

ARDELEAN
BLOODLINE



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SARAH JAEGER

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THE ARDELEAN BLOODLINE

SARAH JAEGER

BEARLY CONTAINED ROMANCE



© Bearly Contained Romance

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To anyone who thought they had to prove themselves.

You didn't then and you don't now.

“We think that denying our emotions makes us stronger and more resilient, but the research shows that it actually makes us LESS resilient.”

— BRENÉ BROWN



“Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens.”

— J.R.R TOLKIEN

A QUICK NOTE ON CONTENT

This book is a traditional shifter romance book. As such, it contains events such as physical on-page violence and discussions of death. These events may be handled or discussed in ways that may not be acceptable by all readers.

Haze is a book based in a world very much like our own and deals with a wide variety of heavy topics. These topics may cause individuals to have negative feelings or reactions.

The list of topics includes, but is not limited to, mental health, revelations of biological parentage, drug and alcohol use, addiction, sexual intercourse, gambling, misogyny, conversations relating to firearms, body dysmorphia, infertility, medical trauma, health struggles, suicidal ideation and suicide.

These topics are not always handled in the most politically correct way. As often seen in real life, my characters can sometimes be insensitive to those around them and their struggles.

None of these words written were chosen without thought. All choices were debated at length. Ultimately, it is my intent to highlight the struggles of humanity as we work toward acceptance of all the differences among us. Even if that means allowing my characters to be imperfect as part of their growth, as part of our growth.

And while it is never my intention to cause any reader any distress: reader discretion is advised.

If based on this warning, related to the potential triggers listed above, you have any additional concerns or questions that you'd like addressed, you may reach out to me, the author, via email: sarah@authorsarahjaeger.com or on Instagram: [@author.sarahjaeger](https://www.instagram.com/author.sarahjaeger)

LENA

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

TODAY IS MY BIRTHDAY. THEY DON'T CELEBRATE IT. NO ONE CELEBRATES worthless things.

Jimmy knows, and he tried to make it special. So I get to play with his remote-control truck while he cleans his room. It's really cool. I like how the big wheels run over the rocks.

Dad has been reading his newspaper, sitting in one of the chairs on the patio. I run Jimmy's truck up over the ramp, and movement distracts me. Dad lunges toward me. I wince, turning my head away from him, trying not to curl up in a ball or run away.

"Kathleen Meredith! What did I tell you?" Dad snarls.

I was trying to be good. But I wasn't strong enough. I'm never strong enough to stand my ground.

My wolf and I shrink away from his words. I can't help it.

Cowering only makes Dad angrier. The more angry he becomes, the harder it is to not cower.

"That's it. Enough." Dad's Alpha command quakes through my body.

Inside, my wolf whimpers, and tears make the afternoon sun brighter. I squint and blink through the sunlight. I know it'll make Dad more mad, but I can't help it.

Dad wraps his big hand around my wrist. His fingers dig into my skin, and his long legs walk fast. Trying to keep up, I don't bother asking him to slow down. It's another weakness. I'm too small and too slow. He drags me across the lawn into the trees. Ferns rustle loudly but not enough to drown out his growl.

The path leads down toward the other houses on the property, where the

rest of the pack lives. The houses aren't as nice as ours. But the people seem much happier. When I'm allowed to play with them, they're nice. Jimmy, my older brother, gets to play with them more. He's stronger than me. Not as strong as Cade, our older brother, though. *Why couldn't I have been like them?*

"You will learn, Kathy," Dad growls at me.

His growling gets louder as we walk until he makes the forest seem quiet.

My wolf struggles and tries to pull me to the ground. She can't help it. We're both afraid. Why is he doing this?

Stopping abruptly, Dad jerks me up by the arm to keep me from falling to the ground. "You'll see why you can't behave like the worthlessness your wolf is."

My wolf whines. We don't like being called names. It's not fair. We're trying. It's hard to be perfect all the time.

At the edge of the woods, he makes me stop. Standing in the tree line, we have a perfect view of the first house on the left. It's white and little. Olive lives there. She's really nice. She's flawed like me, but because she's older, Mom and Dad let her take care of me sometimes.

A black car is parked in front of Olive's house with two men standing by it. They're wearing suits, but they don't look like good ones. Mom would say they're raggedy. The men are slouchy and not nice looking.

Olive comes out of the house. She has her red backpack and keeps her head down, not looking at anyone.

Her dad makes her stand in front of one of the men. That man lifts her chin and looks her in the eye. When she fights his gaze, he laughs. With his other hand, he makes her open her mouth.

We're too far away. I can't hear what they're saying. *But why are they doing this? They're hurting her. Why is Dad letting them hurt her?* I want to ask him, but Dad'll tell me to be quiet and mind my place.

One of the men pushes Olive toward the car.

Her mom comes to stand outside. She's crying. Where are they taking Olive?

The man comes back from putting Olive in the car. He's holding a big envelope. After he pulls out a bunch of money, he hands it to Olive's dad.

Her dad flips through, counting.

"That's what happens to wolves like you." Dad has sharp, angry words.

My wolf whines. "I don't understand."

“We can’t have any of your kind in this pack. We are strong. I am The Leviathan. I am King. Your wolf is a reflection of mine. If you can’t make yourself strong, I’ll have no choice but to sell you off like Olive,” Dad growls.

“Where is she going?” I look up at him. He’s blurry through my tears.

“Olive will go into heat. Those men want a lot of pups. They’ll use her for that.” Dad says those words, and I only sort of know what he means.

“I didn’t get to say goodbye,” I whisper.

Dad huffs, dragging me back through the woods. “You’re not to get attached to people, Kathy. If someone gets close, they’ll see your flaw. No one can know your flaw. Remember what I’ve told you.”

“If I’m not strong, I can’t be here,” I answer quietly.

“You want Robert and me to keep you, don’t you?” Dad snaps his words.

“Yes,” I answer firmly.

My oldest brother, Robert, will take Dad’s place as Alpha one day. He thinks I’m nothing, like Dad does. But I’ll do anything to stay with Jimmy and Cade.

“Then you have to be strong so Robert and I don’t have to get rid of you,” Dad growls again.

Forcing my wolf down, I nod. She makes me not strong, so I’ll just hide her away. I don’t need her anyway. I’ll be strong without her. No one has to know we’re flawed. No one has to know we’re worthless.

PRESENT DAY

FINN

THE DOOR TO THE ALPHA'S OFFICE COMES OFF ITS HINGES WHEN I RAM MY way through it. Splinters fly in all directions. The pack Quartermasters spring up. Guns point in my direction as they move to protect Magnus. Their loyalty to my brother has always been admirable. But today, the blind trust I placed in him is gone, and they're in my way.

"Get out!" The Alpha command rips through me.

They scatter out the door as quickly as I came in, leaving Magnus and me alone.

Magnus doesn't stand but offers me a seat with a lazy wave of his hand. "Come now, Finn. Let's chat."

"There are no words for what you've done, Magnus," I snarl. Balling my fists is the only thing stopping me from ripping his head off.

Magnus's gaze darkens. Green eyes fade to black, and the void, which is his wolf, watches me. Men are scared senseless seeing The Hellhound. But when he's your brother and you've grown up cutting your teeth on each other's flesh, there is no fear.

"Enlighten me, brother. What is it I've done to upset you?" Magnus sits back in his chair, playing dumb to the massacre he's orchestrated.

"You walked them straight into their deaths. Don't deny knowing. You fed them straight to the O'Mahoneys. Now you're sitting here like it's any other Tuesday," I spit.

My finger itches. I could draw my gun here and now and end him. I have half a mind to put a bullet in Magnus, the same way he allowed those boys to die.

"It's Wednesday, and it's the cost of war," Magnus corrects me flatly;

he's completely unfazed.

"They were too young, Magnus. They were starting their lives. You've made young widows, one with pups on the way. For what? You sent them to die on purpose?" I'm snarling through words that come from the fire in my gut.

Magnus doesn't bother raising his voice when he scolds me. "I told you, Finn. It's the cost of war. The widows and pups will be cared for, as always."

"The cost is too high, Magnus." I shake my head, stifling my snarl, but my words aren't any less cutting. "What will Ma say about all this?"

Magnus stands, letting out a snarl as he leans forward, bracing his hands on his desk.

We're nearly face-to-face. "Ma isn't here. So, what does it matter about what Ma will say when she gets back from Galway? She'll say it's my job, my responsibility, and if you don't like it, you should leave."

I run my tongue against one of my descended fangs. Ma would tell me to get out. "You're exactly right, Magnus. I can't pretend to be blind. I'm not your loyal brother anymore. I'm done."

Magnus huffs, his hand reaching into the top drawer of his desk where he keeps his gun, "Fine. Do one last thing."

Suspicion runs through me. *No. There's no reason Magnus would reach for his weapon.*

His hand returns from the top desk drawer and, with it, an Ardelean blue envelope. Magnus tosses it on the desk in front of me before leaning back into his chair.

As I collect it, rage makes it difficult to slide the letter free from the envelope.

Magnus explains, "Evidently, The Leviathan doesn't quite know what the late Alpha Regent was doing. But our shipping company came up in the books, and The Leviathan is inviting us to the table as a show of good faith for the future."

Robert was breaking the centuries-old armistice by doing business with Magnus. When The Leviathan slayed his brother to take back the throne, Magnus was left holding the wrong end of an under-the-table deal. It's been months of cleaning up the mess.

"Sending me because I won't be associated with you any longer. Then you'll have no reason to comply in the future?" I laugh, shaking the envelope at him. "Is there a level you won't stoop to?"

Magnus leans back in his chair. “If you don’t want to go, I will. But maybe you’ll like America permanently. There isn’t a place in Ireland where you can hide, not with the blood on your hands. Without your jacket or the family’s protection, there aren’t many places in this world you’ll be safe. But The Leviathan’s pack seems like a good place to start asking for amnesty.”

He makes a valid point, and it’s another douse of fuel on the fire.

I grit my teeth. “Fuck you, Magnus.”

He nods his head. “Wedding is this Saturday with the Equinox. Anything you don’t take with you, I’ll have shipped. I’ll get your recent take disbursed to you. It’s what’s fair.”

Backing away, I make it only a few steps before Magnus says, “You walk out of this life, Finn, and there’s no coming back. Blood or not, you walk out the door, you won’t walk back in.”

With a nod, I walk backward, retreating from his office, not willing to turn my back on him. The hallway, despite the scattering of the Quartermasters, is empty.

I refuse to be complicit in The Hellhound’s apathy for the lives he’s responsible for. I can no longer be the devout Enforcer, the good soldier Magnus needs.

God help me make up for the blood I’ve spilled in the name of my brother. I was misguided and refused to acknowledge the devil within him. It ends today. I won’t be able to make those lives right. Thousands of people have suffered because of my involvement. But I can sever my ties to that role. Withdrawing my hands — the learned skills used to further Magnus’s agenda — is a start to atonement.

Why did it take losing those boys to see it? The purpose of their deaths isn’t something I want to know. There’s so much I’ll never learn about what madness Magnus is creating.

Ma will keep Magnus honest in paying out death benefits. Not that he’s ever gone back on the rules we’ve lived by. We may be brothers, but the blood of the covenant isn’t thicker anymore.

CHAPTER I

LENA

“DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH I FUCKING HATE SOCIAL EVENTS?” DEACON, MY older yet somehow less mature brother, walks backward through the hotel room door.

Pulling on his tie and loosening it quickly, he pulls it off over his head. He’s already got three buttons of his dress shirt undone.

“Yeah, Deacon. I know.” I sigh.

He made his complaints well-known to me all night.

As I slip my hotel key back inside my clutch, my fingers brush against the placeholder cards I swiped off the table. They read ‘Lena’ and ‘Deacon.’ It’s ridiculous and sentimental, but being invited to something formally by the names we’ve chosen and not bestowed on us by our parents, it’s healing. These could have easily read ‘Kathy’ and ‘Jimmy.’ That thought, the one taking me back to being called Kathy, makes my stomach lurch. *It’s been twelve years. When do I quit feeling this angry?*

Carrying my heels and the extra fabric of my dress that I had to hitch up to walk flat-footed, I follow Deacon into our hotel suite. It was his idea to share one to keep us from making bad choices and bringing a random hook-up back to our room.

Unprotected for far too long, my wolf chimes in. As I pass over the threshold, she stops cowering. Leaning back against the door, I draw a deep breath and let all the tension fade away.

Making my way deeper into the suite, my wolf makes the most obtuse observation, *our mate though, he was handsome*.

I ignore her. It’s bad enough she wants to find a quieter place in the pack hierarchy, but now she’s decided she found our mate. It’s the wedding

experience that's confused her. I can't blame her. There were so many shiny and elegant things to enjoy.

Deacon shakes out of his suit jacket, like a snake shedding his skin in an uncalculated flail, before undoing his belt and fly and then flopping down on the couch. Like the deviant he is, his feet, still in their shoes, go up on the coffee table.

No more pack events. Not until we hunt our mate back down. The coward whimpers. Apparently, seeing Cade and Thalia happy and mated makes her believe that she can have it too.

She's wrong. It will never be safe to even debate looking for that. I've done the math and calculated the risk.

Deacon lets out an exasperated sigh while unbuttoning his cufflinks. "Damn shame a bunch of the packs didn't come to make it a full gathering."

"Why's that?" I toss my purse on the table and drop my shoes on the floor. Waiting for a response, I begin taking off my earrings.

"There's a blonde from Colorado, we connected at Summer Solstice. Lena, let's just say she looks really good on her knees," he casually says. I can't help but shake my head as I walk over and turn my back to him. He unzips my dress. "Speaking of which, I thought for sure you were about to shack up with that blond from New Orleans. Not usually your type."

"Mmm, he sounded pretty, but I was saved by a vision," I lie. Sighing, I walk away to my bedroom in the suite.

I couldn't shack up tonight because the coward focused in on the sound of someone's voice. The scent of him as it wafted around the room. It was impossible to think about being under anyone else. Especially after we caught a glimpse of the representative from the O'Briens out of Ireland. No one in the room compared to . . .

Our mate, my wolf finishes my thought. He's more than dominant enough. We would be pleased with him. You walked away from our mate. My wolf disagrees with my decision not to actively seek out the man with the Irish accent. The coward's opinion, obsession or otherwise, is delusional.

When she focuses on finding our mate, it's impossible to tune her out and focus on my work. It normally means my heat is close. I should have another month, but they've been irregular before. Or maybe with all the excitement of Cade, my oldest brother, finding his mate, Thalia, she's starting to obsess early. Because that's all she cares about: finding our mate, settling down, and becoming whatever it is they want from us. It's that last one that's the deal

breaker.

Besides, if I was looking to find a potential mate, there's no way I would settle. He'd have to be perfect. I like what I like, and I'm not ashamed to say it.

Theoretical mate aside, it was stupid of me to consider hooking up tonight. Sex isn't worth the possible risk of an unwanted mating mark.

When I come back from changing into leggings and a T-shirt, I plop down on the opposite end of the couch, where Deacon waits for me to continue. I put my feet into his lap, and he lazily rubs them, patient in trying to get me to talk.

I divert the conversation while working out my fancy updo, pulling out bobby pin after bobby pin. "Thalia looked beautiful. You did a great job helping her get dressed. The reception dress was a nice touch. Good call."

"Mmm, it was hard to convince her, but I knew she'd be more comfortable in something lighter," Deacon explains.

I'm proud of him for stepping up to be her man of honor. Watching their friendship bloom has warmed even my stone-cold heart. They both need friends, and I'm constantly, conveniently, and irrevocably unavailable.

"I don't think I've ever seen Cade so pleased being at a public function, or wearing a suit for that matter." I reflect on Cade and how proud he looked standing next to Thalia, presenting her publicly as his. The attention he paid her, like she was the only one on the planet, made me envious of that sort of relationship.

Our mate will do the same. You have to find him. My wolf presses again. Her small growl is an ironic touch.

"Happy." Deacon nods. "So fucking happy. Who do you suppose is next?"

I fight back a wince as Deacon rubs my foot a little too hard. "Does someone have to be next?"

He nods while speaking. "I mean, Judah doesn't date. Dinah has sworn off another mate. Ezra is with me in the let's-have-some-fun category. Ansel's far too busy. I suppose that leaves you?"

"Oh. Yeah. No." I pull my feet back. Half in horror that his brain has decided, out of all our cousins, I'll be mated and half in pain from his strong hands. "Honestly, Deacon, I don't see a way I can ever let someone in. Not without . . ."

"Cade's taken the throne. His Luna is an Alpha wolf. She could take the

role of Alpha Female as well. You could be.” Deacon’s voice trails off.

I shake my head. “No, it won’t work out that way. I’ll get through it how I always do. I’ll be seen, and the wolf won’t be heard.”

“You know you can still talk to me, right?” Deacon’s eyes are bleary from the big day, and it looks like he’s ready to pass out.

“I’m okay. Too much spiked cider, dancing, and being nice. I’m tired of pretending for the day.” I give him a yawn to prove the point, but it’s not quite a lie. I’m exhausted from months of event planning and the culmination resulting in spending time with two-hundred-plus wolves. “I’m going to bed. Apparently there’s some sort of gift opening we’re supposed to be at tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah.” He yawns back. “Weddings are hard. Can we agree that we’ll stick with the brand-new tradition of doing them at major holidays?”

“Not like I’ll ever take a mate, but if I do, Solstice or Equinox. You’ve my word.” I wobble as I stand up from the couch and drag my sorry ass off to bed.

“Hey, Lena?” Deacon calls me back.

Turning, I lean against the doorframe of the bedroom I claimed. He’s moved from slouching to sitting forward with both feet on the floor.

“I remember you used to want a life. Beyond being.” Deacon’s words trail off for a moment before he starts, “What I’m saying is that Cade would rather replace you as his Alpha Female than let you stand in the way of your own happiness. So, if you want the mate and the pups running about in the yard . . . don’t hold yourself back over a duty that . . . forget it.”

Deacon stands and heads to his side of the suite.

It’s my turn to call him back. “Hey, Deacon?”

He looks over his shoulder at me but doesn’t turn around. “Yeah, Lena?”

“Thank you.”

“Any time.” He taps the doorframe twice before heading to bed.

Looking up at the ceiling, I feel my wolf stretching and unwinding more and more from the dark recesses I’ve held her in all day.

Why won’t you let us have our mate? He was here tonight. All you had to do was look, she grumbles.

For the millionth time, I explain to her, *Because we’re flawed. We don’t get a mate or a happily ever after, so we’re making do with helping the world be a better place instead.*

She doesn’t answer or push the issue.

It's not worth either of our time to keep having this conversation. We both want it, and only one of us is smart enough to acknowledge that it can't happen.

CHAPTER 2

FINN

FOR THE HEAD OF THE UNIVERSITY'S VETERINARY AND LABORATORY operations, Doctor Thorpe's office is laughably small. The tight quarters on their own have made me uncomfortable.

My wolf has been fighting for control since I plopped my arse in this chair almost an hour ago. We've had to endure the pompous lab rat talking down to us like we're beneath him. But I need this job. I need to earn my way into the Ardelean Pack and prove I'm no longer working for Magnus nor tied to Ireland.

"As an external consultant, you'll report directly to me," Dr. Thorpe says while flashing his wolf in a show of dominance.

I'm not sure he knows who I am yet, but he's making it clear he's the one in charge here.

While gritting my teeth and trying to keep my wolf at bay, I say, "Understood."

"You'll report to me each day to get your assignment, and I want results. I need to figure out the inefficiencies immediately. We have a major discrepancy in many of the labs' inventories. I expect your reports to find these discrepancies and display accurate measures to resolve them. I need you to start as soon as possible. Wednesday at the latest." Dr. Thorpe gives me a curt nod, effectively dismissing me.

I stand from my chair and begrudgingly extend my hand. I don't want to work for this sort of asshole, but time is running out and opportunities are limited. "I'll be there Wednesday, and I'll get the job done."

I bow my head like a good wolf in the hierarchy and comply with his requests, even though it grates on my nerves to do so. This is a fresh start. I

can't afford to waste it. I need a job with pack visibility, and this job is my ticket to getting that. I can't be picky about who I'm taking orders from, not just yet.

Once outside the science building walls, I loosen my tie and take in the area around me. I had been in such a rush to get to this job interview that I wasn't in a mood to take in the university campus, not beyond what was needed for my own security.

Despite the job being at a facility six and a half kilometers away, Doctor Thorpe wanted me to meet him on campus. Can't say I've been on one much in the better part of two decades, but this seems like a nice enough place.

Taking in a deep inhale, I consider how much my life has changed in the last five days. I've spent a lot of time in Minnesota over the last eighteen months. But I'd never considered it as a possibility for home. Ireland, with the pack, had always been where I wanted to settle down. It's hard to think about, but less than a week ago, I was monitoring shipments of guns, ammunition, and drugs. I was keeping us above board with the harbormaster. Now I'm about to figure out why some lab rats can't seem to use whatever ridiculous equipment correctly. Isn't white-collar work supposed to feel more prestigious?

Since giving up my position as Magnus's Enforcer, to best protect his business, Magnus had his fixers make up documents, work history, and a whole new resume for a subsidiary we own. On paper, I was an exemplary employee for the last twenty years. It's not fake, it's just not honest. But nixing log books for the pack business is a bit different from jobs in the world of the lawfully employed. Hopefully, once I prove my loyalty to Cade Alden, The Leviathan, and his pack, he can help me find something I'm more suited to.

The autumn weather is nice in Minnesota. But I've been in the Ardelean Pack's territory for four days. My time of allowable visiting is almost over. I'll have to make my extended stay known to The Leviathan.

My wolf is still on edge. He presses me to walk down the sidewalk, passing students walking at a relaxed pace. The habit of keeping our path slightly erratic, to avoid being followed, will be hard to break.

How long before I quit looking over my shoulder?

Swapping my leather jacket for a tweed coat feels too scholarly. As long as it conceals my gun until I can wear a thicker coat, it'll do. While I'd like to think I'm safe here, it's not a notion I give into easily. Even if I get pack

status, which comes with the registered protection of an Alpha, some people don't fear The Leviathan as much as they hate me.

I'm not afraid to be a lone wolf, but having caught the scent of my mate at the wedding Saturday, I need a pack to vouch for me. I don't expect anyone to agree to mate a lone wolf. *Fuck, God help me.* I don't know how I'll find her. But I'm not ever giving up.

Quit wasting time and find her, my wolf urges. There were too many wolves at the reception. We hunted all night but couldn't figure out where the beautiful scent was coming from. If only I knew what she looked like so I could use more than my nose to find her.

I'm patient. I'll find her. I've waited this long.

Yes, we will. My wolf reminds me of how long he's wanted to find ours.

