued, wanting to know more of him, yet while I was curious, there was a very real concern holding me back. I let out a sigh. “I’m not like you, Evan. I’m

human. I can't shift or fly. I'd be..." I hesitated, searching for the right words. "I'd be more of an outsider than ever."

His hand felt so gentle on my cheek, even as his stare sharpened. "Don't ever say that again. You're not an outsider. You're my mate, which means you belong with me, wherever that might be. You belong here."

I wanted to believe that, but there was no way for him to know exactly how I felt. "That might be true—"

"It *is* true."

"My point is, I'll be out there alone, the only human standing around on the ground while all of you do your... dragon business."

"Dragon business?" He chuckled, a low sound that sent warmth radiating through me. "Mariah, you won't be alone. I'll be with you."

The certainty there was comforting, but the prospect of being around so many dragons still had me on edge.

"That's not all," he said, a playful twinkle in his eyes. "My dragon *really* wants to see you."

"Oh, he does?" I smiled. The idea of Evan's dragon wanting to see me, as strange as it sounded, was sweet. I'd only seen Evan in dragon form a handful of times, and only once had I been up close.

It was Evan, but also something else. Something other. This dragon, this essential part of Evan, but also something distinctly separate, wanted to invite me into a part of their world I hadn't experienced yet.

"He does," Evan said. "It's time you got to know each other a bit better."

"I don't even know how to act around a clan of dragons," I said, biting my lip, hardly able to believe I was considering this. Still, the last thing I wanted was to insult a dragon. "I hardly know anything of your customs or behaviors. I wouldn't know the first thing about..."

Evan gently pressed a finger to my lips.

“Just be yourself,” he advised. He then brushed his lips lightly over mine. “I’ll be right there with you, and everyone will love you as much as I do.”

I nodded, though my stomach was doing backflips. This was an opportunity to get to know a side of Evan I hadn’t really interacted with yet, and his dragon was part of him, another piece of this intricate puzzle I desperately wanted to understand. This was what I wanted, so I shouldn’t let my own insecurities hold me back.

“Okay,” I said, blowing out a breath. “I’ll go.”

The pure delight on Evan’s face was worth it all. “I promise, it’ll be an experience you won’t forget.”

* * *

I was going to a gathering of dragons. That wasn’t something many humans could claim, was it? Maybe tonight wouldn’t be as terrifying as I’d initially thought. After all, I was going with Evan, and his dragon was looking forward to seeing me. That had to count for something.

There was no way Evan would put me in any danger, either. It wasn’t so much that I was afraid of getting hurt, I supposed. Maybe it was fear of the unknown. I had no idea what to expect.

As twilight set in and we waited for the full moon to rise, I went to get ready, not sure what I was supposed to wear to something like this. We were out in the wilderness, so I had to take that into account. Ultimately, I settled on a pair of dark jeans, a white tank, and a leather jacket in case it was cold. Abi also let me borrow a pair of rugged but stylish boots.

As I braided my hair back, Evan came into the bathroom and smiled, taking in my outfit. “I like it.”

Just his presence helped with my anxiety, and now I felt pure anticipation.

Tonight, I was stepping into a world most people only dreamed about—a world of dragons and shifters and magic.

Tonight, I got to be part of their world.

I smiled back at him. “Is it time?”

“It is. Abi has Sofia. She said she’d put her to bed.” He held his hand out, and I laced my fingers with his. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

He led me out of the house and toward the trees, following a path I’d never been on before.

The moon slowly rose, casting a silvery glow over the Carey clan lands as Evan seemed to make his way on instinct. I didn’t know how long we’d been walking when I felt it: a buzzing sensation, as if the air itself were electrified. It reminded me of walking near a power line, but we were out in the middle of nowhere.

I swallowed, gripping Evan’s hand. “Do you feel that?”

He glanced at me, smirking. “The byproduct of the regenerative power of the moon.”

“It feels like magic.” That was the only way I could explain it.

Evan shrugged. “I guess you could look at it that way.”

We rounded a corner, stepping into a vast clearing. Sebastian was already there, standing several yards to the right, where he was speaking with some men I recognized as his senior advisors. As soon as he caught sight of us, he excused himself and made his way over.

“Mariah.” He took my hands and brought them to his mouth, kissing my knuckles. “I’m so glad you decided to join us. What do you think?” He gestured to the clearing.

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected, but everyone here was still in human form. “No one’s shifted.”

Sebastian chuckled, and Evan slid an arm around my waist. “There’s a bit of ceremony to it first.”

I frowned, but I didn’t get a chance to ask more as Sebastian’s attention moved to a couple who were walking

toward a massive bonfire. He lifted a hand, calling out, “Lyla, Jace!”

Sebastian led us toward them. He had such a commanding presence not just because he was the alpha, but because he was so genuine and approachable.

“Mariah, meet Lyla and Jace,” Sebastian said when we stopped before the couple. They looked to be somewhere between my age and Evan’s. We’d spent a little time with Lucas and Cynthia, but I hadn’t met any other couples since I’d come here.

Lyla, a petite woman with fiery red hair, was the first to greet us. “Mariah! I’ve heard all about you.”

She had? I glanced up at Evan, my eyes wide as I felt my cheeks turning red.

Jace, a tall man with sky blue eyes, laughed. “All good things, don’t worry.”

I immediately felt at ease when they gave warm smiles, asking about what I thought of the clan lands. We chatted for a bit, but then Sebastian was guiding us away, introducing me to more members of the clan.

There was no way I’d be able to keep track of all their names, but I was overwhelmed by their kindness. Despite my insecurities about being the only human here, everyone made me feel included, as if I were one of them. It was a comforting feeling, and one that made the butterflies in my stomach subside.

Evan kept his hand around my waist the entire time Sebastian walked us around. Eventually, Sebastian excused himself. “I need to get things started.”

He left us standing there together, and I turned into Evan, resting my hands on his chest as I looked up at him. His eyes sparkled like black diamonds under the moonlight, and my heart fluttered at the sight.

“How are you feeling?” he said.

“Really good,” I said, happy things had gone so well. “Everyone’s been so nice and welcoming.”

Evan nodded, looping his arm around my waist and pulling me closer. “They’re glad you’re here, Mariah,” he said quietly but firmly. “They know who you are. Most of them suspect what you are to me.”

“You mean your mate?”

He nodded, his eyes flickering gold for a brief second. “Yes. You’re a part of this clan now, and they’re happy to welcome you.”

I looked around at the faces of the clan members and felt a warmth spreading through my chest. I hadn’t known just how much I was craving that until this very moment—to be a part of this, a part of them. There was a sense of camaraderie here, a feeling of extended family I’d never known before right then and there.

It wasn’t long before the chatter subsided, and all eyes turned to Sebastian who moved to the middle of the clearing, ready to address the gathering. His imposing figure was so similar to Evan’s it was like looking into the future. He stood, illuminated by the writhing flames of the bonfire.

“Welcome, everyone,” he said as his words resonated across the clearing. They carried weight, a blend of power and respect that commanded the attention of every person present. “I’m honored to all gather here once more under the full moon, together as a clan, as a family.”

His eyes swept across the crowd, and when they met mine, he gave me a subtle nod, a silent welcome that warmed me from the inside.

“We all play a role in our clan’s strength and prosperity,” he said. “From the youngest to the eldest, each one of you contributes in your unique way. I’m deeply grateful for your efforts, and proud to call you my family.”

As I watched the crowd, every face seemed etched with deep admiration for Sebastian. The regard was palpable, and even as a newcomer, I felt it as well. Sebastian was a good

man, a man of honor...much like the man who stood beside me. I looked up at Evan, tightening my arms around his waist. He smiled down at me, love shining in his eyes.

Sebastian went on to speak of unity, an invisible bond that held the clan together, and I could see why he was such a strong, powerful leader. Tomas Hawthorne should have been shaking in his boots going up against an alpha like Sebastian.

Having ended his speech on a resounding note, Sebastian lifted his hands to the sky.

“That’s the sign,” Evan murmured in my ear. “It means the shifters can begin the ritual of shifting under the full moon.”

A sight I was both excited and nervous to witness. Evan’s hand found mine and gave it a reassuring squeeze. I turned to look at him, at the dancing flames reflecting in his eyes, filling them with an intensity that took my breath away.

“Ready?” he said, a hint of anticipation in his voice.

“Ready,” I said, squeezing his hand in return. I had no idea what to expect, but I wasn’t going to turn back now.

One by one, the shifters transformed. It was magnificent, an awe-inspiring sight as their bodies contorted, skin rippling and changing in a flash of light that was magnified under the silvery wash of the moon. Their human forms melted away, replaced by shimmering scales and wings that unfurled, stretching out to embrace the night in a rainbow of colors.

The change wasn’t all at once but in waves, as some shifted faster than others, giving each other space to transform and take to the skies.

“Come with me.” Evan led me toward the edge of the crowd, to a secluded area near the trees where the shadows were thick. He turned to face me.

“I know you’ve seen my dragon once before,” he said in a lower pitch while he searched my gaze. “But we didn’t know each other then like we do now. I had no idea what you would come to mean to me. Or that you were my mate.”

“Evan—”

“It’s time you two formally met.”

It felt like a wild bird took flight in my chest, fluttering and darting about with a mix of apprehension and exhilaration. But even as my pulse thrummed in my ears, there was no fear there, either. I trusted Evan.

He cupped my cheek, tilting my head as he bent down. And there it was, that...awareness that I’d experienced in Miami. I hadn’t known how to describe it before, but now that I was feeling it again, I knew it had to do with his dragon or being his mate. It was as if I could sense him in a way that went beyond the physical.

I could feel his love wrapping around me as he breathed the words, “I love you so much, Mariah. Don’t be afraid.”

I kissed him hard before I pulled back and said, “I could never be afraid of you.”

He looked at me, then he took a step back, putting several yards between us. I stayed at the tree line while he gave himself some space. His eyes never left mine as he began his shift.

At first, it was nothing but a light breeze, then it picked up, swirling around him as the air seemed to pulse with his power. His body shimmered, the transformation so smooth and graceful, as if he were shedding one skin to reveal another.

It wasn’t like the first time I’d watched him shift where it felt forced. Being here among the others made a difference, even if he didn’t see it. His transformation was swift, yet every second was etched vividly into my memory as his new form expanded, his human form giving way to a much larger, more imposing one. His clothes seemed to simply dissolve as his body morphed, his skin replaced by shimmering black scales that caught the moonlight, casting a prism-like glow all around him. His body elongated, muscled limbs stretching into powerful legs, his back arching to accommodate the growth of colossal wings that bloomed from his back, dark and imposing.

Where Evan had once stood, there now was a magnificent dragon. His wings were vast, their span dwarfing the trees around us, yet he settled and tucked them in with hypnotic grace. His eyes, now the molten gold orbs of his dragon, bore into mine. They were the same gold I'd seen flash countless times, only now they held a depth that was both familiar and utterly foreign.

This was Evan, yet not Evan, a separate entity, yet still a part of him. And in those dragon eyes, I saw the same intense emotions I so often found in Evan's: passion, love, a fierce vow of protection. Fear was a distant concept, the furthest thing from my mind in the face of the indescribable connection I now felt.

It was like before but magnified tenfold, an awareness of this creature's very soul. A soul that was staring back at me through dragon's eyes, and one I recognized as the other half of my own. This was Evan, wild and untamed, and I was ready to embrace this other part of him.

"You're beautiful," I whispered, the words slipping from my lips as they shook with emotion. Was this the mate bond I was feeling now? With Evan in dragon form, was it easier to feel that connection? This was undeniably the soul of the man I loved, yet it also felt as though I were meeting him anew.

He remained still while I stepped forward, tentatively extending my hand to touch the scales of his snout as he bent his head low. They were cool under my fingers, harder than any material I'd ever felt, yet there was a pulsing warmth beneath them, and a vibrancy that thrummed in time with my own heartbeat.

A raw, primal force vibrated in the air around us, and my breath caught in my throat. It was a potent reminder of how physically fragile I was compared to him—a powerful, majestic beast compared to a mere human woman.

Soft, warm breath blew my hair back as he brought his massive head closer, his eyes still locked on mine. His body was rigid, but his gaze was gentle, inviting, even. I gave his snout another gentle caress.

Then he nudged me, ever so gently.

I chuckled softly. “What are you telling me?”

He swung his head around slowly, glancing behind him, then brought it back, this time nudging my backside with his snout.

“Hey,” I said in protest, even as I laughed. He guided me to his side, then glanced at his back. I gasped when I realized what he was implying, and stepped back, waving my hands in front of me. “No. No way.”

His shimmering eyes implored me to trust him as he lowered himself to the ground, never taking those gold pupils away. But even as I understood his unspoken invitation, panic gripped me. I shook my head fervently.

“No way in hell, Evan,” I said with both fear and amusement. “You expect me to ride on your back? Are you insane?”

His nostrils flared in what I could only interpret as a dragon’s version of a playful smirk, and he nudged me again, a bit more insistently this time. His eyelids slid closed, and then I felt him again. His emotions. The unwavering vow that he would keep me safe.

His message was clear : he believed in me, in our connection, and he wanted to share this exhilarating experience.

I took a step back, my heart racing, caught between the thrill of the idea and the overwhelming fear of the unknown. Was I crazy for even considering this? Riding on a dragon’s back was a far cry from anything I ever could have imagined. It was wild, extraordinary...and I’d be a fool to miss it.

I met his stare with determination. “Okay, Evan,” I finally said. “Let’s do this.”

A surge of excitement washed over me as his large wings unfurled and I stepped closer. I mustered every ounce of courage I could find, then climbed onto his back, my hands gripping the ridges of his scales for dear life.

The moment my legs settled in front of his wings, his powerful muscles flexed beneath me, the wings rising up before sweeping through the air in a graceful motion. And we were airborne.

The sensation was euphoric: a rush of wind, the ground falling away beneath us, and the electrifying connection with this dragon which made my blood hum. We soared above the land, the world below transforming into a patchwork tapestry of awe-inspiring beauty.

I took it all in, committing the sight and sounds and feelings to memory. This was like a dream I never wanted to wake up from. As we glided through the night sky, I marveled at what'd grown between us. I understood now, more than ever, that our connection went far beyond the physical, transcending the boundaries of what I thought was possible. I laughed with pure joy, the air carrying my exhilaration into the night.

We soared through the night, staying in the skies for what felt like hours, the moon casting its silver glow upon us while I clung to Evan's back. Each flap of his powerful wings echoed through my very being. As I truly relaxed and enjoyed the experience, I could feel that connection growing stronger.

Eventually we descended back onto solid ground. The moment I was steady on my feet, Evan shifted back into his human form, in a flash of bright light, and then he was there, holding me in his arms. The surge of emotions was unexpected, a strong burst that then faded to a dull remnant of the connection present when he was in dragon form.

Still, the connection remained stronger than before. I lifted a hand to my heart and caught my breath.

“Do you feel it?” he whispered, his arms tightening.

I nodded, wasting no time in flinging my arms around him and pulling his mouth to mine. I kissed him with a fervor and passion I didn't know I possessed. Evan took control, turning my wild feelings into a deep, passionate kiss that left me aching for so much more.

“I can’t believe it,” I said when he finally broke the kiss, a smile playing on my lips. “That was...it was incredible, Evan. More than incredible. I just flew on a dragon.” I laughed in disbelief.

Evan’s eyes sparkled, back now to the deep, near jet-black color of his human form. Joy and affection shone in their depths, along with a bit of awe. He shook his head. “You were amazing up there, Mariah. So brave and strong. And you felt it. Our connection.”

I nodded, my heart full to bursting. “Yes, I did. I’m finally starting to understand. It’s because I’m your mate.”

He nodded. “That’s a taste of it, at least from what I understand. The actual mate bond will be similar but more intense.”

I’d been worried that it’d be different because I was a human, that I wouldn’t be able to feel the bond like Abi had explained it, but maybe I’d been wrong. Our connection went far beyond what I imagined. It defied the logical world and surpassed human limitations. I might be human, but I’d never been more convinced that we belonged together. We would face the challenges that lay ahead, with the strength of our love and our bond seeing us through.

Chapter 9

Evan

I stood over the long, polished, wooden table in the corner of Sebastian's office, my eyes focused on the list of names laid out before us. The morning light from the east-facing windows filled the room.

"Phone calls won't be enough to get to these men." Sebastian tapped the papers. "We'll need to meet them in person."

I studied the list, noting that most of the targets were human. My eyes narrowed. Tomas held too much power over these people. Money had a way of swaying humans, and Tomas was giving them some big payouts.

"Maybe we can offer them even more than Tomas did," Sebastian said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. I immediately waved my hand in dismissal. Sebastian didn't need to sacrifice anything more for this plan.

"No. I think we can get these men to fold without dangling money in front of them. I want to be better than Tomas." The flame-shaped alpha mark on the back of my left shoulder seemed to burn as I spoke, determination radiating through me. I wouldn't sink to Hawthorne's level.

Sebastian nodded. "I can appreciate that. Honestly," he said with a faint smile. "That integrity is exactly what will make you an excellent leader one day."

I shifted uncomfortably on my feet. I still hadn't told Sebastian where I stood on that. Maybe once all of this was behind us, we could have a heart to heart about my thoughts

on leading the clan, and why Lucas would be a much better choice.

When I didn't respond, Sebastian pressed ahead. "Let's find another way."

I glanced at the list again and tried to come up with a plan. We had more resources at our disposal than just money. We were a clan of highly trained dragon shifters. I was strong, fast, and fiercely protective of those I loved. But I didn't want to come in with brute force and guns blazing, either.

"Let's go through the list again," I said, my mind racing with possibilities. "We can find the best way to approach each of these men individually. Find out what makes them tick. Then we can make them see that siding with Tomas will only bring them pain and destruction."

"Agreed." Sebastian's expression was grim, his jaw set with determination. "We'll work together to break this alliance between Tomas and his cronies. Not just for our family, for Mariah and Sofia, but for all the innocent lives that have been lost in this senseless rivalry."

I swallowed against the lump in my throat as I nodded. We would make Tomas pay for everyone he'd hurt, everyone he'd taken, including my mother and the clan I was born to. As we settled in for a long night, Sebastian and I went over the list again, talking out various options and scenarios as we plotted the downfall of our enemy. The end of Tomas Hawthorne's reign of terror couldn't come soon enough.

"Sebastian," I said after a while, rubbing my chin. "We need to think outside the box here. These humans may fear being imprisoned, but we can't bank on that. We need to come up with something more than just exposing their dirty dealings. A different approach that will guarantee they side with us."

"Perhaps we could offer them legal shares in stocks." Sebastian angled his head in thought. "They'll still get a payout, just not a direct one, and it won't be dirty money."

My eyes narrowed as I considered the idea. I hated the thought of Sebastian having to sacrifice anything else because of Tomas's hatred and greed—he'd dealt with enough already, just as I had—but I couldn't deny the logic there.

“Sebastian, I don't like the idea of you having to give up anything for this stupid rivalry,” I said. Frustration vibrated through me as I stared at the list of names. “You've done so much already, and now we're dragging you even deeper into this mess, all because I'm your son.”

Sebastian placed a hand firmly on my shoulder, his face steady and reassuring. “Evan, this is about more than just me. You are my son, yes, but this is about so much more than that. It's about protecting our family: Mariah, Sofia, and everyone else who's suffered because of Tomas. It's not a sacrifice for me. It's just money. It means nothing compared to keeping all of you safe.”

I took a deep breath. Despite our rocky past, there was no denying the bond we shared as father and son. All the years apart, the banishment, the secrets—none of that changed what went deeper than I'd ever realized. He was right. We needed to do whatever it took to end this, to outsmart Tomas and protect those we loved.

“Okay, let's do it. We'll offer something valuable enough to get their attention, but we won't let them manipulate us. We'll be better than Tomas.”

Sebastian nodded. “We'll find a way to break their alliance with Tomas without stooping to his level.”

“Okay, let's find out more about these men on our list.”

We continued strategizing through the morning, devising our plan of action, digging up whatever we could about the targets. Despite the challenges that lay ahead, my sense of hope held strong, and with Sebastian by my side, we could face whatever Tomas threw our way.

“Here's something.” Sebastian handed me a paper he'd been perusing. “Ronald Bennett. I know him. He's a hotel mogul here in Texas. Sketchy guy—one of the reasons I've

never done business with him. But if we get him to come to your side, his influence might be our best shot at getting through to the others.”

“Let’s see what he’s up to tonight,” I said, pulling out my phone to search for any information on Ronald Bennett. It didn’t take long for me to find his social media profile, littered with pictures of his lavish lifestyle and various high-profile events he attended.

“Looks like he’s going to a charity event tonight, two hours from here,” I informed Sebastian, showing him the post. “Think we can get ourselves an invite?”

“Leave that to me.” Sebastian flashed me a confident grin, already punching in a number on his phone. He sounded smooth and persuasive. “Yes, hello, my son and I would like to attend the charity event this evening... Of course, we’re more than happy to make a generous donation.”

I felt a surge of pride as I watched Sebastian work his magic. Despite our complicated past, he had always been there for me when it mattered most, and now, as we embarked on this mission together, I knew we were an unstoppable team.

“Done,” Sebastian said in satisfaction, hanging up the phone. “We’re on the guest list.”

“Perfect.” I grinned back at him and flexed my fingers in anticipation, eager to do anything that’d make progress.

“What do you need to take care of before we go? We shouldn’t delay. We have a long drive ahead of us and an even longer night. I’m guessing you don’t have a tux at the ready?”

I laughed. “Wasn’t high on my priority list when I came here. I’ll need to rent one, I suppose. I also want to talk to Mariah and run our plan by her so she’s in the loop.”

“Of course.” Sebastian glanced at his watch. “I have a guy that can get a tux delivered in a couple hours. Just give me your measurements and I’ll take care of it.”

I gave him what he needed, then made my way downstairs to find my mate. Hopefully, she’d be just as excited as I was

about this next step. Anything was better than sitting around waiting.

“Mariah,” I said once I found her in our room, absorbed in her laptop. “Sebastian and I have got a plan for our first target. One of the guys on the list Jax sent over, Ronald Bennett. Apparently he’s some kind of hotel mogul. He’s attending a charity event tonight.” I quickly relayed the rest of the information. “We think the threat of prison time might do the trick, but we have a back-up plan if necessary.”

“Wow, you guys move fast,” she said. “You’re right, though. That’ll put fear into any man, especially if the evidence is incriminating enough.” She grinned. “I told you Jax would come through for us, didn’t I?”

Just hearing her say his name stirred a tinge of jealousy in me, and my dragon growled possessively within. I took a deep breath, struggling to restrain him. There was no logical reason to feel threatened by Mariah’s confidence in Jax, but it didn’t seem as if we were being very rational these days. Not when it came to our mate.

“Are you okay?” Mariah said as she studied my face.

“I’m fine.” I stepped closer, capturing her lips in a tender kiss. “I just don’t like the idea of leaving you. We’ll be heading out pretty soon, gone until tomorrow morning. I need to pack, and Sebastian has a tux on the way—”

“A tux? I can’t wait to see you in that.” Mariah’s eyes lingered over my body, igniting a need deep within me.

“Trust me, you won’t be disappointed,” I teased, smirking at the way her cheeks flushed.

She rolled her eyes and swatted my shoulder. “So full of yourself.” She laughed, but then she wrapped her arms around me. “Be careful, Evan. Promise me you’ll be safe.”

“I swear,” I murmured into her honey-brown hair, holding her tightly. “I’ll be right back home before you know it.” Back to her and Sofia, where I belonged.

After one last lingering kiss, I set about packing. Mariah stayed with me, chatting and acting like it was no big deal, but

I didn't miss the look in her eyes: a strange mix of apprehension and determination that I felt echo through my bones. This confrontation with Ronald Bennett was only the beginning of our fight against Tomas and his network of allies, and I'd no doubt that we would emerge victorious. I just hoped we wouldn't have to pay too high a price.

I finished packing, spent a few minutes cuddling and playing with Sofia in her room, then Mariah and I went downstairs to find Sebastian and Abi waiting in the living room. His eyes were focused on the series of papers laid out before him.

Sebastian looked up when I entered the room, folding the papers and tucking them into his pocket. "I got our tuxes. You just about ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

Sebastian gave me a quick briefing on the additional security he'd put in place to protect Mariah and Sofia while we were gone. Confident they'd be safe here, I turned to her, wrapping her in my arms.

"I'll be back in the morning. Don't worry about me."

"Please be careful, you two," Mariah whispered, her eyes filled with concern when she pulled back, glancing between the two of us.

"I promise. I love you." I held her gaze. "I'll be right back by your side as soon as possible."

Sebastian and I made our way outside, with Mariah and Abi trailing behind us. I gave her one last kiss, then smiled at the woman who'd raised me for half my childhood, the woman who'd been a mother to me. "You're both in great hands."

Abi wrapped an arm around Mariah's waist. "Don't worry about us. Just be safe."

The drive to Austin flew by while Sebastian and I focused on the task at hand, talking through various scenarios and fine tuning what we'd say to Ronald. When we checked into our hotel, I felt the weight of the situation pressing down on me. So much hinged on the success of this mission. If we weren't

able to persuade Hawthorne's cronies, the rest of our plan for Rosalind to drop the custody suit would slip right between our fingers.

"Are you ready for this, son?" Sebastian asked as we prepared for the gala in our hotel room. "Once this ball starts rolling, there's no turning back."

I looked at the man who had raised me, who'd only recently revealed himself as my biological father. "I'm more than ready," I said. "Let's bring this bastard down."

We changed into our tuxedos, my thoughts on Mariah and Sofia. They only fueled my resolve not just to stop Tomas, but to build a life with them free from danger and filled with love. That future hinged on how this plan played out. I could not fail.

"Looking sharp," Sebastian remarked once we were dressed, adjusting his cufflinks. He gave me a grin. "Let's go make some powerful men very uncomfortable."

* * *

The opulent ballroom sparkled beneath the chandeliers once we entered the gala. Guests dressed in designer gowns and custom-tailored tuxedos mingled effortlessly, the atmosphere thick with wealth and ambition. I felt slightly out of place among such extravagance. Despite my own wealth, this wasn't my scene at all, but I still knew how to handle myself among the elite. I squared my shoulders and followed Sebastian around the room.

"Sebastian Carey!" a man exclaimed, zeroing in on us immediately. He was quickly joined by a small group of businessmen who encircled Sebastian, eagerly shaking his hand and firing off questions about his latest ventures.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Allow me to introduce my son, Evan," Sebastian said, placing a hand on my shoulder. The men turned to face me, their surprise evident. It was clear they weren't aware Sebastian had another son besides Lucas. We might have been in a room mostly filled with humans, but it

still wasn't common for alphas to publicly acknowledge their illegitimate offspring. The pride in Sebastian's eyes spoke volumes, though. None of that mattered to him, and warmth spread through my chest as I realized just how much our rekindled relationship meant to him—and to me.

“Nice to meet you all,” I said, shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries with the group. I privately marveled at the surreal nature of it all. Just a short time ago, I were completely unaware of my true parentage, and now here I was, standing alongside my father, united in our mission to bring down Tomas.

After making small talk for a few minutes, Sebastian and I resumed our walk around the room, keeping an eye out for our target while greeting and chatting with various guests. I noted the way Sebastian navigated the world of high society with ease, charm oozing from his every word and gesture. It was a skill I'd honed over the years as well in my own business ventures. I was only now realizing I'd come by it naturally.

“Over there,” Sebastian murmured about thirty minutes after we arrived, nodding subtly toward a portly man with a bushy mustache: Ronald Bennett, hotel mogul, and our first target in dismantling Tomas's empire. “You ready for this?”

“Absolutely.” I narrowed my gaze on the man, determination fueling my steps as we approached him from behind.

“Ronald, good to see you,” Sebastian said smoothly. “I'd like you to meet my son Evan.”

Ronald whirled around, surprised as he took us in. “Sebastian Carey. I didn't expect to see you here. Of course, it's always a pleasure.” Ronald eyed me warily as he extended his hand. “And, Evan, nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I said firmly. It was time to get down to business and I wasn't in the mood for beating around the bush. “We heard about your involvement with Tomas and the casino at your hotel. We have some information that might interest you.”

Ronald's eyes narrowed, his cordial demeanor slipping away as he lowered his voice. "What kind of information?"

"Let's just say it involves some less-than-legal activities," Sebastian said. "The sort that could land a man in prison for a very long time."

Ronald's eyes were dinner plates. "Are you threatening me?" he hissed, glancing around as if he were afraid someone was listening.

"Merely presenting the facts," I said in a low voice. "We don't want any trouble. Just to let you know that we're aware of the...*situation*, and that you may want to reconsider your association with Tomas."

"I don't know what it is you think you know," he grumbled, "but I'm not involved in any—"

"Cut the bullshit, Ronald." Sebastian took a step closer. "I have all the proof I need to have you locked up for the rest of your life. Hear us out or don't, but I won't play games."

Ronald swallowed, a bead of sweat falling from his brow as he lifted his hands, a placating look on his face. "Okay, okay. What do you want? No need for threats. Just tell me what you're after."

"I want you to cut ties with Tomas Hawthorne. Immediately. No questions asked."

Ronald's eyes narrowed. "No questions? How do I know you aren't full of shit?"

Sebastian leaned in, his tone dangerous when he said, "You can test that theory if you like. I have everything ready to send to the FBI."

"No!" Ronald protested loudly enough that several heads turned our way. He gave them a shaky smile, the sweat now streaming down his cheeks. "Fine. I'll do it. I'll sever ties with him. The casino will be out of my hotel once the contract is up. I'll have the paperwork drawn up tomorrow."

"Tonight," Sebastian said.

“Fine, fine. Whatever you want.” He glanced back and forth between the two of us. “But if any of this comes back to bite me...”

“Rest assured, we have no intention of causing you any harm.” Sebastian gave him a tight smile. “Our only goal is to put an end to Tomas’s schemes.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say he’s messed with the wrong family. And I protect my own,” he said confidently.

“Very well,” Ronald said reluctantly. “But I should warn you. You need to be careful, gentlemen. Tomas Hawthorne isn’t someone to be trifled with.”

“Neither are we,” I said with a grim smile on my face as I clasped his hand in a firm handshake strong enough to remind him just what was at stake.

“Listen,” Ronald said urgently, just as I thought he’d turn away. He lowered his voice and leaned in close. “I have no doubt Tomas will retaliate once he finds out I’m no longer on his side. I need to know you’ll have my back if it comes to that.”

Sebastian was a picture of composure when he met Ronald’s worried stare. “We’ll support you if Tomas comes after you. If it comes to that. But to be frank, I have a feeling I’ll be the main target of his wrath.”

“Regardless,” Ronald said, glancing around the opulent ballroom as he wiped his eyes. “You both need to keep an eye on Tomas. Watch your back. I’ve heard whispers that he’s been up to some shady things lately. Things even darker than I could have imagined.”

“Thank you for the warning,” Sebastian said gravely, concern flickering in his eyes.

“Stay vigilant.” With that, Ronald excused himself, disappearing into the sea of extravagantly dressed guests.

“Dark things, huh?” I mused, watching Ronald’s retreating figure. “As if we didn’t already have enough to worry about.”

What do you think he means?”

“I can’t be sure.” Sebastian sighed. “When it comes to Tomas, there’s nothing I’d put past him.”

The weight of his words settled on my shoulders. I knew he was right—Tomas was mad, unpredictable. We had to remain alert at all times, on the lookout for anything he might throw our way.

“Let’s enjoy the evening for now,” Sebastian suggested, clapping me on the back. “We’ve done what we came here to do.”

We had, and it went even smoother than expected. With tonight’s business handled, we continued mingling among the wealthy attendees, making small talk, and exchanging pleasantries, with Sebastian putting in the necessary effort among his business ties. The time passed quickly, and despite the tension lingering beneath the surface, it was nice to have a temporary reprieve.

The next morning, we got back on the road again early, driving back to our family with news of a small victory under our belts. My phone buzzed, and I glanced down at the screen to see a text from Jax.

Ronald is out, it read, confirming the success of our mission.

I relayed the message to Sebastian while I contemplated our next move. “One down. Who’s next?”

“We’ll figure that out soon enough,” he said. “But one thing’s for sure... we’re on our way to finally bringing that bastard down.”

Chapter 10

Mariah

I stared at my computer screen, my palms sweaty, my heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and anxiety as I read the email again.

The schools I applied to were requesting pre-assessment tests to determine if I was a suitable candidate for their programs. It'd been years since I last set foot in a classroom, since I'd last taken a test. It was completely unfamiliar territory, and I worried I'd somehow stumble at this crucial step, jeopardizing my chances of pursuing higher education.

I opened the attached study guide to see what I was in for just as Evan burst into the room, flinging the door open. His presence seemed to fill the room. Fierce, protective. Alpha.

“Mariah?”

Evan stood in the doorway, out of breath, his eyes darting all over me. The panic I saw there had me forgetting all about the entrance exams.

“What’s wrong?” I said, sitting up straight on the bed.

“That’s what I was going to ask you.” He walked toward me, his eyes drawn tight as he searched my face. “Are you okay?”

I laughed lightly. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Evan grimaced. “You were afraid. I felt it.”

Felt it?

“What happened?” He glanced at my laptop, forgotten on the bed.

Grabbing it up quickly, I shut it and stashed it under the pillow. “What do you mean you felt it?”

Evan pressed his lips together, wariness creeping into his eyes, mingling with the lingering panic. “I was upstairs in my office, and I just got this...impression. Like a hint of fear.”

And he came running downstairs to see if I was okay. It took me a second to catch my breath at the realization. Ever since I’d flown on Evan’s dragon, he’d seemed even more tuned into the way I was feeling than before. More aware. I hadn’t thought much of it, but now he was saying...

“You can feel my emotions?” I thought back to the way it’d felt when he was in dragon form. To the connection we’d shared that night in Miami. But the idea that he could feel what I was from upstairs was a little unsettling. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it.

Evan sighed and put a hand over his jaw. “Sort of. It’s not that simple, and it’s not all the time.” He glanced away, then turned to me fully, his gaze searching as he gripped my shoulders. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

I waved my hand. “I’m fine. I just got a letter from the schools and—”

His whole face lit up. “What did they say?”

I had to smile at his enthusiasm, his genuine interest in something so important to me. “The schools want me to take these pre-assessment tests,” I explained, still thinking about how he’d sensed my fear. “It’s part of their evaluation process before they decide about acceptance. I haven’t been in school for so long, and I guess I’m just worried I won’t do well.”

Evan’s eyes softened. “Is that what you were afraid of? A test?”

I shrugged, and my cheeks grew red. I hadn’t meant to say all that.

Shifting on the bed, he settled me in his lap and trailed a hand through my hair, tucking it behind my ear. “Don’t worry about it for another second. I’ve got your back. I did pretty well in college. Graduated top of my class in business.”

“Of course, you did,” I said teasingly. “You’re good at everything.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “I’ll take the compliment. And if you play your cards right, you might be lucky enough to snag me as your study buddy.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and leaned in, my lips hovering a breath away from his. “Sounds promising,” I whispered. “Any tips on how to play those cards?”

His fingers tightened in my hair, and I brushed my mouth over his before I flicked my tongue out, lightly teasing his lower lip.

Evan groaned, his other hand coming to my hip. “You could start like that.”

I gripped his shoulders, then moved lower, trailing my mouth and tongue slowly down his neck.

His voice was tight. “That works, too.”

I grinned, coming face to face with him again. “I think I like this little arrangement.”

And just like that, all my worries about my test vanished. As always, Evan came through for me. He was there to support me in every way. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Evan’s smile was so bright while he put his arms around me. “You don’t ever have to worry about that. I’ll always be here for you.”

The words were a vow, a promise, and over the following days he held to them. We found a balance between work and studying, finding a rhythm that worked for us and Sofia. Studying while taking care of an infant was no joke, but Abi was always there when we needed her.

As the week progressed, I began feeling more prepared for the assessments, and when the day finally arrived, the whole family wished me good luck while I disappeared into Evan's office. I made my way through the questions with ease, submitting my exam with confidence, and when it was done, I shut my laptop and sat back in the chair, sighing in relief. It was out of my hands now, and all I could do was hope for the best.

Excitement bubbled up as I got up from the desk and went to go find Evan. I didn't have to go far. As soon as I opened his office door, he was standing on the other side.

"Well? How did you do?"

I laughed, half in disbelief. "Have you been here the whole time?"

He shrugged. "I'm your study buddy, remember? I'm invested in your success."

I reached for him, pulling him into the room and shutting the door again. "Just how invested are you?"

His eyes darkened. "Invested enough to be at your disposal."

I grinned. "Just what I was hoping you'd say."

"What are you going to do with me?" Evan said.

"Why, show you my appreciation, of course." I led him to the bed, feeling bold as I pushed him down onto his back.

"Oh, I could get used to this." His eyes flashed gold. "For future reference, I'm happy to be of service."

I laughed, my eyes drifting over his body. Sometimes it was hard to believe he was really mine. I reached for his shirt and pushed it up, taking in his carved chest, his chiseled abs. I'd seriously never known a man as sexy as Evan.

He grabbed his shirt and pulled it over his head, watching as my hands moved to his pants, slowly undoing the button. I could practically feel his anticipation as I dragged my fingers along his waistband. He sucked in a sharp breath when I pulled at his zipper, his eyes heavy with desire.

I leaned forward, bracing myself over him as my lips brushed against his ear. “I want to make you feel good.”

His response was more like a moan than an answer, sending a thrill through my body, making me ache with my own desire. His body begged for my touch, and his now shallow breathing was spurring me on. I moved lower, dragging his pants down until he was completely naked.

The way he watched made me feel even more empowered, and I looked down with a smirk before bringing my hands to his muscled thighs and settling between his legs. He watched me, heat blazing there, as I lowered my head, my breath teasing him before I flicked my tongue out, tasting the tip of his cock.

Evan moaned, and I smiled even wider. This was exactly what he wanted from me. It was my turn to show just how much I appreciated him.

I took my time, exploring every inch of him with my mouth while I licked and sucked, loving the feel of him quivering beneath me as I picked up the pace. His groans grew louder, his hips bucking up to meet my mouth when I finally closed my lips around his cock and sank down on him, taking him deep in my mouth.

He reached down, pulling up my shirt and finding my breasts, shoving my bra down and teasing my nipples as I worked him over. My own body shuddered with pleasure, and I moved even faster, swirling my tongue around the head of his cock before taking him in deeper each time.

His hands clutched at the sheets as his breathing became ragged and his body tensed in anticipation. Just as he was about to reach climax, he pulled me off of him with a loud pop of the lips and growled.

“Not like this.” He reached for me, pulling me onto the bed. “When I come, I want to be buried so deep inside your pussy, I don’t know where I end and you begin.”

I moaned, his words sending white-hot need coursing through my entire body. “Yes, please.”

He gave me a grin, full of pure male satisfaction, then he was stripping me down, tossing my clothes aside before I was splayed out before him. Soon he was spreading my legs and lowering his head. I arched myself off the bed the moment his tongue touched my clit, swirling around in tight, fast circles.

“Oh, God,” I said, moaning, knowing I was too loud but unable to stop myself.

He hummed along my clit, his tongue exploring every inch of me, pressing deep into my folds and dragging his teeth along the sensitive skin. His hands trailed up and down my legs before settling on my hips as he went even further, licking and sucking until I was a shivering mess.

I could feel the orgasm building inside me with each passing second, and when Evan sucked my clit between his lips once more, I let out a loud cry as it crashed over me in waves. My body shuddered with pleasure so intense, I lost myself completely to the sensations rocketing through me, reaching down to grab Evan’s hair as he kept going, not stopping until I finally collapsed, my body limp as I floated on a cloud of utter bliss.

He climbed up into bed, wrapping his arms around me and nuzzling my neck with soft kisses while I came down from the climax, my body still feeling the aftershocks.

“I know I’m done with the exam,” I said when I finally caught my breath. “But can you still be my study buddy?”

He chuckled, his breath warm on my skin. “I’m at your disposal.”

His cock was pressed against my thigh, still hard, and even though he’d just given me a mind-blowing orgasm, I felt my need already returning. I reached for him, rolling on top of him and straddling his thighs, giving him a wicked grin.

“Well, in that case...”

* * *

It was well after lunch when Evan and I finally got too hungry to stay in bed any longer. There was no peep from Sofia, and I wondered if everyone had cleared out of the house when Evan and I started...celebrating.

I giggled when Evan pulled me into the kitchen and sat me on the counter.

“What’s so funny?” he said, grabbing a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

“Just wondering if anyone heard us.” Evan handed me the water, and I pressed it to my forehead instead of drinking, making him laugh, too.

“I don’t care if the whole clan did,” he growled.

The sound of someone clearing their throat made us both whip our heads to the side.

“Clearly,” Sebastian said, looking rather amused.

I buried my head in Evan’s shoulder and groaned. How embarrassing. I might be a grown woman, but this was my boyfriend’s father.

The moment was short-lived, though. When Sebastian spoke again, his tone was so serious it immediately caught our attention. “I have information on our next target.”

Evan’s body tensed, and I lifted my head. His arms then wrapped around me on instinct. “Who is it?”

Sebastian looked between the two of us, hesitating, but he seemed resolved once he spoke again. “Caterina Velez.”

I watched Evan closely as he frowned. “Why do I know that name?”

“She’s an escort provider in New York.” Sebastian held up a stack of papers, his gaze fixed on his son.

Evan snapped his fingers. “That’s it. I’ve used her services a few times.”

My mouth dropped open. “Excuse me?”

Evan laughed. “Not like that. It was business-related, providing entertainment for clients at the club.”

I frowned, but Evan rolled his eyes.

“Not *that* kind of entertainment,” he said. “I never engaged with the girls personally. It was purely to facilitate business interactions, and I absolutely never condoned mistreatment or exploitation. All my dealings with Caterina were strictly professional.”

“That may be, but it just so happens Caterina Velez isn’t simply an escort provider,” Sebastian said. “There’s a much darker side to Caterina’s activities, as we might assume, given her connection to Tomas.”

“Tell me,” Evan said.

Sebastian gave another glance before his expression darkened. “She was supplying girls to Tomas as well,” he said, seething. “But these girls *were* subjected to mistreatment. Assault. From what I’ve learned, some of them were underage and undocumented.”

The memory of Tomas running his fingers over me quickly surfaced in my mind. The way he’d looked at me with sick, feral hunger, and the twisted pleasure I’d seen there when he talked about how he’d torture me to get to Evan.

Anger ignited within me, a fiery rage that went beyond anything I’d ever known, fueled by the injustice suffered by those vulnerable girls. These men had vowed to bring Tomas down, but I wouldn’t rest until he paid for every last person he’d hurt.

“We need to put her behind bars,” I said. I sounded so shaky, so angry. “No one should get away with such heinous acts. She deserves to pay for her crimes.”

Sebastian nodded in agreement. “Personally, I want nothing more than to send her straight to the cops,” he said, growling. “But she possesses valuable information connecting those assaults to Tomas. We need her cooperation to bring him down.”

Evan's jaw tightened and his expression clouded. "I had no idea about this side of her business, but if she has evidence for Tomas's atrocities, we can't overlook it." He sounded frustrated as well. "We have to strike a balance between justice for those girls and the larger mission to dismantle his operation."

"We need to meet with her," Sebastian said.

The room fell silent as the weight of the situation settled over us. My resolve to bring down this corrupt empire had never been stronger. This wasn't just about saving Sofia from his clutches. It went beyond that now. We'd also be dismantling his web of exploitation and abuse.

"We'll need to go back to New York," Evan said, pacing the length of the kitchen as he went into planning mode. "I can set up the appointment, but I've only ever interacted with Caterina over the phone. Now we know why."

Sebastian watched Evan turn and pace back. "Do you think you could convince her to meet face to face?"

"I have an idea," I blurted out. Evan and Sebastian both turned to me. "What if I'm the one who meets with Caterina? What if we set it up like an interview?"

"Absolutely not," Evan growled, balking at my suggestion the moment the words left my mouth. His protective instincts seemed even stronger than normal, his fangs jutting out of his mouth as his eyes turned gold, muffling his words. "Are you out of your mind? You will not audition to be a fucking escort, Mariah."

I gaped, shocked by the display. Evan was overprotective, but it was rare that he lost control of his dragon. I wouldn't let him call all the shots, though—not when this might be a great idea.

"Evan, listen to me. It's not like I'm going to go through with it. I'm not really auditioning. It's just a setup. A way to get close to her and gather the information we need."

"No," he said, his fangs still protruding. "I can meet with her on my own. I don't want you anywhere near her."

I glanced at Sebastian, who was watching the interaction with interest.

“You aren’t being rational right now, Evan,” I said. “You said it yourself, she’s never met with you, and now you know why. The only way to get close is to trick her into meeting with us. What better way than telling her you have an eager new applicant?”

Smoke billowed from his nostrils, and I bit down on my lip. That was excessive, even for him.

“Evan.”

His eyes locked on mine, and he took several deep breaths. His fangs slowly retracted, and he rolled his shoulders, cracked his neck, then sighed heavily as he rubbed his forehead.

“I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “I didn’t mean to...lose control like that. I didn’t mean to react like that. It’s just my dragon...”

He dragged his hands through his hair and shrugged, glancing away. “He—no, *we*—have been experiencing bouts of jealousy lately, even when they aren’t warranted. It’s irrational, I know. I can’t seem to help it.”

Sebastian laughed, to my utter surprise, and Evan and I turned. He thought it was funny?

The clan leader grinned. “It’s because his dragon is tired of waiting to claim you, and the longer you put it off, the more irritable he’s going to be. He wants to make it official, to mark you as his mate.”

My entire body flushed, and I looked back at Evan for confirmation. He hadn’t spoken about this at all. How long had he been struggling?

I rested a hand on Evan’s arm. “It’s okay. *I* will be okay. But I think you should at least consider my idea. We need to get the evidence from Caterina. That’s our goal. If my involvement can help, then let’s use it to our advantage. We aren’t in a position to wait around and hope another solution presents itself.”

Evan nodded, though he still ground his teeth together. “I don’t like it.”

“I know. But we’re in this thing together. I want to do my part, whatever that might be.”

Sebastian’s gaze moved between the two of us. “I have to admit, it’s a great way to get in, Evan. You just have to make sure you can keep it together.” A knowing smile played on his lips.

This mate thing was so much more complicated than I’d originally thought.

“I guess we have a plan, then,” Evan muttered. “I’ll see what I can do about setting up a meeting with Caterina.” He sounded anything but thrilled.

I reached for him, cupping his cheek. “This is also a way to help those girls, and to stop Caterina and Tomas from hurting anyone else.”

He settled his hand on top of mine, then took my fingers and brought them to his lips. “Have I told you lately how incredible you are?”

I smiled. “Once or twice, but I don’t mind hearing it again.”

Evan shook his head. “If we’re going to do this, I want to be there with you. I won’t put you in danger.”

I bit my lip. My safety hadn’t crossed my mind, though it should have. I was just getting used to Evan always being the overprotective boyfriend. “Do you think it’s safe? If Caterina is involved in something like this, don’t you think she’ll have her own security surrounding her? What if we confront her and she flips the switch on us?” She could have any number of people standing by waiting to blow our heads off if we got this wrong.

Evan shook his head. “You won’t be away from me for a moment. These are humans. I’d sense the danger before it ever became a real threat.”

That made me feel better, and I already trusted him with my life.

“Besides,” he said with a smirk, “you’ve seen my wings before. If there were a real threat, I’d use them to shield you.”

My eyes jerked up. “They can do that?”

He winked. “They’re bulletproof, baby.”

“Does that mean you’re on board with the plan?”

Evan sighed. “You do keep insisting you want to be part of my world. I guess I should start letting you.”

“It’s settled, then.” I glanced back in Sebastian’s direction, but he’d already disappeared from the room.

When I looked back at Evan, he looked hungry again, but not for what’d driven us downstairs in the first place. He moved closer, settling himself between my legs, where he’d been before Sebastian came in. “Now, where were we?”

Chapter II

Evan

My finger hovered over the mouse as the new email popped up on my computer screen. It was from Caterina.

I honestly couldn't believe I was doing this. Was I seriously preparing my mate to meet with the owner of a questionable escort service? It made me sick to my stomach to know I'd have to act like I was practically pimping Mariah out. I knew it was a charade, but that didn't make it sit any better with me.

I clicked the email before I could overanalyze it to death. A few days after we decided on our next course of action, I'd sent Caterina some pictures of Mariah that I'd taken while we were in Miami. They were gorgeous, her eyes sparkling as she looked at me by that fountain, the golden streaks in her light brown hair shining in the moonlight. Caterina would be an idiot *not* to hire her.

That thought alone was enough to make me grimace and growl, my blood boiling in my veins. It was getting harder and harder to keep myself under control. The need to claim Mariah was growing stronger with each passing day, my jealous streak bordering on possessive.

It was irrational to feel like I was selling Mariah to the highest bidder when this was an excellent opportunity to clamp Hawthorne's business in a vise.

Scanning the email, I wasn't surprised to find Caterina wanted to meet with us as soon as possible. Mariah was stunning, the most gorgeous woman in the world as far as I

was concerned, and Caterina was a shrewd businesswoman. She knew what kind of money Mariah could bring in.

Smoke billowed from my nostrils at the thought, and I shoved my chair back from the computer, growling under my breath. I needed to get myself under control. The longer I put off claiming my mate, the worse this was going to get. As it was, my dragon was constantly prowling through my subconscious, demanding I put her above everything else.

But we had to get this dumpster fire with Tomas settled first. Then Mariah and I could move forward.

The fastest way to make that happen was to follow through with our plan. I returned to my desk and tapped out a quick reply, letting Caterina know we'd be available to meet in two days' time. Sebastian had already told us we could make use of his private jet, and we could leave for New York whenever we were ready.

Once the email was sent off, I closed my computer and went straight to Sebastian's office to update him on this latest development.

"I heard back from Caterina," I told him as I walked through the door without even knocking. "Do you think the jet could be ready by morning?"

Sebastian looked up from his work. Normally I waited for him to invite me in, but he didn't seem upset. "Of course. I'll go ahead and let the pilot and crew know to be ready. What time are you thinking?"

I sank down into the chair across from him, keeping my breathing steady and my thoughts under wraps so I wouldn't lose my grip. "As early as possible. We'll only be gone for a few days. I can take some time to sort a few things out at the clubs, and I know Mariah would love to spend some time with her friend Analise while we're there."

"We only have three weeks until the hearing," Sebastian said, though I didn't need a reminder.

"I know." I nodded grimly. "We need to move fast if we're going to get Rosalind what she wants."

“We can do this, son.” Sebastian sounded so certain. “I have every bit of faith in you and Mariah. But even if things don’t go as planned—”

“We have no other choice,” I said furiously. The idea of Sofia being anywhere near the Hawthornes nearly made my wings sprout.

Sebastian held his hands up in a placating gesture. “All I’m saying is that if this case ends up going to court, I’ll get you the very best lawyers money can buy. Tomas will never get his hands on Sofia, I can assure you of that.”

I already had the best family lawyer in New York City, but a sense of calm settled over me when I heard his offer. I wasn’t in this alone, not by any means. I had an entire clan who’d back me up at Sebastian’s request. Sebastian was in my corner—how could I possibly lose?

“That means a lot to me. Thank you.”

“No thanks required, Evan. You’re my son. I’d do anything for you.”

I had to swallow against the lump in my throat, standing before I was overcome with emotion. “I need to go find Mariah and let her know.”

“Of course.” Sebastian gave an encouraging smile.

I nodded in return, then left the office and headed downstairs. I found Mariah in Sofia’s bedroom across the hall, putting her down for her afternoon nap.

Mariah looked up at me when I stepped into the room and her eyes lit up. She was bent over the crib, and gestured for me to come closer as she tucked Sofia in, brushing a kiss on her forehead.

Sofia’s eyes were sleepy, blinking slowly as I leaned down to kiss her as well. Then she drifted off. I took Mariah’s hand and led her across the hall to our room.

“I heard back from Caterina.”

Her eyes widened. “What did she say?”

“She wants to meet you as soon as possible. She’s very interested.” I couldn’t help the growl in my chest, but I took a breath and continued in spite of it. “We’ll leave first thing tomorrow morning. Sebastian’s got the jet ready for us.”

Mariah’s face lit up, a picture of triumph. “Really? That’s great news. When do we meet with her?”

I smiled at her enthusiasm. “We should be in New York by lunchtime.” I paused for a moment. “But I’m sure you’d like to spend some time with Analise while we’re there. I scheduled the meeting for the day after tomorrow to give you two time to catch up.”

Mariah threw her arms around me and beamed. “Evan, that’s perfect. Thank you. I know we won’t be home for long, and I’d love to see her while we’re there.”

I pressed a soft kiss to her lips before pulling back slightly and looking into her eyes, only to find a hint of worry in their depths.

“What is it, Mariah?” Was she having second thoughts about going? I was immediately ready to call this off if so.

“I was just wondering if we’d have to leave Sofia behind again.”

My arms tightened. “I think it’d be for the best. The clan lands are the safest place for her.”

She nodded, but sounded forlorn, even heartbroken. “That makes sense. She’s just growing so fast. It seems like every day she gets a little bigger. I hope we don’t miss any big moments while we’re gone.”

I ran a hand through her hair and kissed her temple. “We won’t miss anything. We’ll be back in no time, and she’ll still be the same sweet little girl when we get home.” I paused. So much had happened in such a short amount of time since Sofia came into my life. If not for her, I never would’ve hired a nanny. Never met Mariah.

“It’s really crazy how much our lives have changed in such a short time,” I said. “It’s hard to believe just a few months ago I didn’t even know you, and now here we are.”

Mariah laughed softly. “I wouldn’t have believed it if someone told me I’d be living with a dragon shifter who wants to claim me as his mate.”

I chuckled and kissed her again as I sank down onto the bed, pulling her onto my lap. “I know this is all happening fast, but for dragons it’s different. We don’t take things as slowly as humans do when it comes to choosing a partner. When it’s your mate... I don’t know how to explain it other than...you just know.”

As I looked back now, I could see how my initial draw to Mariah had been so much more than attraction. There was something about this woman that sucked me in, and on some level, I must’ve known how important she was. After all, I’d been perfectly happy as a perpetual bachelor until she walked into my life.

I cleared my throat, aware of just how overwhelming this might be. “I know getting into a relationship in the first place was a big deal. The last thing I want is for you to feel like I’m forcing you into anything with me.”

Mariah blinked up at me, her mouth parting slightly, but I pressed on, knowing this was something I needed to say. She was still so new to all of this, to my world, and I could tell she wasn’t sure what to make of my words.

“I mean it. If you’re not ready for this yet or if you need more time to adjust, then there’s no rush here,” I said, stroking her hair. “I’ve put off discussing our relationship further while we deal with the Hawthornes. But if I’m putting too much pressure on you—”

Mariah shook her head adamantly, cutting me off by pressing a hard kiss to my lips. “No, it’s not that at all,” she said as she pulled back. “Yes, it’s a lot to take in. There’s a lot I’m still learning. But despite it all, I feel like this is exactly where I’m meant to be. I’m learning about what it means to be your mate, but I’m not afraid, Evan. I want to be with you.”

I was flooded with relief as I pulled her closer, my chest swelling with emotion, feeling so full I thought I might burst with how much I loved this woman. I grabbed her hips,

readjusting her on my lap as I stared into her eyes. “You have no idea how happy that makes me.”

She bit her lip. “Well, you could always show me.”

Hot need ignited at her words, fire racing through my veins as my dragon roared in my mind. I dug my fingers into her hips and smiled wickedly, then flipped Mariah over onto her back on the bed. She gasped in surprise, and when I looked down I saw desire shining in her eyes. That gasp quickly turned to a moan when I settled myself between her legs, grinding my already hard cock against her.

Primal lust took over, and my hands roamed her body while I kissed and licked her neck, making her writhe beneath me, the sounds of pleasure making me forget everything but this gorgeous woman. I needed her more than my next breath. I needed to make her mine. The desire to sink my teeth into her neck, to truly claim her, was nearly overpowering. She felt so fucking good that I was afraid I might lose my mind entirely.

I was on the brink of forgetting myself, so I moved lower, away from her neck, trailing kisses down her chest to the swell of her breasts before nipping at the top of them through her shirt.

Mariah moaned my name, and I slid my hand under her shirt. Her skin was warm beneath my touch, and I made quick work of removing her shirt and tossing it aside to give me better access to explore every inch of those luscious tits I loved so much. As I shoved her bra cup down, I trailed my tongue over the swell of her full breast, flicking the taut peak of her nipple. Then I showed the other the same loving treatment.

Already we were both panting with desire, but I was just getting started. I left a trail of kisses in my wake as I made my way down her stomach, unfastening her jeans as I went.

Mariah wiggled her hips, helping push them down over her hips, then she kicked them away, clearly as anxious to be rid of her clothes as I was.

“What do you want?” I said harshly once I’d reached the apex of her thighs.

She sucked in a sharp breath in anticipation, aware of what was coming next, but I wanted to hear her ask for it. I sat, waiting, running the tip of my finger along the crease of her inner thigh.

She writhed even more when I reached up and pinched her nipple with my other hand. “Evan,” she moaned. “You’re torturing me here.”

I chuckled darkly. “All you have to do is tell me what you want, baby.”

She pushed up onto her elbows, staring at me, her hair already mussed. Fuck, she was sexy as hell. I wasn’t sure I could keep this game up much longer. The scent of her desire was driving me mad. The need to sink my cock deep inside her had me gritting my teeth to control myself. I felt like a man who’d nearly starved to death, then been presented with the best feast imaginable.

Mariah’s cheeks turned pink, but there was no hesitation when she said, “What I want is for you to stop talking and make better use of that tongue.”

I had to laugh. I was happy to oblige.

“Whatever the lady wants. I’m at your disposal.” I grinned, wiggling as I hooked a finger inside her panties and pulled, ripping them right off her.

As soon as my tongue touched the slick wetness between her legs, she cried out in pleasure, her hands gripping my hair, the bed sheets, as she arched her hips, grinding against me urgently.

I moaned at the sweet taste of her, alternating between lapping at her and sucking on that bundle of nerves until she was crying out my name, her sounds of pleasure filling the air.

I didn’t care that it was the middle of the afternoon and anyone could be in the house. Anyone could hear us. My dragon, in fact, was rather pleased, and wanted everyone to hear just how good I made my mate feel.

“Evan,” she said, panting, her body going rigid. Then she came, her body hot and wet and pulsing as I tasted every sweet drop.

As she came down from her orgasm, I climbed higher on the bed, ridding myself of my pants while she clawed at my shirt. Finally, blessedly, we were both fully naked, our bodies pressed against each other. I grabbed her thighs, then flipped us over so I was now lying beneath her. She straddled my hips, bracing herself, hands placed on my shoulders.

I reached up and teased her nipple, loving the way she bit her lip, her eyelids fluttering and closing. But then she opened them again, staring down at me, my own lust reflected in her stare as it locked with mine. Never breaking eye contact, she sank down onto me inch by inch, so slowly I thought I might die if I didn't fuck her soon. We both gasped when I couldn't restrain myself any longer, bucking my hips, bottoming out and filling her completely.

“God, Evan.” Mariah sounded breathy, ragged. “You feel so good.”

I took her hands, lacing my fingers with hers, and sitting up far enough to brush a kiss across her lips. Then I settled back and gave her control. Not an easy task when my dragon was still prowling, demanding I claim my mate, but I managed to keep him at bay.

We moved together, slowly at first, but it wasn't long before Mariah picked up the pace. Our bodies moved together faster and faster until we were both panting and gasping. Our sweat-slicked skin slid against each other in a dance that sent me spiraling with the intensity of the pleasure. Our breathing was now ragged, and I was damn close to exploding.

I reached between Mariah's legs, rubbing her clit in fast, tight circles, and then she was crying my name, coming apart, her pussy tightening around my cock as she found release again.

With a roar I didn't even bother stifling, my own orgasm ripped through me, shattering my body and mind into a million tiny pieces.

Mariah collapsed on my chest, her breathing as ragged as mine, and her skin warm and flushed. My chest was unbearably tight with the intensity of what I felt for her.

I held her, running my fingers over her back in slow, languid circles as we caught our breath.

“I love you,” I whispered into her hair.

We lay together for a long time, just enjoying the moment of peace. Eventually we got up and cleaned up, just in time for Sofia to wake from her nap.

We spent the rest of the evening as a family, playing together with Sofia, making sure we got plenty of quality time in with her before we left.

The next morning came quickly. We kissed a sleeping Sofia goodbye, not wanting to wake her this time. Abi told us not to worry, that Sofia was in great hands, and she had it under control. It was true, but it didn't make it any easier leaving our little girl behind.

Sebastian clapped me on the back as we headed out to the car that would take us to the tarmac. “Call if you need anything at all, Evan. I'm here to help in any way possible.”

I pulled him into a quick hug. “Thank you. I mean it.”

The process of accepting my place in this family hadn't been simple, but it was getting easier with each day that passed. Trust was being rebuilt between the two of us, and I knew that Sebastian kept his word. Mariah hugged both of them goodbye, then we were off.

The flight was smooth, and soon enough, we were back in New York. Seeing the city skyline come into view brought a mix of emotions. On the one hand, this had been my home for the last seventeen years, but so many things were still unresolved. Sebastian wanted me to take over the clan, telling me he'd wait until I was ready, but I wasn't sure if I ever would be. I still thought Lucas should take on the mantle.

Yet the more time we spent in Texas, the more it started to feel like home. And when we arrived back at the penthouse, it wasn't what I expected. Somehow, the place didn't feel the

same after all these weeks away. So much had changed since I'd left here. I'd expected to walk in and feel at ease. Instead, I was even more unsettled.

“Are you okay?” Mariah said as she looked up at me.

I sighed. “Would it be strange to say that it doesn't feel the way I thought it would to be back home?”

She came up to me, wrapping her arms around my neck and going up on tiptoes to kiss me. “No. I get it. I kind of feel the same way. I haven't lived here for as long, so I'm sure it's even stranger for you.”

I nodded. “After being on the clan lands, I think that might be the best place for Sofia,” I said. I'd had similar thoughts before, but this was the first time I'd said them out loud.

She cocked her head. I couldn't tell what she was thinking when she said, “Are you considering staying in Texas? For the long haul?”

“I don't know what I'm thinking, honestly. Would you even be okay with that?” I certainly wouldn't go anywhere without her. Where Mariah was, that was where I'd be, too.

“It'd be a big change. I'm not sure how I feel about it, if we're going for honesty here. But I'm willing to consider any possibility. We'll figure out what's right for us.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist. God, I loved this woman. “Regardless, Sofia will need a place to spread her wings and fly at some point.”

The front desk buzzed, and I reluctantly let go of Mariah and went to the intercom. “Yes?”

“Mr. Guerrero, I have a woman by the name of Analise here to visit.”

“Send her up,” I said, turning back to Mariah and seeing her face light up with joy.

“I texted her when we landed,” she said. “But I didn't expect her to be here so soon.”

Just a few minutes later, Analise was knocking on the front door. The minute I opened it, I grimaced. Analise was glaring at me, her eyes narrowed, and her hands on her hips. Before I could say anything, she was pointing her finger at me.

“I realize you’re my boss, but I am *not* your biggest fan right now, Evan Guerrero.”

I held my hands up, palms facing out. “I’m well aware of this, Analise.”

Then she brushed right past me, hurrying toward Mariah. I turned around to see the two embracing, the smiles on their faces so bright that I could easily let go of Analise’s anger toward me. After all, she was only looking out for her best friend’s interests. While I might not agree with her about what that meant, I could appreciate that she loved my mate with her whole heart.

I cleared my throat, and Mariah glanced at me. “I think I’ll head to the club now and give you two some time to catch up. I have plenty to do with Mason.” I glanced at my watch. “I should only be gone a few hours, and I’ve stationed a security guard downstairs. I’m going to send him up to watch this floor. He’ll be in the hallway if you need him. Lock the door behind me.”

I ignored Analise’s grumbling about how Mariah shouldn’t be in a situation where that was necessary, yet Mariah walked over, wrapping her arms around me to give a kiss. Analise made gagging noises in the background, however, and I couldn’t ignore that one.

“Just remember who writes your checks,” I said.

“That’s Mason these days,” she said, giving me a fake saccharine smile.

I sighed, but Mariah only laughed. “I’ll be fine. We aren’t going anywhere.”

I gave her one last kiss, then headed out the door, down the elevator, and out of the building, making the quick five-minute walk to the Dragon’s Den. Just being back in the city was strange. The once familiar sights and sounds felt so different

after spending weeks out in the country, where the vast emptiness and open space was nothing like the bustling streets of New York.

Being back at the club was equally surreal. As I made my way to the office, the flirty glances I was used to from employees and customers alike were there as usual, but it was easy to ignore them. Everything had changed. I had no interest in anyone but Mariah. She was my mate, and the woman I loved.

After taking care of some business with Mason, our conversation shifted to the plan for tomorrow. I'd already updated him on most of the details over the phone.

"A stylist is sending over some pieces today for Mariah to try on for her interview."

I shoved down the irrational flare of jealousy. That wasn't going away, but I could at least try to ignore it.

Mason asked, "How are you handling that?"

"Not well," I said. "I'm pretty on edge." I filled him in on what I'd been dealing with as far as my dragon was concerned, and how the need to claim Mariah was growing. "I wish I could handle this without her. I don't like that she's involved. It puts her safety at risk."

"Then, why are you going through with it?"

I gave him a pointed look. "What other choice do I have? Making her feel like she isn't important, like she can't be a part of my life? I'm trying my best to show her how she *can* fit in to my life. I just don't like putting her in harm's way."

"Would you still feel this way if she weren't so fragile?" Mason said, watching me thoughtfully.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just wondering if you wouldn't feel so unsure about letting her help if she weren't human."

I sat back in my chair. I hadn't really thought about that before. Would I feel differently if she were a dragon shifter, if

she weren't so much more at risk because she couldn't protect herself?

I shook my head. "It doesn't really matter, does it? Mariah's human. She'll never be a shifter, which means it's my job as her mate to keep her safe."

Mason nodded. "She's going to be fine tomorrow, Evan. She'll have you by her side the entire time."

"Damn right she will. I'd give my life to keep her safe."

Mason sighed. "It's not going to come to that."

I hoped not, but I'd be ready to protect her in any way I had to. She'd been taken from me once already. I refused to let it happen again.

Chapter 12

Mariah

“Ugh, why can’t I come with you?” Analise pouted as she picked at her beef and broccoli, delivered just a few minutes ago. “I mean, I could be an escort.” She gave me a sly grin. “Maybe it’s a new way to meet guys.”

“Absolutely not. Evan would’ve had a heart attack if he even heard you suggest that. He already doesn’t like the idea of me doing this. The only reason he’s on board is because it’s our best option.” I’d spent most of the evening telling her about our plans to get Rosalind to drop the custody suit.

“Fine, fine,” Analise said with a huff, tossing a piece of broccoli onto her plate. The teasing twinkle in her eyes remained, though. It was so much better than the hostility she’d had before. Maybe she’d come around to Evan yet. “But you have to admit, Mariah, it’s an interesting world.”

That wasn’t the word I’d use for it, but I couldn’t deny there was a tiny thrill at the prospect of going undercover to help Evan bring down Tomas. This was dangerous, too, and I wasn’t about to let Analise get caught up in it.

“Look, Ana,” I said softly, reaching across the table to squeeze her hand. “You’re my best friend, and I love you, but this isn’t your fight. This is something I need to do for Evan... and for myself.”

Analise squeezed my hand back. “All right, I get it. Just promise me one thing, okay?”

“Anything.”

“Promise me you’ll be safe,” she whispered. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Of course,” I said, enveloping her in a hug. “I promise.”

“Good,” Analise sighed, leaning back in her chair and popping a piece of chicken into her mouth. “Now, let’s finish eating and talk about something less serious. Like...I don’t know, shoes.”

“Well, I do happen to have a stylist coming over tomorrow to help me get ready for the interview.”

That had her popping right back up in her seat. “Seriously?”

I nodded, laughing at that. “I guess it isn’t all bad, is it?”

Analise and I talked about the latest fashion trends and what the stylist might bring tomorrow. We discussed hairstyles and makeup, our plates of takeout slowly emptying. It was lighthearted and fun, and for a few hours, I was simply a girl hanging out with her best friend.

The sun peeking through the curtains woke me early the next morning. For a moment, I was disoriented, forgetting we were in New York, but then the night came back to me. Evan had spent most of the evening at the club, giving me and Analise our much-needed girl time. She’d ended up staying the night in the guest room downstairs—the same room I’d slept in when I first starting nannying for Evan.

So much had changed. I rolled over in the large bed, stretching my hand out for Evan. He was right there, warm and solid, someone I could depend on, and a mixture of excitement and nerves skittered through me in anticipation of the day ahead.

“Morning, gorgeous,” he said, sliding closer on the bed. “What are you doing all the way over there?”

I grinned as he pulled me into his arms. “Enjoying the space?” While I loved the coziness of our room in Texas, Evan’s bed was massive.

He chuckled, but then his expression grew serious. “Are you ready for what’s ahead today?”

”You mean my makeover?” I said, wanting to focus on the lighter part of my mission. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“You can still change your mind,” Evan said. “I wouldn’t think anything less of you.”

“No.” I shook my head adamantly. “This is the best way.”

I gave him a quick kiss, then climbed out of bed before I lost my resolve. It would be all too easy to take his offer, but there was too much at stake. I could handle this, and Evan would be right by my side.

I left him in bed for now and went downstairs to find Analise already up and making coffee—something that never happened in our old apartment.

“You’re up early.”

“I didn’t want to miss a second of this.” She grinned. “Want a cup?”

“You know it.” I sat down at the kitchen island, and for a moment it felt like a normal morning again. Being back here in the penthouse, in New York, was bittersweet. I loved having Ana here, and this city had been my home my entire adult life. It made me long for a sense of normalcy.

That was why I was doing this. So, we could move on with our lives. It was a thought I’d hold on to as I faced the day ahead.

Not long after we finished our coffee, the stylist arrived.

“I am Sabine,” the woman said when I opened the front door, her French accent shining through. “And I am here to make you perfect.”

I stepped back as she clapped her hands twice and stepped aside. A line of assistants marched through the door with leather cases in hand, and I had to jump back to move out of their way. I glanced at Analise, pressing my lips together to keep from laughing at the absurdity of it all.

Sabine stepped out in front of her subordinates, who were wheeling in a large clothing rack, setting up shop right in the middle of the living room. The assistants left, then came back in with a three-way mirror, a pedestal, and a long folding table. In a matter of moments, the penthouse had been transformed into a private dressing area that'd make any woman feel like a princess.

I couldn't believe this. When Evan appeared at the top of the stairs, I lifted my hands and gestured at the room. "Is this your doing?"

He glanced around, seeming as taken aback as I was. "I just asked Mason to find the very best stylist team in the city."

"And he did," Sabine said sharply, turning my direction. She was dressed in a black pencil skirt and sleeveless silk blouse, and she looked like the most elegant woman I'd ever met when she slowly lowered her chic glasses and gave me a once over.

Evan made his way downstairs with a smirk on his face while I squirmed under Sabine's appraisal. When she finally nodded and said, "A lovely canvas to begin with," I had to fight the giggle bubbling up out of nowhere.

She wasted no time in getting straight to work. One after the next, she had me try on dresses from her rack, and it seemed as if it would go on forever. While I liked fashion and enjoyed pampering myself, this was to the extreme.

With each new outfit, Analise eagerly offered her input, while Evan stood back with his arms crossed over his chest. He eyed each dress with a mix of parental disapproval, fierce possessiveness, and raw lust. The muscles in his jaw ticked, his gaze pinned on me the entire time, and I had to wonder how hard he was fighting to maintain control. He didn't seem keen on each subsequent dress leaving less and less to the imagination, but as Analise pointed out, that was the point.

"Trust me, Mariah," Analise said, holding up a dangerously low-cut red number. "Clients want eye candy on their arm—something classy but slutty at the same time."

I glanced at Evan, who growled when he heard that. “No.”

Analise rolled her eyes. “Are you serious right now? Do you want Caterina to take interest in her or not? You know I’m right. This is exactly what she’s looking for.”

Evan looked at me, and I felt my entire body flush with the intensity of the desire that flared in his eyes. My legs felt a little weak.

“Fine,” he said, running a hand through his dark hair in frustration. “But not this one.”

The next one Sabine brought me was a black, cutout mini dress that hugged my curves and showed off more thigh than I’d ever dared to reveal before. When I stepped up onto the pedestal, I could feel Evan’s eyes on me, the familiar growl rumbling in his chest again.

“Absolutely not,” he said, glaring at the dress. “I’m rethinking this entire thing.”

“Lighten up, Evan,” Analise chided, rolling her eyes. “You’re not going to play your role well if you’re going to be a grump about it the whole time. She won’t believe you for a second.”

“Analise is right,” I chimed in. We couldn’t step foot in her office if Evan was going to act like this. “We just need to get through the interview and then everything can go back to normal.”

“Right,” Evan said, still looking like he might bite someone’s head off if they said the wrong thing. I recalled what Sebastian said about Evan’s dragon growing impatient. How much worse was this going to get? This possessive mate thing was on another level. Maybe I needed to tone the dress back if we had any chance of pulling one over on Caterina.

But before I could say anything, Evan said, “We’ll take that last dress.”

Analise grinned at me. “Now we’re talking. I’ve always wanted to dress you up.”

I laughed. “Am I your own personal Barbie now?”

Sabine took my hand and led me off the pedestal. “Time for hair and makeup.”

“Are you sure about this?” I said nervously, still eyeing my reflection in the mirror. The black cutout clung to every curve of my body, showcasing far more skin than I was used to, but if it helped us complete our mission, I was willing to do whatever it took.

“*Absolument*,” she said confidently. “By the time I’m done with you, no one will be able to resist your charms.”

I eyed Evan at that comment, but Analise was already dragging him into the kitchen.

Sabine got to work on my hair and makeup, and I looked in the mirror, marveling at her skill. I knew how to do the basics, but this was incredible. She’d deftly applied makeup to enhance my features, blending shades and colors I never would’ve thought to use myself. It was as if she were painting a masterpiece, and I was her canvas, just like she’d said. I had to admit, it was pretty fun to be pampered like this.

“I hardly recognize myself,” I whispered, awed when she finally stepped back to survey her work. My brown eyes seemed bigger, my lips fuller, and my cheekbones were sharper. It was like looking at an entirely different person.

“See? I told you!” Analise beamed. “You’re sexy as hell, girl. Evan,” she said as she called upstairs. “The new and improved Mariah is ready for you.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said with a laugh as I got out of the chair.

When Evan appeared at the top of the stairs once more, his dark eyes flared in surprise. For a moment, he seemed unable to speak, and I could see the hot need in his eyes warring with the possessive snarl forming on his lips.

“Sabine, you’ve outdone yourself,” Evan said stiffly, still eyeing me like a feral beast. “You’ll see a bonus on your invoice.”

“Thank you, Mr. Guerrero,” Sabine said smoothly, and then she and her assistants gathered supplies, carting them out

and clearing the room as quickly as they'd come in. She turned to me at the door, her harsh expression softening slightly. "You are really lovely, dear."

Then she was gone.

"That was a compliment coming from her," Analise chortled. "But she's not wrong. You look like a walking advertisement for sex."

Evan growled loudly at that, not holding back anymore.

I rested a hand on his arm. "You really do have to work on that."

Ana ignored him, turning me to face her. "Just promise you'll be safe, Mariah. Be smart. I'll be waiting here for you when it's over."

"Of course, Ana," I said, hugging her tightly.

"And you." She whirled and pointed at Evan. "If you let anything happen to her, you'll have me to answer to."

From the look on Evan's face, I wondered if he dreaded that more than facing Tomas Hawthorne himself. "Thank you for everything," he said begrudgingly. "Your support here means the world to Mariah. And to me." It looked like he had to force the words out.

Analise excused herself while I looked back at Evan. His eyes hadn't wavered from me the entire time, and now that we were alone, he seemed to drink me in even more hungrily.

"Mariah," he breathed, stepping closer, looking like he might devour me whole. "You look incredible. So fucking sexy. So tempting." He groaned. "You have no idea how much I want to just claim you right here and now."

The passion in his words took me by surprise. "Evan, you can't act like this when we meet Caterina," I said gently. "We have to focus on the task at hand."

"Right," he said. "But once this is all done, just know that I plan to ravish you like never before."

My cheeks flushed, but I couldn't deny how much I wanted that, too. "I'm looking forward to it," I said.

Another rumbling growl, and then Evan closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "That might be the only thing that gets me through this."

* * *

The wind whipped between the tall skyscrapers, creating goosebumps on my skin when Evan and I exited the car he'd hired for the meeting. The building loomed above us, and I couldn't be sure if I shivered from the breeze or the nerves threatening to consume me. My heart pounded in my chest, palms sweaty against the fabric of the tight black dress.

"Are you okay?" Evan said, his warm breath tickling my ear.

"I'm nervous," I said, glancing up at him with wide eyes. I hadn't thought it would hit me like this. I hadn't been this nervous when confronting Rosalind in Miami, but maybe it was because then I was just being myself. Today, I was pretending to be an escort.

Evan squeezed my hand. "I'll be right beside you the whole time, Mariah. Always."

His words brought comfort, but the nerves remained, coiling like a serpent in the pit of my stomach. Taking a deep breath, I nodded, and we approached the entrance.

A burly security guard stood just inside the door when we entered. He held out a hand and signaled us to stop. "Weapons check," he grunted, his gaze lingering on me a moment too long for my taste.

"Of course," Evan said smoothly, allowing the man to pat him down first. His hands roamed over Evan's muscular body, checking every possible hiding spot for a weapon. Then he turned his attention to me.

Evan's jaw tightened, and I could see the gold flecks dancing in his eyes as he struggled to keep his dragon in

check. The guard's hands were too familiar as they searched my body, making my skin crawl.

"Okay, you're clear," the guard said as he stepped back. "Go on in."

"Thanks," Evan muttered, guiding me deeper into the building with a protective hand on my lower back.

The interior was dimly lit but opulently decorated. Clearly, Caterina had made plenty of money with her dirty dealings. Evan's tension radiated off him in waves, and I knew he was just as on edge as I was when we stopped in front of a bank of elevators.

"Remember," he said softly, "if things go south, let me handle it."

"Right," I whispered, steadying my breathing and calming my racing heart.

The elevator dinged, and an attendant eyed me as we stepped inside.

"We have a meeting with Ms. Velez," Evan said smoothly, and the attendant nodded, pressing the button for the top floor. We rode up in silence, stepping out when the door whooshed open to reveal a giant waiting room. I noticed the women who lingered about. They wore sultry smiles and clothes that left little to the imagination, much like mine, though they looked a hundred times more comfortable in their own skin. My pulse jumped as they looked over, sizing me up like a piece of fresh meat. But what bothered me the most were the lustful looks they cast Evan's way, as if they wanted to devour him on the spot. They had no consideration for the fact that he was with me.

Because he isn't yours, I reminded myself. Not here. I had to be careful or I might blow our cover as easily as Evan.

"Stick close to me." Evan's tone was low and reassuring as he placed a hand on my lower back. I nodded, feeling a little safer with him at my side.

A well-dressed man approached us. "Please make yourselves comfortable in the sitting area. Caterina will see

you shortly.”

“Thank you.” Evan guided me to a plush sofa, and I tried to keep my anxiety from showing. I forced myself to take slow, deep breaths, attempting to steady my racing thoughts.

“You look so fucking hot,” Evan whispered as he leaned in close, his breath tickling my ear. “I wish I could just devour you right now.”

“Maybe later,” I teased, offering him a small smile. “You’re supposed to be acting as my pimp, remember?”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” His face contorted into a scowl.

The door to the office swung open, revealing a tall blonde woman exuding an air of authority. Her icy blue eyes met mine, though she commanded the attention of the entire room. “Stand up.”

I obeyed on instinct, but my legs trembled slightly beneath me. She scrutinized me from head to toe, her gaze lingering on the exposed skin where the dress barely covered my thighs. It took all my strength not to shudder under her invasive stare.

“Come inside,” she said after a moment. Apparently, I’d passed her initial approval.

We followed her into the dimly lit office, Evan’s hand still firmly on my back as she rounded her desk and took a seat. We settled into the high-backed chairs on the other side of a massive mahogany desk. Caterina shuffled some papers, glancing at them before looking up at Evan.

“I never took you for this type of entrepreneur, Mr. Guerrero,” she said coolly.

“Everyone’s got to make money somehow,” Evan said. The sleaze in his tone, however, took me by surprise. I had to remind myself it was all an act. “And I have a good eye for quality.”

Caterina’s gaze drifted over to me, and I held my breath, appearing calm and confident so I’d look the part I was playing. She leaned forward, clasping her hands together on

the desk. “So, Mariah, let’s get straight to the point. Tell me about your limits. Are you willing to sleep with your clients?”

I swallowed hard, taken aback by the question, but I forced myself to maintain eye contact. “Well,” I said hesitantly, improvising. “I’ve never actually...been with a man before.” My cheeks flushed, but I pushed through the embarrassment. “But I’m open to new experiences.”

Caterina’s eyes widened, and she licked her lips in anticipation, her mouth curving into a cat-like smile. “You’re telling me you’re a virgin? My, my, there are plenty of men who’d pay top dollar to deflower such a beauty.”

My stomach twisted into knots, but I kept my composure, looking down demurely and letting my hair fall over my face like a shield. I could sense the tension coursing through Evan as his hands balled into fists, but somehow he managed to keep himself in check.

“Of course,” I said, trying my best to sound innocent and naive. “If that’s what they want.”

Caterina leaned back in her chair, a predatory grin spreading across her face. “Oh, I’m sure we’ll have no trouble finding clients for you, darling.”

I forced a smile, my heart pounding in my chest. All I wanted was to get out of this room and away from this woman, but we had to see this through, for Evan, for our family, for all the girls who’d suffered at Tomas’s hands.

“In that case,” Evan said, “We’re looking forward to working with you, Caterina.”

“Likewise.” Her eyes lingered on me one last time before returning to her paperwork. “Now, let’s discuss the details about your cut for recruiting this lovely girl here.”

I glanced sideways at Evan, my heartbeat quickening as I wondered how he’d shift the conversation toward our true purpose. He leaned back in his chair, a confident smirk on his lips.

“Actually, Caterina, my price isn’t a percentage.” He crossed his arms over his broad chest. “What I want is for you

to pull your investments from Tomas Hawthorne's casinos... and stop providing girls to him altogether."

Caterina's perfectly manicured eyes flew up in surprise, but she quickly recovered, laughing lightly. "Evan, darling, we both know that's where the real money is. Why on earth would I do that?"

"Because," Evan said in a cold tone, "if you don't, I'll expose what happened to those underaged girls who were assaulted at Tomas's hands. I have their names, and I'm not afraid to go public with them."

Caterina's laughter died in her throat, and her face went pale. She tried to play it off, forcing a smile as she waved a hand in dismissal. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really?" Evan challenged, leaning forward with a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Because I also have video footage of the assaults, as well as the transaction records proving Tomas paid you to keep quiet."

My stomach churned at the thought of the horrifying evidence Evan had gathered, and at the idea that Tomas filmed such things, but I knew in my heart it was true. He'd threatened to do as much to me. It was all the more reason to bring this corrupt empire to the ground.

Caterina stared at him, wide-eyed and speechless, clearly struggling to maintain her composure. Evan held eye contact, a fierce determination in his face which made me so proud. He was braver and stronger than any man I'd ever known, and his heart was just as big. My love wouldn't rest until justice was served.

"Pull your investments and stop providing girls to Tomas," he said again. "That's my price. Take it or leave it."

"Show me the footage, then," Caterina said, her breathing heavy, eyes narrowing. "Prove it."

Evan didn't hesitate. He pulled a series of photos from his jacket pocket and laid them on the desk between us. My stomach churned, and I looked away, not wanting to see what images they held.

As if that wasn't enough, Evan produced another document and placed it alongside the photos—evidence of the undocumented girls exploited by Tomas and his associates.

I wondered how Evan managed to acquire such damning proof. But as I glanced at him, a small grin tugging at the corner of my lips, I realized it must have been Jax's doing.

“Still think I'm bluffing?”

Caterina wore a mask of rage and fear while she stared at the incriminating evidence laid out before her. She clenched her fists, visibly struggling to maintain control.

“Fine,” she spat through gritted teeth. “You've got me. Well-played bringing her in here.” She glared at me. “But why? Why do this to me? Is this some kind of vendetta?”

“This isn't about you, Caterina. It's about Tomas. Take my deal, hold up your end of the bargain, and I'll make sure all of this is erased from existence, and that Tomas can't use it against you later.”

“You're asking me to sacrifice a fortune!” Caterina said, her eyes flicking back and forth between the documents and Evan's unyielding expression. “How can you expect me to choose?”

“Because sometimes there are more important things than money,” Evan said. “And with one phone call, this will be released to the public. Do you really want to take that risk? I've set up an account for those girls who'll be out of a job once you pull your stake. It's more than enough to compensate their income loss, and whatever portion you'll lose in the process. Plus, there's enough in there for them to leave if they choose to do so.”

Caterina's nostrils flared, and her eyes blazed with fury, but she was cornered. The weight of Evan's words hung heavy in the air, leaving no room for further argument. Her fingers trembled as she looked down at the photos.

My heart raced as I watched her slowly reach for the phone on her desk. “Make a plan to remove our shares from the casino and halt all contracts for the girls we have out in New

Jersey,” she said into the phone in a wavering tone. After a beat, Caterina clenched her jaw and said, “I’m sure. Do it. I want the details on my desk today.”

She slammed the phone back onto its cradle, making me jump at the sudden noise. Her eyes locked onto Evan’s. “You better stick to your word, Guerrero, or I’ll bring hell down on you.”

Evan nodded. “Once I get confirmation that you’ve done your part, I’ll make sure to keep my end of the bargain.”

Caterina turned her attention toward me for the final time. “Are you sure you don’t want to come work for me, dear?”

Before I could respond, Evan’s protective growl filled the air, making Caterina flinch. “I’ll see your death before that ever happens,” he said.

Caterina swallowed hard and forced a smile. “Understood.”

We stood to leave, but as we turned to the door, she spoke again, stopping us in our tracks.

“You should know, there are rumors Tomas is dabbling in something sinister. He’s been vague about the details, only mentioning a scheme that’d make us all even richer.”

Evan’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you telling me this?”

She shrugged. “If you’re going up against a man as powerful as him, you might want to know what you’re getting into.”

She didn’t say anything else, and Evan and I exchanged a glance before turning and leaving without another word.

The moment we stepped out of Caterina’s office, a heavy weight lifted from my chest. We made our way toward the elevators and the exit as quickly as possible, but I could see Evan was mulling over what she’d said, his jaw clenched tightly, eyes locked forward.

Once we were safely inside the car, Evan turned to me, his dark eyes filled with concern. “What do you think she meant?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea, but it’s all the more reason to keep Sofia out of his hands. The man is sick, Evan.”

He put a hand over his jaw, studying me. “Are you okay? I know that couldn’t have been easy for you.”

I gave him a small smile. “I’m fine. It was worth it in the end.” We got what we came for.

He leaned in to kiss me. “I can’t wait for this to be over,” he said, his breath a warm caress on my skin. “Are you ready to get back home? I know you were enjoying your time with Analise.”

Home. That word was on my mind a lot lately, especially since we’d been in Texas. I was coming to realize that home wasn’t just a place, it was the people you cared about, and the memories you made together. Evan meant *Texas* when he said home just now, but I wondered if he even recognized the full weight of his words.

“Of course. I can’t wait to see Sofia.” Some part of me sensed a lot of changes were coming. But I smiled in spite of it, feeling the warmth of his body next to mine, knowing that no matter where we went, I would always find home with him.

Chapter 13

Evan

The morning sun burned brightly when we landed on Sebastian's private airstrip, and the scent of freshly cut grass and distant wildflowers filled my nose as I walked down the stairs. It was good to be back.

A car was waiting to drive us back to the house, and we'd barely settled inside when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I glanced at Mariah, who looked at me expectantly.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I saw a text from an unknown number. I hoped it was Jax's new burner and he had good news. Once I saw the message, I just smiled.

Caterina is out and the records are wiped.

That meant two of Tomas's biggest backers were gone, leaving his casino empire vulnerable. If everything went according to plan, his company's worth would plummet, giving me the leverage I needed for Porter's resignation.

"Good news?" Mariah said, searching my face.

"Better than good." I pulled her closer and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Our plan is working."

Her eyes sparkled with excitement, yet I could see the gears turning. "What happens next? When Tomas finds out?"

"That's what I'm counting on." My protective instincts flared while I considered all the ways he might react when he realized what we were doing. "I won't let him near you, Mariah, I swear."

She nodded, though she looked hesitant as well.

I kissed her again. “This is all going exactly how I planned. It won’t be long now.”

We arrived at the house, and the sense of relief at being home eased some of my tension. I quickly went to Sebastian’s office to brief him on the new development, then I went in search of Sofia. At last, I found her in the family room with Mariah, playing on the floor as the sun streamed in through the windows. I stood in the doorway and watched them, my love for these two girls stronger than ever. All I wanted was to have a life full of moments like these.

There was still much to do, though, and after cuddling Sofia and covering her with a dozen kisses, I found myself pacing the living room while she got back to playing.

“Evan, you’re gonna wear a hole in the floor at this rate.” Mariah looked up at me, reaching for my hand as I passed by. I paused, and she pulled on my hand. “Why don’t you sit down and relax for a minute?”

Relaxing wasn’t exactly my strong suit, especially with everything at stake. All I wanted was the news that’d signal the next phase of our plan.

But I knew she was right, too. I had to keep my head clear and focused, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

I took a deep breath and settled back down beside her on the couch. “I just want to hear something.”

“Patience, Evan,” Mariah whispered, resting her head on my shoulder. “We’ve come this far. Like you said, everything is coming together.”

We sat there for a while, watching as Sofia played with her toys, but after a bit she became fussy.

“Okay, little one,” Mariah said, standing up off the couch and scooping Sofia in her arms. “Time for your nap.”

I stood and walked to the back window, staring out over the endless stretch of land. More than anything, I wanted to hold my girls close, protect them from the coming storm. We were making headway, but there were still battles to fight, and our future together depended on the success of our plan.

Sebastian appeared in the doorway a few moments later. “Evan, we have news.”

I spun around. “Good or bad?”

“Come up to my office and decide for yourself.”

I followed him up the stairs and down the hall, my mind racing. Had Tomas discovered our game? Or was our plan falling apart when it’d barely begun?

Sebastian closed the office door behind us and walked to his computer, clicking on an audio file. The sound of Tomas’s voice filled the room, his fury palpable as he raged at someone on the other end of the line.

“What the hell is going on?” he demanded. “Why are my stakeholders dropping like flies?”

Another responded, wary and placating. I could only assume he was one of Tomas’s advisors. “I have no idea, sir, but it’s not looking good for us. I suggest you call the other stakeholders and butter them up so they don’t follow suit. The last thing we need is more disinvestment.”

My heart thundered as I stared at Sebastian, the weight of our situation bearing down on me. We’d set the wheels in motion, but it sounded like this had taken on a life of its own. The structure Tomas had built his empire on was crumbling.

“Jax sent this.” Sebastian clicked the mouse again. “Tomas is starting to feel the pressure.”

“Good,” I said, clenching my fists. “He deserves to feel it tenfold for everything he’s done.”

“Agreed. But we can’t let our guard down, Evan. We’re walking a tightrope here, and one wrong move could send us plummeting.”

Our plan was going exactly as we’d hoped, but we were far from safe. We had to be on the lookout for anything Tomas might throw our way.

“Let’s keep pushing forward. Tomas won’t know what hit him.”

Sebastian nodded, gesturing to his computer again as he clicked a few more times. “He’s already feeling it. Look at this, Evan. Word is already spreading that the casino’s losing major backers.”

I studied the screen: the declining stocks, the news articles on the subject. His numbers were plummeting.

“I can’t believe this is working.”

“Money talks,” Sebastian said, a grim smile on his lips. “The world is a greedy place. People pay attention when it comes to their money.”

“Do you think he knows it’s us yet?”

Sebastian put a hand over his jaw. “It won’t be long before he catches on, if he hasn’t already.” That’s what we were counting on. “We just have to be careful about how we respond. They can’t know someone on the inside has been helping us.”

“Jax,” I muttered. I’d been so sure we couldn’t trust Tomas’s son. Now it appeared I’d been mistaken. He’d been on our side all along, risking everything to bring his father down. “We can’t let Tomas find out.”

“Exactly.” Sebastian rounded the desk and rested a hand on my shoulder. “We continue to hit him where it hurts, but we must remember what a delicate game we’re playing. One wrong move could cost us everything.”