Being a Dominant, inside the kink community and that lifestyle, and an Alpha wolf has given me dozens of opportunities to explore, learn, and grow. But I've yet to find the perfect submissive for me. Most partners have been above adequate and have gone on to serve Dominants and Masters without issues. The simplified version is that I could never fully accept the responsibility as a Dominant for someone because I was holding on to my personal beliefs.

Between the wolf lore of our people and the Catholic faith of my mother, I prayed every day we'd find our mate and that she'd be crafted for me in every way. I'm ready to put that wait behind me. I need to claim her in all ways possible and never let her go.

After turning toward the main road on the edge of campus, I pull up the address on my phone and check the map.

A few blocks ahead is the sign. You can get the black stuff in all the sports bars in Minnesota, but only one pub imports my favorite ale from back home. Guinness will do, but it's not what I want. A rich amber lager calls my name. The green pillars and gold sign sell the pub feel.

Thinking about finding my mate must be messing with my head because once I open the door, I swear I smell her. But the scent disappears almost as quickly as it hits. I'd be far too blessed to find a woman who wants a beer in a dark pub on a Monday afternoon.

Tinted windows make the place much darker inside than out. I blink my eyes to adjust, only to find the entire establishment bustling. My wolf perks up, on the hunt. Despite all the scents of other patrons crammed in this pub, he's certain we smell our mate. My lack of detection or notice of it doesn't

deter him.

I'm not giving up, but I'm not going to get far too close to every woman in the place to find her. No sense in alienating myself in the only place that has what I want.

Further scanning the room, I find exactly one open seat. It happens to be next to a fine thing. Her deep brown hair folds in big curls down her chest, draped over her beautiful tits, which are cloaked behind a black dress. She's leaning comfortably against the end of the bar, rotated in her stool so that her back is against the wall. Beautiful hazel eyes scan out across the room. Her soft cheeks and nose are a stark contrast to the sharpness of her eyes.

From the way she carries herself, proud and strong, to how easy she is on the eyes, I'm glad that's the only seat available. I'm fooling no one. She's far more than easy on the eyes. I can already tell it'll be more than a little disappointing when she's not the one for us. Surely God wouldn't make it that easy to find my mate.

Go closer, she could be ours, my wolf urges. She's our type too; good childbearing hips. We could have the yard full of pups.

It's not like one can simply look at someone and know they're a wolf, mostly. She's certainly built to be one. Soft curves and an hourglass shape but clearly muscular. My feet move, driving me to her without any further thought.

There are too many people and smells to single any one out. It seems hard to believe I'm imagining my mate's scent. Far too coincidental to scent a sweet smell of water lilies and the warmth of fur at the reception and now here in the pub.

Drinking in the beauty, I let myself admire her. Perhaps a bit too long before I turn the leatherback of the barstool to accommodate sitting on it.

"With a beautiful lass like you sitting here, I have to ask, this seat taken?"

Clearly, having watched me look her over, she's none too impressed. Coldness infuses her gaze as she looks me up and down before turning a critical look at the stool. "I suppose that depends. Is your ego going to fit on it?"

Damn, she's fiery. I don't reply with snark. Not yet.

While the scent I want a deeper breath of seems ever so slightly stronger, she may not be mine. But there's no harm in taking a test drive until I'm sure.

A sassy mouth and headstrong behavior. I have no doubt in my mind she's a brat waiting to be broken and molded to a Dominant's hand.

Sitting on the barstool next to her, I shrug. "Guess so."

My ass barely touches the stool when the bartender stalks over. He tosses the towel he was wiping the bar top with over his shoulder and puts both hands on the bar, glaring at me. "You okay here, Lena?"

"Here for a pint." I raise my hands in surrender.

No point in pissing off the man with the beer.

The brunette with the attitude, Lena, shakes her head and rolls her eyes.

Batting her long lashes at the bartender, she defends, "Nah, Jay. Seems to be brave enough and new here. I'll give him a fighting chance. His first one is on me."

I pull my wallet out, tossing a twenty on the counter. "I'm not here to hit on you. This is the only place in town I've been able to find my beer. I'll pay, drink in silence, and be on my way."

I have no intention of being silent. I'll prove my assumption of her disposition is correct and take her number by the time I leave the seat. Is it cocky of me to be so sure? Absolutely, but she's not the first brat I'll have brought to her knees.

"Two Smithwick's. Please," she rattles off the order, her smile locked on me.

The bartender slides my twenty back to me, but I leave it on the bar. *How did she know that?* The sweet smile on her face only adds to that question. *How on earth would she have known that?*

When he steps away, her eyes fall away from me back to her empty glass. "New to town or passing through?"

Before I can reply, the bartender returns with two bottles and empty glasses for us.

He pops the top as I nod a thanks. "New to town. Should I worry that the glass is coated with some sort of poison?"

She picks up the glass in front of me. With a lighthearted and surprising laugh, given the start of this conversation, she smiles and shakes her head. Tilting the pint glass, she pours her beer into it, minding the foam.

With the glass in hand, she draws a slow sip before slipping her tongue out to clean her top lip. It seems second nature, but I can't help but wonder if she's doing it for my pleasure.

My slacks are tight, and my breath catches. Beautiful images of that tongue and the tip of my cock only torture me further. It hasn't been that long since I've had a woman in my bed. Lena has no business having this strong

of an effect on me.

Unless she's ours. Quit stalling and get closer, my wolf demands. I give in to his nagging, leaning forward in my chair, but there are still too many scents hanging in the space between us.

She swallows before answering. "Worry about whatever you'd like, but it would be bad for business to start killing off new patrons."

Giving my beer a gentle pour, I raise mine toward her in a silent toast, then bravely take a sip. The sweet scent of the brew mixes with the first taste of home I've had in nearly a week's time. It fills my mouth, and I groan with appreciation and pull another swallow.

"Woah, dude, it's a beer. Keep it in your pants." Lena huffs out a laugh.

Her hair bounces, catching in the muted bar light. It tempts me to wrap my fingers in it. If only she'd pull it to the side to expose her neck and give me better access to where her scent would be strongest.

Again, her tongue drives me wild as it finds the lip of her pint with a seductive lick before settling the glass and taking a swallow.

"Ahh, I see how you are." I taunt her for a reaction. "You're the kind of woman who wants to sit on her barstool and be bothered by a man so she can be rude and run them off. You get off on belittling them. It's too bad, Lena. I prefer my women strong, not unnecessarily antagonistic."

"Love when men assume they know everything about a woman because they've seen one before." Lena snorts.

From the corner of my eye, I watch her roll her eyes and run her hand back through her hair. I draw a deep breath but can't make out even a hint of her scent over the rest of the bar.

Breaking Lena could be fun, but do I want to dedicate time to that when I could be hunting down my mate?

May still be our mate. My wolf is slow to dismiss her. He's always craved the challenging ones. He loves the fight of the bratty behavior and thrives when they come back to center, accepting our lead. He urges me to get closer and block out the scents of the room around us.

Would be so blessed to have her as our mate.

Lena's not interested in playing nice. I mean my statement. "I'll leave you in peace as soon as I finish my beer."

"Something tells me you won't be doing that," she quips.

I rotate in my chair to look at her, and she tilts her head with a knowing look.

Her finger picks at her coaster. The quick little movements seem nervous and uncomfortable, the unease a stark contrast to the confidence and sharp tongue from a moment ago.

“Think you’re that interesting? That I’ll want to stay?” I pull another sip from the glass, and while drawing my attention from her, I relax back into my barstool.

She’s not wrong. I don’t want to go anywhere. Even with the hunt for my mate on, I’m content sitting here with her.

Looking around the room, I assess that Lena has a perfect vantage point of the bar. The reflection in the mirror above the door covers the other end of the bar the bartender would normally block.

Is she careful, or is there something more to the little woman beside me?

“I don’t think your wolf will let you,” Lena answers under her breath with a sideways glance, knowing I’ll be able to hear her over the packed bar.

Her. My wolf affirms. It’s her.

She gives away the secret between us. We’re both wolves. I turn my attention back to her. Spinning the stool, I risk giving my back to the door to watch every move she makes.

Get closer, scent her, my wolf demands loudly. There’s no way she’s not ours.

“Bold of you to think he’d be interested in someone like you,” I lie.

I’m ready to put money on Lena being my mate. I’m done waiting for a rogue gust of air to blow her scent toward me. God can only take someone so far before they have to take matters into their own hands.

I encroach on Lena’s space.

She doesn’t shy away from my hand. Gently, I run my fingers into the hair at her temple, lifting it into a slight tussle before tucking it behind her ear, displaying a diamond earring.

Withdrawing my hand, I don’t even have to get my fingers close to my face to smell them. The sweet water lilies scent I’ve been chasing is strong. Shaking my head, I meet her eyes. She knew the entire time and was baiting me. *My mate is perfect.*

Our mate is perfect. My wolf corrects, not wanting to be left out of her love. He pushes forward, trying to draw hers out as well.

There’s no way she doesn’t know. But Lena’s wolf doesn’t rise to meet him.

Her beautiful lips pull together politely before changing the subject.

“Mm-hmm. How long have you been fringing the territory?”

“Not long, I’ve been interviewing for a position with a university, and my final interview was today. I was offered the position and planned to speak with the Alpha this week yet. It’s all above board,” I answer confidently, stacking proof I’m here for her.

Lena’s sitting tall now, no longer pretending she’s relaxed. She pulls her hair forward, covering her ear and neck again.

“An Alpha male looking to move into Ardelean country without speaking to The Leviathan first. Bold.” Her judgmental tone, while not incorrect, irks me.

She tips her head while reaching for her glass and takes a long drink, waiting for my answer.

I’m enamored with her. Everything about her draws me in. I bet her wolf is gorgeous. *What do I need to do to get her to show me the animal within?*

I don’t want to look away. But I do have to address her pointed attack. What I’m doing isn’t against the laws or customs. I’ve also heard the Ardelean Alphas here are a bit more lax on tradition despite being royalty. While who I am probably makes a slightly more delicate situation, it’s not that she needs to know, right now.

By securing this position with a well-known and established university, I hope to leverage wanting a peaceful retirement from being Magnus’s Enforcer against it. The facts are straightforward for my case: I’m no longer welcome in Ireland, I’m no longer an O’Brien, and as such, I’m no longer a threat to the Ardelean Bloodline. Old-world wolf families haven’t always played nicely. The Ardeleans and O’Briens are no strangers to disagreements. But I’ve changed my last name and have my payout from the take. My ties to Ireland are done.

I shrug and draw a long sip of my beer again, formulating words. “I don’t think Cade Alden and I will have any issues. I pose no threat to anything he wants or needs.”

“Our Alpha is best to judge, not you.” Lena smirks.

Her beer is empty, and she spins the glass on the bar. Without even flagging him down, the bartender takes the empty glass and sets a water in front of her with a curt nod and a smile.

“Regular here then?” I tip my head to her water glass.

It’s my turn to change the conversation away from something I don’t want to discuss. Knowing more about her is my only care in the world. I’ll

deal with The Leviathan later.

She sips her water and sets it back down. I catch her eyes examining the ink poking out from under my jacket sleeve.

“Something like that.”

“Something like that,” I echo.

So, she’s of the Ardelean Pack. I can get used to Minnesota.

She goes to pick up her glass again but puts it back down, her posture rigid. Her whole demeanor is well polished. It’s nearly too perfect.

I fish for more. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“You did, you’ve said it once,” she answers with a smirk. Dropping the volume of her voice again, Lena continues. “The thing is, I don’t recall you giving me yours.”

“Finn.” I keep it short. We’re dancing this delicate exchange of pointed remarks. “You know why I’m here. Why are you? Hardly seems like the place for my mate to be unaccompanied at this hour.”

“Mate?” She quirks a brow but ignores my question, taking another sip of her water. After setting it back down on the bar, she follows a drop of condensation down the side of the glass with her fingertip. “Assumptions will do nothing but get you a free donkey around here.” She cocks her head. “Who’s to say I’m not already mated?”

“Surely any man with enough tact and taste to find you and offer you his collar wouldn’t dare let you out of his sight long enough to have a beer with a stranger.” My stomach drops into a hard knot.

It didn’t occur to me that she might be mated. The collar on her dress is too high to reveal if she’s wearing someone else’s mark.

Lena shifts in her chair, her finger back to playing with her coaster. Tension ripples from her. Biting her bottom lip, she withholds the answer to my question.

I press again. “So, what leaves you sitting at the bar, alone, on a Monday night?”

CHAPTER 3

LENA

THE QUESTION IS SIMPLE ENOUGH. BUT EVENTUALLY, HE'LL FIND OUT I'M Lena Alden of The Ardelean line, and then Griffin O'Brien will head back to Ireland and be done with this lie of working for the university.

There's . . . something about Finn that makes me want to answer his questions without my trademark sarcasm and snide remarks. And that's unsettling. They're my sword and shield against wolves who try to get too close. Which means I'll have to double down on my defenses.

I glance around the room and, with a wave of my hand, indicate, "Seems I'm not so alone. There are at least fifty people here."

Our mate. He found us. You clearly feel attracted to him. My wolf gets mouthy and pushes, wanting to get closer to him. She's been hung up on him from the moment the damn door blew his scent straight to us.

I immediately recognized his scent from the wedding, and given his accent, he's undoubtedly the not-so-little brother of Magnus O'Brien. The Irish pack is known for its illegal and violent ways of business. The advantage is that he must not recognize me as an Ardelean, or he wouldn't be so forward with the ready-to-get-to-know-you attitude.

He is our mate. She pushes, focusing on the thickness of his muscles and overall size. *He's hot as fuck, and you want him too. He said he's our mate. Were you not listening?*

Finn fills out the barstool well. Wolves tend to be more lean, built for running and being nimble. How differently he's built is more than slightly attractive. The size difference between us makes me want to bite my bottom lip, but I won't let him see the effects he has on me.

We could be finding out where those tattoos lead. My wolf focuses back

on the black ink poking out the sleeves of his jacket.

Despite the quickening beat of my heart at that prospect, I push her back, away from the forefront of our shared space.

Attraction is not grounds for mating. Give him an inch and he'll want the mile.

Finn looks around the bar, taking in the bustling of entirely human patrons, then trains his eyes back on me. They turn from deep brown to a much lighter green. His wolf watches me, and heat floods through me.

My wolf wants to meet his, but I'm in control. She won't be meeting his wolf. Not today. Not ever. I'll keep us both safe. Because there's no point in giving him any more reason to pay attention to me.

When he addresses me again, there's a darkness to his words. "Why are you here, Lena?"

The way the question comes out unsettles me. It's not quite accusatory, but it's very reprimanding.

My wolf sinks, squirming lower inside me. *Tell him we'll be good.*

The answer to his question is that my date found out I was a wolf and then was no longer interested in being seen in public with me. Not that that's any of Finn's business.

Our mate is here instead. My wolf wags her tail. *Like cousin Ansel says: it all works out in the end.*

I ignore her and give him half the truth. "Let's say my date didn't go as planned. He didn't meet the minimum height requirement for the ride."

He snorts with a laugh and an eye roll. "Size queen."

I lift my water glass in a toast. "May he be long and hard in all the right places."

He shakes his head and doesn't say anything but drinks anyway. He drains the pale amber liquid from his glass in a final swig. As he promised before to drink his beer and move on, I expect him to stand to leave, but Finn, with his deep voice and rich Irish accent, flags down the bartender. While waiting, he pulls additional cash out of his wallet.

Jay comes down the bar, running his rag along the top. "Another?"

"Yes, please. And whatever she's having this round."

Jay looks at me, raising an eyebrow in concern. I've never let a man buy my drinks before. He knows my two-drink limit without Deacon here.

Today, I'm apparently possessed by something. Something like wanting to explore how Finn somehow knows exactly how to navigate my bratty

behaviors. *How the fuck is he so disarming?*

I agree to it. “Only this once, Jay.”

Finn’s lips draw into the quickest smirk before it disappears. When Jay returns with our beers, Finn tips him well, and I wonder if it’s out of an attempt to impress me.

I pour my beer into my glass and wait for Finn to begin sipping before I do.

“What are your opinions on our Alpha?” Finn turns slightly, his body blocking me into my chair. “Is he larger than life as the legends make him?”

Our. Adorable that he thinks I’ll accept his claim on me as his mate. Wrong. But adorable. A dance for dominance continues.

Submit to him. Let him win. It’s not hard, my wolf cries, whining inside me. She rolls low inside me, pressing me to fall to my back beneath him.

Despite her demands, louder than normal, I keep my composure.

A coy smile creeps across my face. “I wasn’t aware there are legends. But I’ve heard no complaints from his mate.”

Finn’s laugh is full-bodied. He almost spits out his beer, quick to mop it up from his lips with the back of his hand.

The way his tongue clears the back of his hand has my wolf in a fit of desire. My core clenches with a need that I’m not ready for. I push my wolf and those feelings away, harder than I ever have before. Finn can’t know that he makes her or me feel anything.

Shrugging, I sip my own, letting the rich taste roll across my tongue. “What do you want to know about The Leviathan?”

“So, they do call him that?” Finn cocks his head, watching me.

“His wolf. Yes.” I slouch back into my chair, pretending to be comfortable. “He tells people he answers to Cade.”

“Cade, even to newcomers? Or should I be prepared to pull out the whole formal wardrobe and honorifics to meet with him?” he probes.

“Split the difference between the two. Why all the questions? You’re fairly certain you’re staying?” I push back.

He can’t stay. With how my wolf is acting, there’s no way he won’t figure out our secret.

Finn pauses, almost unsure of his answer.

My wolf’s hackles rise, watching him clench and unclench his fist.

He gives me something real. “I want someplace to settle into a quieter life, and I’ve been made a job offer here. I want to do all the right things to

earn favor. And since I've found my mate, why would I go anywhere else?"

His honesty doesn't ease the feeling. I don't trust what he says. But it's not something I need to work out now.

Half of my beer is gone, and it's time to head home.

I smile at him. "Well, that's it for me."

"When will I see you again, Lena?" Finn doesn't move from the tight quarters of the barstool.

He's almost blocked me into my seat.

My wolf pushes back. *Yes. Now. We'll see him now. Absolutely yes.*

I disagree with a shake of my head. "It's been fun. Antagonizing you has been delightful, but I don't see other wolves."

Finn stands from his chair. We're too close together. I draw in the heady scent my wolf clung to at the wedding: fur, warm bread, and salt.

There's no denying this experience. Cade told me it was like a magnetic pull that he couldn't fight. My heart beats quickly.

Please? My wolf begs for just one touch. One moment of vulnerability with him.

Instead, I step around him, locking her deep inside, and move on with my life. Finn, with the sexy Irish accent, may be my mate, but without a mating mark, it's nothing more than spending time in the same space as someone I'm attracted to. *Really attracted to.*

"Lena." His voice is gruff and commanding.

I don't look at him. Not when I can hear the recognition of who I am, who we are, in the way he says my name. Regretting that he got my real name, I wince and keep walking. I can't fix that mistake, but I can get the hell out of here. There's no way the Irishman knows how to get around Minneapolis faster than I do.

His footsteps follow me through the bar to the door. As I'm headed out, a group of college guys crowd in. There are about ten of them. They let me out but block Finn's exit. I walk with the wind, mixing in and out of the traffic on the sidewalk. The after-school and dinner crowds flood the streets, giving me cover on the way back to my building. To be on the safe side, I walk two blocks out of the way, taking my scent and putting it in the wind. I haven't felt Finn behind me the entire way, but there's no such thing as too careful. I go in the door on the far side of the building, looping myself to the opposite stairwell, running it to the second floor before walking back to the elevator and riding it to the sixth floor.

As I open my apartment door, calmness washes over me. The large windows let in the setting sun, warming the main living space and making it feel cozy. I take my shoes off by the door and walk toward the back of the unit to the bedroom. The California king bed waits for me with plush, fuzzy blankets and soft, fluffy pillows.

We need to find him. We can't be without him now. We know he's here. You can work out your stubborn pride later, but let him take care of us. My wolf protests loudly. But, as I've done hundreds of thousands of times, I tune her out.

After taking my makeup off and checking my messages one last time, I crawl into the sanctuary of my bed and try to relax. There's no function, no urgent, pressing matters, nothing that needs me more than I need the silence and stillness of the night.

CHAPTER 4

LENA

THALIA'S DAD, DARREN CLARK, HAD PURCHASED AN APARTMENT IN THE CITY while we were rebuilding the pack house. And while he loved it, he volunteered to take an assignment in Europe as a consultant of some nature until we could finish the pack house and a separate free-standing cabin for him. Somedays, I wish I could have gone with him. Home building is not for the faint of heart, and I'm over it.

Darren evacuating the country, and subsequently, his apartment in the city, is perfect because I was able to move into the space. With the pack house a pretty good drive away, commuting even three days a week was draining. The apartment building is two miles from the university and six miles from the lab.

Normally I walk rather than take the bus or my SUV, but today I drive.

Knowing Finn, my most likely, probably, begrudgingly, do I dare say the word, mate, is in the city and was so close to my apartment and the campus, I'm extra cautious on my way into the lab. The less I walk, the shorter the scent trail to follow.

We could look for him. My wolf remembers his broad shoulders and the way he said our name.

Her wants don't matter. We're not hunting down Finn O'Brien. We're not embracing this idea that we could have a fated mate. That's ridiculous.

Even if he is, we can't have him. We won't be able to keep him. He'll have a life in Ireland. There is no way in fucking hell I'm giving up my research for a man. We're so fucking close to a breakthrough. I can practically taste it.



I'VE NEVER BEEN ACCUSED OF BEING THE FIRST ONE IN FOR THE DAY. I AM more often than not the last to leave, and on occasion, I may have still been here when the early birds got in. Either way, no one expects me to be here and functioning before 9:30 a.m. without a coffee in my hand. Because, truly, mornings are just not my thing.

Nikki is at the workbench in my office, looking through my microscope.

“Do none of the other microscopes work today?” After hanging my purse on the back of my office door, I pull my lab coat off the hook.

Nikki snorts. “Well, first, I wanted you to look at this.”

With a roll of my eyes, I go back to the sink in the main lab to wash my hands.

Once I return, I walk over to the microscope and examine the slide. “Yikes.”

“Have you ever . . . ?”

I don't answer her, trying to count the rupturing cells. I rotate the tray and adjust the magnification. They're too far deteriorated to count accurately.

Shaking my head, I admit defeat. “I would take it to path. I can't get a good count.”

“Yeah. I was afraid you'd say that.” Nikki sighs.

She stands there, lingering.

Putting on my lab coat, I watch her expectantly. *Why is she still here?*

It takes me a minute. “Oh, right, you said first. What's second?”

“Did you see the new accounting partner?” Nikki's eyes widen, her pupils enlarging at the thought of him.

Pulling my hair into a ponytail higher on the back of my head, I roll my eyes before expressing my displeasure. “Oh joy. Is it not bad enough that I've got to distract Brayden for the lab? Now we've got a new accounting partner.”

Nikki shrugs. “Doctor Thorpe is dead set on getting all the departments efficient. Not everyone is as anal in processing samples as you are. Do you ever make mistakes?”

“It's not my fault I like to be right.” *Attention to detail is a good thing, I remind myself.*

Nikki hums, indicating that my very specific ways of doing things are more intense than everyone else. It's a conversation we've had a few times

before. But I'm not about to change how I do things to be less accurate to spare others' feelings. That would be silly.

Nikki raises her eyebrow. "Besides, what's the harm in a little more eye candy around here? It's almost as exciting as when we got that new vet."

"Please tell me he's at least —" *human* . . .

Nikki shakes her head. "Nope. But I don't think he's wolf. I didn't get any smells, but by the looks of him, there's no way he is. That man is stacked."

Mate? My wolf paces.

I roll my eyes. *She said she doesn't think he's wolf. So, how could that be our mate?* I argue back with her.

Heading out to the general portion of the lab, Nikki takes her slides and petri dish to the pathology department.

Veterinary sciences and laboratories for the university are run by wolves. We've been running the department since shortly after its creation, and it's where we've developed, tested, and manufactured every heat suppression drug. We're able to create suppressants for wolves and cats in large enough quantities to be completely sound and with enough efficiency that the only cost for the drugs is the shipping to get it to those who need it.

And, even then, if someone's afraid and they can't afford it, like magic — or someone with access to the Ardelean Fund — the drugs get where they need to.

The morning birds, second- and third-year chemistry and biology majors, arrived before me this morning and started checking their experiments. I review numbers, smile, answer questions, give directions, and get everyone underway.

This morning routine means that by the time they go to lunch, I can get square into my project. Then when they leave for the day, I can get a few solid hours of work in before calling it quits myself.

"Morning, Lena." One of the sophomores greets me.

I wave back at him. I haven't bothered learning their names yet. Most of the humans will drop out by midterms, and the wolves in the program are too afraid of me to question anything I say.

"Hey, Lena." Brayden leans up against the bench next to the workstation I'm working at.

"Miss Alden. My office," Doctor Thorpe orders me, cutting off Brayden's pass before it begins.

I walk quickly, first in relief and second because Doctor Thorpe never takes such a short tone with me.

CHAPTER 5

FINN

“I HAVE ONE MEMBER OF THE TEAM WHO’S BEEN HERE FOR SIX YEARS NOW, and I swear she is the most efficient researcher I’ve ever met. Her schedule tends to run a little bit later in the day. I’ll see if she’s available now.” Doctor Thorpe makes his way out of the lab briskly.

I sit and wait for their return. Scrubbing my hand down my face, I’m equal parts angry and exhausted, having tried to hunt down Lena in the city for the last day. Last night, two hours before midnight, I stopped scouring the buildings close to the bar. My wolf and I conceded we had to rest for this day.

That rest did not mean sleep. Unable to push her from my mind, I worked my cock over again and again until, finally, exhaustion took me.

With the sound of footsteps returning, I stand to wake myself up more to meet whatever perky college student Doctor Thorpe wants to —

Lena follows Doctor Thorpe through the door into the office. She falters at the door seeing me, taking a half step back like she’s ready to run.

I’ll only chase you. I shake my head ever so slightly, discouraging her. Though with the way the blue denim stretches across the front of her thighs, I can only imagine the view from behind. My lip twitches, threatening to smile. I tame it back. Having searched all night for her, I’m exhausted to the core, but maybe I’d like the view of her darting off now that hunting her down won’t be as hard. I break, and the smile crosses my face momentarily.

“Miss Kathleen Alden, this is Mr. Griffin O’Leary. He’s our new accounting partner. He’ll be the one to make sure our budgets are in order. You’re our most efficient department . . .”

Doctor Thorpe could have been tap dancing for all I know.

The way I'm focused on Lena, it doesn't matter what he's saying. *What are the odds?* Kathleen Alden, as in Cade Alden, as in The Leviathan's little sister, is my mate. I worked so hard to hunt her down when a trip to the pack house or simply showing up to work would have gotten the job done.

Ma was right. While she always expected Magnus and me to go into the family business and become heads of the pack, she damn near forced me to go to Trinity College, where I got my business degree. I'll have to call her and thank her. It'll tickle her to have been right and hear those words.

Doctor Thorpe concludes his diatribe. "If we can get the other labs to process with your level of efficiency, I believe we can, in fact, get better equipment."

"Yes. I can show Mr. O'Leary around and explain my process." Lena answers obediently in agreement with hesitancy at my last name.

She was expecting O'Brien. The slightest shake of her head shows her obvious disapproval.

Don't worry, faolan. We'll sort out our issues right quick.

Her name plays back in my head. *Kathleen.* Strong name for a strong woman.

Drawing her eyes off me, she refocuses on Doctor Thorpe. All business, she addresses him, "As an update, I did submit a request last week for further review from the independent lab."

"That's wonderful. If I hear back from them, I'll let you know. It would be nice to get a clinical trial underway before the break." He dismisses us, offering his hand out to shoo us from his office before speaking to her again. "With any luck, it will be sooner rather than later. I would be so proud to see your contribution to medicine highlighted this year."

Lena nods but says nothing.

This time when she walks away, there isn't a crowd for her to get lost in. I follow her white lab coat, which is blocking my view of her luscious ass, back down the hallway toward the labs I was shown earlier today.

She uses her key card for the door, and when she glances back at me, I can see hesitation cross her face as she toys with the idea of locking me out of the lab. I ready my card in the event she tries.

There's nowhere I won't follow you, faolan.

I accompany her through one door into a large lab space. She walks past a bank of countertops and then through a door off the left of the lab that leads into a small office.

Closing the office door behind me, I lock it and let out a low growl.

Lena's body tenses, but she forces her shoulders down before turning back to me.

Oh, faolan. You're so much braver than all those temporary fixtures in my life.

I admire her control and dedication. It takes a strong woman, even if she is an Alpha wolf, to keep this kind of control around me.

"O'Leary, is it?" Lena questions immediately. "Because last I checked, you were an O'Brien. Does Doctor Thorpe know?"

I nod, stepping closer. "I've left Ireland and had to leave the last name behind. It's customary for those in my position to use their mother's maiden name. I'm an O'Leary now and plan to petition to join my mate's pack, your pack. I'll take whichever name I need."

"This won't work. You need to quit. Leave. Anything but this job. And sure as fuck, not this pack," she orders, glaring at me.

Her teeth click when she closes her jaw. I'm so close she has to raise her chin to look up at me.

It's adorable that she tries to tell me what to do. But I highly doubt even Miss Kathleen Alden, the Ardelean Alpha Female, will be able to give me an Alpha command my wolf will be forced to follow. It's rumored The Leviathan can, but from my experiences with Revecca Ardelean, it's not a gift all Ardelean Alphas share.

Shaking my head, I step closer.

The way she so insistently objects pleases me, and I give her a half smile. "I won't be quitting or leaving. You know that, Kathleen."

Lena's breaths are shallower with my proximity. She holds her head high as she shakes it at me. Unlike most women of my past, when I encroach on her space, she stands her ground, like the Alpha Female she is.

Her eyes knit together, but a smirk paints her mouth. "Fine. If you want to be that way, I'll let Cade deal with you. You won't be staying, whether you leave on your own accord or when he and The Leviathan force you to."

Her older brother is a worthy adversary. I'm not threatened by him. He's another Alpha doing the best he can for his pack.

I step closer again and drop my voice to just above a whisper. "Don't be this way, Kathleen. You feel it. Your wolf and mine, they need each other."

Bringing her, my beautiful Alpha Female, to submission will be all the sweeter knowing she's trying to fight the connection between us. The day she

chooses to be on her knees before me is my new purpose in life.

“Lena,” she corrects me and brings her hand to rest on the center of my chest. “You’ll call me Lena, like everyone else. You are like everyone else.”

Lena’s hand on me wasn’t expected. The pressure of her palm isn’t forceful. I let her feel my heartbeat and give her a soft rumble of approval. Her eyes flutter up to mine. Despite the chemistry between us, her wolf isn’t pressed forward to meet mine.

What will it take for you to let your wolf bond with mine? I want to ask her but now isn’t the time. Not for this. But I won’t waste the opportunity to bond in other ways.

Much like at the bar, Lena’s not truly chasing me off. The pressure of her hand on my chest is some defense mechanism to buffer her space.

Instead of retreating, I step closer and pull her hand from my chest to above her head, pushing her backward. The office is small. In two steps, I have her back against the wall.

Lena pushes back against my hand, half-heartedly testing me, trying to break free. It’s not enough to even really claim an earnest effort. I ignore it entirely and tip her head up with ease to place a kiss on her lips. Resting my weight against the wall, she has nowhere to go.

Unexpectedly, Lena kisses me back. It’s sweet before she breaks it, pushing my head aside with her nose.

Turning her head with mine, I kiss her jaw. “I’m not like everyone else, Kathleen. Don’t bother trying to tell me you don’t want this, want us. That you’re not attracted and not feeling this pull.”

Lena’s ragged breathing pairs with the beautiful, sweet scent of her arousal. As I kiss her neck, the softest, breathy moan escapes her lips. I run my free hand down her shoulder to explore the contours of her waist. She presses forward, pushing her hips into mine. Nibbling at her skin, I trail kisses to her collarbone.

She writhes against me. Nose for nose, Lena kisses me. Her tongue probes my mouth. She proves me right at every movement. *So responsive.* Her body can’t deny me like her smart mouth does. It’s instinctual.

Meeting her kiss, I slide her other hand up the wall and brace it with the first. My hand easily contains her wrists. Again, she gives a small struggle but hardly any real attempt to escape. It’s playful in nature, testing my response, and so fucking sexy.

With her contained, I reach behind her and cup her tight ass through the

denim. She lifts her leg, and I slide my knee between her thighs. When I squeeze her ass, Lena makes a needy moan against my mouth, rocking herself against my thigh. My little Alpha Female is already showing how badly she needs me. In response, my cock throbs behind the zipper of my trousers.

As I kiss her deeper, my tongue plays with hers. Dragging my hand from her ass, I slide it under her lab coat and into the waist of her jeans. She freezes for a moment, her whole body stiff. Without waiting for her to relax into it, I grind my thigh up between her legs, and she moans loudly.

Kissing her into silence, I unhook the front of her jeans and lower the zipper. I don't break our kiss but slow it down, letting her focus on my fingers playing with the cotton fabric of her panties.

A needy whine escapes her as I tease the warm skin at the hem. She grinds forward, pushing her arms against mine, trying to free her wrists. Sliding my fingers down to her core and past her panties, I find her wet.

I murmur my approval against her lips. "God, you're soaking fucking wet for me."

Adjusting my angle, I work her clit. She bucks her hips fast and hard against me. Lena wants her release and has no problem using me for it. I will be here for her every single time.

She's not earning an orgasm that fast, though. I'll let her come, just not before I say so.

I ease my pace and push my fingers inside her with a long, slow stroke. Curling my fingers, I find the warm, wet center I want to press my cock into. But my first time filling her pussy with my cock won't be a quick fuck in the office.

Lena arches as I push my fingers deeper. She whimpers at the intrusion, and her body stiffens.

Before easing the pain by working her clit, I whisper, "Seems like my ego fits here just fine."

When she tries to reply, I kiss her deeply to cut off a likely snarky response. As a reward, I apply the pressure she desires with my thumb against her clit, drawing a moan from her. I slide my fingers out, then back inside her wet cunt, pressing into the sweet ribbed spot. Lena's moans and squirming let me know it's what she needs. She grinds her hips against me, and with how tight she's squeezing me, there's no way she lasts longer.

Her tongue stills against mine, and I know she's on the precipice.

Pulling my lips from hers, I whisper, “Come for me, Kathleen. Come quietly.”

I continue working her clit, and she does. Lena comes hard. Her body is tight, pressing against mine. Her wrists push forward as her body tries to curl. With my mouth on hers, desperate, needy moans fly from her throat, and I swallow her sounds, drowning them in a kiss. Feeling her buck against my thumb as her pussy clenches around my fingers is pure bliss. Her entire body trembles before she breaks our connection, her body relaxing.

“Good girl.” I praise her, and my cock twitches against my zipper, but I won’t sink into her here. My beautiful little mate will only get it after she begs.

Begrudgingly, I untangle myself from her, and Lena rests her head against my shoulder as I release her arms from above her head. They fall slowly, landing on my shoulders before she pulls them between us.

Embracing her in my arms, I whisper into the crown of her head, “Such a good girl.”

I hold her steady between myself and the wall.

Minutes tick by, and I’m basking in this moment, feeling her heart return to its steady rhythm and her breaths slow. Somehow she skips the usual sexually sated and willing-to-talk moment women have.

Squirming, she pushes back against me hard. Her movements don’t stop until I settle her feet back on the floor and take a slight step away.

Free of my embrace, Lena says nothing. Stiffly walking past me, she grabs a container of sanitation wipes off her desk and hands them to me with a flick of her wrist.

The sound of a switch is followed by a fan blowing, which drowns out the possibility of anyone outside the office hearing us. She agitatedly runs her hand down her face.

“This can’t happen again.”

I know it’s meant to be firm, but her voice quivers, and she runs her fingers into her hair as she finishes her sentence.

I toss the dirty wipe into the trash can and try to pull her in for a hug. She resists, firmly pushing me away. Apparently the strong-willed woman from the bar can return within the span of a heartbeat.

“Talk to me, Kathleen,” I coax while trying a little harder to hold her.

With a small thrash, Lena pushes me again. This time, I let her go.

Shaking her head, she turns off the vent with a hard click. Her vacant

eyes glaze past me when she draws them from the switch.

She corrects me. “Lena.” Her voice is stronger. “There is nothing more to say. That will not happen again. You will need to find somewhere else to go. You can’t be here.”

My wolf and I try to make sense of this contradiction.

I felt her come undone, pussy clamped down on my fingers minutes ago. She’s going through sub drop so quickly? I turn her toward me.

“Are you upset it happened at work or school?” I probe.

There’s a limit I crossed with her. I have to go back and find it.

Lena shakes her head before drawing a deep, ragged breath. Her shoulders drop, and her posture straightens before firmly restating her point. “You and I, this can’t, and won’t, happen again, Finn.”

A rattle on the doorknob startles me from my desire, and I step back. Lena points to the knob lock.

Her voice comes out irritated as she speaks like she’s reminding him. “Doctor Thorpe, I’ve told you. You’ve got to give it a little push before you turn the knob.”

When Doctor Thorpe pushes on the other side of the knob, I unlock the door. How many times has she done this trick? I hold back a smirk. *Seems she locks out everyone in her life.*

“One of these days, I’ll get maintenance to get this fixed. It’s a fire hazard,” Doctor Thorpe mutters, either oblivious to what’s between us or too wrapped up in his own world. When he thrusts a stack of papers at me, I can tell it’s the latter. “Here’s that first round of reports. Ms. Alden, you’re good for Mr. O’Leary to shadow you today, correct?”

Lena nods, not putting up a fight, but she does nothing to hide the stiff agitation cutting in her voice at his suggestion. “Yes, I’ll make do. Thank you, Doctor.”

“Actually, Doctor, if you don’t mind.” I look at Lena and give her a slight nod. She’s clearly in need of space. Sometimes the best aftercare is room to process, even if it’s not what I want. “I would like to analyze the other departments to see what their current process is. That way, when Lena shows me what she does, it’ll make more sense. It’ll be easier for me to better implement her practices across all the departments.” I indicate to the work he handed me.

“Very well.” Doctor Thorpe nods. “I’ll take you to one of our other departments. They’re my most wasteful. Maybe you can keep them on their

toes.”

Lena is gobsmacked. Her lips are slightly parted when I give her one more glance before following Doctor Thorpe out of the small office. I’m far from finished with my mate, but pushing her right now won’t gain favors. Hopefully, giving her this space will be enough.

Doctor Thorpe leads us back out of the lab, into the hallway, and up a flight of stairs before we come to a new lab.

“What research does this department do?”

“This lab handles our traditional biological studies for the animals in the traditional sense,” Doctor Thorpe says at a low volume so as not to disrupt the chatter of the lab team.

“And Kathleen’s lab?” I try not to sound too interested.

“Miss Alden,” he corrects me with a sharp undercut. There’s a warning growl with his words, and his wolf flashes through his eyes. “She’s been working on reproductive health for shifters, predominantly wolves, since she started her undergraduate degree. She’s perhaps one of the most well-respected researchers.”

My wolf presses forward to meet Doctor Thorpe’s, but that’s the only reaction he’ll get from me.

I nod, accepting the information. Keeping a straight face is second nature. I dislike being under the thumb of a less dominant wolf, but if he wants to play king of the lab and have some protective feelings toward my mate? Fine. It’s only a matter of time before I claim her, and when I do, what he thinks won’t really matter. But I want to beam with pride knowing my mate is strong and smart. She’s well respected in all areas of her life.



I’M LED AROUND THE ANIMAL SCIENCES DEPARTMENT ALL DAY, WRITING notes, gathering documents on usages, and writing equipment lists. It’s been forever since I’ve had to catalog a new way to do business. If I swap bullets for pipettes, guns for various pieces of equipment, and explosives for samples and control pieces, then it may eventually make sense. I’ve probably made myself look like an idiot more times than I can count today, but I’ll adapt. Until then, I’ll blame it on the Irish accent.

By four thirty, I’ve had enough. Once I find my way back to the office

assigned to me, I drop the stack of work on the empty desk and scrub my hands down my face. Maybe I'm too old to be learning new tricks. I've done the same thing my entire life. Death, destruction, and enforcing pack law are my nature. Now, I'm in a new world, and none of it makes sense.

"Finn." The way she says my name removes all the intensity from the room.

"Yes, Kathleen." I turn to her.

"Lena," she corrects me with a stern look before continuing. "Cade wants to see you on Friday evening. Seven p.m. Nonnegotiable."

Turning on the ball of her feet, she walks away.

"Kathleen." I beckon while standing to put my jacket on. "I'm taking you to dinner."

A laugh floats in from the hallway, but it's cut short. Her footfalls halt instead of fading away.

Trouble. My wolf hums.

I agree. Nothing good is coming from that. I pull my gun out of the desk drawer before following. Once I reach the threshold, I find out what stalled her escape.

"Hey, Lena. Do you think you could help me with O-Chem tonight? We could get a bite beforehand. My treat." A male's voice is talking to my mate.

His words, meant to drip like honey, set me on edge. *Absolutely not.*

It would be foolish to believe she doesn't have others vying for intention. But I'm here now. They'll fall into line.

Lena's lack of response indicates her desires on the subject. I tuck my gun into the holster in my jacket and continue unhurriedly walking around the doorframe to see him. He's human and, from the look of him, harmless. Not that humans aren't dangerous, but this one, God help him.

Somehow, despite being closer in height to Lena than myself, he finds a way to be spindly and lanky, as if he hasn't quite grown into himself. By the looks of it, he never will.

Though, I can guarantee he won't if he doesn't stop looking at my mate like he intends to fuck her.

Leaning against the doorframe, arms folded over my chest, I call to her, "Kathleen. You ready?"

She looks over her shoulder at me, and a sly smile crosses her face while she casts me a devious glance.

Turning to the human male, she releases the words, dripping with

defiance. “Yeah, Brayden, I can make the time tonight.”

“Really?!” Brayden’s voice all but cracks like the pup he is. “I mean, awesome, I brought my books, want to go to the library or to Mike’s Bar?”

“Mike’s Bar would be fine.” Lena nods. “Let me grab my bag, we can walk together.” She turns to walk back to her lab, which puts her on a path past me.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I growl as she passes, letting my disapproval hang in the air.

I follow behind her into the lab and toward her office.

CHAPTER 6

LENA

HIS DISAPPROVING TONE PUTS ME ON EDGE. DESPITE HOW HARD I FIGHT TO appear relaxed, my body tenses. I enter my office and close the door to swap my lab coat for my jacket and purse. With a few seconds to myself, I draw a deep breath and exhale, forcing my shoulders down from where they keep creeping up. All day, I've been on alert, just waiting for him to fuck everything up.

After grabbing my bag from the back of the door, I open it again to leave, only to find Finn blocking the exit. I flick off the light in my office, indicating that he should move. My office gets the light of the morning sun. Without the sun or the awful fluorescent, we're cloaked in darkness.

Even in the shadows, his face is painted with dark and deep brooding anger. Finn completely cuts off my path to the outside world.

My wolf lowers herself down within me, wanting to curl into him and kiss his neck to apologize. She urges me to make it right with him.

That won't happen. Taking a mate would only serve to unravel the years I've spent keeping myself hidden from the world. It can't happen. I push through her outrageous desire to appease him.

With a smile, I respond with the obvious answer, "I'm helping Brayden with his organic chemistry because if he fails again this semester, he won't be able to continue with his degree."

"You knew I was taking you to dinner." His tone is scolding, and he tilts his head down toward me. But then his next words are spoken with a lighter quality. "And I'm not sure much can help Brayden in life, especially organic chemistry."

It's not fucking fair he can sound so sexy while scolding me. Wanting to

misbehave just to hear someone speak more is not in my normal repertoire.

“Finn.” I hold up a finger, hoping to spell out my point. “You said you were taking me to dinner. Not when, not where, and I didn’t agree to anything.” I step toward him, attempting to walk past him.

Not interested in moving, Finn keeps me barricaded in.

With a sigh, I chastise him. “Be nice to Brayden.” Tossing my head toward the lab door, I choose an insult that hyper-inflates his age to move us along. “Besides, it’s not his fault that you’ve what? Twenty? Twenty-five years on him?”

That would make him almost fifty, which I know he isn’t. I keep a straight face, but my eyes rake down his body.

It’s every bit what I remember. Wide and muscular. The way he worked me with his hand.

Five feet separates me from the wall he could have fucked me against earlier. The orgasm I enjoyed at his hands was an ethereal experience.

No matter how good that orgasm was, it doesn’t change the facts of the matter. *But fuck, it was so good.* No. He thinks we’re his mate, and he’s trying to lay claim. Hot and heavy in the office can’t happen again.

Sex with Finn is completely off the table. The mouthwatering idea of sex with him had no business being on the table to start with. *Fuck, what is wrong with me.*

I have to move past this moment before everything goes off the rails.

“Generally, it’s implied if it’s around the dinner hour, and a man says he’s taking his mate for dinner, his intent is now.” The spaces between Finn’s words are filled with a soft growl.

He called us his mate. My wolf swoons, and I stuff her down. There won’t be any of those thoughts today. Well, not any more.

Taking a step closer, I watch him draw the corner of his lips into a smile through the low light. I’ve been caught checking him out. And I’m positive he can smell how badly I want him again. My face heats, and I’m thankful for the darkness.