Dragon fire burned within me at the thought of failure. It was a possibility I wouldn’t even entertain. “Then, let’s make sure we don’t make any wrong moves.”

Sebastian’s eyes were filled with the same determination. “We’ll bring Tomas down and protect those we love. And when he falls,” Sebastian said, a fierce glint in his eye, “we’ll be there to make sure it’s for good.”

* * *

It took three days for Tomas to crack. I was in the kitchen making coffee when Sebastian burst in, a triumphant grin on his face.

“Another one of Tomas’s backers just pulled out.” He practically vibrated with anticipation, a world of difference from his typically stoic demeanor.

“Tell me more.” I sat the coffee pot down, grabbing my mug and following him to his office. He updated me along the way.

“A large distribution company received an anonymous email exposing their fraudulent dealings with him. They were using undocumented workers that he provided, underpaying and overworking them. Now they’re cutting ties with him to save their image.”

“That’s exactly what the bastard deserves. The more people turning against him, the better. He’s going to have a hard time recovering from this.”

“That’s the plan,” Sebastian concurred. “And it’s working even better than we expected.”

We’d barely made it to the office when Sebastian’s phone rang. He glanced at the screen, then back at me, his expression tight. “Speak of the Devil.”

He answered the call and put it on speaker.

“Sebastian, you bastard,” Tomas snarled from the other end of the line. “What the hell are you doing? You and Evan are sticking your noses where they don’t belong, messing with my business.”

“I’d heard rumors about your dirty laundry piling up,” Sebastian said. “But I can’t take credit for that.”

“Stop playing dumb,” Tomas said in a growl. His rage was palpable. “Whatever you’re up to, whatever you’re telling people, you need to stop. If you don’t back off, there *will* be hell to pay.”

“Threats don’t become you, Tomas.” I remained calm and steady, despite the pure hatred coursing through my veins.

This man was my mortal enemy. A murderer. I was going to enjoy watching everything he'd built crumble to the ground. "But if you're looking for someone to blame, perhaps you should take a long, hard look in the mirror."

"Your feigned ignorance is pathetic," Tomas said. "You think I don't know you two were spotted speaking with Ronald? And I'm well aware of your recent activities in New York." His laugh had a dark, coarse glee to it. "Though, I must say, Mariah would make a lovely addition to Caterina's offerings."

Fire churned within me, enraged that he'd dare speak about my mate like that. "You deserve everything you get, Hawthorne."

Sebastian placed a hand on my arm, shaking this head slightly: a warning not to let him get to me.

"Ha! You underestimate me. Both of you. You've gone too far, messed with my business."

But I couldn't hold back. "That's all it's about to you, isn't it, Tomas?" I said. "Greed. Power. All you care about is getting more. You don't care who you hurt along the way."

Tomas chuckled. "Oh, you mean like your mommy?"

I saw red, and my wings unfurled from my back, knocking over several lamps and vases in Sebastian's office. Sebastian's gaze was piercing as he stared me down, silently willing me to keep it together.

"Enough of this," he said. "What's your point, Tomas? Why did you call? Just to fling accusations?"

"I'm calling to let you know I'm onto you, and if you don't stop, there will be consequences."

Sebastian merely smiled, unfazed by the threat. "If you're looking for skeletons in our closets, you won't find any. The only one I had was the fact that I had an illegitimate son." My chest tightened, but Sebastian caught my eye and gave a small, reassuring smile. "While I may not be proud of everything I've done, I don't regret Evan's existence. My businesses are legitimate, unlike yours."

“Keep pushing me, and you’ll regret it,” Tomas said.

“Are you done throwing your tantrums, Tomas?” Sebastian said disdainfully, “We have better things to do than listen to your empty threats.”

For a moment, there was silence on the line, but Tomas’s fury was like a living, breathing thing. Time to push him even further.

“Tomas.” I was back in control. “What would you be willing to give up to make all this stop?”

“I knew you were behind this, Guerrero,” he snarled.

“I never said that. I just want to know the price you’d be willing to pay to make it stop.”

“Are you suggesting I drop the custody suit?” He practically spat the words out. “That’s not happening.”

I grinned. He thought he knew what we were after, but he was short-sighted to think it only went as far as Sofia. Even better, I knew now that I didn’t even need him to do it. All I had to do was keep our end of the deal with Rosalind. We had Tomas exactly where we wanted him, and he didn’t even know it.

I stayed neutral, though, not letting my satisfaction shine through just yet. “Here’s what I want. There are several employees working under your thumb, desperate to get out. Let them out of their contracts.”

He didn’t speak for a moment as he considered my words. No doubt he didn’t see the bigger game at play. “Names,” he said at last, seething.

Sebastian stepped in, listing off a few upper-level team members, including Porter. They’d been carefully selected so he wouldn’t make the connection. I held my breath, waiting for Tomas’s response.

“I’ll release two of them,” he growled. “But not Porter.”

My fists clenched, and I fought to keep my emotions in check. “That isn’t the deal, Tomas. All or nothing.”

The silence that followed was heavy with tension, the seconds ticking by as Sebastian and I stared at each other. This was it, the moment we'd been working for. If we pulled this off, the custody case would be as good as over.

Tomas finally spoke, his words dripping with venom as if he were speaking through his fangs. I wouldn't be surprised if he was. "Fine. Have it your way, but mark my words, this isn't over. Both of you will pay for this."

The call ended abruptly, and I exhaled, hardly daring to believe it. We'd pushed Tomas to the edge and forced him to agree to our terms.

"Let's not get too excited just yet," Sebastian warned, as if sensing my thoughts. "We still need to ensure Porter's safety. Tomas is a vicious beast, and he could very well have the boy killed. That would make getting Rosalind on our side dead in the water."

He was right, of course. The last thing we needed was for Tomas to catch on to our true intentions and thwart our efforts in one fell swoop.

"I'm going to make some calls," Sebastian said. "We need our security team on Porter at all times."

I watched as Sebastian worked, marveling at how calm and in control he was. He handled the situation expertly, giving the team explicit details on Porter and stressing that his safety was top priority.

"I want a team on him constantly," Sebastian said. "Keep us updated on any developments, especially anything that seems suspicious."

When he hung up the phone, I felt a surge of gratitude for Sebastian. He'd done so much for me—for my entire life. He'd taken me in when I was just a young boy, raised me as part of his own family, and now he was risking so much to help me protect mine. It was humbling, and I didn't know how to express just how much it meant to me.

"Thank you, Sebastian," I said quietly. "For everything."

He simply clapped a hand on my shoulder. “We’re in this together, son. Always.”

“We’ve really put ourselves in some trouble,” I said, sighing. There was no going back now.

He shrugged. “This mess with Tomas had to come to a head. I have no regrets about stepping in and helping you. That’s what family does.”

I swallowed, unable to speak as I held his gaze.

“When will you accept that I’d do anything for you, Evan?”

His words resonated deep within me, strengthening the bond we shared. We were one step closer to having the lawsuit dropped, and my heart swelled with relief, knowing my baby girl wouldn’t be taken from me. But there was still much to do, and danger remained ever-present.

After I left Sebastian’s office, I leaned against the wall in the hallway for a moment, closing my eyes as I drew in a deep breath. For Sofia, for Mariah, I had to stay strong. I had to be the one they could depend on.

I quietly made my way downstairs, listening to see if Sofia was up from her nap yet. I entered our bedroom, the door creaking imperceptibly as it opened. Mariah and Sofia lay together on the bed, the afternoon sunlight pouring through the windows, bathing them in a warm, golden glow. My heart nearly burst with the love I felt for them.

Mariah’s eyes glanced toward me from where she was watching a comatose Sofia, holding a finger to her lips. Sofia’s chest rose and fell, her auburn hair a contrast on the white pillow. As I looked at the precious, innocent baby who relied on me, I silently vowed to protect both her and Mariah at all costs.

Mariah deftly climbed from the bed. I angled my head toward the hallway, and we crept back out and shut the door behind us.

“How did it go with Sebastian?”

“Tomas called. He knows it’s us.” I watched her face closely as she processed this. She swallowed, then nodded slowly, taking a breath and squaring her shoulders.

“Okay. That’s good.”

“It’s great. We convinced him to let Porter go.”

“Do you think he will?”

“Sebastian has a security team on him. It should be fine.” I didn’t want to worry her with my own concerns about what Tomas would do. For now, things were headed in the right direction, and that’s what we needed to focus on.

“I know I’ve said it before...” She hesitated, her fingers clenching and unclenching. “Just...promise me you’ll be careful, Evan. I can’t even think about anything happening to you.”

“Nothing will,” I said, running my knuckles over her cheek. “I’ll do whatever it takes to protect all of us. Tomas won’t get anywhere near us again.”

Chapter 14

Mariah

Two days had passed since our return from New York. The news that Evan and Sebastian's plan was working filled me with hope, but the calm that'd settled over our lives felt precarious. I didn't know what to expect next. I only knew we couldn't let our guard down—not when Tomas Hawthorne loomed in the shadows.

The sun was easing toward the horizon as I stood on the back porch, the scent of flowers filling the air. To anyone who didn't know better, life would seem perfect out here, but I couldn't shake the unease coiling inside me like a snake, ready to strike. Even the soft rustle of leaves in the breeze seemed to whisper in warning.

“Everything okay?”

Evan startled me, and I turned to see him stepping out onto the porch. His dark eyes were filled with concern, those strong shoulders tense beneath his shirt.

I sighed as I leaned against the railing. “It's been too quiet these past couple of days. I can't shake this feeling that something's about to happen.”

Evan exhaled slowly, running a hand through his dark hair. He looked out into the growing darkness.

“I know what you mean,” he said quietly. “But we can't live our lives in fear, Mariah. We have to keep moving forward, for Sofia's sake.”

I nodded, though the knot in my stomach refused to loosen. As much as I wanted to believe that we could build a happy, normal life for ourselves, the shadow of Tomas remained. We were in limbo until Hawthorne was eliminated as a threat.

“It’s just hard to act like everything is normal.” I turned and faced him.

Evan’s eyes met mine, and he came closer, wrapping me in his arms. “We just have to try our best.” He kissed my forehead. “Any news about your exams yet?”

“I haven’t checked my email today,” I said.

“Well, why don’t we go do that now? Maybe it will take your mind off things.”

I nodded. “Maybe.”

“Come on.” He took my hand. “Let’s go find out.”

We went upstairs to our room, and I grabbed my laptop and settled down on the couch in the sitting area of the bedroom suite, perching it on my knees. I opened my email, my heart jumping up in my throat when I saw there was, in fact, a response from my favorite of the two schools I’d applied to.

I glanced up at Evan, who was standing behind me. “It’s from the school.” I bit my lip, moving my cursor to hover over the email.

He grinned. “What are you waiting for? Let’s see what they have to say.”

My pulse raced as I opened the email and scanned the contents. Then my jaw dropped.

I’d done it. I’d passed the entrance exam for the degree program. I squealed in excitement, hands flying up to cover my mouth as happy tears filled my eyes.

Evan leaned in, reading over my shoulder, then he let out a loud whoop, vaulting himself over the couch and pulling me to my feet. “That’s amazing, Mariah. You did it, just like I knew you could.”

His body pressed against me, and his lips found mine.

“Thank you,” I said when we pulled apart, my hands resting on his chest. “I couldn’t have done this without you, without your support, your belief in me. All of it.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that, Mariah.” Evan was full of warmth. “You deserve all the happiness and success in the world. I might have helped you study, but you’re the one who did this. You decided on what you wanted, and you took action to make it happen.

“This deserves a celebration.” Evan’s eyes glinted with pride. “How about a family dinner? I know everyone else would love a chance to celebrate your success.”

“That sounds perfect.” Hopefully it’d take all of our minds off everything that was happening.

It didn’t take long for Evan and Abi to put together the celebration dinner. The entire family was there, including Lucas and his mate Cynthia. We hadn’t seen them much lately. Evan said Lucas were attending clan business, while he and Sebastian were occupied with the Hawthornes.

As we all gathered around the large table in the dining room, I looked around at the people who’d welcomed me in as part of their own family. I’d never had such a support system before, never belonged to a family like this, and it was something I was coming to treasure. The meal was filled with laughter and the clinking of glasses as we toasted to my success.

“Congratulations again, Mariah,” Cynthia said warmly from where she sat beside me. “You deserve all the good things coming your way.”

“Thank you, Cynthia. That means a lot to me.” I gave her a smile, hoping we’d get to know each other better soon.

Lucas grinned, clinking his glass to mine, too. “We’re glad we could be here for this. Overseeing the businesses out of state has kept us away, but it’s nice to be home again with family.”

Home. Family. Two things that'd come to mean more to me than I ever could have imagined. Despite the road ahead of us, it kept me grounded, safe and secure in the knowledge that I wasn't alone. The evening wore on, conversation flowing effortlessly between us all. It was a true family gathering, something I'd craved for so long, and I was immensely grateful for these precious moments where the shadow of our situation faded, allowing joy to shine through.

As the last of the dessert plates were cleared away, Evan leaned in and whispered, "How about a walk outside? The night is beautiful, and I want some time alone with you."

"Sounds perfect," I said, reaching for his hand.

"You two go on," Abi said. "I'll take care of clean up."

"And I'll take care of Sofia," Cynthia said.

I wouldn't say no to that. Evan and I thanked them and strolled out into the moonlit night.

We walked in silence for a while, taking the familiar path toward the vineyard. Eventually, Evan spoke. "There's a story from my childhood I want to share with you."

I looked up at him, squeezing his hand in encouragement. "I'd love to hear it."

He cleared his throat, staring up at the night sky. "It was shortly after my mom and clan were murdered, not long after Sebastian and Abi brought me back here to live with them." He paused and swallowed. "I had a terrible nightmare one night."

My heart ached at the pain he must've experienced. "I can't imagine how hard it was for you," I whispered, squeezing his hand tighter.

He nodded, though his eyes were far away. "After waking up in a panic, I searched the house for my mom, only to be struck by the painful reality that she was gone forever. I was beside myself, not thinking clearly, feeling like I might implode from the ache in my chest. I ran out into the woods, but I hadn't been here long. I ended up getting lost in the forest."

I swallowed against the lump in my throat, terrified he'd suffered alone in his grief. "Did someone find you?"

"Sebastian." He glanced down at me with soft, sad eyes. "He was always there from the moment he brought me back here with him. He found me huddled under a tree, crying my heart out. It was a defining moment, when I realized just how important family truly is. I want that for Sofia, too."

Hearing Evan open up about such a vulnerable memory touched me deeply. I knew how much he'd struggled with the loss of his parents, and the fact that he was willing to share this with me connected us on a deeper level.

The trees weren't as dense once we drew closer to the vineyard, and Evan gestured at the gnarled grape vines. "That wasn't here when I was first brought over as a kid," he said as he sank into his memories. "I remember running through these woods, completely lost and terrified. It's strange to think about how long ago that was. Seems like another lifetime. Losing my parents was devastating, but finding a new family here... it helped me heal."

"Sebastian and Abi must've been so supportive," I mused, thinking of the strong bonds that tied the dragon shifter community together, the bond Evan and the Careys still shared, despite the hardships they'd had to overcome.

"They were," he said. "But it took a long time for me to settle in here. It wasn't easy, adjusting to a new life without my mom. I'll always be grateful for everything Sebastian and Abi did for me. Some of my best memories are on these lands." He stopped and turned to me. "I want Sofia to have that same sense of belonging."

"Family is everything," I whispered, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. We'd both endured so much in our lives, but now we had each other.

"Exactly." He pulled me further into his strong arms. "Together, we're going to make sure Sofia has the best family she could ever ask for. I've been thinking about our future, though, especially for Sofia. After being here, then going back to New York..." He paused, shaking his head.

“What is it, Evan?”

“I’ve been thinking about selling the penthouse. The city is no place for a dragon shifter to grow up. I want her to have a real home, open space, where she can fly freely and learn what it means to be a shifter. I want her to grow up surrounded by family.”

He watched me closely, as if he wasn’t sure how his statement would land. New York was my home, and what he was saying carried heavy meaning. If that was what he really wanted to provide for Sofia, staying in the city simply wouldn’t work.

“I understand that.” I played with my hair so my hands had something to do. “If you’re asking if I’d be okay with that—with leaving New York...” I paused, gathering my thoughts. “A month ago, I never would’ve imagined I’d consider leaving the home I’ve known for so long, but now I realize that my home isn’t simply a place. My home is with you. With Sofia.”

He gathered me in his arms, holding me tightly. “You have no idea how glad I am to hear you say that.”

I rested my head on his chest. He wanted me to be part of their lives, to help him raise Sofia as if she were my own, to make a home and a life together. It was everything I’d ever dreamed of. “We’re in this thing together, and we’ll figure it out together, too.”

“Would you want to help me choose a home for us?” he said, his eyes searching mine for any hesitation. “I mean, once all of this is over. Have you ever had a dream home in mind?”

The earnestness there had me tightening my arms around his waist. No one had ever cared about my opinion or dreams like this before. “I’m honored that you want me involved in such a significant decision at all. Growing up, my aunt was very strict. She never encouraged me to dream big. Honestly, I don’t think she gave a damn about my future.”

A growl rumbled in his chest, but I pulled back, not wanting to dwell further on the past. I took his hand, leading him farther into the vineyard.

I tried to recall some of the dreams I'd had when I was younger, when the world was full of possibilities: a house with a sprawling garden, a place where children could play safely and explore their surroundings, a home filled with love, laughter, and stability. They were possibilities I'd all but dismissed. Yet here I was, with everything I'd ever wanted being presented to me.

"When I was younger," I said after a few minutes, "most of my dreams revolved around getting away from my aunt. I wanted to go off to college, build a life of my own. But I never had the money to get started, so I became a nanny instead."

"Mariah, you've done an incredible job as a nanny," Evan said. "You've given Sofia so much love and care. And now you're pursuing your degree. You have no idea how proud I am of you."

My cheeks flushed at his praise, and I smiled, feeling truly grateful for this man who'd become such an important part of my life. "Thank you, Evan. That means a lot to me."

"Of course," he said, squeezing my hand. "So, have you ever thought about what kind of home you'd want? What it'd look like?"

I let out a soft laugh, realizing I'd never really let myself consider it before. "Honestly, I never thought I'd even have the chance to pick out my dream home. I figured I'd be living in my tiny apartment forever. But if I had to choose something, I'd want a home that's warm and inviting, with lots of natural light. A place where Sofia can play and explore, where she can fly free, and we can create beautiful memories together."

Evan's smile was full of love when he stopped again and brought a hand to my cheek. "That sounds perfect. We'll find that place, I promise. As soon as all of this is over, I'm going to devote myself to making all your dreams come true."

It was more than I'd ever hoped for as a young child, and made me even more determined to get through this, to bring Tomas down and start our dream life. My heart swelled with love for this man and our little family as tears spilled down my cheeks.

“Mariah? Are you all right?” Evan said.

I nodded, smiling through the tears. “I’m more than all right. I just never imagined I’d be this happy.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” He pulled me close, wrapping me in his strong arms. “You’re the missing piece that makes my life complete, Mariah.

So full of love I thought I’d collapse, I kissed Evan with all the passion in me. Eventually, though, we had to make our way back home.

As we approached the house, hand in hand, our temporary reprieve from reality was shattered by the sight of Sebastian coming outside, his face tight with worry.

“Sebastian, what’s wrong? Did something happen?” Evan asked, instantly on alert.

“It’s Porter,” Sebastian said. “My security team lost sight of him. We’re reviewing the security footage now, but I have a feeling Tomas isn’t holding up his end of the bargain.”

My stomach dropped, and I could feel the fear creeping into my bones. “What can we do?”

“Right now, we’re waiting for more information,” Sebastian said with a grimace. “But be ready to act when the time comes. Tomas won’t hesitate to make a move against us if he thinks he has the upper hand.”

“Damn it,” Evan growled, his grip on my hand tightening. “Just when things seemed to be going our way.”

“Come inside,” Sebastian said. “We need to come up with a backup plan.”

Evan nodded, following behind his father. As we walked back into the house, I felt dread settle in my chest. For all the happiness and love we’d found, there was still danger lurking in the shadows. For every moment of joy we had, there was always something waiting to pull us back to reality.

We’d barely made it inside when the sound of Sebastian’s phone ringing shattered the tense silence. He stopped and turned to Evan, a grim expression on his face.

“It’s Tomas.”

The worry I’d been suppressing now bubbled to the surface like a volcano about to erupt.

“Put it on speaker,” Evan said, and Sebastian answered the call. My heart raced in anticipation as I tried to steady my uneven breathing.

“Sebastian,” Tomas said. His snake-like tone made my skin crawl. I fought the urge to gag and clung tighter to Evan. “I hope I’m not interrupting your evening.”

“Cut the bullshit, Tomas. What do you want?” Sebastian said, growling.

“So, you want to get right to the point this time?” Tomas chuckled. “If only you were the one calling the shots here. Fortunately for me, that’s not the case. I’ve discovered something interesting, you see—something that gives me the upper hand.”

He paused dramatically, evidently enjoying dragging this out.

“What do you want, Tomas?” Evan barked.

He clicked his tongue, and I could practically picture the sick satisfaction on his face when he said, “I’ve discovered someone from my own team has been conspiring against me.”

Evan tensed up, and my stomach dropped, nausea roiling in my gut. There was only one person he could be talking about: Jax.

“It seems my bastard son still hasn’t learned his lesson. He’s been helping you all along, hasn’t he?” His tone turned lethal. “Make no mistake, he’ll pay the price for his betrayal. And as for our deal... consider it off.”

This couldn’t be happening, not now, not when we were so close to getting what we wanted—to putting an end to Tomas’s reign and finally starting to build a life together. Then there was Jax. He’d done nothing but help us from the very beginning. What would Tomas do to him? What price would he exact from his own son?

“Listen closely, Sebastian,” Tomas said, the threat clear in his voice. “I’m coming for what’s mine, and I will stop at nothing to get it.”

The line went dead, leaving us all staring at each other in shock. Anger mingled with utter fear at this new development, and my knees felt like jelly.

“*Fuck*,” Evan said, snarling, slamming his fist into the wall as his own rage got the best of him. I winced at the sound but held onto him, needing his strength to keep me from sinking to the floor.

“Sebastian, we have to do something,” I pleaded as panic set in. “We can’t let Tomas hurt Jax. Who knows what he’ll do to him?”

“I know, Mariah,” he said, his face a dark mask of determination. “We’re going to figure this out. He won’t get away with this.”

Anger rolled off Evan in waves, like heat from the flames, his eyes burning gold. “Sebastian, we need to move quickly. We have to find out where Tomas has taken Porter and get to Jax before it’s too late.”

Sebastian clenched his jaw, his gaze locked on the phone. “Let’s start with my security team. They’ve been watching the Hawthornes, so they can give us the best lead. At the very least, we’ll have a jumping off point.”

Evan nodded tersely and turned to me. The fierceness in his eyes softened ever so slightly. “Mariah, it’s going to be okay. We’ll find Jax and make sure Tomas doesn’t get to him.”

I felt like I was going to be sick. Jax had done nothing but help us from the beginning. If not for him helping me escape, who knew what Tomas might have done to me? He’d helped us figure out what we needed to do to win the custody case, and risked his own safety to do so. Now he was paying for that kindness.

I swallowed hard, not wanting to think about what Tomas might do.

Evan reached out to gently cup my cheek, his thumb brushing away the tears spilling over. “It’s going to be okay,” he said, determination in his eyes. “We’ll make this right. I swear it.”

I nodded, clinging to the hope he offered, but I couldn’t keep the thought from slipping in.

What if we were already too late?

Chapter 15

Evan

Things were going so smoothly for us. Too smoothly, in fact. *Damn it.* I should have been more prepared for this. I should have questioned it when Tomas agreed to our terms, but I'd been so damn sure we had this in the bag. I'd wanted to believe it could be that simple. Now we were paying the price.

I pulled Mariah into my arms as her eyes flooded with tears. What if I'd trusted Jax sooner? What if I'd done more to ensure his safety?

"Mariah, I'm so sorry," I whispered. "If I'd listened to my instincts and trusted Jax from the start, I could've protected him better."

"No, Evan." She shook her head as she lifted her gaze to mine, her light brown eyes glistening with tears. "None of this is your fault. Every bit of this is on Tomas. We'll find Jax. We can make this right." The look of hope in her eyes—the belief that *I* could make this right—nearly broke me. Could I save him from Tomas's wrath? What if we were already too late?

"Mariah's right," Sebastian said from where he leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. He looked worried, but there was also that determined glint in his eye. "We won't let Tomas win. We *will* find Jax, and we'll get Porter back, too. This isn't over."

Sebastian pulled out his phone and began making calls, the few silver streaks in his hair catching the light as he paced the room. He'd gone firmly into alpha mode now.

A few minutes later, his security team sent over the footage they'd gathered. We followed Sebastian to his office to see what it might reveal, and watched as he clicked through the files. Most of the footage was of Porter, as we needed him to be safe if we wanted Rosalind's cooperation. I tried not dwell on how all of our hard work might be in jeopardy.

"It looks like he was picked up in an unregistered vehicle." Sebastian paused the video and pointed at a car with no tags. He backed up the video, then zoomed in as the footage showed a man being shoved into the car before it pulled away.

I ground my teeth. "Any idea where they took him?"

Sebastian shook his head but pulled his phone out and began making calls once more. Mariah clung to me, utterly distraught as he worked.

"Okay," he said, glancing at us as he ended one call and immediately dialed someone else. "I think we've got a lead. One of my guys managed to follow the car. They took him to a warehouse in Atlantic City."

"You've got the address?" Sebastian demanded into his phone. He listened for a moment, then nodded. "Can you put your drones on the property now? I want a live feed."

Within minutes, drones were launched and were flying over the property Porter had been taken to. The live footage streamed on Sebastian's monitor, and we watched, hoping to see something, *anything* that'd let us know what we were facing. Before long, there was activity along the back of the warehouse. A different car pulled up to the nearly obscured bay, and Mariah gasped when Jax stumbled out. Even in the footage, he looked battered and bruised, limping as he was shoved toward a metal door next to the bay.

"Damn it." I slammed my fist on the desk. "Tomas is twisted enough that I'm sure he has no qualms about killing his own son."

Mariah shuddered, a sob catching in her throat, and her hand coming to her mouth as she shook her head. "No."

“Let’s not waste any more time,” Sebastian said, already dialing his pilot to ready the jet. “My team is on it, but I need to get there as fast as possible.”

How had this become my life? I never would’ve imagined I’d be back in this world of dragon shifters, much less entangled in this kind of situation. This went beyond the custody case. It was becoming a full-blown clan war.

But we owed it to Jax. He’d stuck his neck out to help us, and now he was in danger. It was time to face the battle ahead and secure the future of my family once and for all.

I turned to Sebastian once he ended the call with his pilot. “Your men. Are they trained for search and rescue?”

“Of course,” he said steadily. He was always such a solid rock. “I had them trained for situations like this. It was mostly due to my fear that Tomas would come after you again or try to take Lucas. I never thought it’d come to something like this, though.”

“I’m ready to go.” I was ready to lend Sebastian whatever he needed, despite Mariah gripping my arm while panic flashed in her eyes. “Whatever you need, just let me know.”

“Listen, Evan,” Sebastian said. “I don’t think that’s the best idea. You’re not trained for this kind of operation like my men are. They’re specialists. I think it would be safer if you stayed behind.”

“No fucking way,” I growled, even as Mariah’s grip tightened, her fingers digging into my arm. “This is my mess, and I won’t hide while somebody else cleans it up for me.”

“It’s our mess. We started this together,” Sebastian countered.

“All the more reason why I’m going to be right there with you to finish it.”

“Evan, I understand why you want to be involved, believe me. But having you there, untrained in this kind of mission, could put both yourself and others in danger. It’s essential that we all know what we’re doing out there. These men have been a team for years. They know each other’s every move.”

I clenched my jaw, keeping my temper at bay, but it was hard when my dragon's instincts were flaring, demanding I do whatever it took to protect those I loved, including my father.

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm not backing down on this, Sebastian. I'll listen to your orders and do whatever it takes to bring Jax and Porter back safely." I stared him down, determination etched across my face.

He sighed. "I don't like it, but I understand why you feel this way. If it were me, I'd be saying the same thing. If I agree to this, though, you have to promise you'll follow my lead and take orders, no matter what. There's no room for mistakes if we all want to make it back home in one piece."

I could see Mariah shaking her head from the corner of my eye, but this was something I had to do: for her, for Sofia, for all of us.

"I swear to it." I extended my hand. Sebastian clasped it firmly, and I knew that despite everything we'd been through, despite any unresolved feelings about the past and what he wanted for my future, we were united on this.

"Let's go save our family," Sebastian said. "I'm going to speak with Abi. Gather only what you need and meet me downstairs."

I nodded once, then took Mariah's hand and wordlessly led her from the office and downstairs to our room.

As soon as we were alone, she turned to me, her eyes full of tears. "Please reconsider this, Evan. This mission is too dangerous. Sebastian said so himself—you're not trained for it."

"Mariah, I have to do this. I can't let Jax and Porter pay the price for my error in judgment. I got the ball rolling on this. They're my responsibility."

She bit her lip as her gaze dropped to the floor. "I know, but I feel guilty. In a way, it's my fault. I brought Jax into this mess, and now he's in danger because of it."

I cupped her face in my hands, making her look at me. "Jax *chose* to help us, Mariah. He knew the risks, and he went

in willingly. You can't blame yourself for his decisions."

She nodded. "I'm so afraid of losing you," she whispered, so quietly I almost didn't hear it. But then she steeled herself, squaring her shoulders as she exhaled. "Just promise me you'll come back, Evan. Promise me you'll be careful."

"You aren't going to lose me, baby," I said, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. "You and Sofia are my world. I'm doing this for us. I swear nothing will happen to me."

Just then, Sebastian appeared in the open doorway, his expression serious. "The jet's ready, Evan. We need to go."

I grabbed the essentials, turning to give Mariah one last embrace before following Sebastian downstairs. I didn't look back as she watched us leave, afraid I might not be able to focus if I saw that fear in her eyes once more. I had to keep my mind alert, on the mission ahead.

"Remember your promise, Evan!" Mariah called after me. "I love you. Come back to us safe."

I did glance back at her then, despite the ball of dread that formed in my stomach. This was dangerous. There was the very real possibility that I might not come back if things went badly, but I wouldn't let her see that. "I will, I promise. Take care of our baby girl."

She nodded, tears streaming down her face, and I pulled her to me once more, brushing them away before covering her mouth with mine, letting all my love for her shine through.

"I love you." And then we left.

* * *

The tension in the jet was palpable while we soared through the sky, the steady thrum of the engines doing little to ease my nerves. I stared out the window, watching the clouds below us, but my mind was elsewhere.

Sebastian, seeming to sense my apprehension, leaned closer and spoke quietly. "Evan, are you sure you want to go

through with this? This is your last chance to change your mind.”

I turned to face him. “Porter’s safety is the key to protecting Sofia. We need him safe, and we owe Jax for everything he’s done for us. There’s no question in my mind that we have to see this through. That I have to.”

Sebastian nodded resolutely. “Okay, then.”

Once we touched down just outside Atlantic City, a black SUV was already waiting for us on the tarmac. The driver stepped out, a tall man with short-cropped hair and a no-nonsense expression that screamed military experience. He introduced himself as Colton Reeves, a rescue and tactical specialist.

“Let’s not waste time,” Colton said as we climbed into the vehicle. “I’ve been briefed on your situation. You both have unique strengths that we can use to our advantage, but remember, causing minimal damage is our priority.”

“Understood. Colton is the best of the best,” Sebastian told me.

“Your dragon forms should only be used as a last resort.” Colton looked directly at me, as if he were sizing me up, and from the look on his face, he viewed me as the wild card. “You two might be able to level the place, but be assured there are plenty of shifters there. The last thing we need is an all-out battle that could put Porter and Jax in even more danger.”

“Right,” I muttered, pushing down the growing impatience inside me. Every minute spent talking was another minute they were in danger.

“Trust me, Evan.” Colton sounded softer now. “I know what I’m doing. We’ll get them out safely.”

Sebastian met my gaze, his message clear: follow orders, no going rogue.

The sun was setting when we turned into the warehouse district, casting ominous shadows on the dilapidated old buildings. The atmosphere was rife with anticipation as the SUV pulled to a stop, parking down the road out of sight from

the entrance of Tomas's warehouse. We climbed out of the vehicle and gathered the tactical gear from the back.

"Remember, minimal damage," Colton whispered as he gave us a final once-over and we stealthily headed toward the building. I knew Colton's team was around, remaining out of sight, ready to provide reinforcement when needed. He and Sebastian had determined the best course of action was to go in with as few people as possible, calling on the others once we'd scoped out the place.

The smell of oil and rust filled my nostrils as we drew closer, keeping to the shadows, and I could hear the distant sound of muffled voices inside when we came upon the door Jax and Porter disappeared through.

"Ready?" Sebastian said, barely audible. He gripped my shoulder, his eyes without an ounce of fear or doubt. I nodded, swallowing hard, drawing on my inner strength to stay in control. As much as I wanted to burst through the doors in dragon form, burning a path of destruction, I knew it would be reckless. We had to use strategy.

Colton met our eyes, silently counting down from three on his fingers. As one, we turned, slipping through the shadows and entering the warehouse through the door.

I instantly knew we'd need backup when we were met with half a dozen armed guards, their faces twisting in surprise at our sudden appearance. But they'd been trained well. They didn't hesitate in coming for us.

Colton whistled, three short bursts: his cue for the team to move. The guards were already upon us, and adrenaline surged through my body as I fell into action, relying on my instincts. Fists flew, and I knocked a guard to the ground the next second, whirling as another came up behind me.

"Stick to the plan!" Colton shouted over the chaos, just as his team poured through the door. Colton caught my eye as I sent another guard sprawling. "Evan! This way."

I hesitated, then followed, aware I had to hold up my end of the bargain. Sebastian broke free of the fray as Colton's

team took over handling the guards, and I fell into step beside him as Colton led us through the warehouse. Our eyes scanned the dimly lit space, searching for any hint of where Jax and Porter might be hidden.

This was the part of our plan that couldn't be worked out ahead of time. We had no idea of the layout of this place, and we had to act fast.

"There," Sebastian hissed, pointing toward a door tucked away in the corner. It was guarded by two hefty men who looked ready to rip us apart. We moved as one, the sound of fighting echoing through the warehouse as we made our way across the room to the waiting threats. My heart pounded in my chest as my dragon rose up, ready to burn them to ash, but I couldn't let him take over. Not yet.

A growl rumbled in my chest as I cracked my knuckles. Sebastian caught my eye and gave a subtle nod. Together, we lunged at the guards, fists connecting with flesh, taking one of them down together while Colton took care of the other. Then the path to the door was clear.

"Come on," Colton said, glancing behind us at his team. The sounds of fighting echoed as we pushed through to find a darkened stairwell, looking as if it led far below ground. The air grew cold once we silently made our way down the stairs, the damp smell of mold clinging to the walls.

When we reached the bottom, it was only thanks to my enhanced vision that I was able to make out a near empty room. There, slumped against a wall, battered, but alive, was Jax. Relief washed over me.

"Jax!" My voice echoed off the concrete, and Colton sent me a warning look. He raised his gun, scanning the room as he went deeper into the darkness, while I rushed to Jax's side. Thankfully, he wasn't chained to a wall, but he might as well have been for all the strength he had left when I tried to help him to his feet. Getting him out was going to be a challenge, but we'd planned for this.

"Where's Porter?" I said as I slipped an arm around his waist, supporting most of his weight. He looked around,

disoriented, before shaking his head, wincing with each movement.

“I don’t know,” he managed to say. “They took him somewhere else.”

“Damn it.” I let out a string of curses under my breath. We’d come this far but still didn’t have them both. At least we had Jax. If we could just find Porter, we could get the hell out of here.

“Do you know the layout of this place?” I said, glancing up at Sebastian, who wore a grimace as Colton continued to search the dark room.

Jax’s voice was strained from pain and exhaustion. “You should have just left me to my fate.”

“Like hell we would,” I said. Not so long ago, I could barely stand the man. Now it was my mission to get him out alive. “You’re not dying today, Jax. Not on my watch.”

There was gratitude in his eyes, but there was something else there, too—something that looked a lot like guilt.

“Where’s Porter?” I demanded. “We can’t leave without him.”

He looked away, agony etched on his battered face. “It’s probably too late for him.”

My heart sank when I heard that. “What do you mean? What has Tomas done?”

Jax swallowed hard. The bruises on his neck meant he was in pain each time he tried. “I had my suspicions about what my dad was really up to, but I never thought he’d go this far.” He shook his head. “I didn’t want to believe it. And now...”

“Spit it out, Jax,” I said. We couldn’t wait around much longer. Surely an alarm had been triggered, and Tomas likely had his own backup ready for us. “We need to find Porter. Now.”

But before he could answer, one of Colton’s men came rushing down the stairs, breathless. “You might want to follow me, sir,” he said urgently, his gaze fixed on Colton.

“Is it Porter?” I said, hope and dread mingling in my chest.

“Let’s go.” Colton turned to follow his man, gesturing for us to as well.

“Can you walk?” I said to Jax as I helped him stand, glancing at Sebastian.

“Yeah, I’ll manage.” But he still leaned heavily on me for support. In a flash, Sebastian was on his other side, helping me practically carry Jax down the hall to another set of stairs. My mind was racing over what we might find when we climbed higher, my gut churning as I replayed Jax’s words. From how it sounded, Tomas’s plans were even darker and more twisted than we’d imagined.

The man leading our group moved quickly, the urgency in his steps fueling my own, and when we came to another section of the warehouse, I couldn’t shake the feeling that settled in the pit of my stomach. Something wasn’t right.

“Through there,” the man said, pointing to a door at the end of a hallway.

Colton went first, followed by the other. I took a deep breath, then exchanged a glance with Sebastian as we pushed through the door, bracing for whatever might lie beyond.

The sight that greeted us was enough to make my blood run cold. There, sprawled on the ground, was Porter, battered, bruised, and unmoving. A surge of relief washed over me when my enhanced hearing picked up the very faint sound of his heartbeat. He was alive, though barely.

“Porter!” I rushed to his side, leaving Jax to be supported by Sebastian. Even though I wanted to scoop him up and get the fuck out of this place, I knew better than to move him without assessing his injuries first.

“Is he okay?” Concern lined Sebastian’s face.

I gritted my teeth. “We need to get him out of here.”

“Guys,” Jax said in a croak, drawing our attention to the rest of the room.

In front of us, Colton and his man stood, staring into the dimly lit room. And that's when I noticed them: cages, nearly a dozen of them, all filled with terrified, shaking humans. Their eyes were wide with fear, silently pleading for help.

I glanced around the room as nausea roiled in my gut. I took in the cages, the gurneys, the medical equipment. The place looked like a twisted laboratory, and the realization made my stomach churn.

"Holy shit," I muttered, horrified by the extent of Tomas's depravity. The damp air in the room seemed to burn my lungs as I stared at the imprisoned humans, their eyes wide with terror. My heart clenched painfully, and I turned to Jax, who wore an expression of utter remorse.

"Jax," I said with a growl. "What the hell has your father been doing?"

"Creating a serum." His words were barely audible. "He's been turning humans into shifters."

"Impossible," Sebastian hissed, horror reflecting on his face. But Jax didn't waver, and as I looked at the medical devices around the laboratory, my gut knew he was telling the truth.

"Seems everything we thought impossible is turning out to be all too real." My mind raced with the implications.

"Enough talk," Colton said urgently, his attention focused on a control panel near the cages. He strode toward it, then hit a button, and there was a hissing sound as the cell doors unlocked. "We need to get them out of here."

"Sebastian, you help Jax. I'll carry Porter." I was already moving toward the unconscious man, lifting him off the floor and holding his limp form.

"Everyone, stay calm." Colton took charge of the freed captives. "We're getting you out of here. Just keep quiet and follow me."

Then we all seemed to realize it at once. The hissing from the cell doors hadn't stopped, even though they all stood open. We exchanged glances as realization dawned, only a second

before a distant explosion rocked the warehouse, the shockwave sending us stumbling. I nearly lost my footing, barely managing to keep my grip on Porter.

“Go, go, go!” Colton yelled as he herded the group toward the exit.

Gas. That was the hiss—a trap, set to go off if anyone released the humans.

We rushed out of the room, only for another explosion to go off, this one much closer, shaking the ground beneath my feet. Dark smoke surrounded the main room of the warehouse where Colton’s team had taken down all the remaining guards. It was only a matter of time before the entire place went up in flames.

We raced through the warehouse, the heat from the expanding flames at my back as we moved for the door. I wouldn’t look back. Couldn’t—there was no time. Our only hope was to get out of the warehouse if we were going to make it out alive.

“Everybody out! Go!” I shouted, fear for Mariah and Sofia spurring me on as I sprinted toward the exit. I couldn’t fail them. If Sebastian and I didn’t survive this, Tomas would come for them. I had no choice.

The scorching heat intensified as we burst out of the burning building, my lungs screaming, desperate for fresh air. I felt the ground shake beneath us again, but we couldn’t stop running. We had to put as much distance between ourselves and the warehouse as possible.

“Keep moving!” I bellowed, pushing through the pain as adrenaline flooded my veins.

But then we were all thrown from our feet as another violent explosion rocked the night, lighting up the dark sky with deadly fire. The cages, the laboratory: all of it went up in flames.

Chapter 16

Mariah

I paced the living room floor, my heart pounding in my chest while I waited for Evan's call. The silence was deafening, and every second that ticked by felt like an eternity. My fingers drummed against my thigh, my anxiety building with each passing moment. He should have called by now. The mission should be over. Had something gone wrong?

My heart leaped into my throat when the phone finally rang, and I answered immediately. "Evan?"

"Mariah." Relief washed over me at the sound of his voice, but it was quickly replaced by worry when I heard how distraught he sounded. "First, just know that we're okay. Porter was hurt, but we're at a hospital and they're treating him now."

My pulse raced, but I needed answers if he was going to drop a bomb like that on me. "What the hell happened?"

Evan hesitated. "There's a lot I can't explain over the phone, but things just took a major turn."

That statement did nothing to ease my worry, and if anything only made it worse. I knew Evan wouldn't keep anything from me unless it was absolutely necessary, and that fact terrified me more than anything else.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm okay, Mariah," he said, though his next words did little to assuage my fears. "We made it out, but there was an explosion."

“An explosion?” I sank down on the floor, clutching the phone so tightly my fingers ached.

There was an edge to his tone I’d never heard before. “Tomas tried to kill us. It’s not just a custody battle anymore—he’s ready to commit murder to get what he wants. Hell, he already has. Too many times.”

“God, Evan,” I said, barely able to process what he was saying. “And you expect me to believe you’re okay?”

“All of our men got out in time,” he said. “But some of Tomas’s own men weren’t so lucky. Apparently, anyone and everyone is disposable.” He sighed heavily, and I could practically see him moving his hand through his hair. “There’s more, but I want to wait before going into it. Rosalind just arrived at the hospital, and she’s with Porter now. He’ll be okay, but I’m going to stay here until he’s released so I can get them both somewhere safe.”

Which meant he didn’t know how long it’d be until he could come home.

“Be careful,” I whispered, my throat constricting. “Please, just come home safely to me.”

“I swear on my life,” he vowed. “I need to go take care of a few things right now, but please try not to worry. I’ll be home soon. And Mariah?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” But Evan had already ended the call, leaving me shellshocked.

I pulled my knees to my chest, my mind racing, my stomach twisting into knots. What was so terrible Evan couldn’t even tell me over the phone? And how long would it be until he came back?

The following days were agonizing for Abi and me, our nerves frayed, minds consumed by worry. Evan made sure to check in with us regularly, but it was clear that nothing would truly set us at ease until he and Sebastian were home safe.

As the third day came to an end, Evan let me know they were leaving and would be home that night. I could barely focus on dinner and getting Sofia bathed and put to bed, anxious to see Evan and find out what really happened in Atlantic City.

I was standing on the porch when the car pulled into the drive. Evan climbed from the SUV, Sebastian by his side, and I ran down to meet them.

“Mariah!” Evan called out, throwing open the door and jumping out before the vehicle even came to a complete stop.

I nearly stumbled over my own feet in the attempt, but in the next heartbeat, I threw myself into his arms, my body trembling as I clung to him. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tightly, like he never wanted to let go. His heart pounded when I rested my head on his chest, his protective instincts seeming to flare to life as he breathed in my familiar scent and held me even closer.

“God, it’s good to hold you,” he said. “I never want to be away from you again.”

I pulled back, looking him over, needing to see for myself that he really was okay.

“See, I told you I’m okay,” he said, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. “I came back to you, just like I promised.”

It was only then that I allowed myself to relax, though just slightly. I was so wrapped up in being back together that I didn’t even notice there was someone else climbing out of the vehicle with Sebastian. Sebastian gave me a reassuring smile, his own relief apparent in his expression, but it was the other figure that had me turning from Evan.

“Jax,” I said, gasping as he stepped down from the SUV. Even from this distance, I could see the exhaustion etched across his face, and when he began limping toward us, I couldn’t help but pull myself from Evan’s embrace and run toward him.

My face fell as I approached and really took him in. He was bruised, having clearly been beaten, and there was a nasty

gash on his forehead.

“Oh, Jax.” I reached up, my fingers hovering over the stitches before I pulled my hand back. “You look terrible. What happened to you?”

He offered me a sheepish smile—one that didn’t reach his eyes. “I guess I’ve been better, love, but don’t worry about me. I’ll survive.”

My eyes filled with tears, and before I knew it, they were overflowing, streaming down my face. Guilt nearly overwhelmed me. “I’m so sorry. I never should have asked you to get involved in this.”

“Asked me?” He chuckled softly, pulling me into a one-armed hug and squeezing my shoulder gently. “How many times do I have to tell you? I’d do anything for you, love. You have nothing to feel guilty about. I made my own choices, and I’m still standing.”

“Come on,” Evan said, appearing beside me and gripping my elbow, pulling me back to his side. “Let’s go inside and catch everyone up on what happened.”

I glanced up to see the muscle in his jaw ticking as he stared at Jax. I could sense the tension radiating from him, as if it were taking everything in him to keep himself under control. I remembered what Sebastian told us about how Evan’s dragon was fiercely overprotective and possessive when it came to his mate. I could only imagine what must have been going through his head.

Jax looked between us, but he didn’t say anything as we made our way inside.

Abi was already bringing in a tray of refreshments when we settled in the living room, and I marveled at her composure. While she’d clearly been worried these past few days, she held it together much better than I did. I supposed this was par for the course being an alpha’s wife, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever get used to it.

Evan and I sat on one couch, while Jax, Sebastian and Abi took the opposite one. Tension hung thick in the air, with

everyone looking on edge. But I badly needed answers.

“Please tell me,” I practically begged. “What happened?”

“All right.” Sebastian cleared his throat, and he sounded steady, despite the dark circles and the haunted look in his eyes. I gripped Evan’s hand, afraid of what he was about to reveal. “While we were at the warehouse, we discovered Tomas has been up to more than we realized.”

Jax cast his eyes to the floor, and I glanced at Evan. “What do you mean?”

Sebastian sighed. “One of the men we rescued was human—one of half a dozen Tomas was holding captive, but this one let us in on his secrets. Turns out, Tomas has been working on a serum.”

“A serum to turn humans into shifters,” Evan growled, his eyes flashing gold.

“Are you serious?” I said, hardly able to believe what I was hearing.

Evan nodded. “It wasn’t against their will. They knew what they were getting into. Well, sort of. Tomas offered them a lot of money to participate in his...experiments.”

“Is that even possible?” Abi said.

“Not yet,” Jax chimed in, rubbing his temple, a look of guilt on his face. “But with everything we’ve seen so far, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s closer to success than we think.”

“This man,” Evan said, “the one who told us of this plan. He’d originally been kept somewhere else, not in cages like the humans we rescued.”

“Cages?” My stomach twisted. I clutched Evan’s hand tightly, my knuckles turning white with the force of my grip.

Evan nodded. “There was a lab with cages. It’s where we found Porter. Anyway, this man witnessed others going in for testing, but none of them ever came out. It was obvious the test subjects died during the experiments. Eventually, the volunteers weren’t so willing. They decided they no longer wanted to participate, and that’s when Tomas locked them up.”

“You got them all out? They’re safe and sound?”

Evan looked at Sebastian, then Jax, pressing his lips together, and I shivered in cold dread. “All but the one who told us. We recorded his statement, but he died later in the night. Apparently, Tomas had gotten to him. When the serum fails...”

Sebastian picked up where Evan left off. “Tomas hasn’t perfected the serum yet. The human bodies aren’t able to process it, aren’t able to handle the transition. When that happens, they don’t make it.”

Evan squeezed my hand reassuringly, offering some semblance of comfort amidst the horror.

I glanced at Jax. “Did you know about this?”

Jax sighed, running a hand through his disheveled hair. “I had no idea what was really going on until I was brought to the warehouse. But last week, I discovered some strange email exchanges between my father and a ‘doctor’ about a serum they were working on. Something about it didn’t sit right. None of our companies dabble in pharmaceuticals or skincare, so I kept digging to figure out what was going on. Apparently, Daddy dearest didn’t take well to that.”

I swallowed. “That’s why he took you?”

“Part of it. He also wanted to use me as leverage against you, and get retribution for my betrayal.”

I felt like I was going to be sick. “What about Porter? Is he okay?”

“Porter will be fine.” Evan squeezed my hand gently. “It turns out Tomas’s men got a tip that we were on our way. We don’t know who from, but they tried to trash the lab before we got there and took off just before we arrived. They drugged Porter, hoping it’d kill him, but we found him in time.”

“Thank God,” I whispered, my eyes stinging with tears. “And Rosalind? Where is she now?”

Evan cleared his throat. “Sebastian and I got them both out of the hospital and to a private airstrip safely. They’re on a

private island now. Their flight records can't be found, so Tomas won't have any way of tracking them down."

At least we had that going for us. As for Tomas's sick experiments, I didn't even know what to think, but Rosalind had gotten what she wanted, and so had we.

I sighed, some of the tension finally draining from my body. "At least we know they're safe for now."

"They are," Evan said, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a piece of paper. "And we have this."

He handed the paper to me, and I unfolded it, scanning the contents. My eyes widened as I read, and for the first time, hope outweighed my dread. "Is this what I think it is?"

Evan nodded. "Rosalind agreed to drop the custody suit. We should have a formal letter in the mail soon."

I nearly collapsed against him in relief. It'd worked. The Hawthornes taking Sofia was no longer a threat. But Evan didn't seem as thrilled as I'd expected. His relief seemed mixed with frustration.

"That's a good thing," I said, frowning as I studied his face.

He rolled his shoulders. "It is, but now there's so much more for us to deal with. We can't just ignore what we've discovered."

"Can't we get the police involved now? This doesn't have to be our responsibility."

Evan's gaze met mine. "That was the plan, yes. But now the key witness is dead." He shook his head. "The authorities have chalked the explosion up to a gas leak. Tomas isn't being held responsible for the men who died. We have Jax on our side, and we can try to charge him with kidnapping, but there's no way to know if Tomas has the cops under his thumb, too. We have to play our cards close to our chests if we have any hope of bringing him down. One more wrong turn..."

The tension was overwhelming. "Does anyone know if the serum worked on anyone? What if there are successful cases

your witnesses aren't aware of?"

Jax shook his head, looking grim. "I thought of that. From what I found when I was digging, there were no records of any successes. In the last exchange, my father mentioned altering the serum, but that's all I know."

"That's a good thing, right?" But then I wondered why he wanted this in the first place. "What could he possibly gain from creating something like this? What game is playing? And who in their right mind would volunteer in the first place?"

Sebastian leaned back in his chair with a hard expression. "You'd be surprised how many humans want to become shifters, Mariah. They crave the power that comes with being a shifter, and there are plenty of people who'd pay big money for something like this."

"So, that's it? It's all about power?"

Sebastian and Evan exchanged glances again, and I wondered what they weren't saying.

"We have to find a way to stop him," Evan said. "That's what we have to focus on. Tomas can't get away with this."

Sebastian nodded. "We're going to do everything we can, son. But for now, we need to wait. Tomas has gone dark. We have to play our hand very carefully."

"I don't like playing these waiting games," Evan said, frustration evident in his voice. "We need to be prepared for his next move."

"Patience and vigilance," Sebastian said. "We keep our eyes and ears open and make sure everyone is on their guard at all times. For now, I suggest we all get some rest. It's been a long few days."

"I could use it." Jax put a hand over his face.

"I agree. Let's get some rest," Evan said. "Jax, you can take the guest room down the hall."

"I'll show you the way," Abi offered.

Evan took my hand then, pulling me to my feet, and leading me upstairs to our bedroom. When we were alone, I glanced up at him, searching his dark, wary eyes.

“You look exhausted, and not just physically.” I was genuinely worried about him. He may have remained strong all this time, but it had to have gotten to him. To discover such atrocities...

“I’ll be fine,” he said, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. “But I’m ready to wash the grime off and call it a day.”

“Let me help you.” I went up on tiptoes and pressed a soft kiss to his lips before leading him into the bathroom and turning on the shower, adjusting the water temperature until it was just right. I undressed him first, then myself, and we stepped under the warm spray together, the soothing jets seemingly washing away some of the tension in his muscles. I carefully washed Evan’s body, keeping my touch both gentle and tender, giving him exactly what he needed.

“Thank you,” he murmured into my ear, wrapping his arms around me. I simply smiled and pressed my lips against his in a sweet, lingering kiss.

Then we dried each other off and slipped into bed. Evan pulled me close, and I curled into his embrace, fitting perfectly against him. For the first time in days, I thought I might be able to sleep well.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” I whispered against his chest. “Please don’t ever do something so risky again. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you.”

“Believe me, one near-death experience is enough for this dragon,” he said as he tightened his grip.

Plenty of challenges might still lay ahead, but I took comfort in his arms, and in the unbreakable bond growing stronger each day. Evan fell asleep quickly, but I’d been wrong to think sleep would come easily for me. I lay there for a long while, staring at the ceiling as I struggled to make sense of it all. Eventually, knowing sleep wasn’t coming any time soon, I

climbed quietly out of bed. Maybe a cup of tea would calm my lingering nerves.

I made my way downstairs, surprised to hear the clinking of glassware when I stepped into the kitchen.

“Jax,” I said, surprised to find him there pulling a teacup from a cabinet “I would’ve thought you’d be asleep by now.”

“Can’t sleep,” he said. “I guess there’s just been too much to process. Being in an unfamiliar place makes my dragon uneasy.”

I gave him a sympathetic smile, walking to the stove and reaching for the kettle. “I was just coming down to make some tea myself. Do you mind having company?”

“Please, love.” Jax leaned against the counter, watching me, and I had the distinct feeling that he didn’t want to be alone. I busied myself with preparing our tea, feeling his gaze on me the entire time. I couldn’t begin to imagine what he’d been through.

“Here you go.” I handed him a steaming mug and stood there, wanting to say something but unable to find the right words.

Jax finally broke the silence with a chuckle. “I know you’re still feeling guilty about all of this, but really, love, you shouldn’t. I chose to help you the very first day we met, and I stand by that choice. It was my decision, and I’d do it again.”

I bit my lip, struggling with the weight of his words, as that night we met in Tomas’s mansion replayed in my mind. How he’d been so eager to help me escape. I couldn’t even begin to fathom why, and part of me didn’t want to ask. I was afraid of what he might say.

He looked at me for a long moment, and there was something in his light blue eyes that gave me pause. It was a soft look, and I wasn’t sure what it meant, or if it was anything at all. He opened his mouth, but then he shook his head and polished off his cup, as if dismissing the thought. He yawned and stretched his arms above his head.

“Guess I’m more tired than I thought. That tea did the trick. Thank you, Mariah.”

“Of course, Jax. Get some rest,” I said, smiling despite the strange feeling that’d settled over me.

“Everything is going to be okay.” He took a step closer while wearing that same soft look. “We’re all in this together now. We’ll put an end to Tomas’s games.”

I nodded.

“Good night, Mariah,” he said abruptly, placing his teacup in the sink and heading toward the guest room.

I watched him go, the image of his stare seared into my memory. As I finished drinking, my thoughts swirled, unable to shake the feeling Jax had given me. Was I overthinking this? Or was there something more behind his eyes? I couldn’t be certain, but the look was...adoring.

I shook the thought away, rinsing out my cup before making my way back upstairs where Evan was still sleeping peacefully. As I slipped under the covers once more, I held onto him, drawing comfort from his warmth and steady breathing.

But I still lay awake far into the night, trying to make sense of it all.

Chapter 17

Evan

“Any updates on Tomas’s whereabouts?” I said to Sebastian when I walked into his office for our morning meeting. Jax was already there waiting.

“Nothing concrete yet,” Jax said, running a hand through his messy hair. “But I won’t stop digging for information. I still have a few more angles to explore.”

“Keep at it. We need to find him before he makes another move.” I clenched my teeth together at the mere thought of Hawthorne still out there. It’d only been a few days since we’d returned, but I wouldn’t let him hurt anyone else.

“Should we involve the human authorities at this point? They may offer resources we don’t have access to.”

Sebastian steepled his fingers. “Only if we gather enough evidence to lock him away for good. If he catches on to what we’re doing, if he realizes that we’re on to his bigger scheme...” Sebastian shook his head. “We can’t risk him slipping through the cracks again.

But that didn’t make it any easier to sit around and wait. How much proof would we need for the human world to take us seriously?

“Let’s keep going, then.” I took a seat at the long table we’d all taken to working at. “Jax, do you have any of your encrypted files saved on a cloud?” There had to be a way we could access the data we needed.

“No,” Jax said, rubbing his temples. “The chances of being hacked were too high. I had everything on my laptop, and that’s long gone. It took me months to secure my own system so it wouldn’t be traceable when I accessed the files. It’d be stupid to risk it unless you guys have a setup where I can’t be tracked.”

I put a hand through my hair. I’d assumed as much, but I was also grasping at straws.

“I don’t dabble in the hacking world, Jax,” Sebastian said. “Everything I do is legit, but I may know someone who can provide you with what you need. It may take some time and convincing, but I can make some calls.”

I nodded. “Right now, that’s our best shot. We can’t afford any more setbacks with Tomas still at large.”

“I do have updates on the security,” Sebastian said, leaning back in his chair. “The team completed the upgrades, and we’ve brought in a few men from other clans that I vetted personally. If Tomas tries to come for us directly, he’ll be in for a surprise. No one will step foot on clan lands without us knowing.”

“Good to hear.” I clenched my fists as my dragon stirred restlessly within me. Even with the increased security, I couldn’t shake the sense of unease settling over me with his words. I trusted that Sebastian had done everything he could, but my protective instincts were out of control these days.

“Thanks, Sebastian,” Jax said to the alpha. “I appreciate the help.”

They continued discussing the next steps while I was lost in thought. Tomas was still out there, plotting and scheming, and we were racing against time to stop him. The stakes were incredibly high not just for Mariah and Sofia, but for all of us, for every human who’d been caught in his trap whose lives were at risk thanks to his vile experiments.

We worked for several hours but eventually needed a break. Jax and I stood up to leave Sebastian’s office, and as we stepped out into the hallway, he turned to me, his expression

full of concern. “How’s Mariah holding up through all this?” he said. “I haven’t seen her around much the last few days.”

The sound of her name on his lips, the familiarity and expectation that he *should* see her, made me growl straight away.

Jax raised his eyes in shock, lifting his hands in the air. “Whoa, there. No need to go feral.”

I gritted my teeth and forced myself to calm down, to be rational, but it wasn’t easy. My dragon snarled within, and my blood boiled with raw fury. It was an outrageous reaction. I was self-aware enough to realize it. But it was getting harder and harder to hold it back, especially with Jax living under the same roof as us. Part of me wanted to keep him as far away from my mate as possible.

“Sorry,” I muttered, rolling my shoulders, trying to loosen up because damned if I wasn’t strung out right now. “It’s my dragon. He’s been acting up lately.”

“That’s one way to put it.” Jax let out a disbelieving laugh. “What’s the deal?”

“It’s just that...” A growl rumbled up again as I looked away in frustration. “Mariah is my mate, and my dragon wants to claim her. Like yesterday.”

Jax frowned. “So, why haven’t you?”

I hesitated, trying to put it into words, but found that I couldn’t. I didn’t have a well-thought-out answer. It was just this... feeling. This sense that I needed to wait.

“It’s not a good time,” I said. “We’re dealing with a lot right now, and I don’t want all this chaos to cloud the joy a claiming is supposed to bring. It’s supposed to be a happy moment, a memory to treasure. In the midst of all this...” I shrugged, not sure how else to explain it.

Jax nodded, but I could see he wasn’t fully buying my story, and for good reason. He knew as well as I did that the bond between mates was powerful and all-consuming. If I were to claim Mariah now, the desire to be around her would be more than I could bear. If it came down to it and I had to

leave Mariah to put an end to Tomas, it would be extremely difficult. Still, that wasn't the whole story. There was also this deep-seated fear that claiming Mariah would somehow put her in even greater danger, or worse, end up hurting her in the process. It was irrational, but it was how I felt. I wanted to wait until all of this was behind us.

“Look, I understand your reasons, Evan,” Jax said carefully. “But keep in mind that it's different for dragons. Mariah isn't a dragon, so your bond might not be as...intense as you're expecting.” He paused, his eyes searching mine. “Right?”

Jax's words hit like a punch to the gut. I hadn't considered that before—the fact that Mariah was human and wouldn't experience the same bonding I did. Would my dragon still feel the same connection? Or would that be muted, too? Doubt crept in, making me question everything I thought I knew about my connection to Mariah.

“Maybe you're right, Jax,” I said. “Maybe I'd be able to handle it and take care of Tomas, too. But is it really worth the risk?” I shook my head. “Once all of this is over, then I'll claim her.”

It felt weird to talk about this with the man who'd enraged me by merely asking about my mate. I cracked my neck. This mate bond was something else.

“You'll figure it out,” Jax said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Love is powerful, Evan, and from what I've seen, you two share that connection. I'm just saying maybe you shouldn't let your fears dictate your actions.”

I appreciated his advice, but a feeling of unease still lingered. “Thanks. Think I'll go find Mariah,” I said, leaving him in the hallway and jogging down the stairs, lost in thought. My priority had to be finding Tomas and protecting my family, Mariah, and Sofia. No matter which way I looked at it, claiming her now would be a distraction.

When I stepped outside, I saw Mariah, Abi, and Sofia coming back from a walk. Just the sight of them made me smile. Sofia looked absolutely adorable in her stroller, dressed

in a little white sunhat and sunglasses that perfectly matched Mariah's.

Mariah's face brightened when she noticed me, and I thought Jax might be wrong about our bond. How I felt for Mariah, and the way my dragon reacted to her presence, was enough to convince me that her humanity didn't matter. Our bond would be just as strong if we were both shifters.

"Hey, there you are," I called out as they approached, stepping off the porch to meet them. Mariah's eyes sparkled, and I couldn't resist leaning in for a kiss.

"Hi," she said, her cheeks flushing with color as she glanced at Abi. "Were you looking for us? We needed some fresh air. It's been a bit tense inside lately."

Immediately, guilt hit for not spending more time with her amidst all the chaos. I'd been gone for days, then once I returned, locked myself away, figuring out where to go from here. "I'm sorry, Mariah. Truly."

She waved me off with a gentle smile. "Don't be sorry, Evan. I get it. We all have our roles to play right now. Keeping everyone safe is your priority."

Her gentle understanding only made me love her more, but it also deepened my frustration at not being able to claim her yet. I glanced down at Sofia, who was fast asleep in her stroller, clearly worn out from their walk in the summer heat. She seemed so peaceful, unaware of the danger lurking in the shadows.

"Mariah and I were just discussing her class schedule," Abi said with a smile. "I've already cleared my own routine, and I'll be able to take care of Sofia at any time."

"You got your schedule?" I said quickly, looking between the two of them. She hadn't told me.

She nodded, her honey blonde hair catching the sunlight. "Yeah, I received the information yesterday. With everything going on, I didn't want to bother you with it, so I talked to Abi about what I might need when it comes to help with Sofia."

“Bother me?” I was shocked that she thought it’d be a bother, and I couldn’t deny the twinge of hurt that she hadn’t come to me first. “Mariah, things might be crazy right now, but I still want to help and support you any way I can.”

My dragon rumbled inside me, making it clear that he wanted to be just as involved in Mariah’s life. She was our mate, after all, and we should be the ones she turned to for support.

“I know,” she said softly, reaching out to squeeze my hand. “Honestly, it just slipped my mind. I figured since Abi and I had some free time today, we could talk about her watching Sofia while I’m in class.”

“Of course, Abi is more than capable of looking after Sofia.” But what I said came out tight, strained, and I couldn’t ignore the jealousy simmering beneath the surface. “Just don’t forget, I’m here for both of you, too, no matter how crazy things get.”

Mariah glanced at Abi.

Abi’s wary stare settled on me. She must have picked up on my irrational jealousy. “You two really need to have a talk about that problem you’re having,” she said, giving me a knowing look before turning her attention back to Sofia.

Mariah seemed confused, but Abi didn’t offer any further explanation as she lifted Sofia from the stroller, cradling my daughter against her chest and carrying her inside.

“Problem?” Mariah said, her eyes searching mine for answers. “What did Abi mean?”

I hesitated. We’d talked about this once before when Sebastian brought it up in the kitchen, but I knew I needed to address things more concretely.

“I’ll explain it all over dinner.” I offered a small smile so she didn’t see my internal struggle. “We haven’t had any alone time together lately. I want to take you out.”

Mariah stepped closer, reaching up and wrapping her arms around my neck as she smiled. “That sounds perfect.”

“Perfect,” I said, lowering my head and pressing my mouth to hers, taking my time as I kissed her thoroughly.

“By the way,” she said when we finally broke the kiss and made our way back inside. “I’m sorry if I upset you by not telling you about my class schedule sooner. I didn’t mean to keep you out of the loop.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I just want you to know I’m here for you, Mariah. I want to be the one you turn to.”

Her smile widened, and she looked up with love in her eyes. “I know, Evan. And I appreciate it more than you could possibly imagine.”

Once we were inside, I went to find Abi, asking her to watch Sofia tonight, then I spent the rest of the afternoon playing with my little girl, with Mariah right there beside us. The day had started a little rough, but it’d turned around. My dragon was soothed and settled by the time we got dressed and were ready to leave.

I was about to speak, but the moment Mariah stepped out of the bathroom, the words died in my throat. She was stunning, clad in a simple yet elegant black dress that hugged her curves. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders, and the sight transported me back to our time in Miami, when everything felt so simple.

“You look incredible,” I managed to say, approaching her and offering her my arm.

“Thank you.” She blushed as she took it, and I loved that I could still do that to her. I hoped I was always able to bring that lovely pink color to her cheeks.

We walked out to the waiting car, the night sky clear above us, stars twinkling like diamonds, and I vowed to just enjoy this time together away from everything else. The air was still warm from the hot day, but a gentle breeze rustled through the trees, carrying the scent of pine. It was a perfect evening for a romantic dinner, and a chance for us to reconnect amidst the chaos consuming our lives.

We drove with the windows down, music playing as the wind whipped through our hair, and when we arrived at the restaurant, I felt like a new man. I hadn't realized how badly I'd needed this, and I made a mental reminder to take my mate out more often. As we sat at our candlelit table, our hands entwined, I couldn't tear my gaze from Mariah. Her eyes sparkled in the flickering light. Soft laughter filled the air, a sound that further soothed my soul and eased some of the tension that'd set up residence inside me. We talked and joked, and for a while I was able to forget everything else.

But eventually, Mariah returned to my reaction earlier in the day.

"Evan," she said. "What did Abi mean earlier? She said we needed to talk about your problem."

I hesitated, unsure how best to approach the subject. My dragon's possessive nature was surfacing so much more often lately, making it difficult to maintain control at times, but I knew Mariah deserved the truth and that we needed to address this.

"It's about my dragon," I said, my grip on her hand tightening. "You remember what Sebastian said a couple weeks back?"

Her cheeks flushed. "You mean when he caught us in the kitchen?"

I laughed. "Yeah, then. Well, it seems to be getting worse. I've been feeling even more possessive lately. My dragon feels threatened when others get close to you, even though he knows they're not a danger to you or to our relationship."

Her eyes widened in surprise, then her lips curved into a smile. "What exactly are you planning on doing about it, then?"

I nearly growled, then had to close my eyes and take a deep breath. "I'm keeping him, and myself, in check, but it's not easy. I just want you to know that I'm aware of our behavior and I'm working on it."

"Why do you need to work on it?"

I couldn't breathe as the image of claiming Mariah flashed through me. It took all my self-control to keep myself in check.

"I know what you're asking," I said. "And I want it more than you could possibly imagine—the need to claim you as mine, as my mate. For you to belong to me in every possible way..." I shook my head, wanting her to understand, but I wasn't sure I could put my fears into words. "I want to do it when things are calm, when there's no danger surrounding us, when I can give you the joy and celebration a claiming deserves. I want it to be a memory we'll always cherish, not something done with this dark cloud hanging over us."

She squeezed my hand. "I understand, Evan, and I'm happy to wait as long as we need to. Just knowing that I'm yours, and you're mine...that's enough for me."

Her words felt genuine, but I could have sworn there was a hint of sadness in her eyes when she disentangled her hand from mine and took a long drink from her water glass.

Maybe it was my imagination, but I also saw a longing there, similar to my own, for us to be fully bonded, with nothing standing between us. I wanted that more than anything, too. My dragon thrashed within me, restless and impatient, yearning to lay claim upon the woman we both knew was destined to be ours.

"Mariah," I said softly as I leaned forward. "I promise you, it will be soon. As soon as we've dealt with Tomas and the danger he poses, as soon as this custody hearing is behind us and our family is safe and whole, I *will* claim you. We'll be together, bonded in a way that nothing can break. I swear it."

She nodded, a single tear escaping from the corner of her eye and making its way down her cheek, even as she smiled. "I know. I trust you, and I believe in us. Soon."

I repeated the word to myself like a mantra as I looked forward to a future not yet within our grasp.

Soon.

Chapter 18

Mariah

The sun hadn't risen yet, but I was awake, my stomach jumping with a mixture of excitement and nerves as I carefully slipped out of bed so I didn't wake Evan. Today was the first day of my classes, and part of me couldn't wait to dive in. The other felt the pressure of going back to school for the first time in nearly a decade.

I slipped on a robe and tiptoed across the hall, peeking into Sofia's room, making sure she was still fast asleep. Her tiny chest rose and fell with each breath, and I backed out of the room, shutting the door softly and making my way down the stairs.

"Morning, Mariah." Abi gave me a bright smile when I walked into the kitchen.

"What are you doing up?"

She was busy brewing coffee and preparing breakfast. The enticing aroma of freshly made waffles filled the air and made my stomach growl.

"I thought I'd send you off to your first day of school with a full stomach," she said with a wink, pouring me a mug of the hazelnut brew I'd grown pretty fond of since I'd been here.

I smiled at the gesture. "Thank you so much."

I took the steaming mug of coffee she offered, wrapping my hands around the warm ceramic. The rich flavor made me sigh in contentment. I'd been right to get up early and give myself plenty of time to wake up and get ready for the day

ahead. I wanted to be totally prepared when my first class started at eight o'clock.

“Are you sure you have everything you need?” Abi flipped a golden waffle onto a plate. “I think the office is pretty well-equipped.”

“I'd say so. I still can't believe you guys did that for me.”

Just yesterday, Sebastian and Abi had taken me up to the third floor where Evan and Sebastian's offices sat next to Lucas's. They'd converted another empty room up there into my very own office, complete with a new computer, desk, chair, and any type of office supply I could imagine. They'd truly gone all out.

Abi smiled warmly, her blue eyes crinkling at the corners. “We want you to feel at home here. If there's anything we can do to make things easier for you, we're more than happy to do it.”

I blinked back tears, overwhelmed by their kindness, and hugged her tightly. “Thank you both so much. I really don't think you know how much this means to me.”

Abi chuckled. “Let's get some food in you before your class starts.” Abi pulled away and handed me a plate piled high with waffles and fruit. “And don't you worry one bit about Sofia. I've got everything under control.”

I ate every last bit, then went back upstairs to check on Sofia. She'd stirred slightly but was still fast asleep. Kissing her forehead, I whispered, “I'll see you at lunchtime, sweetie.”

Going into the bathroom, I showered and got dressed, then I gave myself an encouraging smile in the mirror. I could do this. This was what I'd wanted, and Evan and the Careys had made it happen for me. My aunt who raised me after my mother abandoned me had made it abundantly clear that she did so against her will, and I grew up without any warmth or nurturing. A family supporting me like this wasn't exactly a familiar experience, but I was more grateful than words could say.

With a deep breath, I grabbed my bag of books I'd ordered, then walked upstairs to my new office. The door creaked when I pushed it open, and I smiled all over again at the cozy, cream-colored space with a large, light wood desk, comfortable white leather desk chair, and bookshelves lining the walls. Tall windows let in rays of morning light, and it was like a perfect little oasis for me to do my work. A sense of gratitude and determination washed over me as I settled in, ready to begin this new chapter in my life.

I turned on the computer and logged into the online lecture hall a few minutes early, anticipation making it hard for me to sit still. Finally, my professor began the class, coming onscreen and introducing himself. For the next four hours, I was completely engrossed in my lessons. Things happened so quickly once I decided to enroll in college, but I was grateful for the whirlwind. The anticipation of waiting for school, along with everything else that was so uncertain right now, surely would've driven me crazy. This gave me something to focus on—something that didn't involve Tomas Hawthorne and his sick schemes.

When my second class came to an end at noon, I stretched my arms above my head. Time for lunch and a much-needed break.

Venturing back down to the kitchen, hoping to find something quick and satisfying to eat, I was surprised to find Jax sitting on a stool at the island. His eyes were bloodshot, his light brown hair a disheveled mess. He'd looked bad when they'd made it back from Atlantic City, but I would've thought he'd have recovered by now. Still, I hadn't seen him for the past few days. Maybe he was worse off than I'd thought.

"Jax, you look terrible," I blurted out before I could stop myself.

He laughed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, love."

I cringed. "Sorry, that's not what I meant. I just mean... are you okay?"

"Physically, I'm getting there." He gave me a wink. "You'll be happy to learn nothing vital was damaged."

I rolled my eyes. There was the flirty shifter I hadn't seen since they'd returned. I guessed he was going to be just fine.

"I've been recreating my program on the laptop Sebastian gave me," he said, glancing my way as I moved to the refrigerator. "But it's exhausting to build months' worth of code and encryptions."

"Wow, that sounds intense." I grabbing some ingredients for a sandwich and placed them on the counter. "Want some lunch?"

"Sure, love. Thanks." He propped his chin on his hand while I started preparing food for both of us.

"How did you get into all this tech stuff?"

Jax hesitated for a moment, then said, "You know, Tomas wasn't the one who raised me. My dad—my stepfather—was a human."

I lifted my eyes, pretty sure I hadn't heard that bit before, but I didn't want to push. I finished the sandwiches, put them on plates, and grabbed some chips as he continued talking, coming around to sit beside him at the island counter.

"My dad was deep into computers. He taught me everything he knew from a very young age. I can't remember a time when he wasn't teaching me something or other. I started coding when I was nine. People called me a genius, but I never saw it as a big deal. I just paid attention, practiced, and tried to do my best."

"Are you kidding?" I stared at Jax now. "That's incredible. You *should* be proud of yourself. Don't dismiss your talent."

He shrugged, though I saw a hint of a smile on his lips. "Thank you, love. I guess it's just always been a part of who I am. My dad wanted me to make something of myself, and I didn't want to let him down."

As Jax spoke, I watched him closely. Despite his evident exhaustion, there was a bright spark in his eyes when he talked about his work.

“Of course, I always knew I’d work with computers,” he said, running a hand through his messy hair. “But over time, my skills grew beyond what I ever thought possible. It’s true what they say about practice.”

He winked again, but his eyes tightened at the corners when I said, “So you decided to use those skills against Tomas?”

I wasn’t sure if I was poking a beast by asking, but my curiosity about how Jax got tangled up in Tomas’s web was nagging at me.

Jax sighed and looked away. “That’s not exactly the happiest of stories.”

“You don’t have to talk about it,” I said hurriedly, placing a hand on his arm. “Seriously, Jax. I get it.”

But he shook his head. “No, I don’t mind telling you, love. You might understand why I’m so set on helping you.” He clenched his teeth, his eyes settling on the hand still resting on his arm. “I’m as determined as Evan not to let him get his hands on you.”

I blinked and pulled my hand back, a bit surprised by the fervor in his words, but then he was talking again.

“I got curious about my biological father and started digging. My mother would never tell me anything, and I know she didn’t want me learning about Tomas. Honestly, I wish I’d listened to her. I never expected what I’d find.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, hardly able to comprehend what it’d be like to have such a monster as a father.

“Thanks.” He offered a small smile. “Anyway, during my search, I discovered I had a little sister. Rosalind. My parents couldn’t have kids because my mother was a dragon and my stepfather was human, and I’d always wanted a sibling, so I was really curious about her.”

And she’d turned out to be a selfish brat. There was obviously no love lost between Jax and Rosalind, yet I wanted to know more. “So, what happened? You reached out to her?”

“Yeah, I managed to get in touch with Rosalind, and we started communicating secretly. She never told Tomas we were speaking.” Jax shook his head, a shadow crossing his face. “But of course, he found out. Tomas came to see me personally.”

“What about?”

Jax grimaced. “He’d learned about my tech skills somehow and wanted to use me for his own twisted purposes, though I didn’t see it at the time. I was just a desperate teenage boy who wanted to know his father. I didn’t realize agreeing to help him would mean I’d never see my mom or stepdad again.”

My heart ached, knowing this story wouldn’t end well.

Jax swallowed when he looked me in the eye. His own were brimming with unshed tears. “Later on, I found out Tomas had my parents killed. By then, I was trapped. There was no way out. Nowhere to go.”

“Jax...” I was stunned, at an utter loss for words. Yes, I knew Tomas was a vile, cruel man, but to kill his son’s parents? The enormity of what Jax had gone through was nearly overwhelming.

In that moment, all I wanted was to provide some comfort to this man who had suffered so much. I reached out for him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

“Jax, I—”

But before I could even get the words out, a growl filled the room, loaded with menace and warning. I whipped around and found Evan in the doorway, a wall of pure rage as he glared.

“Get your hands off her!” Evan said with a snarl, eyes blazing gold with fury.

Before I could comprehend what was happening, Evan lunged, shoving me away from Jax. Panic surged as he grabbed Jax off his stool and threw him to the floor with enough force to shake the foundations. He was on top of him

half a second later, his hand raised, razor-sharp talons jutting out.

“Evan!” I screamed as I rushed at them.

Just when I thought Evan was going to tear Jax apart, he sprang into action. Jax was fast, fierce, and on his feet in the next breath, ready to defend himself in spite of his recent injuries. I backed up on instinct, knowing getting between the two alphas couldn't end well.

And then Sebastian was there.

“Stop it, both of you!” His booming voice filled the room as well as his alpha command. He stepped between Evan and Jax, grabbing Evan by the shoulders and pulling him back.

“What the fuck is the meaning of this?” He was growling right in Evan's face. “Get ahold of yourself, son.” It was an order, his tone firm and unwavering. “This isn't the way we handle things.”

My heart pounded in my chest. I couldn't believe what'd just happened. Evan had always been protective and fierce, sometimes to a fault, but this... this was something else entirely. Unprecedented, and wholly unacceptable. Not only had he been ready to rip Jax to shreds, he'd shoved me out of the way to get to him.

“Is everyone okay?” Sebastian looked at each of us in turn, finally releasing Evan and shoving him back. I could see the concern etched on the older alpha's face as he assessed the situation.

Jax glared at Evan, rubbing his arm where he'd grabbed him. “I'm fine.”

Sebastian's gaze turned to me. “Mariah?”

“I'm okay,” I said quietly. I wanted to regain my composure after the sudden outburst.

“Mariah!” I heard Abi as the petite woman rushed into the kitchen, her eyes wide with concern. She took in the sight of Evan and Jax, their chests heaving from exertion, and

Sebastian standing between them like a brick wall. “What the hell happened in here?”

My shock faded and was replaced by anger. My hands balled into fists at my sides, and I glared at Evan. He seemed to finally realize what he’d done, and guilt washed over his face.

“Mariah.” Evan took a step toward me, but I held up a hand to stop him.

“Don’t,” I snapped. “Jax didn’t do *anything* wrong.”

Evan swallowed hard, visibly struggling with his emotions. “I’m sorry,” he said. He turned to Jax, offering a hand to help him up. “I’m sorry, man. I don’t know what came over me.”

Jax grimaced but accepted Evan’s hand, though he waved off Evan’s apology with a dismissive gesture. “You need to do something about that jealous streak of yours.” He turned to me. “Are you okay, Mariah?”

Evan growled again. This was ridiculous. We’d just talked about this last night, yet I was still shocked to see this behavior.

I glared at him, then looked back at Jax. I nodded, forcing a small smile. “Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks, Jax.”

He watched me closely for a few seconds, then finally nodded. “I’ll be in my room if you need anything,” he said before leaving the kitchen.

The silence that followed was thick with tension. Abi moved closer to me, her expression a mix of concern and sympathy. I couldn’t stand it. No one else was saying anything. In fact, they were acting like this was normal behavior for a dragon shifter, but this was far from fine with me. The anger within me bubbled over, and I found myself directing it at Evan.

“They’re all right, you know,” I said. “You need to calm down and get a grip on this possessive jealousy. It’s outrageous, and it’s not fair to anyone, especially Jax. We’re going to be living under the same roof for the foreseeable future.”

He growled again, even as his eyes filled with regret, but he didn't argue, either. He knew his actions were out of line, but knowing didn't make this any easier for me.

"Mariah," Abi said softly, placing a hand on my arm. "Please try to understand. Dragon shifters are different. Evan's trying."

"Yeah, well he needs to try harder. Being a dragon shifter doesn't excuse hurting someone unprovoked," I said in a fury.

Evan tried again, reaching out with remorseful eyes as he stepped toward me. "Mariah, I'm so sorry."

"No," I snapped, stepping back from him. "I won't pretend like an apology makes this okay." My eyes drifted to the clock hanging on the wall. "I need to go. I have another class starting soon."

"Mariah, wait," Evan pleaded, but I turned and ran out of the room, then back up the stairs to the third floor.

As I sat down at my desk, I tried to push the incident out of my mind, but I couldn't seem to let it go. As much as I didn't want to consider it, I wondered if there was a part of Evan, a part of his dragon's nature, that I'd never truly understand.

I sighed, rubbing my temples in frustration. This was supposed to be a day for new beginnings, for focusing on my education and my future. Instead, I found myself questioning everything I thought I knew about the man I loved.

"Focus, Mariah," I whispered to myself, drowning out the doubts swirling through my mind. "One thing at a time."

But as the lecture began, I knew that things between Evan and I weren't going to be resolved so easily.

A couple hours later, there was a knock at the door. I'd decided not to go downstairs, wanting to keep my attention on school, but it didn't seem as if I could avoid what happened earlier.

"Mariah?" Abi poked her head through the door. "I thought maybe you could use some water and a snack." She

walked in and set a tray down on my desk. It had water, juice, and a soda, plus a fruit bowl and some yogurt and granola.

“Thanks,” I said, though I was still a bit wary of even talking to anyone. “I appreciate it.”

“You’ve been in here for hours. I figured you could use some sustenance.” She sat down in a chair on the opposite side of my desk, studying me closely. “Listen, Mariah, about what happened earlier... I know it must have been upsetting for you, but you have to try not to be too hard on Evan.”

I frowned. “Abi, he attacked Jax for no reason. That’s not okay. Who knows what might have happened if Sebastian hadn’t shown up to break it up?”

“I understand that,” she said gently. “But you’re not a dragon, so you don’t feel things the way we do. When our emotions run high, it can be difficult to control ourselves.”

Well, that was just plain annoying. Was she implying that just because I wasn’t a dragon and wasn’t used to their ways, I had no right to be upset about Evan’s behavior?

“No, I’m not a dragon,” I said. “But that still doesn’t excuse what happened in the kitchen.”

“Of course not.” Abi held up her hands in a placating gesture. “I’m not going to justify Evan’s actions. I just want to help you understand why he reacted the way he did. Dragons aren’t always the most rational creatures when our emotions get the better of us.” She looked away. “It’s one of the reasons we tend to avoid being with humans.”

I felt a twinge of hurt at her words, but I didn’t let it show. Instead, I focused on the plate of food Abi had brought me and started picking at it.

“That doesn’t mean I’m against the two of you being together,” she said quickly. “Quite the opposite. It’s just easier to handle when you can relate.” She paused and sighed, rubbing the back of her neck. “I’m not making this any better, am I?”

“Abi, it’s okay,” I said, forcing a smile. “I appreciate your honesty.”

She looked at me with concern in her eyes, and I knew she wanted to help, but that didn't make it any easier to swallow.

"I'm sorry for interrupting you," she said softly. "I'll leave you to it."

"Thank you." I watched her retreat from the room. As soon as the door closed, I tried to get ready for my next lecture, but even as my last class of the day began, instead of the professor's voice, all I could hear were Abi's words echoing in my head.

Would there always be a cultural divide between Evan and me? Would I always feel out of place in their lives? When we'd been back in New York City, before all of this mess, I'd been sure that Evan being a shifter didn't matter, that we could make it work despite our differences. But now that we were here, now that his dragon nature was really coming out, I wondered what other obstacles we might have ahead of us.

My stomach churned, and I found myself unable to concentrate on the lesson. The screen blurred before me as I attempted to reel in my thoughts. I couldn't seem to shake the images of Evan's jealous rage, or of Jax crumpled on the floor, and they stirred an unease deep within that was hard to ignore.

I managed to make it through the class, but the weight of my concerns grew heavier and heavier. Evan and I were from two different worlds, and no matter how much we cared for each other, there would always be that chasm between us. I was human. He wasn't. That was becoming more obvious with every passing day.

That'd never been a problem back in New York, but since we'd arrived on the Carey clan lands, Evan was growing into his dragon more and more with each passing day. He was different than he'd been before. What he'd done today, with Jax? It was hard to reconcile that behavior with the man I knew and loved. With each day that passed, it became clearer that there were fundamental differences between us. Were they too much? I'd been welcomed and accepted by the Careys, and even those of the clan that I'd met so far, yet I wasn't a dragon—wasn't truly a part of it all.

Would I ever be?

I loved Evan with my entire being, but a tiny voice in the back of my head persisted: could we truly make this work?

Chapter 19

Evan

I sat on the back porch replaying everything, and still couldn't believe what I'd just done. My chest was so tight, the guilt weighing on me as my dragon sulked within, pacing back and forth, a stark presence in my consciousness even as he kept to himself, as if he, too, were full of regret.

The scene from the kitchen replayed in my mind: Mariah's arms around Jax, a smile on her face, that look in Jax's eyes. It'd all sent me over the edge, my dragon rearing up, nearly hurting her in the process. I had one driving directive then—to get my mate from Jax's clutches at all costs.

“*Fuck.*” I needed to talk to Mariah, make sure she understood that I didn't mean to hurt her, but the look in her eyes was too much to take. The anger, the shock, the way she'd stared like she didn't even know me.

“Evan,” Sebastian called, alerting me to his presence as he stepped out onto the porch. I turned to find him watching me with concern, approaching slowly, as if he weren't sure I'd gotten myself under control yet.

“Hey, Sebastian,” I said. He knew the reasons for my behavior, yet this was becoming a frequent problem, and today was extreme. If I'd laid into Jax like I wanted to... I shook my head. I didn't even want to think what I might have done.

“You cooled off any yet?”

I sighed. “I'm trying, but it's harder than it should be. I want to talk to Mariah. I need to make this right.”

Sebastian shook his head. “I think giving her some time might be best. It might be just what you need as well. Why don’t you shift? Let your dragon out, fly for a bit?”

“Maybe you’re right.” If I went to Mariah now, with my emotions still raw and my dragon restless, I might only make things worse. She didn’t deserve that.

“Head out to the clearing; get some air,” Sebastian said, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “You need to make peace with your dragon as well.”

I glanced at him, wondering how he knew, but it wasn’t just my dragon I was angry with. My dragon operated on instinct, on feelings and emotions, but I was supposed to be the one in charge. The rational one. Seemed like that side of me was giving way to more my dragon’s primitive instincts with each passing day.

I nodded, giving Sebastian a tight smile. “I can do that.”

I took a deep breath and forced myself to walk away from the house, away from Mariah. Sebastian had become my mentor once again. We’d both slipped so easily into our roles that it was sometimes shocking to realize we’d spent seventeen years apart.

This clearing was a place of solace for our clan, deep within the lands, where we could shift and let our dragons roam free without worrying about being seen by humans. The general public may be aware of shifters, but that didn’t make it easier for them to see them soaring through the sky.

As I emerged from the trail and stepped into the open space surrounded by towering trees, the fresh scent of pine filled my nostrils. Sunlight filtered through the trees, casting dappled shadows on the forest floor as I stood there in the clearing. My hands clenched and unclenched, a futile attempt to release the guilt threatening to suffocate me.

“Get it together, Evan,” I muttered under my breath. Despite my resolve to calm down, thoughts of Mariah and my near-violent outburst wouldn’t go away. Yes, I was on edge about Mariah thanks to our mate bond that had yet to be fully

realized, but that wasn't all of it. I felt like I was constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop. With Tomas out there, I couldn't relax, and then there was the lawsuit looming over us like a dark cloud. According to my lawyer, Rosalind still hadn't sent the papers so she could drop the case.

Nevertheless, all that was no excuse for my behavior.

"Damn it all," I growled, thrusting my fingers into my hair, a scream of frustration ripping out of me, as if I couldn't contain my feelings any longer.

My dragon stirred, his presence rising higher in my consciousness. He'd stopped pouting and was now urging me to acknowledge him.

Evan. I heard his low, inaudible rumble in the back of my mind, more of a sensation, an impression, than actual language. *Shift. We need this.*

I nodded, knowing he was right. I was always closest to my dragon once I'd transformed, feeling what he did, understanding him most clearly when I allowed him to take the reins. As I closed my eyes, I sought the connection between man and beast, our thoughts and emotions intertwining. He shared my regret for what happened with Mariah. Our desire to protect her, to lay claim to what was ours, had momentarily clouded both our judgment.

"Mariah isn't a dragon," I said, hoping he'd understand. "She doesn't understand this bond, and she can't be treated the same as a dragon."

My dragon's understanding and agreement came as raw sensation. *I'm sorry.*

I needed to shift and fly, to burn off some of the lingering, irrational rage. "Let's do this."

Taking several steadying breaths, I released control, allowing my dragon to rise up and take over. It was hard in my current state, but I willed myself to submit to the beast within. Slowly, my body shifted, scales replacing skin, and wings sprouting from my back. My spine elongated, the pain of it nothing compared to the searing hurt that'd flashed in

Mariah's eyes. I continued to let go, and as the shift progressed, the tension dissipated.

When I finally stood there in the middle of the clearing in full dragon form, I felt more at ease than I had all day. In that moment, my dragon and I were one, more so than we ever could be in human form.

Fly.

Then I launched into the sky. The breeze caressed my scaly hide as I rose higher and higher, the evergreen forest dropping away beneath me as I soared, stretching out as far as the eye could see. There, in the middle of the clan lands, I could truly let go. Hours slipped by as I lost myself in the flight, the wind carrying my troubled thoughts away. Slowly, the aggression, the possessiveness, the raging need to claim my mate—they all faded into the background while I communed with my dragon.

When I finally returned to the ground, the sun had dipped lower in the sky, casting a warm golden glow over the clearing. I took a deep breath, the earthy scent of the forest grounding me. In that moment, I felt lighter, the weight of my guilt and worries lessened by the freedom of flight.

It's going to be okay, I told my dragon, feeling his satisfaction and contentment mirrored in my own emotions. *We just have to be patient.*

When I shifted back into human form, I knew that it was time to face Mariah, to make things right and promise her this would never happen again. The thought of facing my mate was terrifying. I was half-afraid that she'd turn me away, but I had to try.

As I approached the house, my gaze fell on Abi standing on the porch, cradling Sofia in her arms. The sight of them together warmed my heart, a stark contrast to the turmoil within just hours before.

“Hey,” I called out, approaching them.

Abi looked up. “Hey yourself. Your little girl missed you.”

I reached out, taking Sofia from Abi and holding her close.

“Dada.” Her hazel eyes met mine, and she grinned up at me. I smiled back at her, so full of love for my little dragon. Just holding her in my arms gave me a renewed sense of purpose.