The thick, growly Irish accent continues. “With age comes experience. And, Kathleen, I promise you all my experience has led me to be exactly what you and your wolf crave.”

This time when I take a quick step around him, Finn lets me pass. His hand squeezes my bicep as he catches my arm.

Denying how it affects me, I turn my head to talk to him, keeping my

voice low. “You will call me Lena. Like everyone else because, as you’ll see, you and me? We’ll never work. Start looking into other packs to live with.”

I push my eyes from his face toward the lab door. Finn quickly notes our audience and releases me.

Brayden stands in the hallway, watching us through the window of the lab door. I know that judgmental look. Brayden would have no qualms about getting between Finn and me. *Because he has no sense of danger.*

Finn growls a reminding threat. “This conversation will continue later.”

Part of me is thrilled by the prospect of Finn trying to correct the ‘errors’ of my ways. And the other part is completely pissed off that he has assumed the authority to set meetings with me.

The coward pushes the idea of ‘meetings’ being held in bed.

I can’t say she’s alone in liking that idea. But those kinds of meetings will not be happening. Even if I want them to. Really. Want. Them. To.



MIKE’S BAR ISN’T SUPER BUSY. IT’S EARLY ON A WEDNESDAY, AND THE DART league doesn’t start for another two hours. While I would have preferred one of the booths off to the side of the restaurant where my wolf could feel more sheltered, Brayden insists on a table out more toward the middle of the establishment, where everyone can see us, no doubt.

The server takes my order without question: cheese curds and a soda. Brayden, however, refuses to be simple. He orders a local brewery’s beer but in the strangest way by asking about the hoppiness of it like we’re in some sort of tasting room. Brayden scoffs when she cards him for the beer. And I can practically hear the ‘do you know who I am’ running through his head.

Everyone knows who Brayden is and *what* he is: a monster waiting to be unleashed. Before wolves were out to the public, Brayden’s attention to myself and the other lab techs was simple flirting. After wolves were outed, Brayden changed rapidly. He continually tries to mimic wolf behaviors. It’s one thing if you’re imitating people from another culture and say a word incorrectly or accidentally tell someone to fuck off. It’s another to corner people, posture over them, and make them feel unsafe.

Lucky isn’t a word one would use to describe an insane person taking a liking to them, but the lab is very lucky that Brayden is stuck on me. It’s

evident Brayden has high hopes he's my mate. Since I'll never take a mate, it's well-known that I don't date and 'no' is my favorite word. Brayden can hang his hopes on me forever. Or at least until he fails out of the program.

I assumed after he barely got a C in organic chemistry, he would have given some thought to what we discussed at the end of last year, and he would look at other majors. But here we are, yet again, books out on the table in the middle of the restaurant. I don't know why he's chosen a subject completely above his capabilities. His lack of knowledge and tangible skills prove he doesn't belong in the lab.

However, his parents are on the board of directors for the university. Wherever Brayden wants to go, Brayden gets to go. This tutoring session will give Brayden false hopes that he can handle the program, but I'm hungry, Mike's Bar has cheese curds, and it gets me out of dinner with Finn.

It's no surprise ten minutes into helping Brayden, warmth runs down my back.

Our mate has come for us. We can leave this now. My wolf gives Brayden a disgusted look. Frustrated, she pushes against me, urging me to let Finn wrap his arms around us. She growls at me. *Why are you being so stubborn? You feel what he can do to us.*

I don't know what happened earlier today. There was anger and rage, and I had every intention to tell Finn off and get him out of the lab today. *How did I end up kissing him? How did I lose control like that?*

I don't remember the last time someone made me come. My thighs clench at the memory of Finn pressed against me. *It wasn't even sex. It was a finger bang in your office. Pull it together.*

Finn doesn't pass us directly. Instead, he takes the route a few tables over, purposefully catching my eye and avoiding Brayden. With a smile, Finn convinces the hostess to seat him in a booth, a hair to the left of my field of vision.

Brayden, the idiot human, is oblivious to a well-known predator, with decades of bloodshed on his hands, behind him. Furthermore, based on the glare on Finn's face, he's more than ready to end Brayden's sad little existence.

Stalking is a new one. Fighting, demanding, and attempting to take more than I'm willing to offer are all ordinary occurrences from wolf males who are drawn to me. They're clueless about what the draw is. If they knew, they'd probably want me less. No one wants a mate who has no value. Finn

won't figure it out; I won't let him. Regardless, never have I ever had a man go so far as to stalk me like prey.

Brayden starts to prattle. "I really appreciate you taking care of me. Well, not taking care of me." He laughs, and I want to gag. "I really think I'm going to get it this year. It would mean a lot if I could stay and help you fix the problem for wolves. Though, from what I understand, it's safe for wolves to be with humans during their heat. It makes it more enjoyable to have a partner."

Predicting where he's going with that sentence, I cut him off. "Oh, well. What do you have for us to look at? It's O-Chem with Doctor Kenzie, right?"

"Okay." Brayden drags out the word, then runs his tongue over the front of his teeth before pointing down at his book. "I can never keep my electronegativities straight, and my last tutor said there was some sort of device to help, but I can't find that notebook. And the professor says they have to be in order."

I alternate my attention between delicately avoiding Brayden's flirting, actually explaining chemistry, and avoiding my wolf's demands to look over at Finn. If Brayden spent half as long trying to comprehend that carbon is literally the most important thing in the world as he did making passes at me, we could be done and I could go home.

Cheese curds arrive, and they're the one reprieve I have against the Y chromosomes battling it out for my attention. Fried cheese will always be my first love.

Fried cheese doesn't give orgasms. My wolf huffs, drawing my attention from the basket of greasy goodness to Finn.



AFTER TWO HOURS AT THE TABLE, THE ONLY THING I'VE ACCOMPLISHED IS that I now have a belly full of delicious fried cheese. Brayden is grasping only a third of what I'm saying, and I'm getting crabby. I've hinted more than once in the last thirty minutes that we should end the session for tonight. Brayden insisting on 'one more thing' after 'one more thing' after 'one more thing' is getting problematic.

I'm picking up my water glass when Brayden crosses a new line. His hand reaches across the table and pets the back of mine. I stiffen.

Dirty brown eyes lock on mine. “I really appreciate you doing this, Lena.” He gives me a slimy smile and a fake laugh. “Huh, I don’t know if you know this, but . . .”

I live in fear daily. Will today be the day someone figures it out? Will today be the day I can’t hold it together? How many people do I disappoint today? But none of those questions, which I’ve asked thousands of times, compare to this moment.

Brayden’s other hand runs up my inner thigh underneath the table.

My wolf whines. Struggling, she doesn’t know what to do. It feels wrong, and we’re uncomfortable.

Doubling down on the locks I use to hide away unpleasant feelings, I glare at Brayden. Removing my hand from my water glass, I avoid his hand above the table. I move to try and brush his hand away from my thigh.

Instead, Brayden captures my hand, holding it in my lap. I’ve been so wrapped up in making Brayden give up for the night that when my eyes dart to Finn’s table, I’m shocked that he’s not there.

Seriously? He waits two hours and, when I could use a hand, now decides to give up?

My wolf whines. Panic sets in with her. I hold steady. I remind her we can do this. Brayden’s only human.

“I really like you, and I’d really like it if you’d let me take you —” His hand finally lets go of mine under the table, and without any more words, he retreats backward, leaning away from me in his chair.

“Kathleen, Mr. Bachman.”

The retreat makes sense.

The deep, rounded vowels of an Irish accent continue. “Fancy seeing the two of you here.”

I’ve never in my life been so grateful for an overbearing alpha male to interrupt a conversation in my entire life. And that’s saying something when your brother is The Leviathan.

Brayden’s eyes dart from Finn and then down to me. His eyes narrow aggressively. My guess? It’s caused by whatever stupid dominant look Finn must be giving him. I don’t bother turning my head to see it. The face doesn’t matter because it won’t be directed at me.

My wolf slowly melts inside. She lets go of the freeze response and watches with me.

Brayden’s nostrils flare. He grinds his jaw for a moment.

With a shake of his head, he speaks abruptly. “Oh, guess it’s time for me to be going. I’ll get my half of the bill.”

Finn’s hand moves past me, dropping sixty dollars on the table. Which would pay for significantly more cheese curds and soda than I’ve had, but Finn’s making a point: he can financially take care of me.

He doesn’t know Brayden’s background, but it doesn’t matter. Brayden said he would get his half. I can’t tell what’s more insulting, him giving up so easily seeing Finn or that he was only about to pay for half, given how his hand was on my knee moments ago. *Rude.*

When Finn pulls his hand back from the table, he gently rests it on my shoulder. He squeezes. “That’ll cover it. Kathleen, I’ll drive you home. No good for a woman out this late on her own.”

The traditional values Finn quotes and their sexist implication isn’t lost on me. But in this instance, I’m willing to go with the devil I don’t know.

Human laws protect Brayden from me, but they don’t protect me from Brayden. Wolf laws protect me from Finn, and with Cade being the enforcer of our laws, I’ll gladly take my chances that Finn truly doesn’t want to piss off my older brother.

Brayden looks at me like he’s expecting me to say something, like he’s anticipating me to object to Finn’s dominance.

Rising from my chair, I drop a heavy hint in a low voice. “I hope that helps, Brayden. Please know the tutoring center has more availability than I do.”

“Lena, you don’t have to go with him . . .” Brayden starts to say. His eyes look to Finn before coming back to me. The way he positions his body, it’s evident he’s trying to nonverbally finish his sentence. A sentence he should have never started.

Saving Brayden from Finn and the embarrassment of making a scene, I lean into Finn, my head resting comfortably on the soft muscle of his pec.

With a rumble of approval, Finn drapes his arm across my shoulder and pulls me against him.

See how perfect we fit. My wolf relaxes against him within me.

I push her back again to focus on the task at hand.

Finn is a means to an end.

Scowling, Brayden pulls his backpack over one arm and makes a point to bump shoulders with Finn on the way past.

It triggers a muddled growl from Finn.

I wrap my fingers into his T-shirt and plead at a whisper volume, “He’s not worth it.”

Finn waits for me to gather my things before guiding me through the bar with his hand on my low back.

Outside the bar, night has set in, and in contrast to Finn’s warmth behind me, the cool air hits me, and I shiver. I didn’t expect to be out past sundown and didn’t grab a warm enough coat. Finn’s shuffling behind me is followed by the warmth of his jacket draped over my shoulders. Taking the curb side of the sidewalk, Finn keeps me close to him, wrapping his arm across my upper back.

“Thank you, for stepping in.” The words are hard to say.

I am thankful. But I’m not interested in the difficult conversation this could prompt.

Finn gives me a small squeeze.

I look up at his face, and when he looks down at me, the green eyes of his wolf reflect back. My wolf runs to the surface to respond, and the urge to nuzzle against his chest aches through me. I fight her back, hard. *Absolutely not. No. You are not coming out. No.*

“I dislike that lickarse,” Finn growls.

That’s not exactly an acceptance of my offering of gratitude, but it feels kind of like it coming from him.

Finn leads me down to a side street before stopping at a gray sedan with obvious out-of-state rental plates. He opens the door for me. I open my mouth to argue, but the way he raises his eyebrows in judgment causes me to slide into the passenger seat without further objection.

Stooping down into the sedan, he buckles my seatbelt for me. A shiver ripples through me as he closes the door.

Fuck, who knew that was a thing? And why the fuck is it so sexy?

Settled on his side of the car, I instruct Finn, “I’m two blocks up and ten blocks left.”

“Thank you,” Finn answers, checking behind us and signaling to get back on the street.

Finn drives the speed limit, is respectful of other traffic, and is suspiciously good at driving on the right-hand side of the road. The trip to the apartment building isn’t long, but we pass it in silence.

Once parked in front of my building, Finn opens his car door, pointing a finger at me, which I only assume means to stay and wait for him. Defiance

leads me to reach for the handle, but I'm not compelled to pull it. *Why?*

Because you want him as much as I do, my wolf growls at me, her attention firmly locked on him.

Finn opens the door and stoops down, making sure the seatbelt is out of the way before offering me his hand to exit the vehicle. In an awkward jingle-your-keys-while-standing-on-the-front-step moment at the end of a date, I stand toe to toe with Finn. His strong silence doesn't make it uncomfortable.

No, that's my wolf as she practically begs me to take Finn upstairs.

"Text him. He'll be asking for your number anyway. Saves me the hassle of getting it off the lab phone tree." I pull one of the dark blue business cards out of my wallet.

After handing it to Finn, I don't wait to hear his reply. I abandon him on the sidewalk and retreat into the apartment building and the sanctuary I've created.

CHAPTER 7

FINN

LENA ISN'T IN THE LAB. I'VE LOOKED FOR HER A FEW DIFFERENT TIMES today. Her office light is off, and none of the things I scented her on have been touched today. By lunchtime, I'm getting antsy looking for her. Without a small army of loyal soldiers, I can't simply have someone look for her while I do the job I'm being paid to do. I dislike this adjustment to the 'new normal' that is my life.

"She doesn't have class on Thursdays or Fridays." Brayden patronizes when I walk past her lab again on my way to my office.

I turn to look at him. His face begins and ends with a shit-eating grin.

Brayden walks toward me slowly. Squaring his shoulders, he crosses to the far side of the hallway and keeps his torso centered with mine as he walks past me. Then he circles back to stand in front of me, blocking my original path.

It's like he's read a book on wolf behaviors and is trying to intimidate me by circling around. I would tell him how it makes him look like an arse, but this is more amusing.

"You think you're tough shit coming in here in your dress shirt and clipboard. Somehow last night, you got Lena to defend you." Brayden makes it clear he misunderstood what happened last night.

He extends his noodle arms out to the side, blocking my path down the hallway.

Do we look like a bear or a flock of sheep? My wolf equates his attempt to seem bigger as an attempt at intimidation.

I agree; the dress shirt is out of place except among senior faculty. But I've yet to see anyone here with anywhere near the amount of ink I have.

Before I take the place down a class, I want a better lay of the land, so the long-sleeve dress shirts stay.

Brayden, like many of the other young gobshites waltzing into my life before him, takes my silence as an invitation to keep running his mouth. “You shouldn’t put your hands on her. You don’t own her.”

My wolf revels in the idea of tearing him to pieces for touching her last night. *It’s our right.*

Back home, if he’d laid a hand on any of the females in the pack, he’d have lost an arm. It would have been me to carry out his sentence, and I would have done it gladly. No one should make a woman feel uncomfortable like that without experiencing negative recourse.

Instead, I stand stock-still, watching. The O’Brien way isn’t suited here.

I try to dismiss him, and I even use manners to do it. “Thank you.”

“You don’t know her schedule, but you’re sure acting like you own her.” Brayden crosses his arms across his chest. Giving up on corralling me, he now tries to intimidate me. “She’s not some weak little flower. She’s the Alpha Female here. Her brother Cade is a big deal.”

At least he pays some attention. Though now I’ve pulled my head out of the trenches more, it seems Cade has been making quite a bit of headway for the wolves of this country.

I try condescension as an attempt to dismiss him with a wave of my hand. “Aye.”

Brayden brazenly steps closer to me. Before, he was just beyond arm’s reach, but now he’s easily too close to escape.

Unaware of the danger he’s put himself in, he scoffs and informs me, “Lena doesn’t need someone like you in her life.”

Smiling isn’t something I do. My men would tell you my smiles are reserved for women and the people I’m about to punch in the face for opening their mouths and letting stupid come out. And Brayden isn’t a woman.

I quirk a half smile and contemplate how good it would be to bloody my knuckles on his face.

Fortunately for Brayden, I’m not in charge here. Until I get Lena on my side of things, I need this job to stay close to her.

I toss the phrase back at him. “Oh, and I suppose she needs *you*? For someone failing chemistry, you sure spend an awful lot of time in the science department. Isn’t there some, I don’t know, communications class you should

be sitting in on?”

“Oh, because you’ve a degree in what?” Brayden sasses, extending one of his lanky arms to gesture toward me.

“I have a business degree from Trinity College in Dublin.” I give him a cold laugh before lowering my brow and looking down at him.

“You don’t own Lena.” He says that phrase again like he’s stuck on it.

He doesn’t know how relevant I plan to make ownership a part of my relationship with Lena. I intend to own her in all ways.

Brayden narrows his eyes at me. “I will date Lena. I’m taking her to homecoming. I’ve known her a lot longer than you have. It’s best you step away.”

Best for who? My wolf laughs, his tongue lolled out in a sly smile.

I question, “I will, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Brayden mocks my Irish accent, poorly. “I know you’re a shifter. I’m not afraid of you.”

“If you think the fact I’m a shifter should scare you, you’re an eejit.” I shake my head. “The fact you put your manky human hands on my mate should.”

“You’ll have to find yourself a different bitch because Lena’s mine.” Brayden makes what could have been a fatal mistake.

I grab his collar and slam him across the hallway into the wall, pushing my forearm against his throat.

My wolf encourages me to finish him. *Little bit more and the problem resolves itself.*

Brayden’s eyes widen, understanding how fucked he is. Fear floods off him in droves. The stank smell clogs up my nose and the air of the hallway.

I push a little harder, cutting off his windpipe. Holding back my wolf, I suppress the urge to growl and snarl my way through my promise. “I’ll speak very slowly so you can understand me. If you talk about Lena that way again, I will have no problem getting rid of you. Touch my mate or even look at my mate the wrong way, and I’ll be sure it’s one of the last things you do.”

A door down the hall opens. I turn as one of the raven-haired wolves from Lena’s lab pokes her head out. She stifles an ‘oh’ before covering her mouth with her hand. It barely muffles the laugh before she retreats, closing the door.

Seems I’m not the only one who’s had enough.

I swing my attention back to Brayden and loosen the pressure on his

neck. He swallows hard as if understanding what I'm saying.

I attempt to drive the fear of God into him, or at the very least, the fear of me. "When you're beating yourself over the head with your chemistry textbook tonight and decide you need to take a break because the last two brain cells in your ugly block have all but given up, maybe you give the old internet search a hit. In the event you haven't heard, I'm Griffin O'Leary, brother of Magnus O'Brien."

If Brayden's paling face is anything to go by, he pays enough attention to international news to know Magnus has been in it a lot since wolves were outed to the public. Crime pays well, but it also tends to get your last name and mugshot splashed across news screens. The police will never be able to make any of the charges stick, but Magnus spends quite a bit of time in the headlines and shiny bracelets.

With great theatrics, Brayden crumples to the ground when I let go of him. He scrambles to his feet.

I grab hold of his bicep, standing him still along my side. Tilting my head over my shoulder at him, I growl, "You will delete Lena's number from your phone and never text her again. If you ever make another woman anywhere near as uncomfortable as you did Lena last night — and it gets back to me — you better start praying to whatever God you believe in that he takes you first."

In his smartest move yet, Brayden uses his spindly legs to quickly walk down the hall with one last wayward glance over his shoulder. I watch him go before walking into my office.

From my pocket, I pull out my wallet to find Cade's card and enter his number into my phone. Per Lena's instructions, delayed by a night's sleep, I send him a text message:

ME:

This is Finn O'Leary. I believe it's time we have a meeting.

Cade texts me back almost immediately.

CADE ALDEN:

I'm guessing this isn't something that can wait until the one I had scheduled for tomorrow.

No.

I'll be in St. Paul in about thirty minutes. I can meet you outside the Capitol.

I'll be there.

AFTER BUNKING OFF EARLY, I PARK DOWN THE BLOCK FROM THE FRONT OF the Capitol. I walk around, taking in the beautiful architecture and the golden gilded horses overlooking the landscape.

“You must be Griffin O’Leary of the O’Brien line.” Cade Alden walks briskly down a flight of steps and arrives in front of me before tucking his hands in his pockets.

I answer firmly, “Aye.”

“Appears you took my wedding invitation a bit too far.” He approaches but doesn’t offer his hand.

He leaves quite a bit of space between us, but the power quaking off Cade Alden leads me to believe The Leviathan is not simply a tall tale embellished over time.

“I’m still within the acceptable timetable to ask for amnesty and a place within your pack.” I try to confirm without sounding insubordinate.

Cade cracks a crooked smile. The tension between us starts to fade as he confirms, “I called Magnus. You’ve ended up on the wrong side of a disagreement with The Hellhound.”

There’s nothing to say, so I nod with a shrug and look down in appeasement. My wolf dislikes it, fighting against me.

Cade went so far as to call Magnus about me being here. I can only imagine what the Alpha who cast me out would say about me. Brother or not, the code we’ve lived by is black-and-white on the subject. I should be dead. I’m probably being hunted by any number of packs and human groups we’ve angered over the years. Magnus broke all our rules by setting me up for safe passage into someone else’s pack. *I hope it’s safe passage.* Seems smart to let Cade do the talking.

He moves right past Magnus to a new topic. “Apparently, you’ve also ended up on the wrong side of a disagreement with my Alpha Female.”

I look back up at him and cock my head back and forth. *If you call her trying to reject me a disagreement, then sure.*

She won’t reject us for long, my wolf murmurs.

To my surprise, Cade laughs. Shaking his head, he pulls one hand out of

his pocket and gestures to the space between us as if to put us on a level playing field. “I’m fighting the government against making us register as shifters, and the media circus is everywhere. Quite honestly, given who you are, if there’s an issue with you being here, I have to deal with it myself, and I’m already at my wit’s end.”

Is he saying he can’t deal with me living in his territory? Cade’s response could have a few implications. But which one does he truly mean? What can I offer him to get him to reconsider? I am not leaving until I’ve solidified my bond with Lena, and even then, any leaving I do will be temporary.

“I don’t want to be trouble.” I raise my hand out to the side.

I didn’t bring a gun to this meeting with the hope he understands this isn’t malicious. An unsettledness in my stomach pulls tension deep inside me.

“Oh.” Cade shakes his head, clearing his throat to suppress his laughter. “Trouble already found you. Lena wants you gone. Yesterday.”

I hang my head. *Do I tell him?* My wolf bristles at the idea of leaving Lena. There’s no way I’ll leave Minnesota without her.

I run my hand up my nose and rub my forehead. I don’t have a better way to explain my dedication to being here.

“She’s yours,” Cade tells me.

His intuitive nature is interesting. We’ve locked eyes, and there’s no hiding it now.

“Yes,” I answer. A nod won’t do it. Someone needs to hear it. “Kathleen is mine. I’m willing to fight for her.”

“Kathleen, hmmm?” Cade runs his hand back through his hair. I catch a glimpse of a small smile, but he wipes it from his face. “Don’t get me wrong, The Leviathan would love to shed blood with you. But I don’t. My mate made me promise to keep fighting to a minimum. After the hell I’ve put her through, I’m willing to make an attempt to give her anything she asks for.”

There’s something Cade isn’t saying.

I draw a deep breath before I try to give him something to work with. “Sure, listen, I walked away from my past. It’s my intention that it doesn’t follow me. Finding my mate wasn’t on my list of priorities. Her being your Alpha Female is truly unexpected.”

“I’ll shoot straight, Finn.” Cade’s voice comes with a growl. The air is back to the crisp, snappy tension of what I can only imagine is the strength of The Leviathan. “Are you here for my pack?”

“Never. If Kathleen were anyone else, I would be perfectly content living

a quiet life with my mate, attending pack functions, and enjoying the culture of something less . . .” I look for a good word. “Bloody.”

“And now, knowing who she is?” Cade tilts his head, watching me, rightfully so.

The growl fades but tension flickers between us. The golden eyes of The Leviathan hold steady beneath the surface.

“There’s no reason my mate can’t outrank me in a pack. I’m secure enough with my wolf and who I am to accept it,” I affirm, although it’s against my instinct to stand here facing off against him.

My wolf pushes, trying to face off with The Leviathan. Counteracting him, I keep us steady. I’m an Alpha wolf, but this is a whole different beast. We don’t need to be squaring off on the Capitol building’s lawn.

Long and uncomfortable moments pass as Cade and The Leviathan observe me. His eyes fleck from blue to gold and back again.

When I go to speak, trying to plead with anything that might make him change his mind, The Leviathan shines steadily in Cade’s eyes.

“The Leviathan likes you. Which he doesn’t like a lot of people, myself included, so let’s take that as a good sign.” Cade blows out a sigh and shakes his head. “Finn, I’ll give you the amnesty you need. Earn your place here, and I’ll accept your petition to join the pack.”

“Is this the part where you threaten that if I hurt your sister, you’ll kill me?” I square my shoulders with the inquiry.

Cade’s eyes fade back to blue, and he gives me a side-eyed smile. “I don’t believe that’s necessary.”

“Because you’re The Leviathan or because you don’t believe I’ll hurt her?” I pry for any information I can get on Lena.

With a nod, he answers, “You and Lena aren’t used to trusting people. Hurting is part of life. I don’t believe you could physically harm her. I wouldn’t recommend proving me wrong.”

“I won’t,” I confirm and swallow my pride. “I’d like to ask, given her being divinely mine, you not entertain any requests for intention on her.”

Cade pulls his other hand out of his pocket and checks his watch. “You sure you met my little sister? What makes you think she’d even let that happen? There’s not a lot I’m afraid of, but Lena pissed off? She should scare you too.” He extends his hand. “Welcome to Ardelean Country and formally beginning your petition into the pack.”

I accept his hand and shake it firmly before Cade makes his minimum

requirements clear. “Two pack functions a month, I don’t care which. We’ve a run this Saturday. I’d prefer you attend, but I understand if it’s short notice. The Luna will get you on the text and email list.”

“Cade! Cade!” Various people are vying for his attention.

Turning my head, I see a camera crew and a few reporters waving and shouting, standing on the far sidewalk away from us.

When I look at Cade, he sighs, rolling his eyes.

As he turns to leave, he stops himself and, with his head over his shoulder, catches me. “Oh, and Finn?”

“Yeah?” I answer.

“Good luck.” Cade chuckles, shaking his head.

I’m fairly certain he mutters ‘good fucking luck’ under his breath, but I don’t question it.

He approaches the press. With his head held high, he looks as natural doing that as Magnus does walking into a business deal. There’s something about the way Pack Alphas are cut, always ready to deal with the impossible.

Perhaps the more pressing matter for me is what is it about my little mate that has The Leviathan worried she’ll kill me? Surely the dainty Alpha Female isn’t truly difficult.

CHAPTER 8

LENA

EARLY IN THE MORNING, COFFEE IN HAND, I DRIVE OUT TO THE BLACK HOLE that is the pack house to supervise the internet install and finish signing off the final touches on the new pack house. We currently have limited service for cell phones and no internet. So if all goes according to plan, the new home will be brought into this century today with functioning technology.

The sprawling fourteen-thousand-square-foot rustic home suits the property much more than the previous building that sat on the lot. A fresh start is fitting for Cade's rule, and while I loved the Wisconsin house for how it became our home, moving back to the Alden property might be a step in the right direction.

All the new furniture has been delivered, the utilities work, the kitchen's stocked, and pack functions are happening. It's not quite finished. Trim pieces are missing in some places, and if you look too closely, one of the picture windows was installed upside down.

The main living spaces were the first to receive new furniture, pieces both large and cozy for members of the pack. They're starting to make themselves more welcome by visiting us when we're here. They're all nice, and I know some from the university. I don't remember much from being a child with them, but I'm trying to acclimate and get off on the right foot as Alpha Female.

Cade would prefer if I spent less time trying to acclimate and more time at the lab. But given his constant trips to DC and meeting with legislators around the country, it feels like the least I can do is to have one of us available for the pack. Sure as fuck can't leave the people-ing to Deacon. I've been named Alpha Female, and it's my duty to the pack anyway.

Through everything, Thalia has been incredible. She's coordinating pack functions and the renovation build practically flawlessly. It must be from being raised a politician's daughter, or maybe she has the kind of grace for this, but Thalia is a phenomenal Luna. Everyone loves her, and where I always thought the cliché phrase, her face lit up a room, was something reserved for dead people, Thalia is truly becoming a light for the pack.

But there are still a lot of things she doesn't know because she wasn't born into this life. You can't become an expert on wolf culture in six months. Even after being gifted one, in the messed-up way it happened, it would be impossible for anyone to simply catch up out of pure will.

It's a little selfish on my part too. It's much easier to hide my wolf and her flaws when standing beside Thalia because The Leviathan gifted his mate an Alpha wolf. As long as she and I are in the same place, there are no questions about why my wolf is so quiet.

My wolf, she doesn't get to exist. I run with the smallest group of wolves possible: only Cade, Deacon, and Thalia. The pack hasn't seen my wolf. I don't know how long I can hide her, but I need better control first.

"Ms. Alden?" The first internet installer dude calls my name.

"I'm in the great room." I can't be bothered to hunt both installers down.

"Do you have a computer to check connections? We double-checked the connection on our end and all the boosters, but to be safe, please?" The tall one finds me.

Opening my laptop, I find a few new options for Wi-Fi. *Thank fuck.* The dude goes over the security settings we provided, and I fire a text to Cade's second favorite lackey, Adam, to come and finish the security system things.

Habitually, I open my email browser and wait as my screen loads. My heart stops.

I jump from the couch and hurry the technicians out the door, thanking them with smiles all around, then close the door and rush back to the great room.

Before I'm even fully settled back down with my computer, I click the email and stare at the words on the screen. Words I've been working to earn for as long as I can remember.

I know my position as a second-semester freshman was a massive exception to the general requirements of the laboratory and the research projects. But I've always made grades and put in the hours. I've wanted to work with the program developing birth control for wolves since I was old

enough to understand how babies were made.

Despite the fact that Cade cuts a sizable check to the university every year, I've worked my ass off every day to get to this point. I have more to prove than everyone else. And I've shown at every point that I belong in the lab as much as the tenured researchers and professors. This confirms it.

"Lena?" Deacon calls from somewhere in the big open space of the house.

"Yeah, Dea?" I answer loudly, without taking my eyes off the screen.

He walks over and sits next to me. "You're okay, right? You've been sitting there staring at your computer longer than normal."

A glance at the clock and then the email's time stamp says it's been an hour that I've been reading through the paperwork. *Uff dah.*

I blink dumbly at him. He's generally the first person I tell everything anyway. Who else will I tell?

"I got approved to run a trial on a birth control pill."

"Why are you not jumping off the walls?" Deacon squeezes and shakes my shoulder gently. His smile lights up so easily.

I shake my head as the overwhelm sinks in. "I've clearance to run a trial on three people to test the side effects. I'm not positive it'll work to prevent pregnancy. So it's either people going into heat alone, have partners ready to use secondary protection, or willing to accept the risk."

"Oh, damn." Deacon pats me on the shoulder. "Maybe Thalia? She's due soon? I know Thalia is all for risking it. Cade's saying no. This could be a good compromise for them?"

I shrug. "I'm not ideal for it. It would put my heat two months early. I could force it if I can't find others. Fuck, maybe I should anyway. I don't know enough to tell people what to anticipate."

"Anticipate what?" Thalia comes into the kitchen with an armful of groceries.

"I got approval to test my drug," I answer without thinking.

"That's exciting! Congratulations!" Thalia beams. When I don't meet her enthusiasm, her face falls. "Oh. Not happy. Okay, what's wrong?"

"They've granted me the authorization to try it on three people. And I'm worried about who to ask. The efficacy of its ability to block pregnancy isn't guaranteed and —"

"I'll do it." Thalia shrugs. Her desire to help everyone all the time is so pure. Unpacking the bags onto the counter, she tells me what Deacon already

did. “Cade and I are back and forth on kids, so this can be part of the compromise.”

Despite Deacon’s suggestion, Thalia isn’t an optimal choice. A bitten wolf on her first heat could be an outlier in how her body responds to the meds.

“I can’t ask you to do this,” I try to explain before —

“Do what?” Cade comes through, ferrying more grocery bags.

Shit shit shit shit shit. My wolf and I both panic knowing how Cade will respond.

My body tenses, already anticipating the coming reaction.

Thalia looks at him with a smile. “I’ve agreed to help Lena test her drug. She isn’t a hundred-percent-sure if it protects against pregnancy. So, it’s a compromise.”

Cade’s whole body shifts, and he squares to me. The coward inside me retreats so hard that I can’t help but shrink against his harsh glare. My shoulders rise toward my ears.

He shakes his head and growls at me, “No, absolutely not.”

Diverting my gaze, I regret being excited about this. I should have known better.

“I volunteered. She didn’t ask. Don’t go all alpha jerk on her,” Thalia scolds him,

It’s so unexpected for Thalia to defend me that even Deacon stops from where he’s been pilfering food out of the grocery piles.

Looking up, I see her hand on his arm, looking at him with a discerning gaze.

It’s not unexpected, in the sense that she would purposefully let him be hurtful toward me, but because each day, Thalia’s growing much stronger. She doesn’t notice it herself yet, but she’s having significantly fewer panic attacks and is managing her body better. No more hangry incidents where she almost bites people’s heads off.

That’s my personality trait anyway. It’s about time she finds her own.

“Not for your first heat. I can’t.” Cade’s faltering over his words. “I know you don’t understand my logic and reasoning. But, this isn’t — Thalia, heat is hard. Adding something more, untested, isn’t the way to do this.” Cade softens while speaking to her, and when he turns back to me, he’s altogether different. “I’m sorry I pushed you, but my answer is still the same.”

With a nod and forcing myself to physically relax under the strain of his

gaze, I respond, “It’s okay. I’ll test it first. That way, I’ll know some potential side effects.”

“No,” Cade growls. “Lena, fuck. Don’t force your heat for this.”

I end the conversation. “I’ll find someone, not Thalia, to do it.”

Cade grumbles but lets it go.

I’m returning to my computer when the doorbell rings.

Deacon looks around the room. “Did anyone else hear that?”

“When did we get a doorbell?” Cade’s furrowed brow matches the frustration in his voice. “I’m pretty sure I asked not to have one in the schematic.”

“Oh, I thought you were joking.” Thalia covers her mouth with her hands.

It’s too much; I start laughing but walk to the door to see who could possibly be ringing the bell. *If it’s Finn, oh fuck, don’t be Finn.*

I meet Lauren halfway to the door and tell her, “I’ve got it.”

She whispers, “I thought Cade said he didn’t want a doorbell. Something about being too loud and you can’t pretend you didn’t hear it?”

“Apparently Thalia thought he was joking?” I shrug, trying not to laugh.

Lauren covers her mouth. Shaking her head, she turns around to return to whatever magic she’s making happen. That woman is an organized army.

Opening the door, I put on a small smile. “Hello. Can I help you?”

“The Leviathan should be expecting me,” a brunette woman says with a slight Eastern European accent.

She’s flanked by two larger wolves, both intending to look intimidating, but they’re not the ones to fear.

Power radiates from the woman in the same all-encompassing way it does from Cade. Her eyes are the same frosty shade of blue. Something isn’t right.

“And you are?”

“I’m his sister. Revecca Ardelean, The Pricolici.” She says those words like none of them should surprise me.

They’re bittersweet with condescension, and I force myself to maintain a neutral expression because her wolf rises to her eyes and mine cowers more before her than I ever have with Cade.

I absolutely have to stop answering the door. Women showing up to take up residence in Cade’s life is leaving little room for me. Thalia being Cade’s mate was tolerable, and recently, I’ve been able to quell the wolf’s desire to cower to her, but now, a literal ‘Lena replacement’ has graced our threshold. Fan-fucking-tastic.

Opening the door wider, I step aside to let them in. I try to keep my tone nice, and with a tight smile, I welcome her and her henchmen. “Please. Come in. I’ll escort you to the public sitting space.”

Rebecca doesn’t speak but rather gives me a posh up-down queen-bitch look over. It does nothing for my foul mood. It’s bad enough she thinks she’s in charge, but to cop an attitude in our pack house before fully entering our home? The audacity of this bitch. I’m in no hurry as I escort them to the main living space where I left my brothers.

“Hey, Lena, who was at —” Deacon stops short, seeing The Pricolici and her entourage walking behind me.

“His sister,” Rebecca calls over my shoulder. “His *real* sister.”

Cade peeks his head around the corner and curses. “Oh fucking joy. How did she get past the gate?”

“Alexandru? Do you have a moment to speak?” The Pricolici looks at Cade.

Deacon whispers, “Who is Alexandru?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Rebecca rolls her eyes and says something in Romanian. “What is it they fucking call you? Or should I address your wolf? The Leviathan.”

“I’m positive last time we spoke, I told you to call me Cade. I also already have a sister, and surprisingly, she’s nicer than you.” Cade shakes his head at her.

I recognize the cross look in his eyes and the crease in his brow. He’s exactly two sassy comments away from exploding, and she just walked in the door.

Rolling my eyes, I sit on the stool next to Deacon.

“Fine, Cade. Ridiculous. We need to talk. Where are your chambers?” Rebecca scoffs.

Brace for impact. I chide my wolf, who’s already squirming deep inside.

It’s not Cade who explodes. A snarl rattles from Thalia. While the initial anger of her wolf settling has passed over the last few months, my brother’s darling mate has a possessive streak. That streak is stronger than Cade’s patience is thin. We’re all one quip away from exploding today.

“Silence,” Rebecca commands.

Thalia shrinks back, hit hard by the direct command.

It rattles my wolf, and she focuses on the door where we could flee. I close my eyes briefly, unmoving for a moment until she stills.

The snarl ripping through Cade shakes the entire house. *Spoke too soon.* He steps closer to Revecca, further protecting Thalia behind him.

Revecca's henchmen flank her in a pathetic attempt to protect her. Out of respect, they won't get in front of her until the last minute, allowing her to maintain a visual on Cade as she speaks.

I'm captivated watching Revecca. I've seen Cade angry; I've been on the receiving end of his rage. I don't need to watch his eyes go golden and his fangs peek out as he fights back the shift. He doesn't get angry regularly, but this situation definitely warrants it.

Revecca's response is unexpected. She leans back on her heels and listens intently to him rather than fight back.

What is happening? Why isn't her wolf rising to meet The Leviathan?

"You will not speak to my mate that way. You will not go about throwing your gift around in my house. This is not up for debate." Cade's disciplinary tone is sharp and brooks no room for argument.

I can picture The Leviathan pushing through.

Revecca is clenching her jaw but not in anger. The way she shuffles back again is the subtlest submission. She turns her attention to Thalia. "I am sorry, Luna. I've stepped out of line."

Thalia says nothing but, with a simple nod, accepts the apology.

"We can talk right here. There's no need to go to my office." Cade finally retreats from her. Wrapping his arm around Thalia, he waits for whatever it is Revecca has come to say.

"Fine, if you want family secrets known by," Revecca sneers, looking back and forth between Deacon and me, "others."

"Uh, lady," Deacon draws out slowly, followed by a pointed remark. "We're his siblings?"

"Impossible. I'm done having foreigners declare having gifts and a claim to the throne in Romania." Her eyes lock on me, but I refuse to acknowledge her existence. Instead, I watch her two henchmen look around our house.

That's where I heard her name. Her Royal Highness Revecca Ardelean, Queen of Romania.

She continues glaring at him instead of me. "But you will submit for proof of lineage."

Oh, fuck. I know the truth. When they force me to submit for the DNA test, it will show that I'm not genetically related to Cade or Deacon. And they're not related to each other either.

As far as I'm aware, no one knows I know. My perfect 4.0 in undergrad was tarnished by a B in my Biology and Genetics class because I wouldn't submit the genetics they asked for. I told him I didn't have time to run the tests. Lie. I ran them four times. For exactly this reason, I couldn't allow the results to be put out in the world.

I worried that if I told anyone we weren't related, even my professor, it would somehow come back to Deacon and Cade. Not knowing what would happen between the three of us, I didn't want to risk it. What would happen if they didn't have a familial obligation to care about me? I know there are places I could go if they didn't want me, but they know all my quirks, when to leave me alone, and when I need love, even if I suck at receiving it.

"You need to come to Romania. It's most important you leave with me now. The family knows you're alive, and they now know you are here. They will not be patient for your return." Revecca's words scare me.

Could someone actually make Cade go? No. That would be absurd. Cade's The Leviathan. There's no way anyone can command him to do jack shit.

"Excellent, then they can come here and talk this out with me. I'm not interested in going to Romania to rule. You won't strong-arm me into leaving my family and my home." Cade shakes his head and gestures to the group of us.

Revecca looks around. "Yes, this is a significant improvement over your art project earlier this year. But your place is at home, in Romania, where you need to be ruling from. Not a lodge in, I think they called it, Minnesota?"

I bite my lips together because that was hilarious, but laughing right now is so inappropriate. Who calls a demolition an art project? Lodge?

Taking the diplomatic approach, Cade answers, "Let us put you and your security up in our guest suites. I'll be glad to entertain further conversations. While I'm not interested in going with you to Romania, maybe there's something we can work out as a compromise."

With a quick bow of her head, Revecca accepts. "That would be excellent. Thank you."

"Revecca," Cade says sharply, "you're a guest in my home. You are not convincing me to go back to Romania, but The Leviathan is telling me something is wrong, so I'm offering assistance. Don't look into this further than that. If there's any hint of discord between us, I will have no problem dispatching you from here."

The eyes of The Pricolici flash and are met with The Leviathan — dominance standoff in the kitchen.

I slide off my stool. “Well, if anyone needs me, I’ll be studying.”

“The two of you will need to submit blood tests. Given the most recent discovery of Cade” — Revecca’s sneer is evident with his name — “we need to test the bloodline to ensure there are no more . . . surprises.”

I had always assumed it was Robert being shady. But now, I’m not sure he was acting alone. This bitch is single-handedly ruining my life. Maybe I should text Ansel, give him a warning? Utah is also one way to get away from my *other* problem.

My wolf wags her tail at the smallest thought of Finn.

I say nothing but keep walking. Unfortunately, with the new layout of the house, I have no choice but to walk past Revecca to get to my office and suite.

“Don’t think I don’t see you. You may call yourself his sister. But given your”—Revecca waits until I look at her—“questionable origins, there’s no way you’re of the main line.”

With a shrug, I answer her, “And yet, of the two women in this room who are his sisters, something assures me that he actually likes me. It’s not my home he’s doing everything in his power to stay away from.”



I’VE EXAMINED MY SYLLABI FIFTEEN TIMES, AND THERE’S A PERFECT BLOCK to squeeze a heat in. I would only miss one week of classes, and with only one professor not being a wolf or knowing my research, it’s a solid opportunity. The only problem? It’s next week. I would need to take the med to start my heat very soon, like Saturday soon.

Covering my ass from Cade will be harder. I guess if I tell him I’m trying to finish the piece for the shifter exhibit at the Smithsonian and need zero distractions, he would have to believe it, right?

He’s too busy to even think otherwise. Revecca is here, and it appears she’s determined to stay until she gets what she wants. What she wants is something Cade won’t give her, so they’re at an impasse for a few days, maybe more.

A knock comes at my new bedroom door. Deacon is leaning against the

doorframe.

“Oh, Lena.” Deacon puts on a thick, fake Minnesotan accent. “You’re wearing your I’m-getting-in-so-much-trouble face.”

With an eye roll from me, Deacon takes it as an invitation into my room. He plops down in one of the seating area chairs.

“What shit are you getting yourself into?”

I say nothing, and Deacon gets back up and closes the bedroom door.

The three of us all agreed that even with a massive house, anything that could be soundproofed would be. Besides the main entry door, a long hallway and an additional interior door into the bedroom ensure we won’t be privy to each other’s proclivities.

When he sits back down this time, he leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “Lena?”

“It’s time I decide what I want to do for my autumn heat. There’s no reason I can’t do the test trial. It fits in with my school schedule,” I argue with logic and frustration in my voice.

“I don’t like it,” Deacon says sternly. He shakes his head with disapproval.

I hate when he goes parental on me.

“I know,” I groan. “If I don’t try it, who will?”

Deacon motions over his shoulder toward where the rest of our pack lives on the property. “Seems to me there are at least a hundred females living right down the road. At least a quarter of them will be going into season surely in the next month or two. I’m positive at least three of them would be willing to help you. Everyone values your research; you’re putting the fun back into heats.”

I roll my eyes. “For almost everyone.”

He releases a huge sigh and nods. I don’t have to say it. Dinah and I suffer from the same pressure. On some level, being Ardeleans means it’s a matter of time before someone takes claim on what isn’t theirs.

“And what’s this about Finn O’Leary?” Deacon pops a smirk.

“How the fuck do you know?” I growl at him.

My wolf pushes forward at the mention of Finn. Her obsession is wholly unhealthy.

“Cade and the ancestors.” Deacon leans back in his chair. “With the tidbit I caught, I’m guessing Finn’s asked Cade to hold off any intentions that come in for you, but your reaction says it all.”

“The audacity of that motherfucker. He would lay a claim behind my back like a slimy little —” I clench my fists and draw a deep breath.

Deacon moves to sit on the couch with me. His proximity quells my anger.

It’s happened, regardless of my feelings about it.

I huff. “It’s not fair. This isn’t fucking fair, and I know I sound like a petulant child right now, but for fuck’s sake. I’m doing perfectly fine, and it’s all going right until —”

He pulls me into his arms and agrees. “It’s not fair. You’re still doing just fine. It’s not the fine you had imagined. Maybe it can be better?”

My wolf relaxes within me, and I turn to contented mush.

I push my head against his shoulder. “What if I don’t want a mate?”