“I missed her, too,” I said, planting a gentle kiss on her forehead. We’d been so busy working to bring Tomas down that I hadn’t spent as much time with her as I wanted. I just couldn’t wait until all of this was behind us.

“Listen, Evan,” Abi said, biting her lip in that familiar way which always told me she was concerned. “This afternoon I said something to Mariah that I think might have upset her.”

“What did you say?” I said, my protective instincts flaring up despite my best efforts to keep them in check. *Easy.*

“I helped her understand your behavior, and I told her she didn’t fully get it because she wasn’t a dragon,” Abi said, looking away, a hint of shame in her eyes. “I didn’t mean any harm by it. I was only trying to help. But I can see now how it sounded.”

I sighed, knowing Mariah would likely have taken her words to heart, but Abi would never intentionally hurt anyone, either. “It’s okay, Abi. We’ve all been on edge lately with everything going on. This is my mistake, and I need to fix it. I’m going to talk to her.”

“Good.” Abi gave a worried look. “Will you make sure she understands that I didn’t mean to imply she doesn’t belong here, or that I don’t want her with you?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Thank you, Evan. It’s going to be okay. You’ll make things right.”

Sofia looked up at me, her gummy smile and soft coo all the encouragement I needed. We were a family unit, and families had problems they had to work through sometimes. I wouldn’t hide from this. It was time to face my mistakes and make amends.

“I know you’ve had her all day, but will you watch Sofia for a while?”

Abi plucked her right back out of my arms and gave me a wink. “You don’t even have to ask.”

Making my way inside and upstairs to the second-floor bedroom, I decided to do something special for Mariah—something that always seemed to bring a smile to her face in the past. After the day she’d had, she needed and deserved it.

I went straight to our bathroom and drew a bath for Mariah, making sure the water was the perfect temperature. I added bubble bath and a few of her favorite bath bombs, their scents filling the air with calming lavender and soothing chamomile. Then I scattered rose petals on the surface of the water as well, the deep crimson contrasting with the frothy bubbles. While the bath continued to fill, I ran downstairs and grabbed a bottle of her favorite wine, then brought it up and poured her a glass, setting it within easy reach of the bathtub.

Her last class should have been ending any moment. A few minutes later, I heard her come into the bedroom, and I held my breath, waiting. I sure hoped I didn’t screw this up. I needed to make peace with my mate like I needed my next breath.

She walked into the bathroom, surprise written all over her face.

“Evan.” She stood and stared, taking in the unexpected scene before her. “What’s all this for?”

“For my mate. The woman I love,” I said softly, taking a tentative step closer. I didn’t dare reach for her yet, not sure my heart could take it if she pulled away. “It’s an apology, Mariah. I am so, so sorry for how I acted earlier, and I wanted to do something to show you how much I care. I know it doesn’t make up for what I did, but I want you to know I would never hurt you. I can’t say how sorry I truly am.”

Something must have shone through, because the lines of tension around her eyes and mouth faded slightly, and she took a step toward me.

“Thank you, Evan. This is a good start.”

I couldn't get a read on her, but I tentatively reached out a hand. "Can I help you undress?"

She gave a small nod. I gently took the hem of her shirt and pulled it up, then over her head. As I carefully removed all of her clothing, my heart swelled with love and gratitude for this incredible woman who'd come into my life. Despite everything, she was giving me another chance, one I wasn't sure I deserved.

Once she was undressed, I helped her into the tub, making sure she was comfortable before handing her the glass of wine. She settled into the warm water with a long sigh, sipping her wine while I took a seat on the edge of the tub.

"Mariah," I said, choosing my words carefully. "I know I've said it already, but I want to apologize for how I acted earlier. I'll apologize for the rest of my life if I have to. My dragon's temperament can sometimes get the better of me, especially when it comes to you. I know it's not an excuse, and I'm not pretending my behavior was acceptable. I just want you to know how much I regret every second of what happened today."

Her eyes met mine, searching, her lips pursed as she shook her head. "I understand, Evan. Really I do. It's just hard for me. I'm not a dragon. I've never experienced this world before."

"I know." I reached out to cup her cheek, taking the risk that she might still reject me. But I meant what I said. I'd do whatever it took to make things right. My body nearly slumped with relief when she didn't push me away.

"Abi told me what she said to you earlier," I said tentatively. "I'm sorry if her words hurt you. She didn't mean any harm, she was just explaining our world to you. She wants you with me just as much as I do."

Mariah's eyes drifted from mine, and she stared at the bubbles deep in thought. Her honey blonde hair was pulled up in a bun, tendrils falling and framing her beautiful face. She was the most gorgeous woman I'd ever laid eyes on. Fate was gracious enough to give me such an amazing woman, and I

prayed I hadn't gone and truly fucked things up this time. I tucked a tendril behind her ear, then pulled my hand back, putting the ball in her court.

We sat there for a few minutes, Mariah sipping her wine thoughtfully. She didn't ask me to leave, which I took as a good sign.

"Can I ask you something?" she finally said, her gaze coming back to mine.

"Of course." I brushed a stray strand of hair from her forehead.

"Am I..." She stopped, took a shaky breath, then tried again. "Do I *truly* have a place in your world, Evan? This isn't the time to be gentle. We can't ignore that I'm not like the rest of you. I'm human. An outsider looking in. This isn't my world. I'm not familiar with any of this, and while I'm trying my best to figure it out sometimes...I just don't know what to think."

Mariah's words nearly knocked me sideways. Her shoulders curled in, and she stared at the bathwater. I never wanted her to feel like an outsider, would never make her feel that way intentionally. She was human, but that didn't mean anything to me.

"You belong with me." I felt the truth of those words deep in my soul. "Whether that's here, in New York, across the globe." I took a deep breath. She was my mate. I couldn't stand the idea of her looking in from the outside. "What happened today...please don't make that mean anything about us. It wasn't about you, Mariah. You did nothing wrong. This was entirely about me and my inability to control my dragon at times. I was so jealous seeing you touch another man that I lost control entirely. That's hard for me to admit, but I'm trying my best. I swear it won't be this way once I claim you, but—"

"But what?" She sat up, placing her wine on the edge of the tub and staring at me. "You keep saying these things, then something like this happens. Jax isn't a threat to you."

Silence fell. She'd never come out and said it like that before. Her heart beat steadily in the quiet stretching out between us, a testament to the truth of her words—at least what she believed. We hadn't fully acknowledged how my jealousy was particularly strong when it came to Jax. I always brushed it off as my dragon's possessiveness and desire to claim our mate, but Jax especially got me all riled up, overprotective, and irrational. Maybe part of it was due to my initial lack of trust, thinking he could be the enemy, but just thinking of him now had me gritting my teeth.

Mariah stared at me as she shook her head. "Seriously? You should know this. I love *you*, Evan. I'm here because of you."

"I know," I said with a grimace. "I do. But that doesn't mean I can trust him."

She sighed, and I knew it was time to let that one go.

"My point is, if none of this was going on, I already would've claimed you. This isn't how I want it to be, Mariah. The timing is terrible. I told you it would be as soon as possible, and I meant it."

"In the meantime, you can't focus on the problem at hand because of it." She grabbed her wine again and took a long drink, then settled back under the bubbles.

I thought I'd made this clear, but maybe she didn't really understand what this meant to me. "A claiming is so much more than just a way to make things official. It's a lot like a human proposal. You're deciding on this one person to bind yourself to, to be your partner through life. Thought needs to be put into it. It has to be special. I want ours to mean something. I never thought I'd find someone like you. And the fact that you gave me a chance, then stuck it out when things got messy...you're incredible, Mariah.

"I want our claiming to be something we treasure forever. It shouldn't be minimized by all the chaos going on around us right now." I leaned closer, staring into her eyes, hoping she hadn't shut me out and our connection was still strong enough

for her to feel my sincerity. “I want it to be perfect because *you’re* perfect, and you deserve nothing but the best.”

Mariah blinked and took a big breath. “I had no idea it meant so much to you. I guess I just feel like if it could help you calm down...” She shrugged. “It means a lot to me that you want to make it special for us.”

She rested her head back on the edge of the bathtub and closed her eyes, a sigh escaping her lips. All I wanted was to close the gap and kiss her, to make her forget everything else except us and how we belonged together.

Instead, I pulled back, wanting to give her as much time as she needed. We fell into silence again, and after a while I said, “I spent all afternoon thinking about this, figuring out what to say, how to be sure it wouldn’t happen again. I shifted, talked with my dragon, and I swear to you, he understands the seriousness of the situation, too. There won’t be any more acts of jealousy. I can’t apologize enough for what happened, but I can vow to you now that it will never happen again.”

Her eyes opened, flashing with the strength and independence that’d made me fall in love with her. She leveled me with a fierce stare. “It better not. I love you, Evan, more than I ever thought I could love another, but I won’t stand for violence against those we protect. I’ll be damned if I let your excuses about being a temperamental dragon be the reason for getting rough with me or anyone else.”

“Understood and agreed. You have my word, Mariah. Never again.” I meant it with my entire being.

Her eyes were still glued to mine. “That’s right.”

I smirked. “Just so you know, my dragon is quivering with fear.”

She gasped. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Not at all. I just like seeing that fierce side of you come out. I might be the dragon, but you’re the fiery one.”

She rolled her eyes, then splashed me with water, soaking my shirt completely.

“Now look what you’ve done. I’m going to have to take my shirt off.” I clucked my tongue and slowly peeled it from my body. Mariah’s eyes drifted over my shoulders, my chest, my abs. When her gaze found mine again, it flickered with heat that hadn’t been there before.

With the warm glow of the candles bouncing off the bathroom walls, Mariah nestled in the bubble bath, looking at me like that, and the bubbles barely covering her chest... desire, hot and needy, sparked to life in my veins. My mate’s smooth curves were on display as well, and I couldn’t resist the urge to lean forward and press my lips against the soft skin where her neck met her collarbone.

I could hear her heartbeat quicken.

“Tell me if I’m wrong,” I murmured into her ear, gently nipping at her earlobe, “but I was under the impression you liked it a little rough.”

She jerked back and swatted at my shoulder. “You know what I meant, Evan.”

“Of course I do.” I didn’t miss the smirk on her lips as I moved behind so I could reach her shoulders, kneading her tight muscles.

“Good.” She relaxed under my touch, her eyes closing as she sighed again.

My fingers moved along her skin, slowly working their way along her shoulders and over her back. “How was your first day of school?”

She shrugged, her shoulders tensing. “The classes were good. It was a lot to take in, but I think I’ll get the hang of it.”

“I know you will.”

After a few minutes, she relaxed some more, her body feeling loose and at ease beneath my touch. She opened her eyes and glanced back at me over her shoulder, grinning a little. “You know, I guess you’re right.”

“While I love hearing that, I have to ask, how so?”

“In certain situations,” she said, her tongue darting out to wet her lips, “I might be okay with you being a little rough.”

My dragon rumbled in approval, and my pulse ratcheted up. “Is that so?”

“Mmhmm...”

I ran my hands over her shoulders again, but this time, I brushed them over her sides, the tips of my fingers grazing her breasts.

Her breath hitched, and I did it again before pulling my hands back.

“Evan,” she said, whining in protest, and I had to laugh.

“Don’t worry, I’m not done.” I stood and stepped out of my shorts, shoving my boxers to the floor. My cock was standing at attention, and I didn’t miss the way Mariah stared as I stepped into the bathtub and settled in behind her.

“I need to make sure you’re fully relaxed,” I purred into her ear before my teeth brushed her neck. My arms came around from behind, wrapping around her waist and pulling her to me.

She gasped, and I gritted my teeth at the need burning through me. I wanted her so fucking badly. But I wanted this to be on her terms.

I brought my hands to her breasts and teased her nipples. “Just how rough do you like it?”

My mind flashed back to all the different ways and places Mariah and I had sex, sometimes raw and primal, sometimes sweet and tender, and every variation in between. Each time was amazing and magical and pure fucking bliss.

I pinched her nipples hard enough to make her squeak in surprise, then caressed them lovingly. Her pulse pounded as I kissed down her throat, my body curling around her.

“That was good,” she said, breathing hard, and I chuckled, knowing exactly what the look on her face meant. She wanted this just as much as I did, and she didn’t care how.

“In that case...” That was the only warning I gave before I moved my hands to her hips and lifted her up, turning her around and placing her right on my lap. She straddled me, my cock trapped between my body and her pussy lips. Fuck if this wasn't the perfect place to be.

I groaned as she rocked her hips, my fingers digging into her ass.

Mariah smiled down at me, and I thought my chest might crack from seeing that smile. Today had been rough, but we'd made it through. Now I could make it all up to her.

I sat up, weaving my fingers in her hair, bringing her mouth to mine. As our lips crashed together, it really did feel like my chest was ripping open. So many emotions and sensations coursed through me, a tidal wave of intensity as Mariah let her guard down and our connection flared—not the same as the mate bond, but it was enough. I needed to feel this like I did my next breath.

Our tongues danced, and I just couldn't get enough of her. Her tits pressed against my chest as I held her tightly, deepening the kiss. Her fingers dug into my shoulders, and I thrust my hips, my body igniting from the friction of rubbing my cock against her.

I broke the kiss, working my way back down her neck, nipping and sucking, biting gently before soothing it with my tongue.

“Yes,” Mariah moaned, arching into me. She reached between us, playing with the tip of my cock, and I nearly came undone.

“What are you doing to me?” I groaned.

“What does it look like?”

I stared at her as our bodies sliding against each other in the water, nearly overcome by the intensity of my feelings. “It looks like you want this.”

In one quick movement, I lifted her up enough to position my cock at her entrance, then I pulled her back down, hard, thrusting my cock deep inside of her .

Mariah cried out, and I brought my mouth to her tits, sucking on each of her nipples. Her hands were tangled in my hair, urging me on for more as she moved her hips, riding me equally hard. This was what we both wanted right now. What we needed. To let out all of our feelings, to rid ourselves of the weight of the day and fuck until all that was left was our love.

I grunted when her pussy convulsed, tightening around my cock, and still she rode me. Her eyes were locked on mine, lips parted while she panted for breath, bracing herself on the bathtub for leverage. Her honey hair had fallen from the bun and tumbled over her shoulders while she looked down at me.

In that moment, she was everything, a perfect goddess, and more than I ever could've thought to ask for. She was my mate, my love, the mother of my child in every way that mattered.

“God, I love you,” I confessed, bringing her back down for another kiss.

And then she shattered in my arms, her walls gripping me so tightly as she came that my own orgasm followed right behind.

I roared, the sound of it echoing off the bathroom walls, and still I thrust into her until we were both quaking with aftershocks, completely spent as we lay limp in the bathtub.

“Holy shit,” she said, breathing hard.

“My sentiments exactly.” I chuckled, then forced myself to stand. I pulled Mariah to her feet and grabbed a towel, drying her off before I lifted her in my arms and carried her into the bedroom.

We fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms, and for the first time in far too long, everything felt just right.

Chapter 20

Mariah

I leaned against the kitchen counter before my morning classes, sipping my coffee and watching Jax from the corner of my eye. He'd avoided me all week, and I couldn't blame him, but it still stung.

Evan had crossed a line. I didn't know if Jax knew how the mate thing was causing him to act out, but I was worried his actions had made the alpha afraid to even come near me. All he'd tried to do was help.

I sighed and rubbed my temples. The tension in the house seemed to ramp up the longer we went with no word about Tomas, but I couldn't go on like this.

"Jax," I said softly. "Can we talk?"

He looked up, surprised, from where he was sitting, hunched over the laptop at the dining room table. "Sure, love," he said with a sigh, closing his laptop. He leaned back and ran a hand through his hair, his face wary as he looked at the arched entrance that led to the hall.

I didn't care if Evan walked in. I would put his vow to the test. We might have made up, but that didn't mean I'd forgotten.

I took a deep breath to try and find the right words. "Look, I just want you to know that I'm not upset with you. Evan was in the wrong, and you didn't deserve what happened. I appreciate everything you've done to help us, and even in the short time I've known you, I've come to think of you as a friend. Please don't feel like you have to avoid me."

“And Evan? What does he think about this?”

“He swore to me he’d keep it under control.”

Jax stared at me for a moment before nodding slowly. “I hope that holds true. Thanks for what you said, love. I just don’t want to make things worse, you know?”

“You won’t.” I offered him a small smile. “Please don’t worry about it. We’re good, okay?”

He grinned then in the first real smile I’d seen since they came back from the rescue mission. “Okay.”

I felt lighter as I headed upstairs for my classes. Once they were done for the day, I headed to my room and called Analise, filling her in on how my first week had gone.

She picked up on the first ring. “Mariah! How was your first week? Do you like your classes? Do you have any hot professors? Girl, tell me everything!”

“Hello to you, too.” I said, laughing as I settled into a comfortable spot on the couch. I could always count on Analise to make me laugh, and to want every detail of my life. “It’s been great so far, challenging, but in a good way. I’m figuring out how it works and learning a lot.”

“I’m so happy for you, truly.” She’d always known about my dreams. “Not to mention how proud. Oh! Don’t let me forget about the hot professors, but I wanted to ask while I’m thinking of it. Mason mentioned he’s going to be gone next week. I assume he’s coming to Texas?”

I frowned. Evan hadn’t mentioned anything about Mason coming to town. “I don’t know, actually. Evan hasn’t said anything.”

“Maybe it’s a surprise?” Analise said, but something told me she didn’t believe that, either.

“Maybe,” I said half-heartedly, making a mental note to ask Evan later. Mason wouldn’t leave his post watching over the clubs without talking to his business partner about it first. Maybe he’d just forgotten to mention it. “What exactly did Mason say?”

“It’s not so much what he said, but the evasive way he said it,” Ana said. “And then there are the scary guys.”

“Scary guys?” I said sharply. “What are you talking about?”

“Strange men I’ve never seen before, coming and going from the club. It’s weird. They give me the creeps. Has something else happened since the last time we talked?”

I hesitated a second too long.

“What aren’t you telling me, Mariah?”

“Nothing. I’m fine. I’ve been right here the entire time, safe and sound with the Careys.” I bit back a sigh. I didn’t think I was in danger, not anymore, and worrying Analise by telling her about Jax and Porter would accomplish nothing. In fact, the less she knew about this, the better.

Ana still sounded worried. “If you’re sure. I just don’t want to think about anything happening to you again.”

“It won’t,” I assured her. “There’s no way Tomas would be crazy enough to try to kidnap me twice.”

“Well, either way, you need to be careful.”

I smiled, touched by her concern. “I promise, Analise.”

“Okay, so enough about that,” she said abruptly. “Let’s get back to talking about those hot professors...”

We chatted for a bit longer, and it just made me miss my best friend. Maybe she could come down for a visit soon. Once we hung up, however, my mind went straight back to what she’d said about Mason. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off. Why hadn’t Evan told me about Mason’s visit?

“Time to get some answers,” I murmured to myself as I stood up and went in search of Evan.

I found him standing by the window in the living room, staring out into the front yard. His tall, muscular frame was tense, and he seemed deep in thought.

“Hey,” I said softly, coming to his side. “I just got off the phone with Analise. Is Mason coming to town?”

Evan turned to face me, his dark eyes meeting mine. “Yeah, he got a tip on where Tomas might be hiding, so he’s taking a team to check it out.”

“Is it safe?” While the tip was great news, I felt concerned. “I mean, Mason’s human.”

Evan’s jaw clenched, and a flash of irritation crossed his face. “Mason is more than capable of taking care of himself,” he said, his tone clipped. “He’ll be fine.”

I was taken aback. “Are you kidding me right now? You seriously have an attitude about me asking about *Mason*? Your best friend and business partner? Evan, come on.”

He sighed. “No, I don’t. I’m sorry if it seemed that way. It’s just...there are a lot of things on my mind right now.”

“Like this tip you haven’t told me about?” I tried to keep the frustration out of my voice. I knew he was busy, and a lot of things were going on, but this was pretty big news.

“Rosalind still hasn’t dropped the lawsuit,” Evan said, grinding his teeth together as his hands balled into fists. His words made my stomach drop, and all my irritation vanished.

“What do you think is going on? Is she having trouble getting what she needs on the island?”

Evan shook his head. “We gave her everything she needed before she left. I should have just made her sign papers while we were at the hospital, but there wasn’t enough time. She would’ve insisted on getting away from Tomas, anyway.” He moved a hand over his jaw. “I talked to my lawyer this morning, and there’s no way to know if Rosalind will keep her word. We only have a week until the hearing.”

My heart sank. We were running out of time.

“Rosalind and Porter are off on that island, safe from Tomas,” Evan growled. “She could have contacted her attorney by now. Jax got a secured connection, and we tried calling, but no one answered. Our security surveillance shows

they haven't left the property. Unless she's pulled one over on us."

"For what purpose?" I said to him, not wanting to go down that path yet. I had to believe Rosalind would come through. "It's not like she can show up in court, anyway, sequestered on the island. It will look better for us when we're there and she isn't."

"You have a point, but it feels like she set us up just so she could shack up with her boyfriend."

If that were true, we could easily turn the tables on her. "Then, we just kick them off the island and leave them for Tomas to find."

Evan looked at me, amused surprise flickering across his face. "Would you really do that?"

"In a heartbeat," I said, my protective instincts flaring. "I may not like all the violence that Tomas has wrought, but it's a different game when my child is involved."

He leaned down and kissed me. "Mama bear coming out to play. You're ruthless." He grinned. "I like it."

I chuckled and wrapped my arms around his neck. "I guess that's what happens when someone tries to mess with my family."

"Mariah, you continue to amaze me," he said. "But I hope it doesn't come to that."

He bent his head, capturing my lips in a kiss that made my knees weak. His tongue traced along my lower lip, coaxing me to open up for him. I tangled my fingers in his hair, moaning softly against his mouth. As our tongues met, I could feel the heat rising between us, and ran my hands back down over his shoulders, gripping his muscular arms and holding on tightly as he deepened the kiss.

The sound of someone clearing their throat, discreet yet firm, had us breaking apart.

We turned to see Jax standing there. My cheeks were bright red, but any thoughts about what he might think

vanished when I noticed how utterly exhausted he looked. Had he looked that way this morning? Dark circles marred the skin under his eyes, and his hair was even more disheveled than usual.

“Jax, you look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I’ve been working round the clock all week,” he said, but there was a glint of triumph in his eyes. “And it was worth it. I did it.” He grinned at us.

“Did what?” I said, confused.

“Are you serious?” Evan let go of me, turning to Jax, his eyes wide. He seemed to understand Jax’s meaning, though I was still in the dark.

“Dead serious,” Jax said, his smile growing wider despite his obvious exhaustion.

“You got your system up and running again?”

He nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah. I was going to wait for the laptop Sebastian was supposed to get, but my system is better, programmed exactly how I want it. I was able to hack into it using the terminal I’ve been building.”

“But what if Tomas catches on again?” Evan said. “How are you able to get in without him knowing?”

“The only reason he found out before was because I got sloppy. I left a trace—a mistake I won’t make a second time. Everything won’t run the way it used to with this new terminal, but it’ll do.”

Evan beamed. “This is amazing news. Let’s go upstairs and go over everything with Sebastian in his office.”

“Sure thing.” Jax turned to leave the room, glancing over his shoulder as he walked out, giving me a small smile. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought that strange look was in his eye again.

“I’ll be in the office if you need me,” Evan said, kissing my cheek and turning to follow Jax.

I stood there for a moment, but then decided I might as well follow them. It would save Evan an explanation later. Evan was in the hallway, about to go up the stairs, but just as he reached the bottom, he stopped abruptly, his body going rigid.

“Evan? What’s wrong?”

“Something’s not right,” Evan muttered. Then, without another word, he took off running down the hall and out the back door.

“Wait!” I called out, but he was already gone. Heart pounding, I raced after him, attempting to keep up with his powerful strides, but it was impossible. He was yards ahead of me and gaining ground with every step.

My mind raced with questions. What could possibly have happened? Was it Tomas making his move? Or had another threat emerged from the shadows? None of the answers could be good judging from the way Evan was hauling himself toward the trees as if his life depended on it.

I pushed myself harder, even as I felt winded, but eventually I had to stop and catch my breath. That’s when I saw it—smoke billowing up in the distance. Panic gripped me as I remembered Abi had taken Sofia out earlier that day to spend some time in the vineyard.

“Abi... *Sofia!*” I cried out, my stomach roiling. My legs felt like they were made of lead, but I pushed myself to keep running, willing them to move faster. Every second counted, and all I could think about was getting to my daughter and making sure she was safe.

After what felt like far too long, I reached the vineyard. Three dragons, two large and one small, stood between the trees and the grape vines. One was Evan’s black-scaled behemoth of a dragon. The smaller dragon I assumed was Abi, leaving the large green one to be... Sebastian?

I scanned the area frantically, and my eyes then landed on a small figure huddled on a blanket, crying. Relief washed over me as I rushed to Sofia, dropping to my knees beside her.

She looked scared, but as far as I could tell, she was unharmed.

“Shh, baby girl, it’s okay,” I whispered, cradling her to my chest. Her tiny body trembled against mine, and I rocked her gently, soothing her fears away. “Mommy’s here now.”

Sofia’s hazel eyes focused on me when she looked up, her breathing uneven as her crying eased. She reached and touched my cheek with her chubby fingers.

“Mama.”

I inhaled quickly, my heart pressing against my ribcage as I was filled with overwhelming love and joy, hardly able to believe what I’d heard.

“Oh, sweet girl,” I breathed, tears welling in my eyes, spilling over as I held her even tighter. “That’s right. Mama’s here. I’ll always be here for you.”

The impact of that one word shifted something in me. She *was* my child, and I was her mother, and nothing in the world would ever change that.

Tears streamed down my cheeks when I caught sight of Evan racing toward us in human form.

“Is she okay?” Evan called out as he finally reached us. He fell to his knees beside me, reaching for Sofia.

“I think she’s fine, just scared,” I said. My heart pounded, fuller than it’d ever been from Sofia’s declaration—her single word that marked my soul. I wanted to revel in that joy, but the urgency of the moment demanded attention.

“What’s happening, Evan? What was the smoke from, and why was Sofia lying here alone?”

“Let’s get back to the house. I’ll explain everything.” Evan held Sofia tightly to his chest, using another arm to help me up, wrapping it around me as we made our way back home. I kept glancing up at him as he murmured to Sofia, reassuring her everything was okay over and over again. There was real worry in his eyes.

We'd barely entered the kitchen when Abi and Sebastian joined us, both looking disheveled. Abi's clothes were singed, and Sebastian had dirt smudged across his face.

"Someone please tell me what on earth happened out there," I said.

"Mariah, I'm so sorry," Abi said, her face twisted with regret. "Sofia and I were sitting on a blanket in the vineyard when I had this strange feeling we were being watched. I couldn't explain it, but out of nowhere, a masked man in camouflage attacked us."

"Attacked you?" I echoed, reaching out to grip Evan's arm, my other hand at Sofia's back as I stared at Abi, horror stricken.

"Yes. I yelled for help and shifted as fast as I could, knocking him back, scenting that he was human. I don't know if he didn't expect me to fight back or what, but he started to run off, so I tried to trap him with a smoke ring. But he was too fast." She looked at Sebastian. "Faster than any human should be."

His gaze hardened, and he glanced at Evan, then at me. "First, I just want to make sure... is everyone all right?"

"Thankfully, yes," Evan said, wrapping his arm around me protectively. "I heard Abi yelling, and I took off to see what was happening." So that was why he'd stopped in the hallway. His dragon senses were strong enough that he could hear her from that far away. It was incredible.

"By the time I got there, he was gone," he told me. "Sebastian arrived just a second later. This is a major problem. Who was that man, and how did he get past our security?"

"I might have an idea about that." We all turned to see Jax standing in the doorway, holding a laptop. He looked more somber than usual, all hints of his teasing and joking demeanor replaced by something that resembled...dread?

"Jax." Sebastian turned to him, gesturing for him to come in. "What do you know?"

He sighed, shaking his head as if he didn't believe it himself. "I'm honestly not really sure." He glanced around the room at each of us. "I've been working on getting my system back up and running since I got here, and I just had a major success. I was looking through some of the files, waiting for Evan to come up to the office, and I found something you need to see."

He swallowed hard, and I had to wonder what could've made him this upset. Jax quickly connected the laptop to a small screen on the kitchen counter, and we all gathered around to watch. The footage was from another lab, showing a man strapped down to an exam table, his face contorted in agony as he was injected with some unknown substance.

"Turn off the sound," I said, hardly able to bear the sight of the man's pain without hearing his screams as well. It was horrific, and my stomach twisted in knots as my heart rate jumped.

"Sorry," Jax said quietly, muting the video. We watched as the man went limp. He stayed like that for several seconds, then his body jolted, rising up off the table as if he'd been electrocuted. In the next instant, the man was gone, vanished. In his place...

"Wait, is that...?" I trailed off, too stunned to finish my sentence, my mind refusing to believe what I'd seen.

"A cat," Jax confirmed. "It seems someone has succeeded in creating a serum that turns humans into animals."

Chapter 21

Evan

The image on the screen flickered as we played it over and over again, contemplating what the hell Tomas had done. The man writhed in pain as his body contorted and transformed. My stomach churned each time we watched it, yet it was hard to look away. We'd moved up to the office. Abi had put Sofia to bed while Mariah, Jax, and I gathered with Sebastian.

I had more questions than answers, but there was one I needed to know right away. "Jax, how did you get this footage so quickly?"

Jax rolled his eyes. "Just because my old terminal got destroyed doesn't mean my entire system stopped running." He said it as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"But where is this video coming from? How are you getting access to it now? This is a live feed?"

Jax pointed to another monitor he'd hooked up. He had eight different rolls of footage running. One screen showed an empty medical clinic, but it was the same location from the other video. "Yes, it's live. I know this place. It's the clan's private clinic."

That meant it was on the Hawthorne clan lands, far away from where we could reach without truly declaring war. I frowned. "And you just happened to have a camera in the clinic? What for?"

"Let's just say I had a hunch something shady was going down there," Jax said, his eyes never leaving the screen. "A lot of strange comings and goings all of a sudden—ones Tomas

was keeping me in the dark about. I was familiar with everything on his property, so I got curious when he started being particularly secretive. One night, I snuck in and found the lab. I thought it was unused at the time. I set up the camera just in case, but for months, there was nothing.”

“Until now,” Mariah whispered, her hand gripping mine even tighter.

“Exactly.” Jax nodded. “This is the first I’ve seen of any of this. When I got back into my system, there were multiple alerts to movement from these particular cameras. I searched it, and boom, now we have footage of a man being turned into a cat.”

“But why a cat?” I had to ask. It was such a strange choice. “I’ve never heard of a cat shifter. Have you, Sebastian?”

He shook his head. “Feline shifters, sure, but shifters are *always* predatory animals. Dragons, wolves, panthers, but never a little house cat.”

“Maybe Tomas is trying something new,” Mariah said. “Or maybe the serum they used didn’t work as intended.”

“Either way, this is bad news.” Sebastian clasped his hands together, his expression growing dark.

“Or,” Mariah said, “maybe their experiments with the predatory animals weren’t working, and they somehow altered the serum to break it down to its base species. It could work better on smaller, non-predatory animals.”

She bit her lip as if she feared her theory might be dismissed, but I grinned as I glanced at her. Mariah was so much more intelligent than she gave herself credit for.

“Mariah, that’s brilliant.” I reached for her hand, and her cheeks flushed pink. “You really might be onto something. I mean, how did a man get this close to the house without being detected? It had to be one of Tomas’s creations.”

Sebastian nodded in agreement. “I think so as well.” He turned to his own computer and clicked a few buttons, bringing up additional footage from the security cameras around the clan lands. He searched through the feeds for a few

minutes, then sat back, crossing his arms as he landed on the clip he was looking for. We all watched in disbelief as a calico cat climbed up the massive brick wall surrounding the clan lands, landing gracefully on the other side.

“Unbelievable.” Sebastian rubbed the back of his neck. “Tomas has found a way to exploit our security blind spots using smaller animals. We’ll need to reevaluate our defenses and make an overall reevaluation immediately.”

“Agreed.” The last thing we needed was for our safe haven to be jeopardized. My mind raced with possible countermeasures, thinking through any potential vulnerabilities. I’d explored every inch of these lands as a teen and knew where we might need to focus first.

Sebastian cursed as I listed out other areas that might put us at risk, running a hand through his hair. “We’ll need to upgrade the fence. Perhaps build an electric one.”

I frowned, my gaze fixed on the screen displaying the calico cat. “This is worse than I feared. Tomas is making progress with that serum if he just turned a man into a cat shifter. I doubt anyone would pay for that, but it proves he’s up to something illegal, and dangerous.” I looked at Jax. “Anything else from the footage?”

He shook his head, frowning as he fast-forwarded through the feed after the man was turned. “Not that I can see. Just the doctor checking vitals once he’s shifted back to human form. And, ugh—” He sat back, banging his fist on the desk. “The camera went dark.”

“Damn,” I muttered, clenching my fists. “Do you think they found it?”

Jax hesitated. “I can’t be sure.” He tapped away on the keyboard for a few seconds and growled in frustration. “I can’t access it anymore, so it’s a possibility. But what we have is enough. We need to get this information to the authorities.”

Here was the final bit of proof we needed.

Sebastian nodded. “Jax, transfer the footage to a physical drive. I want to send it to my friend who works for the feds

and see if there's enough here to lock Tomas away. We need to put an end to Hawthorne's machinations."

"I'm on it." Jax rose up and moved quickly in order to follow Sebastian's instructions. "Let me just grab one from my room."

Once Jax retreated to handle the file transfer, Sebastian and I looked at each other as the weight of the situation bore down on us. This was so much worse than I'd hoped. I'd never expected Tomas to reach a breakthrough.

Sebastian finally broke the silence with a wry chuckle. "You know, it won't be that hard for us to take out a bunch of cats if that's Tomas's plan."

I did appreciate his attempt to lighten the mood. "Yeah, we could char them in seconds."

Sebastian's amusement faded, however. "Still, I think this was more of a test to see how close he could get to us using smaller and less dangerous animals. He was seeing what he could get away with, and he got caught, but unfortunately, he got really close. Too close."

Mariah frowned. "What does that mean for us?"

"It means we need to be prepared for anything. If Tomas is experimenting with different shifters, there's no telling what he'll try next."

My heart raced as the gravity of the situation sank in, but I didn't want Mariah to see my fear. I pulled her into my arms and held her tightly. "We'll get through this, Mariah. We'll find a way to put an end to this."

I wanted to believe it, really I did, but it seemed like every time we turned around, Tomas was throwing a new wrench in our plans. She leaned into my embrace as she looked up at me, her light brown eyes searching mine for reassurance. It was that look which made me vow Tomas wouldn't win this time.

Jax returned, clutching a small flash drive as though it held the key to our survival, then plugged it into his terminal and began tapping away at the keys. A minute later, he held it out to Sebastian, who took it with a nod of approval.

“Thanks, Jax. I don’t know where we’d be without you.” Then he turned to me. “Evan, I want you to take this with you to New York.” It was less than a week until the court date.

“It’s time we admitted Rosalind might not follow through,” he said. “We’ll likely go to trial. I’m getting a message to Rosalind as we speak, but if she doesn’t drop the suit by next week, she’ll no longer have refuge with us.”

“Understood,” I said, my fingers itching to take the drive and put an end to this mess once and for all.

“First thing I want you to do when you arrive is to meet my contact in the FBI to hand over this file. We don’t want to risk it getting into the wrong hands.”

“I won’t let you down.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Sebastian said, clapping me on the back before leaving the room.

Over the next few days, an uneasy ball of dread formed in my gut, growing larger with each passing day. Still no word from Rosalind. My heart twisted with every glance at Sofia, hating how powerless I was here, and that I faced the very real possibility of losing her. The thought ate away at me, gnawing on my insides like a relentless beast.

It was only when I called my lawyer that we received confirmation: we had to appear in court. Even Catherine Shaw couldn’t stop the inevitable.

“Will Sofia have to be present for the hearing?” I said as we discussed the details.

“Thankfully, no,” Ms. Shaw said, to my relief. She’d be safest here, even after the breach. “But any witnesses you have who could speak on your behalf should be there. Or at the very least, send a statement as a character witness.”

Sebastian had told us he wouldn’t be leaving the clan lands while we were away, or anytime soon after what happened. But I could get him and Abi to record something. “I have a few in mind,” I told her.

“Excellent.” Her professional demeanor never wavered, giving me some small comfort. “That should suffice.”

As I hung up the phone, it felt like a lead weight was sitting on my chest. We spent the next few days preparing for our trip and spending as much time as possible with Sofia. The night before we were supposed to leave, I had a last minute meeting with Sebastian, and on my way out, Jax caught me in the hall.

“Can I talk to you about something before you leave?”

“Sure, what’s up?” I said.

“I want to come with you to New York,” Jax said, getting right to the point. “I know it’s last minute. I should have asked you sooner, but I didn’t want you to say no.”

“Do you really think it’s safe for you to leave?” I was genuinely concerned for his well-being. We’d gotten off to a bad start, and I might still struggle with that irrational jealousy, but I didn’t want anything to happen to him. Jax had already put himself at risk too many times by helping us gather evidence against his father.

“The way I figure, it’s probably just as safe as you guys going.” He shrugged, but there was a determined glint in his eyes. “I’m certain my father knows about the court appearance. Honestly, you and Mariah might be in more danger than me.”

He had a valid point. I sighed. “We’ve already arranged for Sebastian’s security team to accompany us. They’ll be with us at all times. Are you sure you want to go? It’s a risk I’m not sure you should take.”

“Don’t you both need some kind of backup?” Jax grinned sheepishly. “There’s this tech shop I need to visit, anyway. The guy who makes the parts for my new system doesn’t ship his goods, and I need a few things to optimize my new setup.”

I chuckled, a bit surprised, yet if he really wanted to go... “You can come with us, but I’m serious, Jax. You need to watch your back now more than ever. Like you said, Tomas

will be there, or his goons will be watching us at the very least.”

“I swear, I’ll be careful. And thank you, Evan.” Jax gave a genuine smile. “I also need to stop off at the bank. I feel like I’ve been freeloading off of you guys.”

“Please don’t think that. That’s not how it works with us. You’re part of the team now, which means in a way, you’re family.” Words I never thought I’d be saying to him, of all people.

“Still,” he said, looking down and shuffling his feet. “I never had much money, anyway. Tomas was rich, but he wasn’t big on sharing the wealth, even with his own son.” He rolled his eyes when he spoke of his father. “That’s another reason I need to go, access my safety deposit box. There are things I need.”

“Say no more. You’re coming along.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “See you in the morning, then.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Jax gave me a grateful smile, then left to pack a bag for the next few days.

I walked back to my bedroom, opening the door to find Mariah lying on the bed with Sofia asleep on her chest. I smiled at the sight: my two favorite girls in the world.

“I’m starting to see why this little girl is so spoiled now,” I said teasingly as I climbed onto the bed next to them.

Mariah shrugged, her eyes full of affection as she looked down at our sleeping daughter. She rubbed her back in gentle circles. “Babies are meant to be spoiled. She won’t be this tiny forever.”

I placed a hand on Sofia’s back as well, feeling the warmth, the steady rhythm of her breathing. All the worries that I’d been ignoring rose to the surface.

“Mariah, I’m scared,” I said. “I don’t want to lose her.”

“Hey,” she said softly, reaching out to touch my arm. “Don’t talk like that. Don’t even think like that. We aren’t going to lose her. We’ll get through this court thing, just like

we get through everything else the world throws our way. Everything will be okay.”

I knew she was being comforting, but her words didn’t ease the knot in my stomach. All I could think about was how much I loved Sofia, and the thought of losing her felt unbearable.

“I don’t know why Rosalind hasn’t stuck to her word,” she said, finding my hand and lacing her fingers with mine, providing me with strength without even realizing it. “But ultimately it doesn’t matter, does it? If she doesn’t show up to court, they’ll see she doesn’t care about being a mom. Honestly, this might be the best possible scenario. It could work in our favor.”

“Catherine said they’ll likely set another court date unless we can prove Rosalind is unfit. But if she doesn’t appear for the next court date, we’ll be granted full custody of Sofia.”

“Then, that’s what we’ll look forward to—the day Rosalind is no longer a concern,” Mariah said.

I could feel the tension in my shoulders loosening as Mariah moved closer to me, her head coming to rest against my shoulder. “Just keep thinking positively, Evan. We’ve got this.”

“God, I hope so,” I said, pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head. Her scent filled my senses, helping to soothe my uneasy spirit. “I’ll try to stay positive. For my girls.”

Mariah tilted her head up, gazing into my eyes. “We’re a team, remember? You, me, and Sofia. Whatever happens, we face it together.”

Her words, ones she’d spoken many times before, hit me all over again, fierce determination stirring to life deep within me. I felt that sense of resolve, the promise that I wouldn’t let anything tear our family apart.

“You’re right,” I said.

“About time you realized it,” she said, eyes sparkling.

In that moment, as we lay there in the dimly lit room, all the challenges ahead faded into the background. For now, our world felt small and intimate, just the three of us against whatever fate had in store.

Mariah rested her head against my shoulder, and I sighed in contentment in this little reprieve.

No matter what happened when we returned to New York, I'd fight for my family with every ounce of strength I possessed, as if my life depended on it. Because it did.

Chapter 22

Mariah

As I stepped off the plane and looked down onto the tarmac, I shivered despite the hot summer air. Evan's hand found mine, squeezing it, but it didn't soothe my nerves. This trip felt different, more dangerous than any we'd taken before. It wasn't just that I knew so much more about the true threat Tomas posed, but everything happening around me put me on edge, from the bodyguards who'd accompanied us from Texas, to the private security unit that was waiting for us, armed to the teeth.

I couldn't pretend this was normal. While I eyed all the people who were waiting, ready to defend us at the first sign of danger, I tightened my grip on Evan's hand.

"Are you sure about this, Evan?" I said. Part of me wondered if such an obvious entourage would just draw more attention to us.

"We have no other choice." His jaw was set as he led me down the jet's stairs. "Tomas already knows we'll be here. We have to take every precaution possible."

"He's right, Mariah," Jax said from behind us as he descended as well. "Tomas is ruthless. We have to be one step ahead."

I swallowed against my fear. As much as I didn't like it, they were right. We made our way across the tarmac to where the security unit surrounded a black SUV with tinted windows so dark I couldn't see inside. The men ushered us into the vehicle, then some piled inside with us, some of them taking

another van behind us. Their presence was a constant reminder that we were walking targets.

The drive to the penthouse was mostly silent. As we pulled up, I looked out the window at the tall SoHo building, my mind flashing back to the first day I'd come here for my interview to be Sofia's nanny. Life was so much simpler then. I'd had no idea what was in store for me, and no idea that I'd meet the love of my life.

Before we even stepped out of the SUV, the security team insisted on sweeping the building and the penthouse itself. It was terrifying that these precautions were necessary, but it didn't surprise me, not anymore. I shook my head, overwhelmed by it all.

"Clear," one of the guards finally said through a comm device.

"Let's go," Evan muttered, his grip on my hand tightening as we stepped from the car and hurried into the building, flanked by the security team. There weren't a lot of people in the lobby when we entered, but those that were gasped as we rushed to the bank of elevators.

I looked around the familiar surroundings, taking in the modern architect and art, my gaze lingering on the waterfall glass that cascaded down from the vaulted ceiling. I wondered if this would be our last visit. It was my home for nearly six months, but our future wasn't here—something I was coming to accept.

The security team accompanied us onto the elevator, the doors sliding closed, obscuring us from the residents' curious stares.

Evan sighed. "Guess we'll have to sell the place now. People probably think I'm part of the mob."

I let out a soft laugh, and even Jax grinned. He'd been quiet and serious throughout the flight, and I wasn't sure what was going through his mind. Was he worried about what Tomas might try to do next?

I said, “Well, if you really think about it, it kind of seems like we are—minus the illegal activities.”

“You have a point, but I can’t say I like drawing attention for all the wrong reasons.” His eyes met mine as he smiled.

When we entered the penthouse, I took a deep breath, the familiar scent bringing back so many memories. This was where it’d all started, where our love had truly taken root. As I walked through the living room, my fingers brushed against the back of the couch, remembering the nights we’d spent cuddled up together, watching movies and getting to know each other, making love and discovering everything for the first time.

The security team took their positions, some outside in the hall, some inside our home. It was a stark reminder of just how much had changed. I moved from one room to another, memories flooding my mind. I let them come—the laughter, the tears, the moments of pure joy we’d experienced here—knowing it was possible we might never come back here again after the hearing. It nearly broke my heart to think about it, but I knew there was so much still ahead of us, and things to look forward to that would outshine even our brightest memories here.

Evan showed Jax to the guest room, which was the downstairs nursery where I’d spent my first nights here before Evan moved me to his room. Then my mate was beside me, taking my hand and leading me to a small wooden chest, lifting the lid to reveal a collection of photographs.

“Look at this,” he said, holding up a picture of Sofia, Evan, and me smiling as we sat on a picnic blanket in Central Park. “We can’t leave these behind.”

“No.” I looked through the pictures, surprised to find so many. “When did you have all these printed?” There were photos from all the way back before we even got together. Our entire relationship, and much of Sofia’s first year, was documented here. Warmth filled my chest as I smiled up at Evan.

“Here and there,” he said, gathering the rest of the pictures. “Let’s go ahead and pack these up now to take back home with us.”

Evan had taken to calling the Carey lands home more often than he realized. It was even more apparent how much our lives had changed since the early days depicted in the photographs. We had an extended family now; a life and a home to get back to.

I took the pictures and headed upstairs. The penthouse was strangely quiet and empty without Sofia’s coos and laughter echoing throughout the place. Time seemed to have warped once I’d stepped foot in here. So much had happened, yet it felt like only yesterday I’d arrived as the new nanny.

I wandered into Sofia’s room, my eyes scanning the familiar space filled with her toys and clothes. A pang of nostalgia hit me as I noticed small items that held special memories: a stuffed dragon Evan bought for her at a carnival, the baby blanket with flames, the first matching outfit I’d bought for us to wear. Each one was precious, and I knew they needed to come back to Texas with us.

“You okay?” Evan said from the doorway, his dark eyes mirroring the same bittersweet emotions filling my heart. He stepped inside, wrapping an arm around my waist, providing the comfort and strength I needed.

“Can you believe how much has changed?” I said to him, a tear escaping down my cheek. I wiped it away, not wanting to be so emotional, but I couldn’t seem to help it. “It feels like lifetimes ago that I came here to look after Sofia.”

“It does. I went from having the ultimate bachelor pad to a fully baby-proofed home in no time,” he said, smiling.