“You’ve wanted a mate since we were pups; the only thing that’s changed is now you have one. You have someone who wants you bad enough that he stood his ground against Cade. Which, even if the Irish aren’t believers in the Ardelean gifts, you’ve got to believe Finn is at least skeptical of The Leviathan’s power, and he’s intimidated enough that he wouldn’t claim you without your consent.” Deacon pets my hair. “I’ll cover for you for a little bit with Cade. But Revecca is here to stay for a while. There’s something not right going on there,” Deacon murmurs.

We’re cautious with what we say. Despite our home being soundproofed, her presence is affecting us, making us more careful with what we say and how loudly we say it.

“We’re not his siblings,” I tell him the truth.

Tears come from nowhere in a vicious attack on my self-control.

“I know. I saw your homework forever ago.” Deacon nods. “Lineage won’t change anything for Cade. He doesn’t value bloodlines. Never has, never will.”

Deacon’s reassurance with the revelation that he knew all along instills some hope. *At least I’ll have him.*

Cade’s always been close with us. It doesn’t change the fact, though, that the only people he continues to keep in his life all share the same bloodline or a connection to Corinth Security. Loyalty has always been his paramount. *I’ve done nothing if not been loyal to him.*

“Revecca, though?” I murmur.

Deacon laughs and mocks her shrill voice. “Alexandru.”

“Laugh all you want. There isn’t a Deacon replacement downstairs ready

to step into your job,” I growl at him.

Per usual, not concerned with any physical threat I might pose, Deacon hugs me tighter. “Do you think she could find one? That would be fantastic.”

I smack his chest with the back of my hand. “Ole, you’re lookin’ for trouble, aren’t ya?”

“Only a little.” He laughs. “Only a little.”

CHAPTER 9

FINN

ARMED WITH A STRONG CUP OF COFFEE AND THE PROMISE OF A PACK RUN AT the Alden pack property tomorrow, I thought I was ready to face another day without seeing Lena, but eight hours later, I'm exhausted.

Today I followed a shrill younger woman around a lab, armed with the information that her lab runs on the honor system. A clipboard with a lab equipment shopping list is their method of communicating necessary items. It surprises no one that they're the ones having the most difficulty keeping their needed equipment and tools in stock and accounted for. *Who would have thought when comparing organized crime to a scientific lab that the criminals would be much more honorable when it comes to all the fun toys?* Back home, not once have I ever had an assault rifle or even so much as a case of ammunition go missing. Here, however, it seems they're missing a tube rocker, a semi-essential piece of equipment, and have resulted to 'it'll turn up eventually' as their default answer.

I lock my desk and am ready to bunk off for the day when a knock comes on my office door.

"Mr. O'Leary, my office, please," Doctor Thorpe nearly barks.

While he hasn't been the friendliest, he certainly hasn't been this short with me.

This idiot seems to think we answer to him, my wolf growls, angry at me for obeying Doctor Thorpe's command.

Arguably, blindly following orders isn't my favorite thing to do. Trailing behind Doctor Thorpe back to his office at the labs, I remind myself there's hierarchy everywhere. In the lab, Doctor Thorpe is the top wolf.

When he doesn't offer me a seat, I stand while he sits down behind his

desk. I'm brought back to school, waiting for the headmaster to discipline me. So, normal.

"Miss Alden will be out of the lab next week. I know we had discussed you following her to understand a better workflow. I can arrange for you to continue observing other laboratories, or you can have the week off as well. It is my understanding you are perhaps in the process of establishing yourself now that you're post a conversation with the Sovereign." He looks over his protective eyewear at me.

I've evidently been busted for applying for and accepting a job within pack territory without Cade's approval. But this was a better-to-ask-for-forgiveness situation. I don't bother denying it.

Doctor Thorpe doesn't strike me as a man with a high level of connection to the Alpha and his advisors, but he is close enough that my misstep hasn't been overlooked.

Yes, but where is our mate? My wolf circles back to Lena.

The thought has me debating contacting a realtor or calling the 'now leasing' phone number advertised on the side of Lena's building myself.

My wolf gives me another nudge with a memory of her sitting at the bar.

It's puzzling Lena would be out for a week. The semester is still early, so it's hard to believe Lena would take time off with how dedicated and responsible she seems. But I'm not asking Doctor Thorpe until I know his full relationship with her and how they operate. I don't want to jeopardize anything she's worked hard for.

"Is that all?"

"Well." Doctor Thorpe looks away from me before he pushes out, "Mr. Bachman has attempted to file an official grievance against you. He's worried about your behavior with the female staff."

I huff and restrain the eye roll by shaking my head as Doctor Thorpe brings his eyes back to me. "He's not concerned about my behavior toward all female staff. He's concerned with it relating to Kathleen."

"Ah. It seemed odd he would have used the term mate in place of copulation in a sentence." Doctor Thorpe nods with understanding. "Of course. Everything is making sense now. If you need longer than a week, given the circumstances, let me know. In the future, notify me immediately of your need for time off rather than having me come to you." He raises an eyebrow and shakes his head, dismissing me. "That is all."

Given the circumstances? Notify me immediately?

I turn and take my leave. Doctor Thorpe does not seem like the kind to give further information.

CHAPTER 10

LENA

DOCTOR THORPE AND I SPOKE BEFORE I SENT EMAILS TO MY PROFESSORS notifying them of my absence. While waiting for the dispensation, I swing by the lab. I intended this to be a quick in and out, avoiding where Finn's been holed up in the diagnostics lab.

But I open the lab directory out of curiosity. I check and see that Finn's phone number has already been added to the list.

A little wolf-shaped gremlin presses for me to write it down. *We might need him.*

That thought should have been enough for me to throw the slip of paper in the shredder, but it ended up tucked in my purse instead.

After a trip to the pharmacy department, Doctor Thorpe goes through his usual spiel about how to take the medication. All the while, he makes jokes about how I know more about these pills than he does. His jokes don't entirely mask the slight judgmental tone for not waiting for my cycle to start naturally, but I've never been able to pinpoint my heat precisely. This is more controllable.

Because I refuse to take suppressants due to their long-term, damaging side effects, my only option is the 'updated' version of what our ancestors used to control when they went into season. Let's just say knowing what's in it makes me really glad that it's something we can capsule rather than the tea women used to drink. I wouldn't be able to stomach it.

Despite his judgment, Doctor Thorpe wishes me well before walking me out the door. I leave with Finn none the wiser about my presence.

From what we know, the side effects of the drug should be incredibly mild and similar to human flu symptoms: sinus congestion, coughing, upset

stomach, and increased body temperature. It would make more sense to me if wolves got sick, but from what I've seen of humans when they have the flu, it can't possibly be that bad.



CLOSING THE DOOR ON THE REFRIGERATOR AFTER STOCKING THE GROCERIES, I know future me will hate current me. I bought all sorts of fruits and veggies at the grocery store in preparation for what the internet says the flu is. Nutrient-rich fruits and veggies sit on higher shelves in the fridge above some easy-to-cook proteins above some beautiful steaks — at the end of the day, I'm a wolf, and I'll eat those raw if I have to. Should I cook a few dishes to have leftovers? Maybe. Will I? No. Will I likely have delivery services from all around the city drop food off at my apartment at all hours of the day? Oh, most likely. But I tried to do the right thing, and that should count for something.

We don't have to do this alone. Call our mate, and he'll take care of us through heat. He'll provide, my wolf urges.

The coward is afraid and remembers the pain of all the heats we've gone through without a wolf to care for us.

She whines, pushing images of Finn and reminding me how his hands felt on us. How they felt *in* us.

I shake my head, putting it out of my brain and pulling the pharmaceutical bottles from my purse. The slip of paper with Finn's cell phone number falls onto the counter. I push it aside in favor of looking at the amber bottles again.

The ones to start my heat early: six orange capsules. And the ones to test, fresh out of development: two pink pills. Closest we could get to red. Although, I guess it doesn't matter because if it works, no one will care what it looks like, except me.

The part of my brain that forced me to write down Finn's number is evil. It sits there on the counter, drawing me to him. I won't do it. There's no way in hell I'm texting him. It was a stupid and impulsive decision to write it down.

Call him first, my wolf urges. She reminds me of how good his fingers felt. *Or send him a text. Let him come help us.*

I pop the lid on the bottle with the orange capsules and take the first one, ignoring her. He's good. I'll give him that. But I don't want, nor need, a man fucking up everything around me.

Once I set timers for the next set of medications on my phone, I send a well-crafted text message to my brothers and Thalia via our family chat.

ME:

Feeling the pressure to get these paintings done. I'm taking a few days to hole up until I've finished them. I need space.

I don't wait for their response. There's no need to with how busy Revecca is keeping Cade.

He's dead set I finish my degree, irony not missed with Thalia.

Delaying her degree for a year since she became a wolf was a hard choice for Thalia. I wanted to support her through it. I know how hard she's worked for this because academics are fucking demanding. But Cade made it clear I was to talk her out of it.

I hate being the villain in her life. I maybe didn't react the best to him bringing her home. In my defense, I wasn't wrong. Thalia was a danger, even if it was mostly to herself.

But now, Cade needs Thalia at his side. It's easier for me to tell her difficult-to-hear things than for him to tell her no. I get it — he wants the world for her. But he can only stretch himself so far, and constant trips to DC, where her school is, would weigh heavily on him. So, it fell to me to encourage her to take some time learning how to be a wolf before adding in other studies.

Dinah and I regularly spend time swapping useful visions — hers of the future and mine of the past. So, before I agreed to Cade's semi-demand-ish-request to convince Thalia to put her degree on hold, I had Dinah look. Knowing that encouraging Thalia to push her degree back won't matter in a few years, I agreed. What I've told her or done to keep her with Cade won't hinder her happiness. She'll have her degree, and the two of them will have pups, and her archive becomes her pride and joy.

I have hours before my body starts to turn more primal. Doing what I told Cade and Thalia I was doing, I lift the first of my large canvases into place to work on it.

But first, I walk over to the beautiful floor-to-ceiling windows and check the soil moisture on my fiddle leaf fig. It's the only plant from my collection

I've brought to the apartment. I tried to make the place a little homey.



MY BRAIN WANDERS AS I PUSH PAINT ACROSS THE CANVAS.

Am I supposed to feel guilty for working more on reproductive health rather than on my role as the Pack Alpha Female? Because I do. Maybe I should give it up now that Cade has returned to the throne.

Ansel, who deals with wolves with issues, says not to feel guilty. Anything we can do to help one another should be done. Could I be making a bigger difference by doing something else? No way to know, I guess.

The piece roughed in is of Cade and Thalia in their wolf forms. The Leviathan's red head rests over the top of the gray and black of Thalia's. It's shaping up nicely. I'm not sure what I'm painting on the other canvas. I have a few reference photos of Deacon and me that Cade took of us on a run, but a self-portrait in a gallery like the Smithsonian is pretentious. Then again, despite my wolf's flaws, she is gorgeous. Objectively-ish speaking.

The setting sun is ruining my light, and I've almost exhausted myself painting when the timer dings to take the next set of pills. Once I'm done packing things away, I take the next dose and look at the contents of my refrigerator. I'm already starting to hate my past self. *Stupid fucking cooking.* After making myself a breakfast sandwich, I plop down on the couch and look at the messages on my phone.

CADE:

Sounds good. Text me if you need anything. Love you.

DEACON:

Paint a bunch of dicks hidden in your paintings. Maybe become one of those creative types with symbolism about fucking the patriarchy or some shit. Miss you.

Now, THERE'S AN IDEA. I SMILE. ONLY DEACON COULD COME UP WITH A PLAN like that.

THALIA:

Have fun!!! And, if inspiration hits, they'd be glad to make you a three spot rather than a two spot. They're super excited to exhibit someone so well-known to the shifters and humans. Even if it's not perfect! Don't be hard on yourself! I love you!!!

HOW CAN SHE BE SO NICE TO ME? I SHAKE MY HEAD.

Texting none of them back, I set aside my phone and finish my sandwich to the sound of reality television.

When I take the third and final dose of the drug to start my heat, I'm already beginning to feel warm. The volatile start of my cycle will come soon.

Thirty minutes later, I feel hot all over. It's uncomfortable, and I know I'm in heat. With shaky hands, I twist the lid off the most important bottle. I don't know how many hours of work it's taken to get here. Fear and excitement battle in my brain while I stand here dumbly looking at both pink pills. Stalling won't do me any good. With a swig of water, I take the drug that theoretically will prevent pregnancy.

Tossing myself on the bed, I know sleep is the best option. My body will need the rest before the desire for as many orgasms as possible takes over.

Bred. We want pups. Call our mate. We can do heat with him and make a family, my wolf presses one last time. *He called us good.* My wolf pushes the memory of the orgasm, the way his fingers felt on my body, and the sound and tone of his voice when I did what he asked.

I shudder, wanting more already.

Apparently, I have a praise kink. But that doesn't make Finn the right source for the praise. Even if he sounds so fucking sexy doing it. Pressing my legs together, I try to relieve the ache. I don't want to go into the frenzy of heat before I sleep. I should have at least twelve hours before it's impossible.

Pushing memories of Finn from my brain, I start thinking about sleeping.

CHAPTER II

FINN

“FINALLY REMEMBERED HOW TO MAKE A TRANSATLANTIC CALL, DID YA?” Ma’s voice comes in crisp on the line before the second ring hits.

“Yeah. I know I should have called you when I settled. Truth is, I’m getting the necessities set up today,” I answer.

Sitting in my rental car, I’m at my first stop of the day, the beautiful cathedral in St. Paul. With the few trips I’ve had to take to Minnesota over the year, it’s easily the most beautiful Catholic church. And, despite its strong ties to home, I’ve been notified my sanctuary is still here.

The clanging of cast iron comes over the line. I wince, knowing she’s cooking, and with the time difference, she’s either making a feast for the evening meal or she’s pissed off. My guess is the latter seeing as how it’s only three in the afternoon back home.

“Oh, settled, he says,” she snarls.

It’s evident now she’s mad, but is it me taking my time to call her or something Magnus has done this time?

The growl rumbles with each of her words. “I know you’re mad at Magnus. Griffin, I swear I raised you boys better. You’re supposed to work out your differences.”

“You know what he did then?” I stifle the growl I want to let out. She won’t tolerate it.

“I know you’ve been cast out and chose to go to the States rather than come home. Which I’m guessing means you’re expecting me to split the holidays between you and Magnus, and you know how I get about flying.” Pure rage laces Ma’s voice.

She doesn’t deny knowing what Magnus did. She knows and doesn’t

think it matters.

It does matter.

“If you can get Magnus to grant me safe passage, I’ll come for Christmas.” I offer an olive branch.

“Bah. Magnus will do what I say, or he’ll be reminded I brought him into this earth and won’t hesitate to send him out of it,” Ma threatens.

The clanging stops, and she pants a bit from how fast she was working. I can practically see her wiping the sweat off her brow with the corner of her apron.

“I’ll come home for a week over Christmas then,” I assure her.

“See that you do,” she scolds preemptively. Then she sighs. “What’s the story? How are ya?”

“I’m grand. The Ardelean line is offering me the opportunity to earn my stay,” I tell her.

“So, you’ve found her then?” Ma observes.

“Found who?” I feign innocence.

My wolf stretches, thinking about Lena. We’re both excited about her.

“Your mate.” Ma isn’t asking. Until she is. “Who is she?”

“Complicated. She doesn’t want me. Is already threatening to break the bond, and I haven’t gotten to sink my teeth into her.” I run my hand across the back of my neck.

“Mmm,” Ma answers. “Submissive and hates you then?”

“Nothing submissive about her,” I correct.

The truth of that last bit stings. Part of me always hoped I’d find a submissive wolf, someone like Ma, someone I could anchor and who would let me be their everything. God has bigger plans, I guess.

Ma sighs. “Well, she’ll come ’round. I know your brother and that mess, but you’ve never had a problem with women outside the fact you’ve always been looking for what God made for you.”

“Can I ask for advice?” I ask, running my hand down my face.

I know if I let her keep talking, it’ll be a recap of the seven women she’s tried to put in my life that I’ve run off. I can only take so much of her disappointment in a single phone call.

“Depends, will you use it even if you dislike the answer?” she scolds, still not forgiving me.

“Probably?” I answer.

The sound of work in the kitchen begins again, and I can tell Ma is

waiting for me to ask.

“What did the ol’ man do to bring you around?” I ask carefully. “You said you hated him?”

“Oh, your Da.” Ma’s voice drifts a bit before she pulls it back. She gets an irritated tone, the one she always has when talking about him. “He was consistent, showed up where I was. Probably had someone from the pack following me, and I didn’t know it. But anytime I needed him, even with how busy he was, your Da was there. When I was mad at him, he’d give me no space and wait me out. He made sure all my needs were met.”

I nod, thinking back to how he would wrap his arms around her while she was cooking and follow her around, not letting go. He’d reach and grab things for her so she wouldn’t move from the spot before him.

Ma speaks with a less harsh tone. “Don’t go in guns blazing with her. I know you already have. Which is probably why she’s pulling away already. I’d say give her some space to come back to you, but I know you won’t. At the very least, listen when she talks.”

“It’s that easy?” I ask with a sigh. “Do the opposite of what Da did?”

“Don’t you take that tone with me, boy. Magnus may be Alpha, but don’t you forget who they’re loyal to.” Ma threatens, “The Atlantic Ocean isn’t that big.”

“Yes, Ma, I understand,” I answer.

I’d like to say she’d never send someone to remind me, but I wouldn’t put it past her. Love is sometimes delivered with a knife and a gun. She wouldn’t hesitate to have someone make me bleed to prove a point.

The sound of barking dogs comes through the line.

Ma sighs. “I love you, Finn. Follow your gut. I can’t wait to hear more about her.”

“Godspeed, Ma. I love you too.”

The line disconnects.



THE DRIVE FROM MINNEAPOLIS TO THE PARCEL OF PROPERTY NORTH OF THE cities is long. Driving through some sleepy little towns where the speed limit drops a few times, I understand why Lena would keep an apartment close to the university for the three days a week she has classes. I like it much better

than the idea of her commuting this distance regularly.

Flashing my passport proved to be a quick ticket through the security check of the Alden pack property. Armed with instructions from Thalia, the Luna, on where to park, I ease up in front of the main garage of the house. The large log-and-stone estate sits on top of a small hill.

The front door opens before I knock, and an individual lets me in without bothering to ask my name. I follow the sounds of voices into the hearth of the home, where there's a large kitchen and a great room area.

"Finn!"

I turn to find who is calling my name.

Thalia Clark is waving at me, her red hair bouncing from the movement. Cade sits at her side, resting his hand protectively on her thigh.

The house is by no means crowded, but at least twenty people are milling about in the indoor space and outside on a large deck visible through picture windows.

"Please, sit." Cade indicates to any of the seats in the area around him.

A large leather chair adjacent to him gives me an excellent view of the room and the main entrance.

"Thank you for inviting me today." I try to focus on the two of them.

Being a stranger in a strange land is an adjustment. I'm used to knowing everything about where I'm going. Not having the lay of the land is unsettling.

"Thank you for not making me hunt you down," Cade answers. "Do you need assistance getting settled?" The offer comes with a genuine tone.

I shake my head, letting my eyes drift around the room before settling my attention back on Cade. "The university is sponsoring my work visa for now. I haven't thought of anything beyond that. Doctor Thorpe gave me next week off to perhaps find a place to live and a vehicle with plates from this state. It seems the ones on this rental are triggers for hostility."

"Iowa plates." A man jumps over the sofa and sits to my right.

"He lives!" Thalia raises her arms like a zombie, and it sparks a laugh from the man who just entered the conversation.

"Deacon Alden of the Ardelean Bloodline." He introduces himself without offering his hand to shake.

"Yeah, Iowa plates. That'd do it." Cade laughs. "Let me know if you have any trouble setting up bank accounts or signing for the car or a residence. We can work something out with the pack fund."

“Much appreciated.” I nod.

I do not smell her or hear her. My wolf is antsy. He pushes, wanting me to look for her. Ask them. The Leviathan knows. He respects us.

“She’s not here,” Cade answers my internal thought, clearly picking up on my wolf looking for her. Cade cocks his head. “Lena took the weekend off to hole up in her apartment and finish her paintings for the exhibit Thalia signed her up for with the Smithsonian.”

“I hope she gets both done. They’d really like two or possibly three,” Thalia adds.

Doctor Thorpe said for a week. They believe it is for the weekend? My wolf is equally suspicious.

“Is it common that she takes extended time away?” I probe into the difference in timelines.

“Very.” Deacon shrugs nonchalantly, but at my inquiry, he examines me suspiciously with his blown pupils. “Lena likes her space. She’s not a hermit but —”

Cade clears his throat, cutting Deacon’s sentence short.

I’m realizing the Aldens are not forthcoming with information, so I let the subject go, for now.

We don’t need to run. Let’s go back to the city and find our mate, my wolf presses.

Unfortunately, we don’t have the authority to excuse ourselves from pack activities like this. We still need Cade on our side.

“Are we running or not?” Deacon groans, covering his eyes with his hand before letting out a large yawn.

Deacon is Cade’s Pack Second, and perhaps his informality comes from being siblings. However, if I’d spoken to Magnus that way in front of a new pack member, it would have ended in a brawl later.

I’m not in Ireland. It’s best to remember it’s not my pack nor my place to judge.

Cade squeezes Thalia’s thigh and stands. He uses the ceremonial invitation. “Friends, let us run.”



THE RUN WAS A DIFFICULT INTRODUCTION TO THE PACK. SOME OF THE ALDEN

pack members snapped and snarled at me. Trying not to make waves, I loped behind most of them. On more than one occasion, wolves would turn and move to challenge me. The Leviathan was quick to disband any attempts at challenges. Lowering my head, despite objections from my wolf, I hung back multiple times, attempting to keep the peace.

At the end of it, I'm knackered and glad to be going home, mostly none worse for the wear.

"Finn," Cade calls as I open the door to my rental car.

I stop, letting the door fall closed. He walks around the side of the car to get close to me. I didn't realize how much smaller Cade was than me until now. It's not that he's a small wolf. But he's easily seven to ten centimeters shorter, and he's much leaner. Yet, his presence is still intimidating.

"I'm sorry about today. I didn't anticipate so many of them being intimidated by you. We'll run in smaller numbers until you've settled better." Cade offers his hand out to shake.

I accept his hand and apology. "It's understandable. Another Alpha wolf encroaching while you're still in your first year on the throne. No damage was done."

"Well, we do have a problem though." Cade steps back and leans against the garage door, watching me. He lifts one foot to rest against the door, tucking his hands in his pockets. "I've been notified of a formal complaint at the university about you from one of the humans."

Swallowing hard, I realize it was foolhardy to assume Doctor Thorpe would have been where the conflict ended. I don't do Cade a disservice by denying it or making an excuse. I've no shame in what I did, only that, apparently, I didn't scare Brayden enough to keep his mouth shut.

"Finn," Cade groans. He pulls a hand from his pocket and scrubs it down his face. "Fucking give me something to work with."

"He called Lena a bitch." I shrug, hooking my thumb on the pocket of my jeans. "And at least I didn't kill him with witnesses."

"Fuck. Finn." Cade hangs his head, pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "You're on thin ice. Lena being your mate or not. You put your hands on a human. Keep it together, or I'll have to run you out of this territory too. I don't want to, Finn, but for fuck's sake. Do you know who he is?"

"I have a feelin' you're about to tell me." The words come out before I can remind myself to keep my mouth closed and not bite the hand feeding

me.

Cade shakes his head, looking at me with a glare.

He bites his tongue for a second before growling, “The sass between the two of you will drive me to an early grave.”

“Sorry, Sovereign.” I hang my head in apology for speaking out of turn.

“Brayden Bachman is the child of, I honestly don’t fucking know their title, but even with the couple million dollars the Ardelean Fund funnels into the school each year, Brayden Bachman’s parents are more important or better connected,” Cade growls.

It’s not surprising the idiot would be connected. *How much is this eejit going to cost me?*

“I’m supposed to ask you to apologize, but you and I both know how this will go. You’re going to snort, and I’m going to shake my head. Then you’re going to remind me Lena’s your mate, and you’re defending her honor. To which, I’m going to tell you that you’ll have to get smart and take care of him a different way. Then I’ll have to reiterate, very clearly, I’m not giving you permission to kill him.” Cade breaks down how the conversation will go in one quick breath.

“Let’s cut it short, yeah?” I offer.

“Stay the fuck away from Brayden Bachman. You keep your fucking nose clean. Until I’m sure you’re a member of this pack, I’m not sticking my neck out any farther for you,” Cade says, his words full of dangerous anger.

He draws a deep breath and runs his hand back through his hair. I didn’t realize how tired he looked at first. Cade’s a Pack Alpha fighting with their government while Lena is in university three days a week and Deacon is strung out. It’s a miracle he can still stand. Even with four Quartermasters and me, Magnus would get worn out.

He continues, but his voice is much lower, as if he’s keeping a secret. “The media are starting to circle. We’ll be under a microscope very soon. I’m not having your reputation or temper blow up everything I’m working for. I already have someone who doesn’t belong here threatening to make my life difficult. Don’t be another problem.”

“Understood,” I answer.

The implication is clear. I’ve made it increasingly difficult for Cade to offer me a place here without an anchor to his pack.

“I’ll see you in two weeks?” Cade’s voice is flat.

Even if it was a suggestion, I don’t take it as such. Nodding, I wait to be

excused.

A black SUV pulls up alongside my rental car. Cade bristles, and I shift my body to stand next to him and face the vehicle.

Two large wolves open the vehicle's front doors before a third, whom I recognize but from a different side of the world, comes around from the back. However, it doesn't curb my shock when the final door on the SUV opens and my second least favorite person in this world steps out.

I shouldn't be surprised though. Word has it that The Leviathan has been demanded back to the home country. Why wouldn't Revecca be here to ensure his return?

"What are you doing here?" Revecca Ardelean, my brother's 'mate,' snaps.

My wolf is forced back hard into my gut. It's hard to breathe. *What does Magnus see in her?* I suppose he has no choice in the matter. God's given him a woman he's meant for. Grateful she's not mine is the most I should say about it.

Cade looks at me, then back to Revecca. "I've asked him here. Enough."

Pulling it together, I answer Revecca's question. "Had assumed by now you'd have heard I've been cast out."

"You cannot be here. Absolutely not. Do you know the nightmare this will cause with Germany? They're already upset this one intends to stay ruling from the States. The lack of authority coming from the colonies is a nightmare. You cannot take up residence in his pack. The imbalance of power this will make." Revecca speaks quickly. Her words come out harshly, almost slipping into Romanian.

"Finn is more than welcome here. Whatever issue Dietrich, in Germany, has, he can address with me personally. Finn's an excellent asset to have in a pack. I'm not casting him out because you seem to believe I'm doing something nefarious." Cade defends me in stark contradiction to our previous conversation. He mutters under his breath, "Though if she keeps showing up, I might."

I bite my tongue to stop the laugh from escaping. Cade clearly wants whatever will piss off Revecca. I'm glad to be an asset if necessary.

"Revecca, I'll speak with you in a moment. Please go inside and get comfortable." Cade gestures to the house.

With a snarl and a headshake, she leaves the two of us to talk in the driveway while she goes into the house.

The guard I recognize from home gives me a small nod. What happened that caused Magnus to force someone from home onto her security detail? Especially someone so skilled. Whatever it is, it's none of my business.

Only after the door is closed does Cade turn back to me. "Later, I will ask about this, and I will need honest answers, but right now, Revecca Ardelean is nothing more than a nuisance. You're staying because I'm staying and Lena is staying. I know you're about to leave here and go back to her to try and get her to spend time with you. But I'm warning you, Lena doesn't warm up to people quickly. Since I won't bother trying to talk you out of it, I suggest you bring her a peace offering. She likes flowers and red is her favorite color. You can't go wrong with the classics."

"Thank you." I smile.

"You're welcome." Cade nods and walks away from the car.



TAKING CADE'S ADVICE TO HEART, I FIND A FLORIST AND PICK UP A DOZEN red roses. Carrying them to her building's entrance, I observe the security. Lena's building's front security isn't perfect. But it's strong enough that I'm not afraid for her safety.

The easiest target to breach security comes along soon enough. A woman, carrying a few bags of groceries, walks toward the door. I follow her. She hesitates but lets me follow her inside. While she takes the corridor down the hallway to an apartment, I take the elevator heading directly to the top floor. With the affluence of the Aldens, I know there's no way they didn't take the most secure floor.

Her scent hits me in the hallway when the elevator doors open. I let my wolf guide me. Taking deep breaths and checking apartment doors, at last, we find one that smells strongly of her.

My wolf presses forward, in tune with me, as I listen to the other side of the door. *Was that a noise?*

"Kathleen?" I knock.

Again it almost sounds like shuffling, but she doesn't answer. I don't smell anything suspicious. Nothing points toward foul play, but even if it's to tell me to fuck off, why hasn't she answered?

"Kathleen, if you don't open up, I'm letting myself in," I explain louder.

I don't need the neighbors thinking I'm a prowler, getting myself into trouble.

This time no sound comes from the other side of the door. I reach into my inside coat pocket and pull my lock-pick set out. Old habits die hard. I work the rake and torque wrench into the keyhole, and the lock glides open like butter. *Her lock has to be replaced, that was far too easy.* I slide the kit back into my pocket.

Unlatching the closure on my gun holster, I keep it concealed as I enter her apartment.

After closing and locking the door behind me, I take note of the apartment. It has a nice layout, with the living room, dinette, and kitchen as one large open space. I can see everything without having to take trips into various rooms.

Depositing the flowers on the countertop, as quietly as the paper sleeve will allow, I follow the hallway to the left of the kitchen toward the back, which I'm guessing holds the bedroom and bathroom.

Sound comes from down the hall.

I call out again. "Kathleen?"

No answer. My wolf is on edge and pushes me forward.

I don't smell anyone besides Lena. But I'm not willing to risk it. Drawing my gun, I move with light footsteps on the floor. Another murmur comes from down the hall.

The bathroom door is ajar, so I nudge it with my shoe, keeping the gun pointed toward the floor. Empty. I creep closer down to the only other door.

Her sweet scent hits me, and I'm salivating at it.

God damn it, Kathleen. She's in heat. I push to turn around and leave, but it's no use.

My wolf's attention is focused on her. We feel her in our soul. She's the missing piece God designed for us. I can't deny the pull. I draw a deep breath and put my gun back in its holster against my chest.

Her bedroom door is ajar, and the blinds are only partly drawn. Leaning against the wall, I have the perfect view of her panting and writhing on the bed. She's soaked in sweat. Naked skin glistens in the diffused light. Lena rolls around, lost to her lust, working a dildo in and out of herself. The sweetest moan comes from her as she chases release.

Wanting to catch more of her glorious form, I push the door open. My cock is stiff in my jeans, throbbing with each twist of her naked body. I

clench my jaw and shoulders, restraining myself.

The movement of the door grabs her attention. Lena turns her head, eyes snapping to look in my direction.

“Damn it, Finn,” she snarls at me.

Her hair falling out of its bun adds to her feral beauty.

Logically, I should leave, text Cade, and have him post between us. Lena’s made her feelings clear about me. The risk of the two of us together during this is too great.

I don’t want to take a choice away from her, but heat . . . is a cruel mistress. She’ll play with your brain and emotions, turn your body against you, and make man and woman alike lose themselves to it. Even now, seeing Lena in the throes of it, with her scent filling the air, I know I need to leave before I can’t.

Lena cries out as another wave of pain hits her. The sound of her anguish hits me like a punch in the gut.

Our mate needs us. We can help her. Quit stalling the inevitable. My wolf pushes hard for me to go to her. Anything to lessen Lena’s pain.

I take a step forward. My pants are tight, and it’s painful watching her fuck herself with a fake cock that’ll never fully satisfy her. It should be me buried in her. That’s my cunt, and I dislike her fucking it without me being involved.

Her hand falls away from it as she growls, warning me away.

“I’ll call Cade to protect you from me.” Offering kills me.

I take that same step back. My wolf smashes against me, fire burning within. He demands I stay.

“No, Finn. No. Need you,” she pants. Her body contorts again. “Please.”

“Oh, sweet Kathleen, you’ve damned us both,” I groan. I’m getting hot under the collar.

I run my hand back through my hair. Her begging for me quickly destroys my self-control.

My entire body is tense. I want to fuck her, breed her, and make it so she’s bound to me forever. But it’s been less than a week since my fingers were inside her, and it’s not as if we’ve had a conversation since.

She’s begging for us. What further invitation do you need? my wolf rationalizes.

Lena’s muscles relax but only for a moment. She whimpers, fingers toying with herself.

I pull my jacket off. I'm slowly drowning, the fever of her heat towing me under. The room radiates with warmth from her. It's too intense. My shoes go next.

I eye the other toys strewn about the bed. There's something insanely sexy about a woman who knows her body and how to please herself.

"I thought we had an understanding that I'm the one in control of your pleasure."

She scoffs. "I don't remember that conversation."

"The rule starts now." There's no more denying who I am with her.

Starting now, Lena is mine, and she will learn the rules of what submission to me looks like. And if she wasn't of the lifestyle before, Lena will learn what a Dominant and submissive type relationship looks like.

I take three steps before I'm at the bed and then reach for the dildo clenched in her pussy. The base flares with a sack and, something I note for later, a suction cup. Lena doesn't put up a fight when I remove her hand from the toy. She hasn't fully inserted it. I slide it out, and in comparison, it's not as long as I am.

Keeping a neutral face, I ask, "Do you take all this?"

"Worried you won't measure up?" she snarks.

I run the head of the dildo up her folds. The head flicks against her clit.

Body writhing hard, she lets out a sharp cry. "Finn!"

Her cry for me makes me ache. My cock throbs harder. Every moment I stand here is too long.

My wolf pushes that we should be mounting her. *She'll be stunning with a belly swollen with our pups.* He envisions her swollen and round.

I've always been intrigued by the idea of my woman carrying my pups. The very real possibility that came with heat always intensified the intrigue.

Setting the dildo on the nightstand, I pull my shirt off as fast as I can so I don't lose the view of Lena biting her bottom lip like the siren she is. As I slide my slacks down, my cock pushes hard to escape my boxers.

Lena gasps when the fabric falls away, and I hear the sweetest thing she's ever said. "Fuck yes. Mine."

Her approval makes my wolf grumble with excitement, beyond the promise of spending days with her in bed. Sitting on the bed, she writhes to get closer to me. I bend toward her and kiss the bit of skin closest to my mouth, right between her tits. A beautiful black-and-white floral tattoo decorates the space from the underside of her breast, daring to go slightly up

between them. It stretches all the way across her ribcage. I want to take a closer look and lick each petal of those delicate flowers. But now's not the time to admire the art she's adorned her body with.

With greedy hands, she reaches for my cock.

I bat them away. "No, Kathleen. Now you're mine. The relief you get will be because I choose to give it to you."

Lena tenses as a cramp rolls through her. She curls toward me, nearly into the fetal position. Her body is apparently working with me in taming the beautiful mind of my Alpha Female.

Joining her on the mattress, I run my fingers up the fronts of her thighs, splitting them open with two fingers. Lena's body trembles. I keep going to her core. Her whimpers tell me how badly she desires me. I've barely grazed her clit, and Lena moans.

"That's it, Kathleen, feel what I'm giving you." I give her a small grumble of appreciation.

Her fingers pull hard on the sheets.

She whines, "Finn, need."

"When did you go into heat, Kathleen?" I ask.

The need to control and set the pace is growing. But to come into this late hurts me. Why wouldn't she have someone here for her?

Lena opens her eyes, and she pleads, "Last night before bed. Now fuck me."

Slightly less than twenty-four hours. It pains me I missed the tenderness of the lead-up to this. But I can still make up for it.

This is what Doctor Thorpe meant. The circumstances he was talking about were my mate and her heat. *And she did it alone. Reckless.*

Mate needs our guidance. So good she has us. My wolf agrees.

I kiss her, teasing, "You're not getting fucked that quickly. You've done this without me, on purpose."

Her lips pull into a snarl, but her wolf doesn't back it. Even in the early hours of heat, Lena has excellent control of her animal. That's an observation for another time.

For now, all I want is to enjoy her as she is. I let my fingers dip, teasing her inner lips. She arches forward, pressing against me and uncurling her body to lay flat against mine.

CHAPTER 12

LENA

WITH THE SOFTEST TOUCH OF HIS FINGERS AGAINST MY CLIT, I THROW MY head back. It's not fair he has this effect on me. He fists his other hand in my hair, wrapping around the strands expertly and pulling back to expose my throat.

"When was the last time you had another partner take care of you?" Finn murmurs into the pulse point of my neck while his fingers pet my clit.

"Seriously? Right now?" I ask.

My body is starting to warm again. I'll need him soon. The all-too-familiar ache is burning me up inside. *Why is he asking this? He's here now. What does it matter?*

Mate came for us. My wolf presses, he'll make it better.

His fingers instantly still. "Yes, Kathleen, now."

I growl and push my hips toward him. He completely pulls his fingers from my pelvis. Pushing me down onto my back with the palm of his hand, Finn moves from my neck, positioning himself slightly above me, his eyes locked on mine.

The haunting eyes of his wolf examine me as he threatens, "I'll ask again. Make me ask a third time and I won't hesitate to edge this pretty cunt until you're near tears begging. You writhe so beautifully — I don't mind watching."

My throbbing clit is begging my brain to answer, and I've already lowered my standards by asking him to stay.

Tell him the truth. Tell him we've never let someone give us this. My wolf writhes. We're both lost to his touch. Needing more.

"How long?" Finn trails his fingers between my breasts to my abdomen.

My hips lift to meet him. “Never.”

“Never what?” Finn hesitates but slides two fingers inside me, curling them like a reward for the single word.

I gasp, closing my eyes as he finds the tender spot. My body clenches, curling against him.

It feels so good that I quickly answer the next question in his interrogation. “I’ve never gone through heat with someone else.”

Finn doesn’t withdraw his hand. He moves closer, not saying anything about it at all. Lips find my neck, and he trails kisses from my ear down across my neck to the opposite collarbone.

I gasp with the pressure of his thumb against my clit.

I want to experience more. Be closer. Thoughts are starting to run together. I press my body against him. I’m already so fucking hot, my skin is on fire, but all I want is more of his touch against me.

Need him. Now. My wolf keeps pushing, urging me to beg.

Calm and with steady movements, Finn gives me what I need. He slides one knee between my thighs, holding my leg down as he works me with his fingers. I’m so close to an orgasm. The way he teases my mouth with his tongue forces me to hold my breath.

I’m on the edge. All I want is a little more. When he nibbles at my lip, biting ever so slightly, I lose myself. I’m chasing an orgasm, until I’m not.

He pulls his fingers away.

Is there a law against denying a wolf in heat? I growl against my wolf’s inner desire to kiss and nibble at his jaw, appeasing him to give us what we need.

I open my eyes, shooting daggers at him for even thinking of stopping.

Finn moves over me, caging me in. The warmth I’ve been desperate for cloaks me. Our eyes meet, and for a moment, I feel seen. Does he see all of me? Even the parts I hide?

I arch up to meet him, kissing him. He draws me closer, cradling the back of my head, and forces my mouth open by pushing his tongue inside.

Missing the intimate touch, I slide myself lower, raising and tilting my head to not break our kiss. His cock presses against me. *Proportional. Yum.*

“Please,” I plead, breaking our kiss.

I’ve begged for it before, but not like I’m begging for him now. It doesn’t matter as long as he gives me more. I’ll deal with the fallout later.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Kathleen,” he murmurs.

His words are in direct contrast to the way he pulls my hair hard enough that I gasp.

“Pain isn’t scary,” I assure him. I narrow my eyes. “Fuck me or leave.”

Finn laughs darkly. “Oh, Kathleen, you’re mine. I’m never leaving.”

Finn pulls my head aside, placing more kisses along and across my neck in the other direction. It’s vulnerable. I’m completely at his mercy. Between his physical size, the positioning of his body, and the fucking pressure of my wolf against me, we’re a bite away from being bound to him for life.

Yes. We want that. Yes, my wolf urges. Her anticipation wiggles through me.

I’m putty in Finn’s hand. He positions my legs wider before lowering his pelvis against mine. The head of his cock is hot against my skin as it slides slowly from my clit until he’s settled at the entrance.

There’s no warm-up. No stretch. Finn gives me exactly what I want but haven’t voiced. The tip enters, and without pause, he stretches me open in a smooth stroke.

My muscles convulse around him. My body falters, losing the arch I held to meet him, and I’m pressed back into the bed. The pain from his cock entering me banishes the pain from my heat. I’m moaning loudly, and Finn doesn’t wait.

He speaks the language of my darkness. Finn decided I am his and is on the verge of proving it. He knows what my body needs faster than I can ask for it. The dominating sadist fucks me with rough, deep thrusts, drawing tears to my eyes. The pull of my scalp keeps me contorted and open for Finn. My eyes are blurry, and I’m a mess. I’ve wanted this for so long. I need this.

Finn’s voice is gravelly, his wolf growling along with him. It’s so connected. “Don’t think. Feel.”

Our lips meet. His tongue explores. My body is bending back for him. With only a slight adjustment, my orgasm is on the cusp.

Panting between kisses and moaning, I push myself up to him. Wrapping my arms around him, I keep him tight against me. All the touch, his whole body. I want it all against me.

Finn gives me the weight and security I need.

I squeeze my eyes tight. My wolf is right there with me, tense, on the precipice of what I need.

“Don’t come, Kathleen. Hold it off,” Finn growls.

He’s holding back for both of us. I obey without a second thought.

It's too much to speak. I whimper while waiting to come simply because he told me to.

With a gasp, struggling to hold back anymore, my whimper dissolves into a needy whine as it leaves my throat.

"Now come, Kathleen." Finn's command beats my failing control by half a breath.

With my arms wrapped tight around him, my entire body curls in on itself. From my toes curling to my knees bending to the pulse of my pussy, it's so intense.

Ours. My wolf follows into euphoria.

A strong taste of blood fills my mouth. Before I can savor it or think any more about it, I enjoy a new pain in contrast to that of my orgasm. My throat hurts as I scream through the next orgasm that barrels through me like a tidal wave.

Time and all sense of it fade around me. The world flickers between darkness, warmth, and cold. Finn's body is warm against mine, holding me. He's whispering, but I can't understand. I'm too satisfied, content, and at peace to even care.

CHAPTER 13

FINN

LENA PASSES OUT SOON AFTER HER ORGASM. I'VE NEVER FELT SUCH POWER from a woman in her heat. But this, between us, is clearly different from any other heat I've serviced someone through.

Lying next to her, I absentmindedly run my hand along the soft, delicate skin of her stomach. The motion pulls on the fresh skin of my quickly healing mating mark. My heart swells with pride. I'm hers.

What will life look like with her? There are some good houses for families in the cities with plenty of room for pups. I'm sure she'll want to be near her school and work.

For close to an hour, I lie next to her, dreaming of what life will be like. I kiss her forehead before rolling away.

She grumbles in her sleep but doesn't move. Pulling myself away from her is difficult, but caring for my mate is more important than staying by her side. Tucking her in and up among the pillows and blankets, I hope she doesn't notice my absence too quickly.

I pull on my pants and walk to the bathroom. A smile creeps across my face seeing my mating mark in Lena's large mirror. It's almost a shame to clean the blood away. Fierce little wolf, faolan, laid a violent claim to my shoulder.

It was unexpected but not unwelcome. Warmth and acceptance fill my stomach.

She's so strong. Our mate is fierce. My wolf relaxes, stretching within me.

As I wipe the last of the blood away, the distinctive sounds of Lena turning over in bed come from the room. Our bond is starting to grow, and a

faint feeling of unsettledness ripples from her. I wait for a moment, focusing on her and listening to her breathing as she tries to settle in. Lena's not resting peacefully. She lets out a frustrated groan, followed by a massive near-aggravated sigh.

I hear her feet shuffling on the floor as she walks toward me until she's at the bathroom doorway.

I'm met with a massive groan. "Oh, fuck."

I raise my eyebrows, meeting her gaze in the mirror, waiting for further reaction. Turning, I face her, and her eyes leave mine, her vision locking on my shoulder where she sank her fangs into me and marked me as hers.

Her hand shakes when she raises it to touch the bite mark I gave her on her shoulder. She then takes that hand to cover her mouth. Lena shakes her head back and forth and draws deep breaths.

She swallows and, instead of discussing the mating marks, says, "I need to pee."

"I'll meet you in the kitchen." I step toward her, wrapping my arm across her for a brief second and kissing her hairline before letting go.

Something is wrong, but she needs a moment. I'm willing to give it to her.

Walking to the kitchen, I try to remind myself it's okay to give her this space. I fucked up giving her a full day to process what we did in the lab, but the two minutes to pee and wake up is reasonable.

The toilet flushes, and when Lena comes out to the kitchen, her body's hidden behind a baggy rock band T-shirt and a pair of oversized sweatpants. She walks past me in the kitchen to the couch, where she grabs a large fluffy blanket and pulls it around herself. Lena eyes me first, then the bouquet of flowers I left discarded on the counter in favor of checking on her.

Lena looks smaller, more vulnerable, wrapped up like that.

"When did you eat last?" I ask. The need to care for her is the strength beating my heart.

Given the way she looks away from me and tries to hide her face, I'm positive I won't like the answer.

Her body shudders. A lie falls from her lips. "I've been too sick to eat."

"Kathleen." There are a hundred things I want to say to her.