“Would you change anything, if you could?” Life had taken so many unexpected turns, after all.

He shook his head without hesitation. “Not a thing. It’s been the best transformation of my life. Sofia coming into my life, meeting you...” He gently brushed away my tears, love shining in his eyes. “You two are the best things that ever

happened to me, and I'll take everything else along with it if it means I get to have you in the end."

"I'm already yours," I said, resting my head on his chest.

"And I'm yours," he echoed, kissing me softly on the top of my head.

It wasn't how I'd expected to spend our first few hours back in the penthouse, but we both seemed to be on the same page. Together, we went through our things, setting aside items we wanted to take back with us, creating a small pile of treasures that symbolized our journey together as a family. We couldn't take it all, so we chose carefully, and each object we selected held a story that we'd carry with us, no matter where our future led.

When we were finished, Evan pulled me into his arms. "You know, everything got even better when you came along," he said. His fingers gently caressed my cheek, and I leaned into his touch.

His words were a salve for the insecurities that'd been nagging at me lately about being an outsider in his world. I knew deep down that no matter what, Evan and I belonged together. We'd figure out whatever came our way.

"I love you both so much." A fresh round of tears welled in my eyes.

Evan brushed them away again, a soft smile on his face as he leaned down, capturing my lips with his in a tender kiss that held all the promise of our future together. "And I love you."

He ran his hands up and down my back as he kissed me again. His touch ignited a fire within, and I found myself craving more. I clung to him, deepening the kiss, reaching up to wind my arms around his neck, reveling in the warmth and strength of his embrace.

Evan scooped me up with ease, cradling me against his chest as I was carried out of the nursery and to our bedroom. As we crossed the threshold, I realized this might just be the last time we'd make love in this place—our first home as a little family.

Evan laid me down on the bed, his body hovering above mine as he gazed into my eyes.

I stared back at him.

He lowered himself, settling between my legs and bracing his arms on either side of me, then he brought his mouth to mine, a gentle brush of the lips before pulling back to look at me again. “You’re so beautiful. Have I told you today just how much I love you?”

“You can never say it enough,” I said reaching for him, winding my fingers in his hair as I brought his mouth back to mine. We kissed slowly, deeply, and I poured all of my emotions into it, all of my love.

Evan took his time, peeling my clothes slowly off my body, his stare caressing every inch of skin he exposed. Then I returned the favor, pulling his shirt over his head, bringing my hands to the waistband of his pants.

When we were fully naked, he wrapped me in his strong arms, and I shuddered at the feel of his hot skin against mine, my breath emerging faster now. Starting at my neck, Evan kissed his way down my body, in no hurry as he worshipped me, his lips blazing a trail of fire along my skin. His warm breath on my nipple had me writhing beneath him, but he wasn’t done.

He continued his way down, over my hip, my thigh, my calf, and then he worked his way back up. I was aching with need when his lips found mine again.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and slowly rolled my hips, savoring his groan of pleasure as his cock met my pussy. I was already so ready for him. “Please, Evan,” I breathed. “I need all of you right now.”

He brought his palm to my cheek, his dark gaze locked with mine, never breaking eye contact as he angled his hips and slowly, inch by inch, thick inch, slipped inside of me. When we were as close as two people could possibly be, he paused, shuddering as he continued to stare down at me.

“I love you so much, Mariah.”

“I love you,” I echoed, my arms coming to his shoulders, bracing myself when he moved. He rocked his hips, thrusting into me gently at first, taking his time to build up the pleasure until I was desperate for more.

Evan knew exactly what I needed, and he shifted his weight, the new angle giving even more friction. I moaned in pleasure as heat ignited in my veins, breathing ragged now as my orgasm teased me, just out of reach.

Evan chuckled when I groaned in frustration.

“Are you doing this on purpose?”

He paused. “Doing what?” He rolled his hips again, and my eyes fluttered at the sensation of his cock dragging along my inner walls.

“You’re teasing me.”

He grinned. “I just want to make you feel as good as possible for as long as possible.”

“Such a gentleman,” I said. “But I’m ready to feel the *best* as long as possible.”

“Then, who am I to deny you that pleasure?” Evan brought his mouth to mine once more, kissing me even deeper this time, the connection burning brightly between us. I could feel his love, stronger than ever before, as if each day, the bond strengthened.

Just when I thought I couldn’t take it anymore, he began moving faster, his thrusts growing more urgent as his own need ramped up. Soon we were gasping for breath, our slick bodies sliding against each other as we raced toward mutual release.

I clung on, wrapping my arms and legs around him as I met him stroke for stroke. Then my body tensed up before waves of pleasure washed over me, erasing everything except this moment, this man, and my love for him.

Evan followed right behind me, groaning, and that’s how we fell asleep, tangled in each other’s arms.

* * *

I awoke with the warmth of Evan's body still wrapped around me, not sure when I'd drifted off, but the afternoon sun was still high in the sky, streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows. I turned to face Evan, finding him awake and staring down at me.

He smiled softly. "Do you feel rested?"

I smiled back. "Completely satisfied, if that's what you're asking."

"I love to serve," he said with a wink, bending down to kiss me again.

It would be all too easy to just stay there for the rest of the day, but after a few minutes I reluctantly disentangled myself from him. We needed to meet with Evan's lawyer before the end of the day, and despite the blissful haze lingering in the air, we couldn't afford to be late.

"I know we should get going," Evan said lustily as he pulled me close again for one more tender kiss. "But I could also stay right here forever."

"First things first." I forced myself to focus on the task at hand. "Let's go see the lawyer, and we can pick back up later."

"I just might hold you to that."

After getting dressed, we made our way out of the penthouse, security flanking us the entire way to the waiting SUV. Jax stayed behind, saying he had some errands to run. Once again, the overt security team that surrounded us at all times was a stark reminder of the danger we faced, even as it gave me a strange sense of comfort. They were there to protect us against Tomas, and I'd honestly never felt safer.

The drive to Catherine Shaw's office was short and tense, each passing block ramping up my fears over what lay ahead. When we arrived, we had to wait for yet another security sweep, ensuring the attorney's building was safe for us to enter. I wondered if she'd ever experienced anything like it.

Evan's quip about looking like we were part of the mob flashed in my memory, and I giggled.

Evan stared, and I shook my head, not sure how our guards would feel about that comment. A few minutes later, we got the all-clear, and Evan's hand gripped mine as we climbed from the SUV and were ushered into the building.

Ms. Shaw's office was a study in professional elegance, the polished mahogany and leather furniture giving off an air of authority. She greeted us with a firm handshake and a kind smile, her silver-streaked hair and sharp eyes exuding confidence.

"Okay," she said, motioning for us to sit. "Just a quick review of what you can expect during tomorrow's court hearing. It will begin promptly with the judge calling the session to order. Should Rosalind fail to appear, which we suspect is likely, the judge will document her absence and proceed to take statements on behalf of Evan."

Evan nodded, his jaw set. "And that's where Mariah comes in, right?"

"Exactly," Catherine confirmed. "Mariah, your testimony will be essential in establishing Evan's role as a devoted and capable father. The more details you can provide about his care for Sofia, the better."

I swallowed, thinking about having to give a testimony in a court of law, but my mind was already racing with memories of Evan's tender moments with his daughter. There was no doubt in my mind that he was the best father Sofia could ever have, and he loved her more than anything. I would do whatever I could to help secure their future together.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I'll do everything in my power to make sure the judge sees Evan for who he truly is: a loving, dedicated father."

Catherine smiled gratefully. "That's all we can ask for. Now, let's review some key points so you both feel prepared for tomorrow."

I glanced out the window, watching the city below buzz with life and activity while she briefed us.

“Once court is adjourned, assuming Rosalind doesn’t show, the judge may set another date for her to appear. In the meantime, Evan will maintain full custody of Sofia.”

That’s what we’d expected, but Evan still sighed in relief, his hand reaching for mine under the table. “That’s what I was hoping you’d say. But isn’t there another way we can get this over with sooner? Couldn’t the judge just grant me custody tomorrow? The thought of going through this again...”

Catherine nodded sympathetically. “I understand your concern, Evan. I’ll do my best to present a strong case that there’s no need for a second court date. It’s important to remember that Rosalind was the one who sued for her custodial rights, and given that she’ll likely be a no-show and abandoned an unregistered infant, things won’t look too good for her.”

At least we had that in our favor. The knot in my stomach began to loosen slightly. The stakes were so high, but Catherine Shaw was supposed to be the best, and we had her fighting on our side. We spent the next hour discussing strategies and potential questions we might encounter during the hearing. As we wrapped up and prepared to leave, Catherine stood and extended her hand to each of us.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said, giving us a confident smile. “Try not to get into any trouble before then.”

Evan chuckled. “We’ll do our best.”

“Thank you, Catherine.” I shook her outstretched hand. “We couldn’t have done this without you.”

As Evan and I stepped back into the bustling city streets, hand-in-hand, I felt a sense of hope despite the entourage surrounding us. Tomorrow would be a defining moment, but I believed in my heart that we’d come out successful. There wasn’t an alternative.

“Do you want to stop for dinner?” Evan said once we were secured in the SUV once more.

“Maybe we could just pick something up and take it home,” I suggested. “Should we check in with Jax to see if he wants anything?”

Before he could respond, Evan’s phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and glanced at the screen, his expression darkening.

“Sebastian,” Evan said into the phone, his gaze locked on mine. “What’s going on?”

As Evan listened, his grip on my hand tightened, the heat radiating from him intensifying. A sudden chill ran down my spine. Something was wrong. It was as if I could feel the dragon within him stirring, ready to protect us at all costs.

“Are you sure?” Evan grimaced. “Keep me updated. We’ll take care of it.”

Evan hung up and let out a frustrated growl.

“What is it?” I said, gripping his thigh. “Has something happened?”

The muscle in his jaw ticked when he stared at me, and actual fear shone in his eyes. “Rosalind requested transport off the island. Sebastian thinks she’s heading our way.”

“What? Are you sure?” A heavy knot formed in my stomach when he nodded. Rosalind’s sudden appearance was the last thing we needed, especially on the eve of the custody hearing, and my mind raced with questions. “Do you think she’s breaking the deal? Will she try to take Sofia, after all?”

Evan’s eyes briefly burned gold at the suggestion. “She can try, but I won’t let that happen. She’ll never take our child.”

His conviction reverberated through me and calmed some of my fears. Evan would do anything to protect our family, and so would I. We might not know what Rosalind was planning, but she wouldn’t catch us unprepared.

As the city flashed by outside the window, I gripped Evan’s hand. We were stronger than any threat that dared to

come between us and our family. It was time to put an end to this once and for all.

Chapter 23

Evan

I paced the length of the penthouse, clenching and unclenching my fists as I waited for any news on Rosalind's whereabouts. Anger simmered inside me like a fire about to consume everything in its path, my dragon's fury burning through me. Every minute that passed without an update only fueled my rage. How could we let Rosalind fool us? Sebastian had lost track of her once she left the island. How could she just disappear like smoke in the wind?

Feeling like I might come right out of my skin, I pulled out my phone and called Sebastian's head of security, who mainly reported to me while we were in town for the hearing.

"Any updates?" I said the minute he picked up.

"Nothing yet, sir," came the reply. "We're still looking."

"Keep searching," I answered with a growl before hanging up.

My bad mood followed me out the door and into the car as Mariah and I headed to court. She looked worried, offering words of comfort and optimism, but my temper was getting the better of me.

"Everything will work out, Evan," she said softly, placing a hand on my arm.

"Stop saying that," I said with a snap. "Rosalind could be anywhere, and we have no clue if she'll even show up at court today. We've lost all the leverage we worked so hard to get."

Everything—all the digging Sebastian had done, the meetings with Tomas’s cronies, our work to get Rosalind and Porter to safety—all of it meant nothing if Rosalind showed up in court and proceeded with the suit. Not knowing what to expect was putting me so on edge I could hardly restrain my temper.

Mariah glared, her light brown eyes flashing. “I understand you’re under a lot of pressure, Evan, but don’t forget that I’m on your side here. You need to check your attitude at the door because if you go into court with this mindset and Rosalind does show up, you might as well hand Sofia right over to her. The judge won’t take kindly to a raging beast of a man.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. She was right. I needed to get my emotions in check, but it was so fucking hard when the fate of my daughter hung in the balance.

I took a deep breath and calmed myself. “I’m sorry, Mariah. You’re right. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

She grimaced. “Just keep it in check, Evan. Let’s focus on what’s important here. We’re doing this for Sofia.”

I nodded, taking her hand in mine as I exhaled. Sofia was the one that mattered here. I wouldn’t let her down. For her sake, I needed to keep a level head and fight for her future with everything I had.

“I’m sorry.” I wondered how she was still putting up with my temper these days.

“Apology accepted,” Mariah said, but her tone was still cool. I deserved that. I couldn’t blame her for being upset. I had let my anger get the better of me. Again.

We arrived at the courthouse, and my heart pounded. Outside the SUV, people milled about. I scanned the crowd, but there was no sign of Rosalind. Our security detail piled out of the vehicle, surrounding us as we made our way into the courthouse.

Once inside, the sterile smell of the building only added to my anxiety.

“Are you okay?” Mariah said, her eyes searching mine. “Are you going to be able to handle this?”

“I have no other choice,” I said, sounding confident, but in truth, my nerves were all over the place. This last-minute wrench with Rosalind had me so on edge I could hardly focus.

I took my seat at the front of the courtroom, Mariah sitting directly behind me. I scanned the room, looking for Rosalind’s familiar auburn hair, but there was no sign of her. The minutes ticked by, but it felt like hours before the judge finally entered.

“Order in the court!” the bailiff said as the judge took his seat, stern-faced and imposing in his black robe. I held my breath, hoping against hope that Rosalind wouldn’t make an appearance.

“Let the proceedings begin,” the judge said, and my heart raced even faster.

Here we go...

“Calling Rosalind Hawthorne to the stand,” the bailiff said as his voice echoed through the courtroom.

I drummed my fingers on my thigh, waiting for her to appear, but the seconds stretched on and on, and there was still no sign of her. Had she simply decided not to show up? But if that were the case, why had she left the island?

“Your Honor, may we proceed without Miss Hawthorne?” our attorney said.

“Very well,” the judge said in an impatient voice. “We’ll move forward with the hearing.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Ms. Shaw said, and I exhaled with a shaky breath. It seemed that for now, at least, we had caught a break.

Despite the temporary reprieve, my nerves were still frayed as the proceedings continued. Each question from the attorneys, each witness statement, only added to the tension in the room. I couldn’t shake the feeling that everything could change in an instant if Rosalind appeared.

“Stay focused,” Mariah murmured from behind me, as if she sensed my unease. “Everything is going well so far.”

She was right, but my instincts were on high alert, waiting for the other shoe to drop. I knew how the Hawthornes operated, and while I couldn’t see the point, it was entirely possible Rosalind had set us up to fail. Still, I clung to the hope that this would work out in our favor.

Just when it seemed like we might get through this without Rosalind showing up, the courtroom doors burst open, and in she waltzed. Her auburn hair cascaded down her back, and her hazel eyes met mine with a smug smile. My heart dropped. In a second flat, she’d managed to erase any sense of relief I’d felt moments ago. She’d fooled us once again.

I wanted to scream, to rage, but I managed to keep control. I wouldn’t let her see me lose it now, not when so much was on the line.

“Miss Hawthorne,” the judge said in a gruff voice. “You are late, and your entrance has disturbed the sanctity of this court. This is a serious hearing, and I expect punctuality and respect from all parties involved.”

“My apologies, Your Honor,” Rosalind said with saccharine sweetness. “I assure you I won’t take long.”

My blood boiled at the sheer audacity. I forced myself, however, to take deep breaths.

“Very well,” the judge said, clearly unimpressed. “Please take your seat.”

Rosalind sauntered over to her place, never breaking eye contact with me. If we hadn’t been in court, I’d have half a mind to wipe that smug look right off her face, but for Sofia’s sake, I kept my anger in check.

The judge called the bailiff over, and there was more murmuring among the crowd, but they fell into silence when the judge banged his gavel.

“Miss Hawthorne, please stand and address the court.”

I glanced back at Mariah, who gave an encouraging nod, though her lips were set in a thin line, her eye moving constantly over to Rosalind. The tension in the courtroom was palpable when Rosalind stood, a gleam in her eyes. I braced myself for another one of her manipulative tactics, wondering what the hell she was going to do now.

“Your Honor,” she said, “I’ve decided to drop the suit. I have no further desire to pursue custody of my daughter.”

The room went silent as the judge just glared. “Let me get this straight, Miss Hawthorne. You show up to my court late, cause a disturbance, and now you are officially withdrawing your suit?”

“Actually, Your Honor, I’d already put in the request to recant my lawsuit,” she said, looking over at me. “It should have arrived well before this hearing, but it seems it never made its way to you. I am sorry if it caused any disruption.”

I leaned back in my chair in shock. This couldn’t be the work of anyone but Tomas. Somehow, he’d intercepted the request, determined to keep this battle going, and I clenched my fists, feeling the anger simmering beneath the surface. This shouldn’t have surprised me. He wasn’t going to make this easy on any of us.

“I truly do apologize,” Rosalind said. “I wasn’t sure if I would even be able to appear here today. My safety is at risk simply appearing in court.”

“Are you admitting that you’re a danger to yourself and your child?” the judge said, her expression stern.

The courtroom seemed to hold its breath as we all waited for Rosalind’s response. Was this really happening?

“I am acknowledging that my presence puts both my life and the life of my child in danger,” she said hesitantly, as if choosing her words carefully.

The judge studied her for a moment before nodding. “Very well. If you’re sure that this is what you want, then I will accept your withdrawal.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” Rosalind offered a weak smile, then glanced at me once more. “I’ve come to realize that I don’t live a life fit to raise a child. I was wrong for not registering Sofia as a shifter and for just leaving her with Evan. I’ll pay whatever fine required for that, and I sincerely apologize for wasting the court’s time.”

As she returned to her seat, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. This was happening. She’d dropped the suit. It was too good to be true, but as I looked back at Mariah, her smile radiant, I knew that it was. We had won.

“Mr. Guerrero,” the judge said, drawing my attention back to the matter at hand. “In light of Miss Hawthorne’s decision, do you have anything to add?”

“Your Honor,” I said, attempting composure, trying not to let my utter glee shine through. “I only want what’s best for my daughter. If Rosalind truly believes that she is not capable of providing a safe environment for her, then I am more than willing to take full responsibility for her wellbeing.”

Understatement of the year. If the judge had ruled in Rosalind’s favor, if she hadn’t dropped the suit, everyone would be seeing a rather different side of me.

The judge frowned, clearly confused by the sudden turn of events. “Very well. Miss Hawthorne, you will be required to pay a five thousand-dollar fine for not registering a shifter in your care. As for custody, the court moves to grant Mr. Guerrero full custody.”

He slammed her gavel, and just like that, it was over.

My body slumped back in relief, even as my hands still shook from the adrenaline coursing through me. I glanced over at Rosalind, who was whispering something to her attorney. The woman looked terrified. Tomas probably hadn’t expected Rosalind to show up, let alone drop the suit.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” I managed to say, wrapping my head around having full custody of my daughter. It felt surreal, like a dream that could be snatched away at any moment. This

was everything we'd been working toward for the past month, and now it was a reality.

Court was dismissed as I turned to Mariah, who threw herself into my arms. "Oh, Evan," she whispered in my ear as I pulled her close. "You did it."

"We did it."

She shook her head. "I didn't even have to testify."

"No, but your support through all of this...I couldn't have done it without you, Mariah."

As we left the courtroom, my thoughts turned to the future and the life awaiting Sofia, Mariah, and me. There were still plenty of things that had to be taken care of where Tomas was concerned. We wouldn't let him get away with what he was doing with his experiments, but he was no longer a threat when it came to my daughter. Sofia would remain exactly where she belonged with the family that loved her.

A breeze whipped through the air outside the courthouse, and I kept Mariah close to my side as we walked out. Just as I was about to lead her to the waiting SUV, surrounded by our security unit, I felt someone watching me and saw Rosalind standing several yards away. She gestured to me, her eyes darting around frantically, and I frowned. Her normally self-assured demeanor was replaced with an urgency I'd only seen once before.

I glanced down at Mariah. "I'm going to go talk to her for a minute. Stay right here."

Mariah nodded, even as she looked cautiously at Rosalind. "Just be quick."

I glanced at the guards. "Don't let her out of your sight. I'll be right back." I brushed a quick kiss over her cheek, then stalked over to Rosalind, who was still looking all around, as if she were afraid someone might pop out at any minute.

"Listen, Evan," she said quickly. The fear radiating from her was entirely unfamiliar. "My father is about to rain hell down on me for what just happened in there, so I need to get out of here...fast."

“Rosalind, I—”

She held up a hand. “Please, just let me say this. I’m truly sorry for all the trouble I caused. I know you’ll take good care of Sofia. Will you thank Sebastian for his help, too?”

I nodded. I hadn’t expected the apology.

She continued glancing around, as if expecting Tomas to materialize at any moment. “Let him know Porter and I appreciate what he did for us, but we won’t be returning to the island. I have a few connections of my own, and I’ve finally managed to access my own money.”

“It sounds like you’re planning to never be seen again, Rosalind.”

She hesitated, her gaze fixed on something over my shoulder, and she looked sad, a shadow of the woman I’d met in my club last year. It was as if I’d never even known the woman behind the mask Tomas had made her wear.

“Evan,” she said. “Do me a favor, will you?”

“Depends what it is,” I said cautiously. Just because she’d helped us out didn’t mean I fully trusted her.

“Make sure Sofia knows that her mother did love her, despite all of this.” She glanced toward Mariah, who still stood near the courthouse entrance, watching us. Rosalind gave her a tiny smile. “I just wasn’t the mother meant for her.”

With that, Rosalind turned and walked away, disappearing in the crowd. I watched her go, an unfamiliar pang of sympathy in my gut—something I never expected to feel for her. But Tomas was the one who’d really done this. He’d used everyone to get what he wanted, including his own children.

I froze. Something was off, like I could feel the danger in the air, prickling at my senses like electricity. My instincts flared to life, screaming at me to protect Mariah, to shield my mate, though I had no idea what from.

I ran toward her, and the security team went on high alert, their eyes darting around, looking for danger.

Out of nowhere, a black van careened around a corner, tires screeching against the asphalt as it skidded to a stop only yards away. The doors flew open, and I acted on raw instinct.

“Get down!” I barked, grabbing Mariah’s arm and shoving her behind me.

Fuck. What was happening?

The guards closed ranks around us, and I shouted at them, “Get Mariah back inside! *Now!*”

My heart pounded wildly with fear as well as adrenaline. The guards broke into two units, one ushering her back into the building.

“Evan!” She was nearly drowned out in the chaos. I turned to see her reaching for me, fighting as the guards forced her away from me.

“Inside, now!” I yelled, a command which made the guards move even faster to get her back into the safety of the courthouse. The sound of bullets filled the air, and I thought I might come unglued. Even with our security team, we weren’t prepared for this kind of attack. As soon as Mariah disappeared back inside, I spun around and took in the scene.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath. Men dressed in black were jumping out of the van, raining gunfire on the crowd. There was only one way to deal with this, to eliminate the threat before innocent bystanders were hurt.

Shifting was a last resort in the city, but it was either that or risk getting shot. My heart raced at the thought of what might happen if someone saw me shift, the penalty I’d have to pay, but there was no time for hesitation. The only thing that mattered was securing the situation.

“Mariah’s inside!” I shouted at one of the guards. “Keep a team on her.” The rest would follow protocol, shifting before joining me, but I couldn’t wait for them. I took a breath, then let my dragon take over.

My body expanded rapidly, bones cracking and muscles rippling, as I transformed into my massive dragon form. It was nearly instantaneous, fueled by the urgency both my dragon

and I felt. People who'd initially been running from the gunfire now screamed and scattered even faster seeing a giant beast appear in front of the courthouse.

I let out a monstrous, reverberating roar that made the windows of the courthouse tremble, then I flapped my wings, rising higher as dragon fire formed within. I was ready to rain down on the men below if it came to it. They didn't falter, still shooting at me as they advanced, seemingly unfazed by the fact that their bullets ricocheted off my scales.

Seconds later, my security team had shifted as well. Three dragons and two cheetahs stood before the courthouse, a formidable threat to even the strongest foe. Anyone would think twice about continuing their attack, but these men didn't seem to care, as if they were willing to sacrifice themselves.

I narrowed my eyes at the gunmen, my vision sharper in dragon form. It was only then that I realized they were human, or more likely, some of Tomas's experimental shifter hybrids. Hawthorne was forcing my hand, getting me to kill humans, to dig my own grave. But if I did that, I'd be no better than him, and I refused to let him win. I wouldn't sink to his level. I wouldn't let their blood stain my hands.

I roared again, mightier than before, displaying the full force of my strength. The ground shook beneath us, the stench of fear rolling off the shooters in waves, and even from above, I could sense their hesitation.

The gunmen trained their weapons on me, firing shot after shot, but each time the bullets pinged harmlessly off my scales. I had to put an end to this, to strike enough fear in them that they abandoned their attack. Once I'd opened my jaws wide enough, I let the burgeoning dragon fire loose, spraying a blast of flames in their direction. It was carefully controlled, just enough for them to feel the heat, but not enough that they'd burn. They stumbled backward, tripping over themselves in their hasty retreat.

Go on, I silently urged them, growling, my tail flicking impatiently behind me as I gathered more fire from within. With wide-eyed terror, they finally seemed to get the message,

scrambling back into their van and peeling away from the courthouse as quickly as they'd arrived.

Seconds later, sirens pierced the air as police cars pulled up to the courthouse, their lights flashing blue and red as bystanders screamed and cried. I cursed and shifted back into human form as quickly as possible. I'd broken the law, and now I'd pay for it.

The officers stepped out of their vehicles, guns drawn, unsure of what they were about to encounter. I raised my hands above my head, showing them I wasn't a threat... or wasn't one anymore.

"Everything's under control," I said steadily, even if I could still feel the adrenaline rush. "We were attacked by a van of gunmen, but they're gone now."

The officers exchanged glances, clearly skeptical, but as witnesses came forth and confirmed my story, their expressions shifted from suspicion to concern.

"Are you sure everyone's okay?" an officer asked, his eyes scanning my security team that'd shifted back to human form as well.

"Mariah..." I hadn't seen her since the chaos began and I'd sent her back inside. I tried not to panic as I turned to one of my guards. "Go find Mariah. Make sure she's safe."

He nodded and quickly disappeared into the courthouse. The officers wanted a full breakdown of what happened, but I barely heard anything they said. All that mattered was that Mariah was safe. They should be bringing her out by now. I growled in frustration. What the hell was taking so long?

One of my men finally emerged. The look on his face told me everything I needed to know.

"Where is she?" I demanded. "Why didn't you bring her out?" I gripped his arm, sure there was fire in my eyes as I roared, "Where the fuck is my mate?"

"I... I can't find her," he stammered. "Mariah's not in the building."

My blood ran cold, and I felt as if the ground had been ripped out from beneath me. I released him, then turned and rushed inside, forgetting everything else except the primal instinct to protect my mate. My team followed hot on my heels, and we split up, scouring every inch of the courthouse for any sign of Mariah. My desperation grew with each passing second.

I couldn't lose her. Not now.

Panic and dread threatened to consume me when one of my guards called out my name. I turned to find him staring at me, face pale as he held out Mariah's purse. It was covered in blood.

"Where did you find this?" I said in a rasp, my vision blurring as rage and fear surged through me. This was Tomas's doing, I had no doubts. Rosalind was worried Tomas would do something, and she'd been right. He'd taken Mariah from me once again.

"Outside," the guard said, trembling. "By the side entrance. There was—" He swallowed. "There was a trail of blood leading away from the building."

I roared in fury. "Who was supposed to be with her?" I demanded. "Get back out there and start looking. *Now!*" My words were ice-cold, even lethal.

The leader of the security team came to me. "Evan. Let's check the security footage. Maybe we can see what happened."

I nodded. I was asleep. This had to be a nightmare. I'd wake up at any minute and be back in the penthouse, celebrating our victory with Mariah.

I tried to hold back as the guards got the courthouse staff to comply. They led us to the security room where they pulled up the footage.

My knees felt weak as I watched the monitor, my gut roiling, and I kept my eyes glued to the scene unfolding before me on the monitors. There, just outside the side entrance, Mariah and one of our guards were approached by a figure

dressed in black. Within seconds, the guard had been shot point blank, his body slumping to the ground.

“Damn it!” I roared, clenching my fists so tightly my talons jutted out, digging into my palms. My heart raced as I watched Mariah fighting tooth and nail against her attacker, putting up a brave resistance despite her tiny frame, but it wasn’t enough. As I looked on in horror, she was overpowered and knocked unconscious, and her limp body thrown into the back of a van like a rag doll.

“Get the license plate,” I said, my vision now tinted red. Smoke billowed from my nostrils, and my wings threatened to sprout of their own accord. Tomas had managed to worm his way into every aspect of my life, always one step ahead. Each time I thought I had the upper hand, he found a new way to strike back at me, making sure I never knew peace.

“I’m on it,” one of the staff members said, terror on his face as he took me in, then quickly focused on the blurry plate numbers. “I’ll pass this along to the police.”

Not that the human police would be as useful as my own team of shifters. My security team exchanged grim glances while they awaited my next order.

I was filled with a rage beyond anything I’d ever felt before now. I didn’t know where Mariah was, but I knew one thing for certain: I wouldn’t rest until Tomas was dead and Mariah was safely back in my arms.

Chapter 24

Mariah

My mouth was dry as if it'd been stuffed with cotton, head pounding like I had the worst hangover of my life. I groaned, wishing I could go right back to sleep, but something said I needed to wake up.

I opened my eyes, then had to immediately squeeze them shut again once the lights from above nearly blinded me. I tried again, squinting this time as the room spun, and for a second I thought I might be sick.

What happened? I gingerly pushed myself into sitting up, wincing as I felt a sharp pain in my temples. I took a deep breath and tried to look around, realizing right away that I'd seen a similar location in Jax's video feed.

"Ah, you're finally awake," a familiar voice said. I gasped and looked up to see Tomas Hawthorne sitting in a chair on the other side of the glass cage I now found myself in.

My stomach sank like a stone as I tried to recall how I'd gotten here. We'd been at the courthouse. Rosalind had dropped the suit. Then...there'd been gunfire, I'd been herded back inside, and the guard...

Nausea came over me at the memory of him being shot in the head.

I'd been kidnapped. Again. The thought nearly broke me, and it took all my strength to hold it together as I stared Tomas in the eye. I couldn't believe this was happening. We'd taken every precaution. I'd had the Careys' elite security team

watching my every step. How had Tomas managed to take me right from under their noses?

Tomas smirked and looked like he knew exactly what I was thinking. “You really should be more careful, my dear.”

“Go to hell, Tomas,” I spat. I didn’t care how weak I felt, I refused to let him intimidate me. He merely chuckled at my response.

“Such spirit.” His cold eyes studied me as if I were a specimen under a microscope. “It’s a shame we have to break it.”

His words sent a shiver down my spine as another memory surfaced, just over a month ago, when Tomas imprisoned me in his fortress in upstate New York. The way he’d looked at me, even as he taunted me with torture. I clamped my mouth shut and looked around.

This was nothing like that ridiculously over the top estate. I’d been given a room there, treated well even as his prisoner, but this place...it seemed like a dungeon. There was another cage in the opposite corner, but I couldn’t see if it was occupied. Either way, I needed to find a way out of this cage.

I gathered all the courage I could muster and glared at Tomas. “Don’t you have anything better to do than kidnap people?” I was dripping with contempt, and proud he couldn’t see how petrified I really was.

Tomas simply smiled. “Oh, I have many better things to do,” he said nonchalantly. “But I do enjoy getting one over on Sebastian and his bastard son.”

His words were like a slap in the face, and I snarled at him.

“Mariah, Mariah,” he clucked, shaking his head. “You are a feisty one. That’s why this is going to be so fun. You may not be a dragon, but you have the temperament of one.”

His comment stung, but I refused to let him see how much it affected me. I didn’t even want to imagine what he meant by “fun”, either. So, I clenched my fists and narrowed my eyes, staring him down with all the defiance I could muster.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” I said, ignoring the pounding in my chest.

He leaned forward, his cold eyes boring into mine as the smile fell from his face. I felt very exposed in front of Hawthorne, and he looked as if he were sizing up a piece of meat. It made my stomach turn, and I recalled when he’d run his fingers over my body the last time. My throat stung with tears, but I managed to blink them away.

“It’s an observation,” he said. “I think you’d make a lovely dragon.”

The look in his eyes left me even more frightened, and despite my best efforts to hide it, I knew he could smell it. A smirk danced across his lips.

“Oh, yes, Mariah. I have big plans for you,” he said, clearly enjoying the effect he was having on me. “Don’t worry, my dear. You’ll get used to the idea soon enough.”

I swallowed hard, controlling my breathing. What did he mean by that? Was he planning to turn me into a dragon? Had he found a way to make the serum work on a predatory species? Or was he simply willing to risk my life for another attempt?

I didn’t have much time to dwell on it before a gruff voice cut through the silence. “Don’t you dare lay a finger on her, Tomas.”

My head whipped around, and I rushed to the front, searching for the source of the voice. I hadn’t paid much attention to the other cage in the room, but from where I stood, I could see it was occupied.

“Jax!” My heart sank at the sight of him standing there, his hands plastered against the glass of his cage, his battered face a testament to the beating he’d taken. Bruised and bloodied again.

He stared, his jaw locking when our eyes met. The way he looked at me, like he was utterly distraught, like he’d failed, was heartbreaking.

“It’s okay, Jax,” I said. We were both trapped in here together, but knowing I wasn’t alone also made me feel better. It gave me hope.

He shook his head. “I should have seen this coming. I’m so sorry, love. I’ll find a way to get you out of here.” The fierce protectiveness flashing across his face momentarily replaced the pain etched on his features.

“Shut up, Jax,” Tomas snarled, turning his attention to his son. “You’re an idiot if you think you’ll find a way out of here. Just as much of a disappointment as your sister. Maybe if I’d been harder on Rosalind when she was younger, she wouldn’t have turned out so spoiled and useless. Don’t worry, though. We’ll find her, and she’ll be dealt with accordingly.”

I felt a strange sense of relief when I realized Rosalind had escaped Tomas’s grasp. She might have put us through hell with the custody case, but she’d come through in the end, and I was glad she wasn’t here to suffer with us.

“Leave her out of this,” Jax said, growling, glaring at his father. His knuckles turned white, and he clenched his fists.

“Ah, yes, the ever-loyal brother,” Tomas said. “Maybe if you spent less time worrying about your siblings and were a better son, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Maybe if you weren’t such a despicable father, we wouldn’t defy you at every turn,” Jax shot back.

“Enough!” Tomas said, his face contorting with rage. “I’m not here to argue with you, Jax. Stay out of my way, stay out of *this*, and maybe I’ll let you live. For now.”

Tomas’s phone rang, and he growled into it, eyes boring into mine.

“What?” Then he listened for a moment.

“Fine,” he said before ending the call. He pointed at Jax, and for the first time, I noticed there was something around his neck: a collar. “Don’t even think about escape. Remember, that collar will shock you if you attempt to shift.”

He gave Jax a menacing smile, then stormed out of the room, leaving Jax and me alone in our cages.

I looked over at Jax. His face wasn't just bruised but swollen, and it was nearly unbearable to witness. This man was beaten by his own father on countless occasions, and now he'd put him in a cage and collared him.

"Oh, Jax," I whispered. "How did you get caught?"

He stared hard at the ground. "I was ratted out by someone I thought I could trust. I thought he was a friend." He glanced up at me then, his eyes full of regret. "Apparently, he called Tomas when he knew I was coming in for a part in my security system. They were waiting on me. My guard was jumped, then they beat me to a pulp and brought me here."

I shook my head, tears stinging again at the injustice of it all. Tomas was a monster, and he couldn't get away with this any longer.

"Where exactly are we?" I scanned our surroundings. The sterile white walls and the metallic scent in the air were chilly and uninviting. Were there cameras on us? Was Tomas watching us now?

"We're in the clinic, in one of the experiment rooms," he said, his eyes darting around the room. "But it looks like they've upgraded it." He grimaced, clearly disgusted by the thought. "We're on Hawthorne clan land, love."

My heart thudded at the revelation. We were in the heart of enemy territory. If Evan came here without permission or reason, it'd be considered an open challenge to Tomas's authority.

"Do you think Evan will try to come here?" Of course, I already knew the answer. Evan would rip the world apart in order to find me.

Jax stared at me for a long moment, then shook his head and sighed. "If he does, he'll be walking into a trap. I can guarantee Tomas is banking on him coming to the rescue."

The fear that'd been simmering inside since waking up in this place nearly boiled over. I tried to swallow it down, but it

lodged in my throat, making it difficult to breathe.

“I’m scared, Jax,” I said. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to us.”

“Everything is going to be fine,” he promised, his eyes flashing. “We’ll find a way out of here, Mariah. Don’t lose hope. You have to stay strong. My father wants to break you. Show him just how tough you are, love.”

I swallowed, trying to believe in myself the way Jax did, but as time slowly ticked away and I paced the perimeter of my cage, I couldn’t be so sure. How would Evan even find us?

I traced my fingers along the edges of the cold glass, searching for any weakness or latch, but I found nothing. The glass felt impossibly solid and unyielding. I groaned.

“Jax, is there any way to break this glass?” Desperation crept into my voice.

He shook his head. “It’s shatterproof. The only thing that could break it is extreme pressure or heat.” He gestured to the collar around his neck. “That’s why Tomas put this on me. To keep me from shifting and breaking us out of here.”

I stared at the collar, my mind racing. *If we could just get it off of him...*

But Tomas said it would shock Jax if he shifted. The reality was we were trapped, and I couldn’t see any way out.

No matter how hard I racked my brain for ideas, I couldn’t think clearly. Thoughts of Evan and Sofia made their way in, distracting me as I realized I could lose them, might never see them again, and that was enough for the tears to overflow. Still, even as I let my emotions go, I knew I couldn’t give in—not without a fight.

My frustration bubbled over as I paced the small cage. “Why is he so obsessed with me?” I screamed, throwing my hands in the air. “I’m just a human!”

“Ah, but you’re so much more than that, my dear.” Tomas’s voice slithered into the room first before he abruptly reappeared. Now a sinister grin was plastered across his face.

My blood ran cold at the sight. “No,” Jax said, growling, his eyes locked on Tomas. “I won’t let you do this.”

“Mariah Bailey, the perfect test subject,” Tomas said, completely ignoring Jax’s outburst. “You see, my dear, I did a little digging on you after our last encounter. It turns out you have no family to speak of—no one who’d miss you if you disappeared. Well, no one other than Evan and his pathetic little clan, which makes this all the more perfect.”

His words struck me like a blow to the gut. No one to miss me...so he really didn’t care if I died in one of his twisted little experiments. But his words also ignited a spark of anger within me. I wouldn’t let Tomas destroy the life I’d built with Evan and Sofia. I refused to be his pawn.

“Whatever twisted plan you have in mind, it won’t work,” I said with a hiss, clenching my fists at my sides. “Evan will come for me, and when he does, you’ll pay for what you’ve done.”

Tomas chuckled darkly. “Oh, I have no doubt that Evan will try to rescue his precious little human nanny. But you see, my dear, you underestimate just how valuable you are to my plans.”

“Valuable? How?” I didn’t want to think about what else his words meant for Evan.

Tomas leaned in closer, and his eyes gleamed with malice. “You may be human, but your blood carries a secret that could change the world of shifters forever.”

I glanced at Jax, but he looked equally confused by the revelation. What could possibly be in my blood that was so important to Tomas?

Then Jax was pounding on the glass. “Don’t do it, Tomas,” he said. “You don’t have to go through with this.”

“Shut up!” Tomas said, his eyes narrowing into slits as he glared at Jax. “I’ll deal with your insubordination and betrayal later.”

He turned his attention back to me. “As I was saying, we’ve been working on perfecting our serum. It seems that

humans aren't well equipped to handle the genetic mutations of shifter DNA...unless they already contain a strain of it."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Ah, Mariah," he said, smirking, clearly relishing my confusion. "It's such a shame that your family lied to you all these years."

"My family? What do they have to do with it?" Didn't he just say he knew I had no family? "What are you talking about?"

The clan leader clapped his hands with glee. "Imagine my surprise when I did a little research on you and discovered that your great-great-grandfather was, in fact, a shifter," Tomas said. Thanks to those dark, wide eyes, the look on his face bordered on maniacal, a wild grin replacing his usual smug smile.

I shook my head. "That's not possible. I'm human." I'd know if someone in my family was a shifter. He was messing with me, trying to get in my head.

"Are you so sure about that, Mariah dear?" Tomas said, walking back and forth in front of my cage like a predator watching its prey. "You see, having even a *trace* of shifter blood within makes you the perfect test subject for our serum."

My mind raced as I tried to process the implications of what he was saying. I couldn't wrap my head around the idea having shifter blood. It felt like a cruel joke, another twisted way for him to manipulate me.

"Oh, my dear," Tomas said, "I understand your confusion. After all, how does a shifter bloodline simply die out? It's simple really. It's when they mate with a human." He leaned against the bars of my cage. "Your great-great-grandfather, it seems, had some strong swimmers. He managed to knock up a human woman—something that's nearly impossible—but the child they conceived wasn't a shifter, and his bloodline essentially died with him."

My hands balled into fists, nails digging into my palms as anger bubbled beneath the surface. "You're lying," I said

through clenched teeth.

“Am I?” he said. “All it takes is a strand, Mariah, and you have one. So, not only am I going to take your blood and break down your DNA to find it, I’m also going to use it to perfect our serum. Before long, I’ll have everything I need.”

“Even if what you’re saying is true,” I said, “I’ll never help you with this sick game. I won’t let you use me to hurt anyone.”

“There’s no ‘if’ about it, and your cooperation isn’t necessary, my dear,” Tomas said, a cruel smile spreading across his face. “We’ll simply extract what we need from you by force if necessary.”

“Leave her alone!” Jax said as his eyes blazed with fury.

“Silence!” Tomas said, his own anger flaring. “You have no say in this matter. You’re nothing more than a pathetic, beaten dog.”

“Jax is worth ten of you,” I said. “A hundred, and when Evan finds out what you’ve done, he’ll make sure you pay for it.”

“Ah, yes,” Tomas said with a sneer. “The mighty Evan. But you see, Mariah, your precious guardian and his pathetic family will be too late to save you.”

The smirk on his face only grew as he leaned in closer, eyes shining with malicious glee. “All we need is to find that strand of your DNA. Don’t worry, my dear. That won’t be your only part to play. Once I find it, I’ll use you as my next subject.”

The door to the room swung open, and a man entered who looked like he’d stepped straight out of a horror movie. He was tall and gaunt, with thinning hair and cold, calculating eyes that seemed devoid of any warmth or empathy. His white lab coat was pristine, and something about the way he carried himself told me he took great pride in his work—work that’d undoubtedly cause me unimaginable pain.

“Ready to change the world of shifters forever, Mariah?” Tomas asked, still smirking as this terrifying figure

approached my glass cage.

A chill ran down my spine. “You won’t get away with this, Tomas.”

“Ah, but I already have,” he said, his grin widening. He gestured to the doctor, who began wheeling a tray of gleaming medical instruments toward me. “Dr. Montgomery here is eager to begin our little experiment. Aren’t you, Doctor?”

“Indeed,” Dr. Montgomery said, his words as vacant and detached as the rest of his body while he examined the tools laid out before him. “Miss Bailey’s DNA could be the key we’ve been searching for.”

Chapter 25

Evan

The beast inside me was a maelstrom of fury, consuming everything in its path.

It'd been two days since Mariah was kidnapped, and every moment that passed felt like an eternity. I paced along the extended balcony of the penthouse, my fists clenched as my dragon's rage threatened to overtake me. It was a wonder I hadn't shifted and flown through the city, raining fire down until I found my mate.

But I was already on thin ice after breaking the law at the courthouse, and even in self-defense, shifting in the city was forbidden. Sebastian and Abi had caught the first flight to New York, bringing Sofia once they learned about Mariah's kidnapping. The only place I felt was safe for my daughter was here with me. Lucas had come back to Texas and was managing things there while Sebastian was gone. Right now, all of us were focused on saving Mariah.

"Where the hell is Mason?" I said, losing patience by the second.

Sebastian had called him over when I'd woken up so agitated, I couldn't get my talons to retract. Each second that ticked by with Mariah in Tomas's clutches was one too many. How was I supposed to stay calm?

"I'm right here," Mason said as he stepped out onto the balcony. He always seemed to know when I needed him, just like when he'd rushed to the courthouse the other day. I'd been

ready to burn the place to the ground when I realized Mariah was gone, and I felt much the same this morning.

Mason exchanged a glance with Sebastian. “Everything okay?” he said.

Sebastian gestured at me. “Evan here is ready to go storm the gates, invade Tomas’s land, and incite a war.”

Mason turned to me. “Evan, you have to pull it together, man. This is the time you need to be most in control.”

“Easy for you to say,” I said, though my words held no venom. It was the frustration and utter helplessness speaking. “That bastard Tomas has her, and we don’t know where, or what he’s doing to her.” A growl rumbled deep in my chest, and my fangs pressed against my gums, threatening to push through.

“Easy there, buddy.” Mason lifted his hands. “We’re going to get her back. Just breathe.”

“Damn right we will. There’s no other option.” I glanced at him. “Does that mean you’d help me go in after her?”

He exchanged wary glances with Sebastian. “That’s not what I said. Maybe we start by checking in with the cops, see if they’ve gotten any leads.”

When we’d made our statement, the police said they’d work on getting a warrant to search Tomas’s land, but everything in the human world moved too slowly for my liking. My dragon roared within me, not caring about due process. Fuck that, he was ready to tear through anything that stood between us and Mariah.

“Last time I checked in,” Mason said quietly, “they hadn’t found any trace of Jax, either.”

“Because they’re useless,” I said, slamming my fist against the wall.

“Hey,” Mason said in a firm tone. After everything we’d been through together, I knew when he wasn’t messing around. “We’ll figure this out, okay? But you have to reel it in. Mariah needs you thinking with a level head.”

The frustration clawing at my insides threatened to tear me apart. “Then, what am I supposed to do? Damn it, I can’t just sit here anymore!” I said, storming back into the living room. “I need to *do* something! I need to find her!”

“Clearly, you aren’t getting my message,” Mason muttered, following me inside.

Sebastian was right behind him. “I understand how you feel, Evan. I’d lose my mind if Abi were in danger, but we have to be smart about this. If you go storming into Tomas’s land without thinking it through, there could be consequences you can’t come back from.”

“Consequences?” I felt my dragon pushing against its human constraints. “This is already a war, Sebastian. That bastard has my mate, and I don’t know what the hell is happening to her!”

“My point exactly,” he said. “We need to be careful. If we charge in recklessly, we might lose our only chance to save her.”

The meaning behind his words hit home. I had no doubt that Mariah was disposable to Tomas once he got what he wanted: me within his grasp at last, to use for his own sick games.

“We don’t even know if she’s there,” Sebastian said pointedly. “We need to figure out his endgame before making our move. He wants us to storm his land so he can use it as an excuse to come after our clan and truly incite a war. We can’t do that, Evan.”

My hands balled up into fists as I battled between reason and instinct. I knew Sebastian was right, but it didn’t ease the pain in my chest, or the panic that threatened to smother me whenever I thought of Tomas hurting my mate.

“Okay,” I finally said, forcing myself to take a deep breath. “But we have to do something. We can’t just sit here and wait for news that may never come.”

Sebastian nodded. “We’ll continue searching for any leads and gather as much information as we can about Tomas’s

movements. If there's even a hint of Mariah being on his land, we'll act. Meanwhile, we hope the police come through for us."

It was the next evening before the police paid us a visit. My heart sank when I opened the door and took in their somber expressions. The air felt thick, suffocating.

"Mr. Guerrero, we conducted a thorough search of Tomas Hawthorne's property," the lead detective said in a solemn voice. "Unfortunately, we found no sign of Miss Bailey."

I felt like I was going to be sick. My vision blurred as anger and despair churned inside me like a whirlwind. It was all I could do to keep myself in check.

The detective looked at her partner and nodded. "I will say," the shorter man said, "everyone on his land seemed extremely cagey. We're keeping an eye on the place for any suspicious activity."

"Thank you, detective," Sebastian said, taking over when I pushed off of the doorframe and walked away before I lost control entirely. Every fiber of my being screamed in agony.

My dragon roared inside, demanding release, and my skin burned with the need to shift, to unleash hellfire on Tomas and everyone who stood in my way. I paced the room, keeping myself together, but my rational thoughts were slipping away, replaced by raw instinct.

"Sebastian," I said in a growl. I didn't even recognize who I was becoming. "I'm going. I won't just sit here while that bastard has Mariah. You can't stop me."

"Listen to me, Evan." He gripped my shoulder. "I'll send out my best team to scout the area around Tomas's land. We'll find her, but you can't lose control like this."

"Control?" I spat, shaking off his grasp. "My mate is out there, scared and alone, and you want me to stay in control?"

"Damn it, Evan!" Sebastian now unleashed a temper I'd only seen a handful of times in my life. It was enough to make me snap my mouth shut as I stared at him with wide eyes. "That's exactly what I expect. You're the son of an alpha—

heir to the largest clan in the country. I expect you to be strong for your mate, not go off half-cocked and set fire to everything in your path. You're smarter than this."

I gritted my teeth, even as the truth of his words hit home, and my chest heaved with the effort it took to hold back my dragon.

"Fine," I said once I felt I'd gotten sufficient control. "Send your team in. But if they don't find anything, I won't wait any longer."

"Deal." Sebastian nodded, the tension thick in the air between us. I couldn't remember the last time he'd raised his voice at me, and I felt ashamed. Sebastian was right. I was better than this.

"We'll do everything we can, I promise," he said, and I knew it was the truth. He'd done nothing but help me from the very moment I'd come home. He'd welcomed me back into the clan, made me part of the family.

I wondered if I'd always felt our connection as father and son, even before I'd known the truth of my heritage. Now, more than ever, I considered this man my father.

"I'm sorry," I said after a moment.

Sebastian held my gaze, giving me a smile and a wink, just like he had when I was younger. "We're going to get through this, son."

He left the room to give orders to his team, and I collapsed onto the couch, my body trembling from the intensity of the emotions. Images of Mariah haunted my vision whenever I closed my eyes.

"I'm glad to see you pulled yourself together." Mason came around the couch to face me.

"Is that what I did?" I opened one eye.

"Yes. And you better keep it that way. This isn't just about you."

"Clearly," I said, sitting up.

“What I mean is that you need to think about your daughter. Sofia is in there taking a nap, completely innocent in all of this. Her mother just ran off and washed her hands of her. Mariah is missing. The last thing Sofia needs is for her father to fly off in some crazed rampage where he could possibly get himself killed.”

I glanced toward the door that led to Sofia’s downstairs nursery, where she still slept peacefully, unaware of the turmoil her father faced. A weight pressed on my chest as I slumped back onto the couch, exhaustion creeping in. I closed my eyes and quieted the raging storm within. For Mariah and Sofia’s sake, I had to find a way to keep it together long enough to save them both.

* * *

The next morning, there were still no updates on Mariah’s whereabouts, and my dragon grew more restless. I was feeding Sofia in the kitchen, thinking back on how Mariah had taught me everything I knew about taking care of a baby right here in this apartment. It was halfway through her meal when I noticed a shift in her demeanor. Her hazel eyes gazed up into mine, and she reached out a tiny hand to touch my face, as if to comfort me in her own way.

“Dada.”

The sweet gesture brought a sad smile to my lips, and I kissed her little fingers softly. It was as if she could sense my distress.

“Thank you, baby girl,” I said, feeling a rush of gratitude for her. Yes, I was beside myself with worry for Mariah, but I had to appreciate what was right in front of me, too.

Just then, a loud banging at the door shattered the stillness of the moment.

“Who could that be?” I muttered under my breath, taking Sofia from her high chair and setting her down in her playpen before heading for the door. We had the place covered. No one came in this building without my team knowing it, and no one

got on the elevator to the penthouse. If they did, they'd find three armed guards waiting for them.

I was at the door when the urgent banging sounded again. I yanked it open, and my heart stuttered. The sight that greeted me was horrifying.

Jax stumbled inside, his face pale and gaunt, his hair and skin smeared with dirt and blood. He looked like a man who'd been to Hell and back, ten times more ragged than when we'd found him in the Atlantic City warehouse. His legs gave out, and he fell to his knees just inside the door, gasping for breath.

"Jax!" I slammed the door and dropped down beside him, bringing my fingers to his throat to check his pulse. "Sebastian! Come quick!"

Jax's heartbeat was erratic under my touch, and I feared he might be on the verge of a heart attack. "What the hell happened?"

Sebastian quickly raced down the stairs, then helped me move Jax to the couch in the living room. "Stay with us, Jax."

Jax's eyes fluttered. I gently slapped his cheeks, trying to keep him conscious.

"Come on, man, we need you to tell us what happened," I said. We needed to a medic, to get Jax taken care of, but I also needed answers.

Jax took a few shuddering breaths before nodding weakly, his eyes fluttering open again. Sebastian handed him a bottle of water, and he sipped at it, some of it spilling down his chin as he drank.

"Mariah..." he said in a croak, and I nearly came unglued.

"What do you know, Jax? Do you know where she is? Tell us everything. We need to know."

"Easy," Sebastian said, placing a hand on my shoulder before he turned to the kitchen. "Don't overwhelm him. Let him get oriented."

Jax blinked a few times, and my dragon roared inside me, desperate for answers. I forced myself to stay patient, giving

Jax a moment to gather his thoughts. Finally, he spoke.

“Mariah’s alive,” he said, and I felt the weight lift, allowing me to fully breathe for the first time in days. She was alive. That’s what I had to focus on. We could save her now.

“She’s in danger, Evan. Tomas is planning something terrible.”

“Where is she?” Everything I said emerged as a growl, and Jax flinched at my intensity.

Sebastian reappeared with a wet cloth, moving in to get Jax cleaned up a bit. He gave him more water, and after a few minutes, Jax seemed better able to talk, though he was still weak. Every time he moved, he winced and gripped his side.

“She’s hidden... in an underground facility on clan lands. I managed to escape,” he said, panting. “But I couldn’t get to her.” His eyes flashed with pain and regret. I had no doubt he’d have tried if there was a way.

“You did the right thing, Jax. Now you’re here. With your help, we can find her.”

“But first,” Sebastian said, “Take a minute. We don’t need you overdoing it and passing out.”

Jax slumped back on the chair as Sebastian and I exchanged glances. Jax needed medical care, but the clock was ticking, and Mariah’s life hung in the balance. We had a lead, a chance to save her, we just needed to know where she was.

Jax took several deep breaths, then opened his eyes again. “I need to tell you the rest. He’s keeping her in a cage.”

I couldn’t breathe. “He put her in a cage?”

Jax nodded weakly. “That’s where I first saw her. After he captured me, he...he wanted me weak. Helpless.” He swallowed hard, and the movement looked painful. “He locked me in a cage, put a collar around my neck that prevented me from shifting so I couldn’t escape. There was nothing I could do to help her. To help either of us.”

“Then, how did you get away?” Sebastian asked.

“I couldn’t let him hurt Mariah.” His eyes fluttered closed again. “But he could tell I was growing restless, unpredictable, and he moved me to another place, out of my cage. But by that point he’d deprived me of food and water. I barely had the strength to attempt an escape.”

“But you did,” I said, impatient to learn more.

He nodded. “They removed the collar once a day to give me a break, always under heavy guard. They knew I didn’t have any strength left, but what they underestimated was the strength of my will. The moment they removed my collar, I took to the skies, and as far as they knew, I was long gone. That was two days ago.”

“Where did you go?” Sebastian said.

“Not too far. Deep enough into the woods that I could hide,” Jax said. “I stayed hidden there for two days, try to regain my strength. Once I was strong enough, I shifted back into my dragon form and flew all the way here.” He pointed toward the ceiling, indicating the roof where he’d landed.

That explained how he’d gotten in. It also meant we needed more security up there.

“You have to stop Tomas,” Jax whispered, his eyes heavy with exhaustion. “Stop him before it’s too late.”

“Where do we need to go? Where on the lands can we find her?” The question I wouldn’t ask aloud: how much time did we have left?

“File 832 on my drive,” Jax managed to say. “It shows the location of the underground lab. Stop him,” he said. “Save Mariah.”

“That’s the plan,” Sebastian said, squeezing his shoulder gently.

Exhaustion finally overcame Jax, and his eyes slipped closed.

“We need to call someone to come check him out,” Sebastian said.

“You take care of that. I’m going to check on the file.” I went into Jax’s room and located the drive, then took it up to my computer and pulled the location. It was a series of photos and a map, exactly what we needed to get to Mariah. Once again, Jax had managed to come through for us.

I hurried back downstairs, my thoughts racing. I was grateful for Jax’s heroic efforts, but also beside myself after hearing his story, terrified of what Mariah might be going through right now.

“Sebastian!” I called out. “I’ve got maps. We have to act fast.”

“Already on it.” His dark eyes mirrored my own determination. “The team is getting the SUV ready.”

It was go time.

“I just need to check on Sofia.”

Sebastian nodded. “She’s upstairs with Abi, still sleeping. I’ve already said my goodbyes.”

“I’ll be quick.”

I made my way upstairs, finding that Sofia was snoozing away, just like he’d said.

“She’ll be fine, Evan,” Abi said from where she sat in a rocking chair. “It’s you I’m worried about.” She pushed to her feet and crossed over to me, reaching up to feel my cheek. “Please be careful. I love you like my very own son, Evan. Come back to us tonight.”

“With Mariah by my side,” I said, knowing it wouldn’t be any other way.

Abi pulled me into a hug, then I took a moment to watch Sofia sleep. She was so tiny. So innocent. I had to ensure she got the future Mariah and I dreamed of for her, complete with all of us. Our little family. It was time to go get Sofia’s mother and bring her home where she belonged.

I kissed her soft cheeks, then left the room before I let my emotions get the best of me.

“Be careful, Evan,” Abi called after me.

I went downstairs to find the security team gathered in the living room. “Okay, everyone,” Sebastian said. “It’s time to head out. Get your gear and meet me at the truck.”

I watched as they quickly scrambled to grab their weapons and equipment, a well-oiled machine ready for battle. They were all focused and prepared, but I couldn’t shake the creeping dread tightening around my heart. With every second that ticked by, Mariah remained in danger, and we didn’t know if soon it’d be too late.

My thoughts raced as we loaded up into the truck. The familiar smell of leather and metal mixed with the scent of adrenaline. I gripped the edge of my seat, my knuckles turning white as images of Mariah flashed through my mind: her smile, her twinkling eyes, the way her laughter filled my soul with joy.

Sebastian placed a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll get her back, son. I promise.”

“She means everything to me.”

“I know, son.” He gave me a reassuring squeeze as the truck rumbled to life. “Ready?”

“More than I’ve ever been,” I said.

“Good. Because we’re not stopping until we bring her back.”

My sentiments exactly. We sped toward the Hawthorne clan lands, ready to face whatever lay ahead, willing to cause as much damage as necessary to get Mariah back where she belonged.

Chapter 26

Mariah

Days blurred together in a haze of darkness and pain, so much so that I couldn't even tell how long I'd been trapped here. My body felt weak, a traitor just when I needed it most, and my mind... I wasn't sure if I could trust it anymore.

I wasn't even sure what they were doing to me at this point. I hadn't had any food since I'd arrived however many days ago, and half the time I couldn't tell what was real and was hallucinated.

"Mariah, hang in there..." Jax's words echoed through my memory, reminding me of the last time I saw him. That had been real, right? He'd fought to get to me when they'd removed him from his cage, anger glinting in his blue eyes as he was dragged away. I was sure I remembered that.

My arms were heavy and sore, a needle piercing my skin where an IV drip fed into my veins. I was certain they kept me hooked up just so they could easily drain my blood whenever they wanted. Tomas continued to talk about my DNA, how he knew I had what he was looking for. Today, strangely enough, no one had come for another vile sample. Or perhaps I was just losing my sense of time entirely. Who knew if it was morning or night down here?

"Evan," I said in a whisper. "Where are you?"

I felt like I was losing my grip on reality. Was Evan even real? Were Sofia and Analise just figments of my imagination? That thought terrified me, but in this state, even fear seemed

distant. I tried to move, to fight the fog that clouded my thoughts, but my body refused to cooperate.

“Please,” I said to no one in particular. “Help.”

I didn’t know if anyone could hear me, if my words reached beyond these cold, sterile walls, or if there was even anyone else down here. But I clung to the hope that someone, somehow, would come for me, and that Evan and Sebastian would find me and take me home where I belonged.

Tears burned behind my eyelids as they slid closed.

The next time I woke, I was no longer in the cage. Instead, I found myself strapped down to a cold, metal table, my heart pounding in my chest like a caged animal fighting to escape. That’s exactly what I felt like, too. Panic clawed at the edges of my mind as I frantically searched the room for any sign of Jax, or a possible escape route, but to no avail. A bright light shone above, casting the rest of the room in shadow.

“Ah, you’re awake,” a cold voice purred.

I jerked my head back and saw Tomas Hawthorne looming over me, a predatory grin etched on his face. His fingers trailed across my cheek, leaving an icy, sickening sensation in their wake. My body tensed, and I flinched from his touch as much as my restraints allowed.

“Get away from me,” I said hoarsely.

“Feisty, aren’t you?” He chuckled, seemingly unfazed by my defiance. “Well, I have good news for you, my dear. You are *exactly* what we’ve been searching for.”

His glee sent a shiver down my spine. Whatever he had planned couldn’t be good. The thought made my stomach churn with dread.

“What do you mean?” I said. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to know, but I had to ask.

He leaned in closer, his breath hot against my face, making me want to gag. “You see, we knew there was something special about you. Your blood, your DNA... it’s all part of the puzzle. It took us a while to locate the specific strand we

needed, but we finally did it. Of course, altering the serum so it wouldn't destroy the strand entirely was a bit tricky, but we managed."

"Serum?" I tried to hide the fear in my voice, but this only seemed to fuel his excitement.

"You'll find out soon enough," he said, his malicious grin widening. "Wouldn't want to spoil the surprise, now, would I? Just know that you're the key to unlocking a power beyond your wildest dreams."

I wanted to scream, to plead for my life and beg him to let me go, but something inside of me refused to give him the satisfaction. Instead, I glared at him, conveying all the hatred and anger boiling within me.

"Whatever you're planning, it won't work," I said. "Evan, Sebastian—they'll stop you, and when they do, you'll pay for everything you've done."

Tomas laughed, a high, cruel sound which echoed through the sterile room. "We'll see about that, my dear."

The sterile room seemed to close in as Tomas leaned closer, his eyes gleaming with twisted satisfaction.

"Your DNA is truly *fascinating*," he said, drawing out the word. "Not only is it compatible with dragon DNA, but it also reacts positively to wolf DNA. It's not as effective as the dragon compatibility, but it will be more than enough."

More than enough for what? I tried to comprehend what he was saying, but my thoughts were foggy and slow from exhaustion, fear, and whatever they might've been drugging me with. My throat felt dry, but I managed to say, "Why are you doing this?"

"It's simple, really." His smile grew wider and more sinister by the second. "There are some very powerful and wealthy men in this world who'd pay their entire fortune for the power and strength that comes with being a shifter, and thanks to your unique DNA, I can grant them such abilities. For a price."

“Money?” I spat. “You’re risking innocent lives for money?”

“Oh, my dear, are you really so naïve?” Tomas said condescendingly, shaking his head. His fingers brushed against my cheek, and I jerked back at his touch. “I’m already wealthier than you could possibly imagine, but once I have more, I’ll show Sebastian what true power looks like. He won’t stand a chance, and he’ll regret ever, ever crossing me.”

He paused, his gaze wild, and I realized in that moment just how mad Tomas Hawthorne really was. All of this for some twisted vendetta, some imagined wrongdoing. Sebastian had never gone after Tomas, but Tomas had created his own skewed version of history in his mind.

But then he snapped back into his cool, controlled demeanor, lingering on me as if he was savoring the moment. “Of course, let’s not forget, my dear, this all hinges on whether or not your body accepts the serum. I really do hope you don’t die.” He clucked his tongue. “Otherwise, all of this would be for nothing.”

In that moment, I hated him more than I ever thought possible. I hated him with every fiber of my being. My heart hammered, and I wished more than anything that I had the strength to break free from these restraints and make him pay for what he’d done. Instead, I could only lie there, weak and defenseless, as he continued to torment me.

“Sebastian will find you,” I said through gritted teeth. “He won’t let you get away with this.”

“Sebastian,” Tomas said, sneering. “He hhas no idea what he’s up against.”

I swallowed hard but forced myself to speak. “What about Jax? Where did you take him? What did you do to him?”

“Ah, your little friend, and my biggest disappointment.” Tomas waved his hand dismissively. “Dead. Tried to be the hero and got what he deserved.”

A sharp pain pierced my chest at the idea of Jax being gone. Tears welled up in my eyes, but I refused to let them

fall. “You’re a monster,” I said. “You murdered your own son?”

Tomas only laughed. “Save your judgment, my dear. You’ll soon understand that we all have a role to play in this world.”

The door creaked open, and a tall, gaunt man entered the room. The doctor. His appearance sent shivers down my spine. He was like a living ghost, his skin stretched tightly over his bones, and his eyes sunken and hollow. I wondered if the man had ever been the subject of his own experiments. My breath hitched when I realized what he held: a large syringe, filled with an ominous-looking liquid. It was thick, like plasma, and had a glow to it.

“Time for your treatment, Mariah,” Tomas said with a twisted smile. “As long as your body accepts the serum, you soon won’t be so weak anymore.”

I pulled against the restraints, but it was no use. Raw panic surged through me, and I screamed out in frustration, the sound echoing off the walls.

“Such spirit.” Tomas grinned, a cruel glint in his eyes.

As the doctor moved closer, I clenched my fists and tried to focus on something, anything, that might give me the strength to resist. Memories of Evan’s comforting embrace and the warmth of our love filled my mind, giving me a small sliver of hope. I wouldn’t give up without a fight, and continued pulling against my restraints, struggling to find a way to free myself, screaming the entire time, a plea to anyone who could hear.

Then, as if in answer to my cry, the sound of an angry roar reached my ears, coming from somewhere far above. My heart raced, and a fresh flood of adrenaline surged into my veins, sparking hope in me when I thought all was lost. I recognized that roar—it belonged to Evan. He’d come for me. Tomas’s face twisted in fury, his eyes darting around the room.

“What the fuck is happening up there?” he demanded just as a man stumbled in, his face pale with fear.

“Sir, we’re under attack! They’ve breached our defenses,” he said, sweat pouring down his forehead.

“Impossible!” Tomas growled, clenching his fists. “How did they find out she was here?”

The man swallowed hard, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He didn’t meet Tomas’s eyes when he said, “Jax... he isn’t dead, sir. He got away.”

“*What?*” Tomas roared. I’d never seen him so angry before, and I curled in on myself, instinctively becoming as small as possible.

In a flash, his hand transformed into a dragon’s claw, and with one swift, brutal motion, he swiped them across the man’s chest, ripping through skin and tissue. The poor messenger gasped, his eyes wide with shock before he crumpled to the floor.

“Idiots! Useless fools!” Tomas kicked the body as he turned and paced the room. I’d thought he was terrifying before, but that was nothing compared to this.

I needed to find a way to use the chaos to my advantage. I had to escape, but the restraints still held me firmly in place. My heart hammered in my chest as I prayed that Evan would reach me before Tomas regained control of the situation.

“Your hero won’t save you this time, Mariah,” Tomas said, fixing me with a venomous glare. “I’ll make sure of that.”

My heart lodged in my throat as he stalked toward me. “You think you’re getting out of here? That Evan will save the day in the nick of time?” Tomas laughed, throwing his head back. “Not this time. Not until I see this through.”

He snarled and pointed his bloodstained claw at the gaunt doctor standing by. “Inject her. Do it now!”

The doctor hesitated for a second before grabbing a syringe filled with that ominous, glowing liquid. My breathing became shallow as he approached, needle poised to pierce my skin.

“Please, don’t do this,” I said, fear gripping my insides and turning them to ice. But it was no use. Neither Tomas nor the doctor showed any sign of relenting. And why would they? This was their plan all along. To turn me into something else. To change me into something Tomas could use for profit.

As the needle came closer, something inside me snapped. In a last attempt to save myself, I let out a scream, the loudest I could muster, praying that someone, anyone would hear me. And then, just as I thought the doctor would inject me, the entire building shook. It was like an earthquake, the violent tremors feeling as if the ground itself would swallow us whole.

The doctor stumbled back as the unsteady floor made him lose his balance. He tumbled to the ground, the syringe flying from his grasp, clattering to the floor and rolling out of view.

Tomas cursed, then glanced between me and the spot where the syringe had disappeared, clearly weighing his options. I could only hope Evan’s attack would buy me enough time.

“Where is that damned syringe? Where did it go?” Tomas barked at the doctor, who scrambled to his feet. I struggled while they frantically searched the room, desperate to free myself before they had a chance to complete their twisted plan. If I could just get out of these restraints, maybe I’d stand a chance against them.

The sound of heavy footsteps echoed in my ears, drawing closer and closer. Tomas hissed. “Forget that syringe,” he said to the doctor. “Go get the backup supply and make sure it’s safe. Now. *Hurry.*”

The doctor nodded frantically and rushed out of the room, leaving me alone with Tomas.

“Looks like our plans are being interrupted.” Tomas glared down at me as if this were all my fault. “But don’t think you’re getting out of this, my dear. We’ll just have to improvise.”

As he spoke, his eyes scanned the room, finally landing on the syringe the doctor had dropped earlier. He retrieved it from

the floor, holding it up triumphantly. “Ah, there you are.”

He stalked toward me with a sinister grin, and I couldn't hide the shudder that ran through me, as much as I wanted to stay strong. This was it, my last chance to escape before Tomas did something he couldn't take back. With one final burst of strength, I managed to snap one of the restraints, but before I could free myself completely, Tomas grabbed my arm, yanking me off the table, then pressing my back against his chest.

“Nice try, Mariah, but you're not going anywhere,” he said as he brought the syringe to my neck. The cold metal poked at my skin, and I froze. If I made one wrong move, if he injected me with that...it would be game over.

“Please, Tomas,” I said. “Don't do this. I can be useful to you in other ways. You can use my blood. If this doesn't work and I die—”

“Save your breath.” He scoffed. “It's far too late for bargaining.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing myself for the inevitable pain. But before he could depress the plunger, a familiar cry rang out, full of raw power and command.

“Let her go, Tomas.”

When I opened my eyes again, there he was, Evan, standing in the doorway with a fury like I'd never seen before. His eyes glowed gold, fire blazing in their depths.

“Ah, if it isn't the love-struck hero,” Tomas said, tightening his grip, using me like a shield. “You're such a fool. You really think you can save her now?” He laughed, an unhinged sound, as he pressed the needle harder against my skin.

I tensed, and Evan and I looked at each other, the burning heat in his eyes taking everything in.

“Last chance, Hawthorne,” he growled. “Let her go, or I swear I'll tear you apart.”

Chapter 27

Evan

I stood outside the door of what looked like a remote guesthouse on the Hawthorne lands. It didn't look like much, but this was where Jax's file had led us. There was no one around. We either had the wrong place, or Tomas preferred hiding in plain sight.

I clenched my fists, the anger boiling deep within me, threatening to release the dragon lurking just beneath the surface of my skin. I wanted nothing more than to rip the roof off this godforsaken place and find Mariah, but if she really was down there, I couldn't risk hurting her.

Jax's files indicated there was a secret door in the basement of this guesthouse, hidden inside a utility closet. Beyond it was a staircase that would lead three floors down to a lab. That was where the cages were, and where Mariah should be. The cops hadn't been able to uncover it when they'd searched the property, but Jax knew better.

My dragon pushed at the edges of my consciousness, and my vision was edged with red. If Tomas was down there... well, it was time to put an end to this.

"Ready?" Sebastian said, despite the tension hanging in the air.

"Your guys know what to do?" I had no doubts, but I wanted reassurance. We'd come this far on our own, keeping to the shadows, hoping to get in, find Mariah, and get back out before anyone even knew we were here. Sebastian's team waited in the trees for our signal.

“They do.” Sebastian met my eyes and rested a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s go get her.”

I nodded wordlessly, then we burst through the front door, our footsteps light on the carpet of the empty house. My senses were on high alert, sorting through every sound, every scent for a trace of Mariah. It appeared there was no one here, so I took a chance.

“Mariah!” I called out, praying she could hear me.

Nothing.

Sebastian shook his head, then we hurried to the stairs leading to the basement. It was dark, but my vision adjusted as we searched for the utility closet and the hidden door beyond.

As we rounded a corner, a door flew open, and a man in a white coat appeared, his hollow eyes wide with fear as he looked over his shoulder. He skidded to a stop as he took us in. I was about to question him when Mariah’s scream, distant and muffled, floated up the stairs.

“Mariah! Sebastian, this way,” I shouted, no longer worried about the strange man, taking the lead as I raced down the stairs as quickly as possible, toward the source of that gut-wrenching sound.

“Careful, Evan,” my father said. “You don’t know what we’re walking into.”

Still, I pushed on, taking the stairs two, then three at a time.

My heart thundered in my chest as faint traces of light appeared below. So far, everything was exactly as Jax’s map indicated. This could only be the lab with the cages. Muffled voices and scuffling floated up to me.

The moment I reached the bottom of the stairs, though, my blood turned to molten lava. Tomas stood there, his cruel eyes glinting as he held Mariah in front of him, a syringe pressed to her neck. My mate’s hair was matted, her light brown eyes wide with fear, and she looked so pale and weak that I wondered how she was standing. This only fueled my rage.

“Let her go, Tomas,” I said, snarling, radiating with barely contained fury.

My gaze locked on to Mariah’s, and the look of panic there filled me with my own terror. But I had to stay strong now for my mate.

“Last chance, Hawthorne. Let her go, or I swear I’ll tear you apart.”

Tomas’s twisted smile widened as he pressed the syringe harder against the thin skin of Mariah’s neck. “Ah, Evan, so protective of your little nanny, aren’t you?”

He said it so casually, as if we were meeting over coffee to catch up, but then his eyes turned wild. “Tell me, where is dear old Sebastian?”

It was only then that I realized he wasn’t behind me. I tried to focus on the darkness behind, and a second later, I sensed his presence in the shadows, watching, waiting.

“This isn’t about you and him anymore,” I said, my hands curling into fists. “Whatever vendetta you have, it’s nothing compared to what you’re about to face. You’re my enemy now.”

He laughed, the sound bouncing off the cement walls. “Poor, deluded little bastard. You’re only as powerful as your clan, but if memory serves, you were banished. No longer an heir. You have no clan, and no power here. You’re nothing more than a would-be alpha from a broken family.”

I could feel the dragon within clawing at the surface, desperate to tear Tomas apart, but I had to maintain control for Mariah’s sake. My heart ached to rush forward, to rip her from his arms and hold her close. But if I couldn’t get there fast enough, and he plunged that syringe into her neck...I swallowed.

Focus.

“Your threats don’t scare me,” I said, my eyes returning to his, watching him closely and reading his next move. “Now, let her go.”

“Or what?” Tomas said, his grip on Mariah tightening.

“Or you’ll face the wrath of not only me but the entire Carey clan.”

Tomas smirked. “Big words, Evan, but can you back them up?” He glanced over my shoulder. “It seems as if you’re here all alone. Meanwhile, I have your mate in my arms.” He bent his head, lowering his nose to her neck and breathing deeply. “And such a lovely one she is.”

Mariah shuddered, and I nearly went for Tomas then, but he was grinning wildly at me, his laughter echoing off the walls. “You see, there’s nothing you can do. You’re just as powerless as when you were a kid. How weak you were, standing by and letting your parents get murdered.” Those eyes gleamed with malicious delight. “I knew then you were just as pathetic as your real father, pretending to be such a hot shot, when really you’re just afraid of anyone being stronger.”

My blood boiled with rage, and I took a step toward him, moving on instinct. But Tomas shook his head, gripping the syringe he held at Mariah’s neck even tighter. My heart clenched at the sight of her fear-stricken face, and I froze.

“Good boy,” Tomas cooed mockingly.

I snarled in response, my dragon demanding I break free and incinerate him on the spot.

“Where is that pathetic excuse of a father, Evan?” Tomas truly was fixated on Sebastian and this rivalry he’d created in his mind. Obsessed, even.

Just then, Sebastian stepped out of the shadows. “If it’s me you want, Tomas, here I am.” He didn’t hesitate when he spoke, unwavering and calm. “Stop using Mariah as a pawn. Let her go.”

“Ah, there you are,” Tomas said, his eyes lighting up. “I’m afraid I can’t do that, Sebastian. She is far too valuable now.”

“Think about what you’re doing, Tomas,” Sebastian said. “You won’t get away with this.”

I stared at the two men, locked in a standoff: Tomas's cold, calculating eyes, Sebastian's controlled demeanor. If Sebastian could just distract him long enough, maybe I could edge around to the other side, knock the syringe from his hands, and buy enough time to get Mariah out of his clutches.

I shifted my weight carefully, imperceptibly, my eyes glued to Mariah as I eased to the left.

"I already have, Sebastian," Tomas sneered. "And this time, you won't come out on top. All you've ever done is take from me. Take and take, always thinking you're better than me. You still do, don't you? Well, now I'm going to prove who the better man truly is. I have everything I need right here to rise to the top. No one will be able to stand against me."

Sebastian raised his hands, palms up, a placating look on his face. "Mariah has nothing to do with this, Tomas. This is between you and me. Let her go."

But Tomas only laughed, his grip on Mariah tightening as he held the syringe against her neck. "Oh, but she does, Sebastian. She has everything to do with it. She may have just changed the entire shifter world forever. I just need to test one more thing out first. Now seems as good a time as any."

"No!" I screamed. My dragon surged forth, begging to be released, and I was moving toward them on instinct alone.

Sebastian moved then, too, and with a mighty roar, charged forward. I held my breath, praying that he'd reach Mariah in time, that we could end this nightmare and finally be free of Tomas's cruelty.

They say that some moments can change your life forever, that time seems to slow down, life flashing before your eyes. The things that truly matter become crystal clear in the span of a nanosecond. This was one of those moments.

Sebastian charged forward, and I was right by his side, ready to die to protect the woman I loved. Then a gunshot rang through the air, leaving my ears ringing, the sounds of everything else muted as time slowed to a crawl. I whipped

around to see the gaunt man in a lab coat wielding a gun, his face twisted in malice.

My dragon roared inside me, and I charged at the man without a second thought, tackling him to the floor and knocking the gun from his grasp. He grunted in pain, but that was the least of my concerns as my heart pounded in my chest, adrenaline pumping through my veins.

“You fool!” Tomas bellowed. “What have you done?”

My gaze jerked back to where he stood with Mariah, syringe still in hand. Both of their eyes were trained on the floor, and I followed their horror-stricken gazes, unable to breathe when I saw Sebastian lying motionless on the ground, blood pooling beneath him.

Panic seized me, and the disarmed man became an afterthought as I scrambled over to Sebastian, my hands shaking uncontrollably. “No, no, no...this can’t be happening,” I muttered under my breath, not believing what I was seeing, praying that somehow this was all just a bad dream.

“Sebastian!” I turned him over so he was lying on his back. A sickening hole marred his chest. I couldn’t hide the terror I felt in that moment. “No, Sebastian, please, no, no...”

“Evan...” Sebastian managed to say, his eyes fluttering open for a moment to meet mine before falling closed again.

“Stay with me, Sebastian,” I said even as my words cracked. I shoved my hands in my hair, feeling desperate, like I might crack into two. “Please. We need you. I need you.”

Sebastian’s eyes opened, and he lifted a hand, trembling and slick with blood, and brought it to my face. “Everything... is yours now,” he gasped. “The clan...the land...all of it. Everything belongs to you...it’s your birthright.”

Hot tears spilled down my cheeks. My hands shook as I held onto him, clutching his arms as the metallic scent of blood filled the air. “No, Sebastian,” I said. “You can’t die.”

“Listen to me, Evan,” he urged, his eyes locking onto mine, shining with clarity through his pain. “This is important.

You are my firstborn son...the rightful alpha to our clan.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. I knew what he was doing, but I couldn't accept it. I couldn't accept that this was it. I'd only just gotten him back, gotten to know him as a man, as a father. We hadn't had enough time together. This couldn't be happening.

“Sebastian, please,” I begged, tears coursing down my face as I clung to his weakening form. “Hang in there. We're going to get you a medic. You're going to be okay.”

He shook his head. “Take care of the clan, son. You're the alpha now.” His body was growing limper by the second. I could barely hear him when he said, “Take care...of our family.”

“Sebastian...Dad...” I managed to choke out. There was so much more I wanted to say, so many things that'd never been spoken, things I'd never get to tell him now.

His eyes fluttered open again, a soft smile curving his lips. “Dad. Never forget how proud of you I am. I love you, Evan.”

“I love you, Dad.”

His eyes filled with such intense love and pride that my chest ached like there was a hole in it that could never be filled. “Don't let Tomas win.”

But all I could do was nod through my tears, promising him that I'd do as he said while the light in his eyes faded away completely. The weight of his hand on my cheek disappeared as his arm fell, and I knew he was gone.

I pounded my fists on the floor, then felt a surge of power, raw and primal, course through my veins, in what I could only assume was a shifting of the mantle as Sebastian ceased to be the alpha of the Carey clan and passed his power on to me. My dragon roared inside, demanding retribution for the loss of my true father.

The room seemed to close in, the air thick as I rose and stood over Sebastian's lifeless body. Then I lifted my gaze to Tomas. He took a step back, his eyes wide, fear and shock replacing any performative menace.

“This wasn’t how it was supposed to go,” he said, staring down at Sebastian before quickly averting his eyes.

I didn’t give a shit about Tomas’s intentions or regrets. The man who’d raised me as his own, who’d only just revealed himself as my true father, lay dead because of him. My dragon mourned deep within me, its primal grief echoing through my entire being.

“Count your days, Tomas,” I said with inhuman fury.

Tomas trembled under the weight of the anger filling the room like an inferno. Fire burned within me, and I ached to let my dragon free, to burn Tomas to a crisp in this very room, but first, I had to get Mariah out of here.

I shoved away my pain, thrust it into the recesses of my mind. There would be time to grieve later, but my main priority was to save Mariah.

Tomas dared to smirk even while keeping the syringe at Mariah’s throat. “This is only the beginning, Evan. You have no idea what’s coming.”

It was then that I saw him slip. He thought I wouldn’t risk making a move, not when he still held Mariah against his chest, but his grip on her loosened, the syringe moving slightly. The second I saw the opportunity, I moved.

Charging toward Tomas, I flung myself forward, ready to knock him from his feet. But he grinned as if he’d planned the entire thing, and with a cry of satisfaction, plunged the syringe into Mariah’s neck.

“No!” My hand was already partially shifting, my talons jutting out to swipe that sick grin right off his face.

Tomas swiftly darted to the left, releasing Mariah as he raced for the door. Her body had gone limp, her eyes slipping closed as she fell to the floor, and I managed to catch her before she hit the ground, cradling her to my chest as I sank back to my knees.

Tomas was escaping, with more syringes clutched in his hands, but nothing else mattered as I stared at my mate. Her breathing was ragged, labored, and her body was twitching.

I threw my head back and roared in agony, my control slipping as my dragon demanded to be set free. My chest felt as if it were going to split in two.

“No, Mariah,” I said, gasping. I couldn’t lose her, too. Sebastian was bad enough. But not my mate.

Please don’t take her from this world. Please don’t take her from me, I prayed, begging fate to intervene. *Spare her.*

Tears poured down my cheeks. “Don’t leave me.”

Mariah let out a choked gasp, and I cupped her cheek, holding out hope, even as I heard her heartbeat slowing down. I was being ripped apart from the inside out.

“Stay with me, baby. Stay here. *Please.*”

Her eyes fluttered open. “I love you,” she said, barely a whisper.

And then her heart stuttered once more before going silent.

Chapter 28

Evan

The penthouse felt like a tomb, the air heavy with grief. Two days had passed since we lost Sebastian. Two days since I'd come back to find Abi beside herself. I hadn't even had to tell her what happened. She'd felt their bond tear apart the moment he died.

Her body had shaken with wracking sobs, and I'd gone to her, taking her in my arms as she poured out her grief.

"I'm so sorry," I said quietly. Her pain tore through me, making it nearly impossible to breathe.

"Sebastian..." she said between sobs. "I felt him leave this earth, Evan. I felt it break, I—"

"I failed him, Abi. I failed both of you."

She took my face in her hands then. "Oh, sweet boy, please don't blame yourself." My own tears streamed down my face. "Sebastian knew the risks. He would never want you to blame yourself."

We'd clung to each other, the weight of our loss too heavy to bear alone.

In the two days after that horrific night, the image of Mariah's lifeless body haunted me. I could erase the memory of how I'd stared down at her as her heart had stuttered to a stop. Seconds had ticked by. Minutes. I'd held her, praying and begging, not willing to admit she was gone, then...

She'd gasped, jerking back to life, and then cried out, guttural screams emerging from her throat. Screams full of

such incredible pain that I'd nearly lost my mind not knowing what to do to help her. Fate had played a cruel game, bringing her back just when I thought all was lost, only for her to be tortured by the serum she'd been injected with.

Sebastian's men had found their way to us then, but it was too late. Sebastian was dead, Mariah might be following right behind, and Tomas had fled.

I'd struggled to keep my rage at bay, but it felt as if the tenuous thread that'd held my world together had snapped. Everything was falling apart. *I* was falling apart, like my very soul was being ripped to shreds.

I still felt that way now as I stood by Mariah's bedside in the penthouse, watching her chest rise and fall with slow, steady breaths. Her honey blonde hair fanned out across the pillow, framing her face like a halo. She looked completely at peace, but beneath lay a storm of agony, tearing through her every moment she was unconscious.

I'd brought her here, alive but in pain, and the only way we'd been able to get her to stop screaming was to sedate her. I'd insisted that a medic watch over her nonstop since.

"Her vitals are stable, sir," the medic said. "The sedative continues to keep the pain at bay... for now."

"What does that mean?" I said.

"Just that we've been having to up the dosage to keep her stable. I'm not sure how much more we can give her at this point without taking a risk."

"When will we know if she'll wake up?" It was a question I'd asked countless times in the past forty-eight hours. My dragon was equally beside himself as we waited to know what would happen to our mate.

"I can't be sure," he said, just as he'd answered every time before. "We'll just have to wait, sir. In another day or two, we can safely assume her body hasn't rejected the serum."

Despite the medic's confidence that she would, in fact, wake up at some point, I couldn't stop thinking about the worst case scenarios. What if Mariah never woke up? I had no

idea what'd really been in that syringe. What if her body rejected the serum and she died, just like all the others before her? Tomas was going to pay for his experiments on my mate, but I couldn't focus on that yet.

My mind was consumed with Mariah. I wouldn't lose her. Not after everything we'd been through. Sebastian had given his life to save her, and I couldn't accept that it'd been in vain.

"Please, Mariah," I whispered, taking her hand in mine. I could feel the faint thrumming of her heartbeat. "You're strong. You can fight through this."

I could *sense* the turmoil inside her. Whether or not it proved successful in the end, the serum coursing through her veins was already changing her, turning her into a shifter whether we liked it or not. Panic tinged my every waking moment as I worried her body might prove too weak in the end. She might not be able to handle the change.

By the third day, when there was still no change in Mariah's state, we arranged our return flight to Texas. We needed to go home with Sebastian's body and honor our fallen alpha. Mason came along, overseeing the details, as I was in no state to handle anything. Abi had pretty much taken over Sofia's care. It was all I could do to hold it together, to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

When we arrived home, I could feel Sebastian's absence like a physical weight. He'd been more than just my mentor and alpha. He was my father.

"Dad would be proud of you, Evan." Lucas' voice broke through my thoughts when he found me in Sebastian's office later that day. Mariah was placed in our room, the medic still watching over her with orders to find me immediately if anything changed.

"Thank you," I said from where I stared out the window. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow over everything it touched, but I felt cold inside.

I turned to face him, and agony ripped through me when I saw the same pain I felt mirrored on his face.

“Lucas.” I had no idea what to say, where to start. “I’m so, so sorry.”

It wasn’t enough, though. It would never be. Sebastian was gone. Our father was dead, and we couldn’t come back from that.

I waited for Lucas to lash out, to blame me for our father’s death, for stealing his place as alpha, for bringing chaos and pain to our family. But instead, he stared silently at me for a moment before pulling me into a tight embrace. His arms were strong, comforting, accepting.

“It’s not your fault, Evan. This is on Tomas.” I’d expected his fury, not his compassion, and it was enough to break me all over again. Tears streamed down my face as I allowed myself to feel the full extent of my grief and fear, letting it out in a way I hadn’t allowed myself to yet. Lucas was there for me the entire time.

When I finally pulled myself together, Lucas clasped my shoulders and looked me in the eye. “I want you to know, our father always meant for this role to be yours. It’s your birthright. You deserve it. I want you to be the alpha, just as I want you to know that whatever comes next, I’ll stand by your side through it all.”

I nodded and swallowed hard. “Thank you, Lucas. That means more to me than you know. I don’t have all the answers about what’s next, but I’m glad I won’t be facing it alone.”

“Of course not.” He squeezed my shoulder. “We’re family, Evan. Brothers. And brothers stick together, no matter what.”

Our world had changed in the blink of an eye, but as we stood there together, Lucas’s words rang true. We would face whatever challenges awaited us together as brothers. For Mariah, for our father, and for the future of our clan, we would stand against our enemies and protect those we loved.

* * *

The sky was a dark, somber gray as the clan gathered at the edge of the ceremonial grounds. The weight of their collective grief pressed down on me, making it difficult to breathe. I stood before them, my hands shaking slightly as I clutched the piece of paper on which I'd written my father's eulogy.

"Thank you all for coming," I managed to say. Mariah wasn't awake yet, but this was something we couldn't continue to put off. The clan needed closure, and Sebastian deserved this honor.

As I looked into the tear-streaked faces of my clan mates, I couldn't ignore the deep sense of responsibility that'd settled on my shoulders in the past days. They were looking to me for guidance now, for comfort in their darkest hour. I was their new alpha, and I wouldn't let them down.

"Sebastian Carey," I said, my voice growing stronger as I found my footing, wanting to be the solid rock for them that he'd always been. "My father. Our alpha. A man of incredible strength and unwavering loyalty to his clan. He loved each and every one of us as if we were his own flesh and blood."

I paused, swallowing hard, but I could feel Sebastian's presence within, urging me to continue. I took a deep breath and pressed on.

"He considered his entire clan his family, and his loss is felt deeply by all of us here today. Our hearts ache with the knowledge that he's no longer with us, but we must remember that his legacy lives on in each of us, and while Tomas Hawthorne may think that he has won, he is gravely mistaken."

My eyes scanned the crowd, meeting the fierce gazes of my fellow dragon shifters.

"Sebastian's sacrifice will not be in vain," I said. "As long as I draw breath, I will not rest until he is avenged, until the threat of Tomas Hawthorne and his lust for power is eliminated once and for all."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the crowd, and I could feel their resolve strengthening alongside my own.

“Today, we say goodbye to a great man,” I said. “The greatest I’ve ever known. But we also pledge ourselves to the task at hand. We will stand united, as one clan, in the face of our enemy. Sebastian Carey may be gone from this world, but his spirit will live on. May he soar among the stars, forever watching over us, and know that his legacy is in good hands.”

As I stood before my clan, their grief and expectations rested upon my shoulders. It was a responsibility I didn’t take lightly. It wasn’t just my own future at stake, but the fate of every dragon shifter who looked to me for guidance.

“Sebastian was more than just an alpha. He was a father, a mentor, and a friend to many.” I had to stop then and take a deep breath. “He leaves behind a legacy that I will honor until my dying day. I may be stepping into his role, but I do not do so lightly. I promise each and every one of you that I will strive to be an alpha worthy of taking my father’s place.”

The silence that followed my declaration was heavy, as if the air itself was holding its breath, waiting for the response of those who’d lost so much.

Then, to my surprise and gratitude, Lucas stepped forward. His eyes met mine briefly before he took a knee before me, baring his neck in a gesture of submission and loyalty. He was my rival once, but the bond of brotherhood was stronger than the past. Now he offered me his support in the most profound way possible.

“Lucas,” I said, my throat tight.

He gave me a small nod, acknowledging the significance of his actions. Then, one by one, the members of the clan followed suit, echoing Lucas’s pledge with their own acts of submission. I was their alpha now, and I meant what I said: I would never take this role lightly. I would dedicate myself to honoring Sebastian’s memory.

“Thank you,” I managed to say, humbled by my clan mates.

Then, together, Lucas and I carried Sebastian’s body to the pyre that’d been prepared for him, as was our tradition. The

scent of oil and kindling filled my nostrils as I helped lay my father's remains on the platform, the wood creaking gently under his weight.

"I hope you find peace." My words were barely audible above the crackling of the fire that'd just been lit. "I swear to you, your sacrifice will not be in vain."

As the flames grew higher, their heat reaching out to us, I watched the first tendrils of smoke rise into the sky. The wind caught hold of them, scattering ash over the lands my father had loved so dearly.

"Goodbye," I whispered, my heart heavy as I turned away from the pyre and faced my new responsibilities.

* * *

Day six was a haze of anguish and uncertainty. With each passing hour, my torment grew as I agonized over Mariah's fate. The estate, usually a place of comfort and warmth, now felt like a cold prison holding me captive. There were things to be done, but I couldn't bring myself to do anything else, not when my mate lay unconscious with no guarantee she'd ever wake again.

Even Sofia knew something was wrong. She clearly missed Mariah, her gaze always searching for her, even if she didn't have the words to ask. She'd been more fussy than usual, needing her mother just as much as I did.

I paced the length of Sebastian's office—mine now, though I might always consider it Sebastian's. My thoughts drove me mad, twisting and turning with every possible outcome.

"You need to rest, Evan," Lucas said from where he leaned against the doorframe with a worried expression. He'd been a strong, unwavering presence for me, taking over when Mason had to return to New York after Sebastian's ceremony.

"Rest?" I whirled around to face him. "How can I rest when Mariah is lying in there, possibly dying? She's becoming

a shifter as we speak. No one knows how this will end. This serum could kill her—”

“Enough, Evan.” Lucas stepped forward and gripped my shoulders, bringing me back to myself. All day, I’d been on the verge of snapping at the slightest provocation. “You’re not doing anyone any favors by working yourself into a frenzy. Most importantly, you’re not helping Mariah.”

I knew he was right, but what else was I supposed to do? I was utterly helpless where my mate was concerned, and it was killing me. I sighed and took a deep breath. “You’re right, Lucas. I know that, it’s just... I can’t lose her. Not now. Not after...”

“I know.” His eyes were full of understanding and compassion. “Why don’t you go downstairs and try to get some rest? I can take over whatever you need me to do today.”

I conceded, knowing deep down that he was right. After giving him a list of things to check on, I left the office and returned to my bedroom, where Mariah was still sleeping in her peaceful, otherworldly state. I watched for a long time before I crawled into bed next to her.

Exhaustion was nearly overwhelming, yet sleep remained elusive. I spent the night tossing and turning, haunted by the thought of losing Mariah, waking countless times to check on her, to make sure she was still breathing. Each time, her state was the same: no change, for better or worse.

When I woke up the seventh day after storming Tomas’s lab, I immediately sensed something was different.

I sat straight up in bed, an inexplicable feeling tugging at my very soul, as if I was being called, drawn by some unseen force. I turned to Mariah, still in bed next to me, still hooked up to an IV as the monitor continually beeped. Her eyes were closed, her breathing was steady, but something was different.

Then I sensed the energy in the room change, and it took me a moment to realize it was radiating from *her*, filling the room with a presence I didn’t fully understand.

“Mariah, can you hear me?” I said shakily as I leaned closer, reaching for her hand. It was warm, her pulse strong—a stark contrast to the coldness that’d gripped her just days before. Then, as I held her hand, I felt it: our connection, our bond, surging stronger than ever before. I could feel her in a way I never had, the bond between us intensifying a hundredfold.

Before I could even process it, her eyes flew open and she gasped, her body going stiff. I froze, half afraid this might be it, that she was dying before my eyes. My heart pounded furiously when those light brown orbs locked onto mine. Only now, something else shone within them. A fierce, primal fire that rocked me to my core.

“Mariah?” It was an awed whisper because of what I felt within her, what I saw in her eyes...

“Evan,” she said, her voice choked from days without water. Thankfully, her body settled back into bed again. “W-what happened?”

“You survived,” I said, my joy bursting forth as my soul sensed what she hadn’t yet. “It worked.”

She squinted against the light, confusion plain on her face. “What do you mean?”

I took a deep breath, not sure how this was going to go over. “Mariah... you were injected with the serum. You’re a dragon shifter now.”

Chapter 29

Mariah

A dragon shifter.

I blinked, his words not fully registering. Everything was so overwhelmingly bright. I winced at the glare as I heard pots and pans clanging, causing sharp pain to shoot through my temple.

Everything ached, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. I groaned against the pounding headache that was growing with every little noise: the snaps of twigs, the rush of wind, muffled voices...everywhere. What was happening?

I realized I was back in our room in Texas. But that didn't feel right. How did I get here? How long had I been here?

I glanced at the door, Sofia's coo coming from across the hall, so loud she had to be crying, but...it was a happy sound. I frowned. That wasn't normal.

"How are you feeling?" Evan was looking me over. "Are you in pain?"

"Everything hurts," I said. "What happened? How am I back here?"

Evan hesitated for a moment. "How much do you remember? We brought you back home a few days ago, but you've been unconscious for a week."

"A week?" I shook my head, the movement making me realize everything felt off. My entire equilibrium was wonky, and I lifted my hand and pressed it to my forehead.

But that movement was off, too, and I ended up hitting myself in the head. Evan looked at me, his mouth tight as he continued to search my face.

My heart thundered as I tried to make sense of the situation. Then my breath caught when something shifted in my chest, like an actual movement. Something fluttering against the walls of my ribcage. My eyes widened in panic, and I shot straight up in bed, my pulse skittering out of control, and I could hear *that, too*.

“What’s happening to me?” I managed to say, though my throat constricted when his words finally hit home.

Dragon shifter.

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t breathe.

“Mariah.” Evan was instantly on his feet beside me, panic on his own face as he tried to soothe me. “It’s okay. *You’re* okay. Please, just breathe. You need to calm down.”

I did as he said, not really having much of a choice, feeling so out of control that I latched on to his own steady heartbeat—oh, God, I could hear his heartbeat—and tried to match his breaths, inhaling deeply, and exhaling slowly. Yet the terrifying sensation persisted.

“Evan—” I shook uncontrollably. “Something is *moving* inside of me.”

“That’s your dragon, sweetheart,” he said, his gaze softening slightly as his hand came to my face.

My dragon. I started to hyperventilate again, my eyes darting wildly around the room.

Evan swore. “Mariah, look at me.” His other hand came to my face, forcing me to look at him. “Listen to me, baby. I need you to breathe. Please.”

His sheer concern brought me back from the brink, and I forced everything else from my mind, then stared into his dark eyes and breathed.

After a few moments, my heartbeat slowed, matching the rhythm, further confirmation his words were true. If I could

hear his heartbeat, just like he could hear mine, that meant Tomas had succeeded.

I'd been turned into a dragon shifter.

Then it all came crashing down on me, memories flooding my mind, being trapped in a cage, that doctor, the serum, Evan and Sebastian coming to my rescue.

Sebastian. My heart broke all over again as I remembered. I choked on a sob and threw my arms around Evan, burying my face in his chest.

"Easy there," he said, wincing slightly. "I'm going to have to get used to that. Don't think you recognize your own strength yet."

The image of Sebastian dead on the floor was burned into my mind, and I couldn't hold it together. I didn't even try.

I cried, letting it all out, my sorrow so overwhelming I nearly forgot the dragon stirring within me, or perhaps I just wasn't ready to face it yet. I clung to Evan, my tears soaking his shirt.

"I'm so sorry, Evan. Sebastian—" I sobbed.

I felt him shudder beneath me before he pulled back and brushed my tears away. The anguish in his eyes caused my heart to squeeze painfully, and for a moment I thought I might lose it all over again. He had to be devastated.

"Everything is going to be okay."

But how could it be when Sebastian was gone, and I'd been turned into a dragon? Then it happened again. The stirring in my chest.

I jerked back, but Evan gripped my shoulders. He must have sensed something, or maybe it was written all over my face. "Mariah?"

Somehow, I found the courage to confirm what I already knew while my heart raced. "The serum worked, then."

"It did." Those two words made my anxiety peak once more.

Evan's eyes searched mine like he was looking for something. "I can sense your dragon. I sensed it the moment you woke up. It's like my dragon already knew, like he recognized yours."

He could sense my dragon. It sounded crazy, but it was true. Our connection had always been strong, but now it'd been intensified, an awareness that went beyond my physical body to something...other. Something primal and ancient. A shudder ran through me as my dragon moved, and I gripped Evan even tighter.

He was still watching me like a hawk, like he was ready to do whatever I needed, and I tried to process all of this without totally losing it again, but my breath felt too shallow.

I tried to close my eyes and shut out all the noise, all the spiraling thoughts that threatened to send me straight back to that dark place when Tomas first kidnapped me. The image of Sebastian flashed in my mind again, and I shoved it away, needing to focus on the one thing that might keep me grounded: my connection with Evan, with my mate.

I tried seeking out that awareness I'd felt before, but I didn't have to look far. It was right there, the intensity so strong it took my breath away. I could feel the impressions of his feelings, same as before, but now they were magnified. I felt his relief and concern, his tenderness and love, and beneath it, the presence of something else: his dragon.

I nearly jerked back again as my own dragon seemed to respond to our...mate.

"Is this what it will feel like with the mate bond?" I said, gesturing between our chests. It was simultaneously awe-inspiring and terrifying. "I can feel you in a way I didn't before."

His smile was full of love as he shook his head. "I feel it, too, but it's not the mate bond. This is just our dragons sensing their mates. It will be stronger once I claim you."

I didn't even know how that was possible. My body was shattered, but my mind raced, replaying everything that'd

happened back in the lab.

How was it possible that Tomas had gotten to me not once, but twice? And now he'd turned me into...this?

"I know this sounds weird because I'm so grateful to be alive," I whispered, "but part of me wishes that meant the serum hadn't worked."

Evan wrapped his arms around me, and I felt a pulse of pain through our connection. Heartache maybe?

"I will *never* regret your life being spared, Mariah. Human or dragon, you're here with me, and that's what matters most."

I nodded, but I didn't even know where to begin. It was all so much. So overwhelming. The mere idea of come to terms with what was done to me felt like teetering in front of a black abyss, like if I let myself think too hard about the fact that Tomas had taken away my humanity, that there was a living thing inside of me, I'd truly fall.

I simply couldn't do that, not when everyone else had lost so much, too. Sebastian was gone. The family was grieving. Tomas was still out there, with a serum that apparently did exactly what we'd feared. There would be time for me to process all of this, and honestly, I'd rather tuck it all away rather than deal with it right now.

So, I took several deeper breaths, willing myself to hold it together, and I didn't miss the relief that flashed across Evan's face when I gave him a tremulous smile.

"It's all going to be okay," he said. "I swear to it."

"So, what now?" I said. "If this serum worked on me..."

Evan sighed heavily. "I know what you're getting at. The serum worked. We have no idea what the consequences of this could be. There's no doubt we have to stop Tomas before he can use it on anyone else. But first, you need to recover." He looked me over again without as much panic. "You've been through a lot, Mariah. How are you feeling...physically?"

It was obvious I might have been holding it together now, but my hold on my emotions felt tenuous at best.

“I’m sore,” I said. “But I wasn’t in good condition before Tomas injected me.”

Evan’s eyes flashed gold, and he bared his teeth, and I felt an echo of his rage in my chest. My...dragon seemed to respond to the emotion.

“He’s going to pay, Mariah. I swear to you. If it’s the last thing I do—”

“No! Don’t say that.” I shook my head and winced as I shifted slightly in his arms. “We’ve already lost enough.”

Evan nodded. “Enough about that right now. I’m more concerned about you. Are you hungry? Is there anything I can get you?”

I became aware of the warm scent of cinnamon wafting through the air the minute he said it, and my stomach rumbled. “I am, believe it or not.”

How I had an appetite was beyond me, especially as I still fought to keep my emotions at bay, to ignore this movement, this *presence* in my chest.

Evan helped me out of the bed, supporting my waist as I wrapped my arms around his waist. My legs weren’t as weak as I’d thought they be, despite the fact I’d been unconscious for a week.

“That’s normal,” Evan said, catching me looking down at my legs and frowning. “Now that your transformation is complete, you’ll heal much faster. You’ll be so much stronger. And as your dragon starts to—”

“I don’t want to talk about that yet,” I said, and thankfully, he didn’t push the issue.

He bent his head, kissing me softly. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. Just know that I’m here for you. And I will be, every step of the way, as you navigate this.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, what it entailed, and I had a feeling if I did, I might collapse on the floor and never make it out of this room. So, I shoved my feelings down deep, even knowing I’d have to pull all the garbage out again and sort

through it at some point. I just...I couldn't handle that right now.

I focused instead on the strength of the man I loved, trusting we'd find our way through this too.

When we reached the kitchen, Abi spun around from where she'd been busying herself with baking. A pan of homemade cinnamon rolls sat on the counter, and it smelled like another was still in the oven.

"Mariah, you're awake!" she exclaimed, dropping what she was doing and rushing to me with a smile on her face. But despite her joy at seeing me, I didn't miss the hint of grief in her blue eyes.

"Oh, Abi," I said, rushing forward and wrapping my arms around her. I'd been through hell and back, but Abi had lost her mate. Fury, pain, and the need for retribution for what Tomas had done eclipsed my own suffering as I held Abi, my heart breaking for her. She clung to me like a lifeline, a sob escaping her. "Sebastian didn't deserve this."

"None of us did," she said, then she pulled back, dashing away her tears and shaking them off as best she could. It was admirable. Impressive, even. But I knew exactly what she was doing, tucking all those emotions away. I was doing the very same.

Abi cupped my face in her hands. "But I'm so, so glad you're okay, Mariah. I don't think my heart could have taken it if we'd lost you, too."

"Thank you, Abi," I whispered, touched by her comforting words, even in her own pain. I glanced back at Evan, forgetting about the cinnamon rolls when an even more pressing thought struck. "Where is Sofia? I need to see her."

Evan's eyes softened. "She's in her new room. Abi's been working on it for her."

"New room?" I said, puzzled. Her old room was right across the hall from us. I'd heard her earlier, loud and clear. "What are you talking about?"

“Come on, let me show you.” He took my hand and led me back up to the second floor, only this time instead of stopping at the first set of doors, he led me farther down the hallway. “Abi hasn’t stopped moving since we got back to the clan lands. It seems like the only way she can keep from having a complete breakdown is to stay busy. So she took on a new project.”

We stopped in front of a closed door, two doors down from our own, and Evan opened it, revealing a beautifully decorated nursery. The walls were painted a soft lavender, and there were delicate dragon decals scattered throughout. A plush area rug covered the floor, and a cozy reading nook was tucked into one corner. The crib, adorned with pastel linens, sat against the far wall, and a changing table stood nearby, stocked with diapers and baby supplies. The new room Abi had designed for Sofia was beautiful. A perfect home for our little girl.

My breath caught in my throat as I took in the thoughtfully decorated space. “Abi did an amazing job.”

“She did,” Evan said. “I told her we could wait but she insisted. She said with our moving in permanently, Sofia needed a permanent room, too—one big enough to run around in once she’s mastered crawling.” He chuckled, then he stared at me wide-eyed, realizing what he’d said.

He took my hands in his. “A lot has happened while you were out, Mariah. A lot of things we need to talk about. I’m selling the penthouse. I can’t go back there again.”

His eyes looked haunted, and I wondered just what he’d gone through in the past week with my life hanging in the balance. Anguish soared through me, taking my breath away, and it took me a minute to realize it was an echo of his own pain, a hint of what he’d experienced. No wonder he never wanted to go back.

“That’s okay, Evan. We don’t have to.”

He held my hands, drawing me closer. “I know you didn’t agree to any of this. I didn’t want to make any decisions without you, but there were some things I couldn’t wait for. Some choices that had to be made.”

“Like you becoming alpha?” I said softly. That part of the night in the lab was a memory that both shattered me, and one I’d never forget. Sebastian passing on the mantle. Evan becoming his true heir.

He nodded, swallowing hard. “I wanted to wait for you, but the clan needed me to step up. You didn’t ask for this, and I understand if you’re upset.”

I hushed him with a gentle kiss, going up on tiptoes and twining my fingers around his neck, unable to bear the guilt clouding his eyes.

“You stepped up because your people needed you, Evan,” I said when I broke the kiss. “I could never fault you for that, and as for living here, I’ve learned a lot about what home means this past month. That place is with you and Sofia, no matter where that is.”

He exhaled slowly, relief flickering across his handsome features as he held me to his chest. “Thank you.”

As we stood there, entwined in each other’s arms, another pressing question came to the forefront of my mind. “What about Jax? Is he here?”

Evan hesitated before answering. “I don’t know his condition the last time you saw him, but Jax showed up on our doorstep, worse than I’d ever seen him. It’s how we found out where you were.”

My pulse jumped. “Is he okay?”

“He came back to the clan lands with us, and our medic has been looking over him, but he up and disappeared right after Sebastian’s...right after we...” He took a minute to compose himself. “Jax was consumed with guilt for what happened. Said he should have seen it coming and protected you better from Tomas. I guess I can understand why, but I told him countless times that it wasn’t his fault. I found a letter from him after the ceremony saying he was going to lie low for a while and that he’d be in touch. I haven’t seen him since.”

My heart ached for Jax getting tangled up in this mess. I hoped he'd find the peace he so desperately needed, but something told me it wouldn't come easily. Tomas was still out there, the threat far from over.

"You said he came to the penthouse? And he needed a medic?"

"Yes," Evan said slowly. "Jax escaped, but he was battered and bruised when he arrived. Tomas had gotten to him again, left him for dead, but he didn't let that stop him. He fought his way through Tomas's men to get to us. To tell us how to save you."

The thought of Jax again risking his life for me brought tears to my eyes. Despite the strained relationship between him and Evan, Jax had still come through for us when it mattered most.

"Without Jax, we might never have found you," Evan said, his grip tightening around mine. "But the guilt... it's eating him up inside. He blames himself for not stopping his father sooner."

I hated that Jax felt such guilt when he'd been nothing but a pawn in Tomas's twisted maneuvers. Still, I could understand why it weighed so heavily on him. He'd been betrayed by the one person he should've been able to trust above all others.

"None of this is his fault. I hope he can find some peace in knowing that."

Evan nodded in solemn agreement, and we lapsed into silence as we both processed the enormity of everything that'd happened.

Finally, I looked up at him. So, what now?"

Evan's eyes met mine, filled with equal parts love and resolve. "For now, we keep our eyes and ears open for signs of Tomas. We protect our family, our clan, and we do whatever it takes to ensure their safety. And also, we take some time for you to rest and adjust to being a dragon."

My dragon. A breath whooshed out of me as it stretched in my chest, making sure I was fully aware of its—her—presence. Evan’s heart beat faster as he bent his head to mine, and I could only think about one thing.

“Is my heart always this loud to you?”

“What?” Evan burst into laughter.

“I mean, I can hear just how excited you are to kiss me.” My cheeks turned pink as his grin widened.

“Oh, Mariah. How do you think I always knew you had a thing for me? Long before you even realized it yourself.”

I swatted at him, and he laughed again as he caught my wrist, tucking my arm behind my back as he pulled me in even closer.

Then when his mouth closed over mine, I knew everything was going to be okay. We didn’t have all the answers, and I had no idea how to “adjust” to being a dragon. But I did know this: as long as Evan was by my side, we would figure it out together.

Chapter 30

Evan

I leaned against the massive wooden desk in my father's study, resting my head in my hands. Two weeks had passed since I took over as alpha, and I still felt like the weight of this responsibility might bring me to my knees.

Being in Sebastian's office made me question everything. The room was filled with the scent of aged leather and wood, so familiar to me. It was a smell I associated with Sebastian, part of the memory of the countless times I'd been in this very office with him. But he was no longer here, and I feared I'd never fill his shoes.

I ran a hand through my hair and leaned back to stare at the ceiling. My dragon was unusually quiet, seemingly needing to come to terms with this as well. After all, I didn't take the legacy I'd inherited lightly. The future of the Carey clan rested on my shoulders.

As I turned my attention back to the records Sebastian had left behind, I continued my studies. There were endless things I needed to know, and these books were filled with meticulous notes, meant as a guide for Lucas when he was supposed to take over as alpha. But Lucas wasn't the alpha. I was.

I made my way through the pages, surprised to find that some of the notes weren't meant for Lucas at all. They were for me. It seemed Sebastian had held out hope for me even in the years I'd been away. My heart thudded in my chest as I read one particularly poignant passage.

Trust yourself, Evan, Sebastian had written. You have the strength and wisdom to lead our people. You are more capable than you know.

He'd always believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. Even when he'd been forced to banish me, he'd cared, hoping for the day I could return. It was all here in his letters and notes. When had he written these? Some seemed to go back several years.

I was still in the office hours later, long after the sun had descended, sitting alone at my father's desk, running my fingers across the worn pages of the book he'd left behind.

Do not be overwhelmed by the weight of this responsibility. Trust in yourself and know that you are destined to be the best alpha for our people. I have always believed in you.

So many similar statements, always reaffirming his belief in me with the reminder to trust myself. His words struck me to the core as tears flooded my eyes. I couldn't remember ever being this emotional. Then again, I'd lost my father. It would take time. The sorrow might never fade completely.

“Hey.”

I glanced up, startled to find Lucas in the doorway. I'd been so absorbed that I hadn't even heard him coming. I had no doubt he could see and sense my distress.

“Want some company?” was all he said. I wiped my eyes, grateful he was here.

“Come in. I found some notes from Seb—from our dad. It's like he knew, somehow, that I'd come around to accepting the role of alpha, no matter how many times I told him differently.”

Lucas came in and walked over, resting a hand on my shoulder, his grip firm but gentle. “He saw something special in you, Evan. We all do. I told you from the beginning, the role was never meant to be mine. This is what you were made for. Don't doubt yourself.”

He and Sebastian had both said that on multiple occasions, but my doubts persisted. How could I ever expect to fill

Sebastian Carey's shoes?

Lucas settled down into the chair across from Sebastian's desk—no, *my* desk. “He talked about you, you know. Before you came home. Starting from the time you left, really.” My eyes flew up in surprise. “It wasn't often, but when he did, I could tell it pained him. He loved you more than you'll ever know. Even though you two didn't have much time together once you came home, it meant the world to him. I could see it shining in his eyes every day, his love and pride. His joy that his son had returned.”

“Really?” It was still hard to believe sometimes that we'd all overcome the rift between us that started all those years ago, but the time I'd had here in the last couple months meant the world to me, too.

“Absolutely. Before Dad told me the truth about you being my brother, I never understood why he seemed so pained whenever someone mentioned you,” Lucas said. “I'd been hurt, angry, even though I'm the one who caused it. My teenage brain didn't know how to process everything I felt, but mostly... I felt guilty.”

“Guilty?” I echoed, feeling a knot form in my stomach. We'd been over his betrayal when I'd first come home, trying to bury the past and start anew. I didn't want to go back down that path.

Lucas nodded. “I knew this role was always meant to be yours, Evan. Dad was preparing you to become alpha all along, from the moment he first brought you home when you were a kid. This was the future that was meant for you. My biggest regret is that I let my jealousy take hold. I blame myself for robbing you of precious time with him.” He looked down, the shame evident on his face.

“Lucas...” I sighed, searching for the right words.

It was true that for years I'd harbored resentment toward him for lying and getting me kicked out of the clan. But that was in the past, and I'd let go of that anger already.

“Look,” I said, rising from the desk and walking around it to sit on its edge, reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder. “The past is the past. We can’t change it, no matter how much we wish we could. I’m grateful for the time I had with Sebastian, even if it wasn’t enough. And I’m grateful for the chance to rebuild our relationship now as brothers.”

Lucas looked up at me then, a hint of a smile on his face.

“What?”

He shook his head, the smile growing. “Just that I know our father is still here in some small way. How many times did he come around and sit on the desk, just like that?”

He was right. I’d noticed it when I’d first come back here, that my mannerisms were eerily similar to Sebastian’s. Apparently, I handled deep family conversations the same way as well.

“I’ve told you before, but your forgiveness means everything to me. Thank you.”

“We’re brothers,” I said, feeling the familial bond of our dragons strengthen. “Our father believed in both of us, and I think we owe it to him to be the best we can be. For our family, for the clan, and for each other.”

Lucas surged to his feet then, bringing me in for a tight hug. As we embraced, that bond grew even stronger, solidifying into something unbreakable.

“There’s something else I need to ask of you,” I said as we stepped apart.

Lucas frowned.

“Will you be my second-in-command? Will you stand beside me and help me lead our clan?”

“Like you even have to ask.” A huge grin spread across his face. “It would be my honor, Evan.”

Relief washed over me, knowing I could rely on him, and for the first time since Sebastian’s death, I felt that weight on my shoulders ease.

I felt lighter, but that didn't mean I could ignore the war being waged outside our walls. Tomas would pay for all he'd taken from us, but there was more to life than revenge and power struggles. There was something I needed to take care of first before diving headfirst into that war. Something that'd been gnawing at me for far too long.

"Lucas, there's something else I need to do. Something important to me." I could faintly hear the sounds of Mariah laughing and playing downstairs with Sofia, so I lowered my own voice and told him my plan, then what I needed him to take care of.

He grinned. "I've got this."

With another clap on the back, I thanked him and left to attend to my business, then hurried downstairs to find Abi and get her in on it.

* * *

The night was calm, the air cool against my skin compared to the recent warmer evenings. Autumn would be coming before we knew it. Lucas had come to me an hour before and let me know everything was set. My heart raced with anticipation as I threaded my fingers with Mariah's and led her down the familiar path. What I'd planned, what I wanted tonight was something that'd change everything.

As we stepped into the vineyard clearing, Mariah gasped, her gaze darting to me.

"Evan," she breathed, her eyes widening as twilight fell. "What is all this?"

"Come," I said, leading her toward the small private space that'd been erected: a table and chairs, a fire with thick, cozy blankets and pillows set up before it, and hundreds of candles everywhere. "I'll show you."

We walked hand in hand along the path of flickering candles Lucas and Cynthia had set up, their warm glow casting

a golden light over the clearing. The atmosphere was magical, and I could feel Mariah's curiosity growing with each step.

Once we reached the end of the trail of lights, the beautifully set table for two awaited us, surrounded by even more candles. The stars seemed to twinkle brighter, as if they were sharing the moment with us.

"Have a seat," I said softly, pulling out a chair for her. She obliged, her brown eyes filled with questions.

"Evan, this is incredible, don't get me wrong, but what is all this about?"

I took a deep breath, the scent of the earth and vineyard filling my nose. It was time to bare my soul to the woman who had changed my life.

"Mariah, these past few weeks have been some of the hardest in my life. But through it all, you've been there for me, for Sofia, for our family, in spite of everything you were dealing with personally. Just as you always are." I paused, searching her eyes, seeing the love I felt for her reflected right back at me. "You've brought so much light into my life. So much love. I never imagined I could feel this way about another person, but you're everything I could ever want. I love you, Mariah, desperately, passionately, eternally, and I don't want another day to go by without claiming you as my mate."

Her eyes glistened with tears as she bit back a small gasp and reached across the table to take my hand. "I love you, too, Evan. You've shown me what it means to be truly cared for, how it's safe for me to trust someone with my whole heart. You've given me everything I could have dreamed of: a life, a family, a precious baby girl. I can't imagine my life without you and Sofia in it. I don't want a life without you in it."

"Mariah," I said, wanting this to be just right, wanting every second to be perfect, a memory we'd cherish forever. "I know you can't shift yet, so you won't be able to give me your own claiming bite just yet. But I don't want to waste another day worrying about our future. I want you by my side, as my partner, my love... my mate. May I claim you? Will you be my mate in every way?"

The tears spilled over, sliding down her cheeks as she nodded. “Yes, Evan. Of course. There’s nothing I want more than to be your mate.”

As Mariah’s whispered *yes* echoed in my ears, I forgot all about the food and drinks our family had prepared for us. I forgot about the champagne and the fire. I forgot about everything else except this woman who wanted me as much as I wanted her.

I stood, pulled her into my arms, feeling her heart beating wildly against mine. And as our lips met, it felt as if our very souls were reaching out for each other, ready to seal our bond forever.

“Come with me,” I murmured, taking her hand and leading her down another candlelit path, toward a cabin just beyond the vineyard. It was a small, rustic hideaway tucked into the trees, unused for years, but Lucas and Cynthia had cleaned it up for what I’d planned.

I’d thought we’d have dinner first, but I couldn’t imagine sitting through a meal right now, not when my mate had said yes and was waiting for me to claim her.

“Oh, Evan,” she said breathily when we walked inside. The single-room cabin was filled with flickering candles and soft blankets strewn across the floor before a fireplace. “You really went all out.” She grinned and winked at me. “And apparently really want to claim me on a blanket by a fire.”

A laugh rumbled in my throat as I pulled her into my arms again. “Only the best for my mate.”

I cupped her face in my hands and pressed another tender kiss to her lips. I could feel her heart beating rapidly beneath her chest, matching the rhythm of my own.

“Are you ready?” I said, searching her eyes for any sign of hesitation, but all I saw in their warm depths was love.

“More than anything,” she whispered back.

I reached for her shirt, pulling at the hem as I kept my gaze on hers. She licked her lips, staring up at me.

“Nervous?” I could already sense that she was.

“I just don’t know what to expect,” she said. “Will it hurt?”

“Maybe for a moment.” I pulled the shirt over her head and tossed it away, then rid myself of mine. “But I promise I’ll make you feel better.”

She nodded, and I ran my hands over her shoulders, her chest, brushing my fingers over her bare breasts in a teasing caress. She shuddered beneath my touch, and desire coursed through me. She was so incredible. So fucking sexy. And sensing her dragon there inside? It was driving both my dragon and me wild, the need to claim her even stronger than usual. But I’d wanted to wait for this moment when everything was perfect.

I carefully lowered her to the blanket, and her hair fanned out, making her look like an angel. My angel. Mariah had given me a gift I didn’t even know I wanted: love, acceptance, a home that went beyond any physical space.

Now I could give her all of myself without holding back. I would’ve loved her just as much regardless, but now that she was a shifter, I felt the difference in our bond. It would be stronger than I ever thought possible.

My fangs pressed against my gums, the pressure growing as I scented her arousal. My dragon knew what was coming, and he was overeager. I forced him back, wanting to set the pace, and I brought my mouth to hers again.

She sighed against my lips when I brushed them over hers, gently at first, then more demanding, urging her to open for me. She did, and my tongue slid against hers, white-hot desire surging at the sensation.

“Evan,” she moaned as I ran my hands down her body, slipping my fingers inside her pants, finding her already wet for me.

I growled, dragging my mouth down her neck, flicking my tongue against the sensitive skin where her pulse hammered. She angled her head, giving me better access, and I lapped at

her again, moving my fingers in tight circles as I found her clit, building up the pleasure that'd wash away the pain.

But as she got closer to the brink, I found myself shoving her pants down, then mine. I lifted my head, staring into her eyes, dark with lust.

“I want to be inside you when I claim you,” I breathed, and she nodded, gasping for breath.

“Yes...” Her eyes were desperate. “I want that, too.”

Aligning my body with hers, I continued to tease, wanting her as wet as possible before I slipped inside, but there was no need to wait. She was ready.

I locked my gaze with hers as I placed my cock at her opening, then rolled my hips. We both moaned in pleasure the moment I thrust inside, her soft, warm walls gripping me tight. Fuck, she felt so good.

I brought my mouth back to her neck as I moved steadily, still playing with her clit as she clamped down around me like a vise. It was then that I felt it.

Her dragon was opening up to me, reaching out for me in a way it hadn't yet. I could feel it there, a presence wholly separate from my mate, but still one and the same. I could feel her love, her dragon's love, and the power of our connection pulsing between us, our bond waiting to be fulfilled.

My fangs jutted out, and Mariah's eyes widened slightly, but she was already in the beginning throes of pleasure. Her pulse pounded, calling to me, and I eyed the thin flesh just above where her neck met her shoulders.

“Are you ready?” I said, barely able to contain myself or my dragon any longer.

She nodded wordlessly, and I bent my head, sinking my fangs into her flesh. She cried out, but more in wonder than pain as a sudden brightness seemed to fill the air. The candles burned brighter, their flames reached higher, and the brightness extended into my body, filling my chest.

Our bond burned through us as our very souls entwined, becoming one as the coppery taste of her blood filled my mouth. It grew stronger and stronger until I thought I might burst with the feelings blazing through.

She clung to me, body convulsing as she came, and I withdrew my fangs so I could watch her face as pleasure wracked her. Already, the small puncture wounds were closing, her new shifter body healing.

But the look on her face. It was something I'd never forget, filled with shock, awe, and undeniable love, purer than anything I'd ever known. Our bond had solidified, and I could sense her dragon in a whole new way. Unable to contain myself, my dragon surged, wings sprouting from my back.

Then the most incredible thing happened. Mariah stared at me in shock as her own fangs pushed their way out for the first time. Her dragon was demanding to stake its claim on me the same way I'd claimed her. She swallowed, eyes wide, as instinct propelled her forward. I bared my neck to her, ready for this next step, my heart full to bursting.

As she sank her new fangs into my neck, our bond peaked, the candles in the room burning even brighter as I came inside her, my own body wracked with pleasure. And then, so fast it took my breath away, the mate bond was sealed, a permanent living thing between us, connecting us in the most intimate of ways.

Mariah stared up at me, breathless. My cock still throbbed deep inside of her as I held her gaze. It was more than I'd expected, and I could barely wrap my head around how it felt to be connected to her like this, and to have the full effect of the mate bond coursing through our veins.

I whispered, "I love you so fucking much."

The words weren't enough. No language could be enough to express what I felt for my mate. But I didn't need it anymore. She could feel it, just as her own love reverberated in my very bones.

She was mine, and I was hers. I'd never felt more complete.

Chapter 31

Mariah

Sometimes it was hard to believe only two months had passed since Evan became the alpha and claimed me—since I'd become a dragon shifter. Our lives had changed so dramatically in such a short amount of time, and I was still adjusting to everything. Some days were better than others, but the good days outnumbered the bad at this point.

I watched him from across the room while I sat on a couch in his office, where I was supposed to be reading one of my assignments for school, but I couldn't take my eyes off him as he worked. He was so natural, so confident, and truly in his element, despite the doubts he'd shared with me over the past few weeks.

Even now, I could sense it, just like I could sense every other emotion that flickered through him. That'd been one of the hardest things to get used to, not the enhanced hearing and vision, the ability to move more swiftly, or the unparalleled strength. I was still coming to terms with it all, to be sure, but feeling another person the way I felt my mate...it was incredible.

Evan had met with many of Sebastian's old allies in the weeks since his death, but it seemed those who'd once been loyal to Sebastian kept coming out of the woodwork, letting Evan know he had their support, too. It'd been like that each and every time he'd had these meetings, and it solidified my belief that Evan was exactly where he needed to be. It warmed my heart to see their loyalty extended to my mate.

As Evan continued working, I reflected on our conversation from just a few nights ago. We'd been lying in bed, my head resting on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. The weight of his new role had seemed to press down on him more than usual, and he confessed to me how strange it felt to have so much power.

"Sebastian was an incredible leader," he'd said, his fingers gently tracing patterns on my arm. "It had to have weighed on him more than I knew, now that I know just how much he was worth, how diligent he was with finances to support the clan." He shook his head. "I'm no stranger to wealth, Mariah, but I never could have fathomed I'd live to have this much money."

Evan was successful in his own right with his and Mason's clubs, but it was true that Sebastian's wealth and influence surpassed anything either of us could have imagined. It seemed Evan uncovered more of his vast resources each day, but Evan didn't dwell on the wealth. Instead, he worried over whether he could be as good a steward.

"Sebastian made sure the clan thrived through smart and honest business practices," he'd said. "And I've made a vow to continue that legacy, no matter how challenging it may prove."

"I have complete faith in you." Immense pride swelled for the man I loved. "You're strong, determined, and fiercely protective of those you care about. You're the alpha this clan needs, Evan. It will continue to thrive under your leadership." He'd wrapped his arms around me tighter, and we'd fallen asleep in each other's embrace.

I managed to finish my assigned reading in time to go help Abi with dinner. When I headed down to the kitchen, I found her already getting to work on the big family meal. Lucas and Cynthia were now back home for good, and we all had dinner together each night as a family. It'd come to be a routine that meant something to all of us, and a way to strengthen our bonds.

"I must have slept wrong," I told Abi while she was chopping vegetables at the island. I stretched, a sharp pain

rippling down my spine. “I don’t understand how dragon wings can cause so much pain when they haven’t even sprouted yet.”

I had yet to have my first shift, and my fangs had only appeared that one time during the claiming. I groaned as I grabbed a knife and began chopping.

Abi chuckled beside me. “Think of it like when Sofia’s teething. It’s a sign that your wings are there just beneath the surface, maturing and getting ready to make their first appearance. As your dragon side becomes stronger and you learn to shift, the pain will become less noticeable and eventually fade altogether.”

I sure hoped that was the case. I hated the idea of feeling this pain for who knew how long. “So, what am I supposed to do about it in the meantime?”

“Take warm baths, use heating pads, anything to soothe the muscles around your wings. Evan should be helpful in that department.” Abi winked. “Most of all, be patient. Your body is adjusting to something completely new.”

That was the understatement of the year. Two months in, and I wasn’t used to any of it yet.

While I attempted to ignore the pain and keep chopping, my thoughts drifted to Jax, as they often did. We hadn’t seen or heard from him since he left, and I was growing more and more worried. Evan had tried to assure me that Jax knew he was welcome here, that our home was open to him if he wanted, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right, that he was out there feeling lost and alone.

“Abi, do you think Jax is okay?” I said.

“Physically, yes. I have no doubt Tomas would use it against us if he’d found Jax. But he’s been through a lot, Mariah,” Abi said gently. “He’s a strong man, and I’m sure he’ll come to us when he’s ready. We have to give him time. He has healing of his own to do.”

“Time. Maybe you’re right, but it just feels like we’re abandoning him when he needs people the most.”

“Sometimes people need space to figure things out for themselves.” Abi placed a hand on my shoulder. “Trust that Jax knows what he needs.”

As I soaked in the bath later that evening, I couldn't shake my unease over Jax, but I knew Abi was right. Jax was a grown man and would make his own decisions, but the thought of him out there alone weighed on my heart. He'd done so much for me, been a true friend, and risked his life countless times. More than anything, I hoped he'd make peace with the past and find his way back to us soon.

* * *

The morning sun streamed through the windows, beams of light casting a glow on Sofia as she crawled from one end of the family room to the other. I smiled when she reached up and swatted at one, trying to catch it in her chubby little hand. She explored her surroundings like a true adventurer, always curious. It seemed like just yesterday she was barely able to lift her head, and now she was into everything, her tiny hands grasping at whatever caught her attention. Before long, she'd be learning to walk, and her first birthday wasn't too far away, either.

“Morning,” Abi called as she strolled into the room, a warm cup of tea in her hand. The early autumn days were growing shorter, the air finally cooling off from the intensity of the summer heat.

“Good morning to you.” I gave her a smile.

“Did you get that bath last night?”

“I did, and Evan came through with the massage.” Plus a whole lot more. My cheeks warmed, and Abi must have taken notice.

“You and Evan better be careful, or you'll have another little one crawling around before you know it,” she said, smiling before coming to sit beside me on the couch.

I chuckled, brushing a stray strand of hair behind my ear, but she made a good point. For the entirety of our relationship, Evan and I hadn't had to worry about birth control, knowing I could never get pregnant as a human. But I wasn't human any longer.

My hand came instinctively to my belly as I considered the possibility. Evan was too busy these days for us to think about a baby, much less have the conversation leading up to it. The fact that I could have children with him now filled me with so much joy, but I wasn't sure we were ready, either.

I still hadn't had my first shift, and I was having a harder time adjusting to everything than I think everyone had hoped. There were days when I fell apart completely, when I let myself think about what'd been done to me against my will, but they didn't happen as often anymore. More often than not these days, I was just frustrated that I hadn't been able to shift, even partially, since the night Evan claimed me. But he insisted there was no rush. We had plenty of time for everything. Our whole future was ahead of us.

"Don't jinx us, Abi. We've got enough on our plate as it is." But as soon as the words left my mouth, something stirred within me. That's when I realized this wasn't the first time I'd felt something. Not movement, exactly, but different from the way my dragon moved around in my chest.

I bit my lip, doing some mental math. "Abi, does going through this change... becoming a dragon... cause you to miss periods?"

Concern was etched on her face. "Not that I'm aware of, no. I've never heard of that happening. Then again, you're a special case here. The first human to be successfully changed." She paused, eyes widening as she fully grasped the meaning of my question.

"Wait." She sat up straight. "Do you think...?"

"I don't know," I said, my hand shaking slightly where it rested on my lower belly. "Everything has been so chaotic lately, and I didn't even realize until now how long it's been..."

“Okay, let’s not panic,” Abi said, trying to reassure me. “We’ll figure this out together.”

I nodded, my mind racing.

“Lucas!” Abi called up the stairs. “Can you please come watch Sofia for a minute?”

“Of course,” he said, and even after all this time it surprised me how well I could hear. Evan had never mentioned this part of being a dragon, but I supposed he took it for granted.

Lucas bounded down the stairs, sweeping in and scooping Sofia up from the floor, lifting her high in the air. “Who wants to spend some time with Uncle Lucas?”

The sound of her giggles filled the room as Lucas spun her around, before setting her back on the floor and chasing her around on all fours, drawing even more laughter from Sofia.

“Come on,” Abi said, grabbing my hand and dragging me out of the room, then up the stairs to hers. Once we reached her private bathroom, she shut the door behind us and rummaged through her drawers.

“Here it is.” She pulled out a small box, glancing at the expiration date before handing it to me. “It’s still good.”

I stared down at the pregnancy test in horror. Was this seriously a possibility? My hands trembled as I opened the package and took out the small plastic stick, fear gripping my heart like a vise. I couldn’t be pregnant, not now when Evan had just taken over as alpha, and our lives were already so complicated. How could I possibly bring another life into this?

“Mariah,” Abi said softly, placing her hand on my shoulder. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Nothing to be afraid of?” I said incredulously. “Abi, my entire world has changed these past few months. With Evan becoming alpha, the clan depending on us, becoming a dragon...and now this?”

“Honey, I know it may seem a little scary, but new things always are. Look at this as a blessing in disguise.” Her eyes

searched mine for understanding. “Life is given, and life is taken away. We’ve all had enough heartache. Maybe fate decided you and Evan deserved a little life.”

Her words clanged through me, echoing the same thoughts I’d been grappling with since waking up as a dragon. The universe had already given me so much: a family, a loving mate, the most precious little girl, and a purpose. Was I going to question it if fate had deemed me ready to bear a child?

“Come on,” she encouraged me, guiding me to the private toilet. “It’s easy. Works just like it does for humans. All you have to do is pee on the stick.” Then she shut the door, leaving me alone with the test.

After taking a deep, deep breath, I followed Abi’s instructions and took the test. I came back out and set the little stick on the counter, staring as if it held the answers to the universe. The minutes ticked by so slowly I wondered if I’d somehow messed it up, though I didn’t see how. The anticipation nearly drove me mad.

Finally, Abi’s alarm went off. It was time to check the results. My hands trembled as I picked up the stick, unsure what to prepare for.

“Two lines,” I said in a whisper, my hand shaking so much I nearly dropped the test. “Abi, it’s positive.”

Abi squealed, wrapping me in her arms. “This is wonderful news.” Her eyes practically glowed with excitement. “You’re going to be a mother again.”

I still stared at the two lines, barely able to comprehend this. I’d resigned myself to the fact that I’d never bear a child of my own. I’d been okay with the knowledge that Sofia would be it for us. But now...a whole world of possibility was opened up for me.

We were having a baby.

“I have to go tell Evan.”

He must have taken a break from work because when I returned to the family room, I found him down on all fours right there with Lucas, the three of them crawling around

making playful growling noises and having a great time. The sight warmed my heart. He was such a wonderful father. I couldn't have asked for a better mate.

Evan glanced up and caught sight of me, his smile widening. Then they flickered at the test I clutched tightly in my hand.

“What's that?”

“Come sit with me.” I moved to the couch.

He exchanged confused glances with Abi, who now gestured for Lucas to follow her. The next second, they were hurrying from the room, leaving the three of us together.

He scooped Sofia up in his arms and came to sit beside me. “What's going on?”

I took a deep breath, staring down at the test, then at Evan. A mixture of fear and excitement swirled inside me as Abi's words from earlier echoed in my mind. It seemed the universe had decided to give us a little life.

“Mariah?” Evan said.

I locked eyes with him, unable to keep it in any longer, the words tumbling from my lips.

“Evan, I'm pregnant.”

[Read Dragon Daddy Defender Now So You Don't Miss Out!](#)

* * *

My dragon shifter boss is hot enough to die for...

Since becoming Sofia's nanny, my relationship with my dragon shifter boss, Evan, has been heating up. But then Sofia's mom, Rosalind, reappears in her life, and things have become complicated fast.

Rosalind is suing for custody of her daughter, and I learn that her powerful father is the alpha of an enemy clan who Evan has every reason to hate. If Evan wants any chance of keeping

his daughter, he'll have to get control of his fiery temper and face the dark secrets from his past.

We'll both do anything to protect Sofia, but when I become a target, I begin to doubt my role in Evan's life. Being a human in a shifter's world is dangerous. And giving my heart to an exiled dragon alpha could be the death of me...

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[Have You Checked Out Next Door Dragon Daddy Yet?](#)

Flirting with my hot neighbor is like playing with fire...

Tate is not the sort of neighbor you can ignore. Especially when he walks around half naked for all the world to see. I can't help that I got a weak spot for bad boys. But that was before I became a single mom, and I'm not so weak anymore.

Besides, Tate lights my temper without even trying, and I swear he enjoys teasing me. Well, two can play at that game, and I think it's time someone teaches him a lesson.

My friends tell me that I'm playing with fire, that I don't know how dangerous Tate truly is. But I'm not scared of a little heat between neighbors.

But there's something different about Tate that I can't put my finger on, and I'm determined to find out what it is. Even if it means getting burned...

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Claimed By The Dragon Daddy

Dragon Rebels: Book 2

Roxie Ray

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