I'd love to start right in with how she needs to care for herself better. But I can't push her right now. I can only care for her and begin setting the foundation for our dynamic.

There will be rules. So many rules.

Lena doesn't look at me or address me. She steps closer to the flowers, and when her hand lands on them, her eyes flash pale white.

Rebecca said the Ardelean gifts are all very real, and while I've been on the receiving end of hers, I never thought much about the rest of the bloodline, but the way Lena's eyes have fogged over is very telling. *What is my mate's gift?*

I assume there's nothing I can do about it anyway, so while she's lost in whatever landscape her gift is giving her, I get to work caring for my mate. Given her stance that fried cheese is a meal, I assumed I would find less nutritional contents in her fridge. Opening the door, I'm taken aback at the highly organized variety.

From my experience, I've at most a couple of hours before she's completely unhinged in lust again. She's been sated, for now, but I need to get her fuel to burn. I'll be damned if I let her burn off any of those luscious curves.

Pulling out ingredients, I put together a balanced dish.

"You're a Dominant." Lena's voice is hoarse and heavy.

Her words catch me as I set the pans I'd located on the stove, and I freeze. *What sort of statement is that? From our time in bed together or her gift?*

Starting a pot with rice, I let her statement hang in the air. It wasn't a question, but I take a moment to answer anyway.

"That surprise you, faolan?" Lena doesn't answer my question. I start opening cupboards before finally answering her question. "I am. I've been lifestyle for well, that's not important."

My question doesn't stop her from placing her blanket on a stool and unwrapping the plastic around the roses. She doesn't look at me but is zoned in on them, squeezing their heads.

Finding utensils and a cutting board, I take to cooking. I'm over living in a hotel and eating out. Knowing what's in my food has been a missing luxury. Magnus kept me traveling fairly regularly, and the last week has been much of the same: restaurant food and deli sandwiches.

More than my desire to eat a full meal, I want to care for Lena and have her feel all the adoration I hold for her. If I can care for her at all, I've begun my job as her mate and Dominant.

She submits so beautifully, my wolf admires, thinking back to how,

without question, she fought back her orgasm for us.

I begin slicing the veggies I found in the fridge. Standing at the island, I watch her from the corner of my eye. I'm drawn to her movements as she finds a vase from under the sink and washes it, completely unfazed by my presence.

"Funeral flowers? Did you kill someone?" Lena accuses as she cuts the flowers' leaves and thorns and trims the stems.

The corner of her mouth turns up into a smile.

"There should be a dozen." I stop what I'm doing to turn and look at her. I suppose I never expected to have to count the stems from a florist. Cade said red and classics. Though, perhaps he set me up? "Would it bother you if I had?"

We could kill for her. My wolf pictures Brayden. It's tempting.

"Flowers in even numbers are for funerals," Lena explains.

"I'll make a note. Would you rather eleven or a baker's dozen?" I ask, returning to the cutting board and continuing to dice through the stems of the asparagus.

Lena doesn't say anything, and when I turn to look at her, her eyes are white again. I need to know more about her gift. *How often does this happen to her? What is she seeing?*

I know she's come out of it when I hear her moving again. She fills the vase with water and pours a concoction in before heading to the refrigerator. Retrieving a lemon, she looks at me hesitantly.

As she's turning away from me, I offer my hand out. "Would you like that cut?"

Her mouth opens to say something, but she closes it again. With a delicate touch, she hands it to me.

Not knowing Lena for long, I'm not sure which version of her is real. Is it the fire and sharp tongue with a strong backbone? The side that dares me to test her limits. Or is it this softer side she's showing right now? Is this who she is when there's no one around to see her walls fall? Logically, I know it's both. But which one does she want to be more?

After slicing her lemon, I'm enthralled watching her finish her flowers. Expert hands slice the stems and slide them into the vase until they're just so. When done, she smiles at them.

"Sit and rest." I point at the stool, on the other side of the kitchen island, with the tip of the knife.

The more I think I'm figuring her out, the more I realize I know nothing about Lena.

Wrapping her blanket around her, she studies me for a few moments. Tenderly, she sits on the stool. She winces and inhales a sharp breath.

"Did I take you too hard?" I can faintly feel her pain in our forming bond.

She certainly enjoyed it while we were in the thick of it, but I've done this, us and sex, all backward.

Lena shakes her head. "I'm good. This is temporary."

I turn the heat on to warm the oil in the pan and then grab the pitcher I saw in the fridge. Once I find the glasses in the upper cupboard next to the sink, I pull them out and pour her a glass of water. After setting it in front of her, I offer her some of the raw, clean vegetables I've been cutting.

Lena shakes her head and scrubs her hand down her face before opening her mouth and closing it again. Can she not find the words, or is she afraid of what my reaction might be? I toss the garlic and onion in the pan to start.

Lena's voice is so quiet I barely hear it over the food hissing in the pan. "You should leave."

My wolf growls, pushing his displeasure forward. *There's no way she can truly expect us to walk out the door, away from her.*

Putting the salmon fillets in the pan, I turn down the heat. Even if there was a need to stir, she and I are more important. I walk around the kitchen island and lean my hip against it, looking directly at her.

"Kathleen, do you really want me to leave, or are you scared because we've marked each other?" The question is anything but simple.

Any hope I hang on her answering falls off quickly. Silence must be Lena's coping mechanism. However, not speaking, not communicating, and shutting down won't give me a way to help. Her shoulders tense, and her breathing comes erratically.

How do I get her to trust me?

I slide my hand across the soft plane of her cheek.

There's a slight change in pressure, ever so small, as Lena leans her head into my touch. The movement, even if it's barely noticeable, assures me I'm reaching her on some level.

"Try this for me?" I encourage.

Lena lifts her eyes from where she was staring at the countertop to meet mine.

Holding her eyes, I give her the exercise. "Give me ten seconds of

complete honesty. Say what you're thinking right now. Be honest. Be raw. Don't sugarcoat or fluff it up. Don't downplay it or try to make it less complicated. Ten seconds of honesty. I'll go first if you want?"

Lena furrows her brow before slightly inclining her head toward me in agreement.

"Okay. Start at ten and count backward to one."

She takes a deep breath before she starts. "Ten."

"I've been praying for God to lead me to you since I was old enough to take a mate. But the older I got, the less conventional my preferences became. I've worried that the more I explored my darker desires, to earn total control over my partner, the less likely I'd be to find my mate. God answering my prayers now feels too good to be true."

"One." Lena releases a shuddering breath.

"Your turn." I cup her cheek.

She wets her lips before pulling them between her teeth, biting them together like she's trying to keep the secret of her feelings inside at all costs. Lena nods, so I drop my hand from her face and give her the space to speak.

"Ten," I start slowly.

"I'm terrified of the pain I'm going through. I don't do heat with other wolves for the exact reason I shouldn't have begged you to stay." Lena pushes out words rapid fire until she's out of air and drags in a ragged breath.

Which reason? I want to ask, but I let her speak.

"Now it's all wrong. I've marked you as my own, and you marked me back." She exhales before drawing another full breath.

The anguish she's putting herself through over something we should be celebrating causes my heart to sink.

"I know" — she stumbles over her words — "*I knew* that heat would be so much easier with a partner. I didn't think it would be so life-changing, but I'm terrified I'll break apart when this is over."

"One." I had been counting, and she'd made it to almost ten seconds of talking.

I didn't want to stop her even though it would be dishonest to let her talk beyond the ten seconds. But seeing tears in her eyes, I make her stop. I don't want her to cry. This is supposed to be liberating, not hurtful. With quick steps to the stove, I click off the burner before I cross back to where she's sitting and wrap my arms around her.

She half-heartedly struggles, but I hold tight, not letting her go. With

another second and a small rumble from me, she settles into my touch.

“Let me ease your pain, Kathleen. I won’t leave you,” I vow, whispering into the top of her head. “When your heat is done, we’ll figure us out. But let’s focus on getting you through the worst of it.”

Lena pulls her arms out from between us and squeezes me tightly once before nodding. Her head rubs against my chest.

My wolf thinks about how nice it’ll feel with her rubbing against us shifted together.

No two heats are the same, and her body is giving off more warmth, sooner than the next wave might typically hit. So I slide the blanket off her shoulders. I know I’m running out of time to get food into her before she doesn’t have any interest in food at all.

My cock’s hard in my jeans. Fuck. I’ve forgotten how difficult it can be to do this. I’m split between wanting to do nothing but fuck her and giving her everything she needs.

I step back and have to adjust myself in order to move any farther.

As I turn back to cooking, the stool creaks. Quickly, to not miss a moment of her beauty, I glance over my shoulder. Lena shifts her body forward, putting more pressure on the front of her pelvis.

The first time I drew out her pleasure comes flooding back. My mate likes to grind.

“Like what you see, Kathleen?” I prompt, tossing the veggies into the pan next to the fillets.

It’s my turn to be admired. Her eyes rake across the tattoos adorning my body.

She whimpers, clamping her teeth on her bottom lip in a sultry bite.

CHAPTER 14

LENA

I WAS SO CLOSE TO TELLING HIM. STUPID HEAT, MAKING EVERYTHING SEEM perfect. Everyone knows you can't trust your brain during heat. Luckily, my filter is very much intact because the words, 'I'm worthless to you,' almost passed my lips more than once. But I couldn't do it.

Finn offers to ease my pain. I know I shouldn't, but it's all I want, all I can think about. Nodding, I open my mouth to say something, but words don't come out.

I look at the flowers. He brought me flowers. No one brings me flowers. *Why does he have to be so perfect?*

He won't think we're worthless. He loves us already. Dominant. You saw that vision. He could do that to us. My wolf pushes back.

The muscles in Finn's back ripple as he stirs the food. His forearms, disguised with dark tattoos, flex with each stir.

A cramp hits me, and I squirm hard, trying to hold back the sound of my annoyance with my condition.

Finn's body stiffens, and he glances at me before moving from the stove. He gently squeezes my shoulder before disappearing down the hallway toward my bedroom.

He returns only a few moments later with one of my dildos, the one with a suction cup base. My heart rate quickens as he looks at me, holding it expectantly.

My wolf pants, wiggling her tail slightly. We're both very much interested in what he's offering.

"You have no idea how happy you make me having a whole gamut of toys to use on you." Finn's voice does the low rumble I've only heard when

he's within kissing distance.

It's warm and thick. His accent is swoon-worthy and homey.

He places the dildo on the counter in front of me before walking behind me. His presence at my back ignites my desire.

I tighten my core only to find myself remembering the muscle cramps.

I gasp hard, regretting my excitement. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"Shhh. Relax, faolan," Finn whispers. "I'm with you."

Finn tugs off my blanket, from where it had pooled around my waist, and then pulls up the hem of my shirt. I raise my arms, letting him run his palms up my sides, fingers brushing the sides of my breasts before he clears it over my head.

Tenderly helping me off the stool, like it's my entire body that hurts, not only the cramping of my heat, he turns me to face him. Finn takes his time as he unties the waistband of my sweatpants, then trails kisses down my flesh. From the top of my head, to my cheek, to my neck, to right above my breast, to the lowest point of my tattoo under my tits, before sliding my pants down my legs. He's thorough in his exploration. I would think he'd stop around my waist, but he doesn't. Finn kisses my inner thigh and down my calf as he lifts my foot from my pants before repeating it with the other side.

"You're perfect," he affirms, looking up at me from where he's kneeling on the floor.

Wolves spend a lot of time naked in front of other people. But it's not naked I feel in front of Finn right now. It's a new kind of exposure I'm not sure I'm okay with.

Show him who we are, my wolf demands, pushing her control against my own.

I hold her back, tightly squeezing my eyes shut. I refuse to show him my wolf, not like this. *Not ever.*

He hasn't figured it out yet. *It will change if he figures it out now.*

"No." Finn's reprimand is soft. I open my eyes, meeting his deep soulful brown ones. "Don't get lost in that beautiful mind of yours. Stay with me."

I abandon fighting her to focus back on Finn as his hands slide up my leg, one on the outside and one traipsing up the inner thigh. As he draws closer to my core, my whole body clenches. It's an involuntary movement that causes me to groan. I'm warm again. I close my eyes, fighting through the dull pain of an early cramp.

Finn skates his hands up my body as he moves to stand. There's never a

second we're disconnected from each other. I open my eyes to see him placing the dildo on the stool where I was sitting.

Spinning me toward the stool, Finn wraps his arms around me and cups my breast with one of his large hands.

I feel the happy grumble he makes. "Do you want to climb your ass up there, or should I place you there?"

He nibbles on the back of my neck.

I shake my head and question, "Neither? I want you."

"Easy way or the hard way?" Finn reiterates my choices. "You're not getting my cock until you eat."

"What happens if I pick the hard way?"

I'm not sure I can climb that high, and the tiniest part of me wants to explore my vision. I'm jealous of his past play partners; watching how he worked them over was salivating. I want to be in their shoes.

"If you pick the hard way, I'll lube your ass up and make you take it there rather than putting it in your needy little cunt. Then, I'll grab the remote-control vibrator I saw and make sure to line it up with your clit, belt you to the chair, and drive you to a wet, needy mess until dinner is ready."

Finn sells the hard way quite well. And I'm actually considering it until a cramp hits hard.

"Fuck!" I curl forward.

With his arm wrapped around my stomach, he holds me steady. Using delicate touches, Finn works his other hand lower. He dips into my warmth, index finger finding my clit.

My body relaxes at his touch.

In appreciation, my wolf whimpers, and it escapes my lips. Submitting to his care, I turn my face toward his neck and kiss his jaw.

I'm lifted high, and the head of the dildo presses against my opening. Finn lowers me slowly, the silicone dildo filling me. It helps. It's not what I need, but it helps.

"That's it, faolan, take it all. Get yourself settled, let me feed you. Then I'll fill you myself," Finn coaches.

I'm melting at his words and his touch. *Everything is right.*

"Good girl," Finn croons the moment I'm fully seated.

The warmth inside me is sated a little bit. He pets my hair for only a moment before separating from me to return to the kitchen.

The distance between us gives me more time to appreciate his body. As

expected, for an Alpha wolf and, well, a never convicted criminal, Finn's body is covered in silver scars. Some of them bisect the lines of the hundreds of hours of tattoos on his skin. Many of those scars look like they'll never disappear from his skin.

There's an old wives' tale that says scars that don't heal are the ones painted on our souls. The folklore is used as an explanation for why mating marks never fade.

Watching him does nothing as I try to calm myself down. I should be trying to stave off the next wave of heat while waiting for food.

He'll demand I eat, but the cock impaling me is leaving me dripping. The cramps are more manageable and becoming fewer and further between, but the stool is wet under my ass, and I can't draw my eyes off his body. I didn't really want to behave anyway, so I'll feast on the eye candy in front of me. It's not my fault he's sexy.

"Tell me about your kinks?" I shuffle on the stool, and it creaks.

Finn freezes. Oh, it'll be fun if it's this easy to make him uncomfortable.

Then, looking over his shoulder, he answers my question with one of his own. "Kinky, faolan?"

His side-eyed glance feels scandalous. I want more. Involuntarily, my core clenches, and I'm forced to feel the fullness of the dildo again.

I'm so sensitive that I gasp instead of saying yes.

Finn turns back to the stove for a moment before rolling his head to look up at the ceiling. He mutters something before bringing his attention back down to the frying pan.

Without his eyes on me, I admit something I've never said aloud. "I'm a submissive."

"An Alpha with a submissive side, could you be any more perfect?" Finn's voice tips up and is, dare I say, chipper.

But based on what he's said . . . he didn't quite catch it all.

I've spent my whole life hiding my wolf, pushing her from the surface so no one would find out. Submissive wolves are rare, but not the kind of rare that's valued. *What possessed me to confess that?* Self-preservation most likely? With the hope that it'll push him out the door.

I'm emotionally and physically naked before him, and he didn't see or hear what I told him. *I guess he'll figure it out eventually.*

My wolf whines. She doesn't understand why he isn't more excited and why he still calls us an Alpha.

A few more minutes of silence pass before Finn starts plating two bowls of rice, vegetables, and salmon fillets before us. It smells divine.

He knows how to cook. My wolf salivates, trying harder to sell me on Finn as our mate.

Finn sets a bowl with a fork in front of me before placing his at the eating space next to mine. I wait for him. He sits and prays over his food.

When Finn nods at me, I pick up my fork and say the only thing that feels right. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, faolan."

Finn's thigh rests against mine. Sitting so close is comforting, but do I want it to be?

I've had a few more bites before another cramp hits hard. Finn's fork clanks as it falls to the dish. He's behind me in an instant. He kisses my neck and runs his hands down my stomach.

I'm squeezing my fork too hard. Worried I'll bend it, I drop it to the counter, and the clatter echoes as Finn's finger finds my clit. It feels so good, but it's too much. It helps, but it helps wrong. It's not right. I can't explain how awful and disgusting it is. My whole body riots against it.

"Finn. I can't do it." I force out my words, all short and jumbling.

My body is too stimulated. I claw at the counter, trying to free myself, pushing up on the stool with my feet against the bottom rung.

"Shhh. Kathleen, you're okay." He pulls his hand from working my clit.

I try to push myself up from the stool, but my body doesn't cooperate. I'm uncoordinated and nearly fall, but Finn's arm is around my waist. He helps and carefully pulls me up from the stool, and the dildo, which had been nestled deep inside, slides out.

I breathe, almost instantly feeling a new relief. Heat is still there, and the need for Finn's cock is strong, but the panic and pain caused by the dildo are gone.

"I've got you, faolan," Finn assures me.

Effortlessly, he carries me over to the couch. After a quick trip to the kitchen and back, Finn returns with my Sherpa fleece blanket and tucks the fabric around me.

Finn's voice rolls from his mouth in warm, soothing tones, I don't understand the words, but they rattle through my bones. Comprehension is irrelevant. He's peaceful, calming, and in direct opposition to my internal chaos.

My heart rate slows the longer he talks, petting my head until I'm not so frenzied.

Finn backs away but never pulls his eyes from me. Despite his build, he moves with agility backward around the bar to pick up our forks and bowls. Like the oaf he is, Finn sits on the table, holding my food toward me.

I shake my head because I'm not hungry. I'm horny and tired. I want to be fucked until I'm too spent to keep my eyes open.

"You don't have to eat it all. You can eat all the fish, all the veggies, or half of each." Finn isn't ordering me.

There's no Alpha command, but there's clearly no choice in the matter. The casual Dominance he brings to our dynamic without any negotiations is alarming. More so, it's that I follow his order, first picking apart the salmon with my fork.

Letting me play with my food, Finn eats his without an issue. I'm beginning to feel warm again. Kicking off the blanket, I try to hand him the bowl. I've defiantly managed to not eat anymore.

"Two more bites. I promise, you can do it. Give me two more bites, faolan, then I'll sate the urge you're feeling," he coaxes me.

Finn doesn't accept the torturous bowl of food I try giving him. I want to return it to sender.

Food that I previously found so delicious — so much so that I would try to look up recipes he may have used to figure out which restaurant may have something similar — is unappetizing. Everything sounds awful. I force both bites into my mouth at once. It's now flavorless and bland. Once I'm chewing, Finn finally accepts my dish.

The need to be fucked had started as a small kindling fire but is now building into a roaring blaze. I have no choice but to let the discomfort work its way through me. There's no fighting what's coming. The steady pain of the heat is punctuated by sharp snaps of the hard, heavy cramps.

Finn carries me from the couch to my bed. He sets me down and steps back. His pants fall to the floor, and his boxers go next. I could have done far worse in mates. Finn is solid mass from head to toe. There isn't a part of him that's not sizable, and as much as I want to memorize his other muscles, it's his dick drawing my attention.

"Kathleen," Finn calls.

I drag my eyes from his dick to his gaze. *Perfect view.*

When I look at him, he slowly stalks closer. "Tell me, Kathleen, have you

played with a Dominant before?”

My body is so warm; this isn't what I want to be doing. Talking doesn't solve cramps.

I groan, “Really? Finn, I need you. Talk later.”

Leaning over the bed, Finn cups my chin. “If it wasn't important, I wouldn't ask.”

When I reach for his cock, he blocks my hand with his other. Gripping my wrist, he pushes me back to the bed.

I grind my teeth together before answering. “Yes. I have.”

“Safeword?” Finn leans forward, his lips brushing my ear.

His warm breath causes me to shudder as I answer, “Red.”

“Traffic lights?” Finn wets his lips, looking at me.

I'm not surprised he knows. It's one of the most common methods of safewords.

My vision of him and a past partner comes back to me from the kitchen. I fight it away. I don't need to send my heart through the wringer right now. I can't watch him fuck someone else when that's all I need. I need him for myself.

With one hand captured by Finn, I use my other to reach for his cock. I want to touch it. No, I want it inside me now. But I'll settle for touching it.

My answer is apparently enough as he lets go of my chin in favor of capturing my other hand. He slides both arms above my head and straddles me.

“If you don't use your safeword, I'll assume you like what I'm doing to you.” Finn kisses my neck.

His teeth skate across my skin.

“Please, Finn,” I gasp, feeling his tip run up my inner thigh.

The way I'm under him allows me to be perfectly positioned for a deep fucking.

The cramp holding my body hostage is hard, but Finn moves one hand down and works slowly, releasing me from it. Yet, he denies me. Finn works his fingers inside me, coaxing my body to unwind for him. My eyes are too heavy, and I let them drift closed. I want to live in the experience of our connection.

“You may touch me, faolan. Wrap your arms around my neck.” Finn's voice is a slight growl before he lets go of my hands.

I comply, unsure of his next move. Snaking an arm behind my back, Finn

smoothly slides us back onto the center of the bed, readying us to get lost among the sheets.

CHAPTER 15

FINN

ONCE I'VE SETTLED US IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BED AND HAVE MORE ROOM TO dedicate to pleasing her, Lena hesitantly moves her hands to explore. I hold myself above her with my hands on either side of her head. Her nails dig in as she squeezes the muscles of my arms. Her pupils dilate when I flex my shoulders. Feeling admired by her is unexpected. Despite her hesitancies, maybe Lena wants me the same way I want her.

I drop to my elbows, and our chests meet in a steady rise and fall. Lena moans as I tease her, pressing between her wet folds. Her grip on my shoulders increases, pulling me closer to her desire. Needy little whimpers tell me she's close, too close. Teasing now is too cruel.

I deliver what she needs and press my cock into the tightly clenched walls of her pussy. She moans, throwing her head back, squeezing hard. I fuck her hard and deep as she writhes in pleasure. The trust she's given me by embracing each of my thrusts rivals nothing I've ever felt before. It's pure and honest.

"Come on my cock, Kathleen," I command a breath before she comes undone, screaming.

It's intense. She's perfect.

Panting, she shudders under me as aftershocks of her orgasm rip through her. I slow my thrusting, moving her through the climax that's broken her fever, for now.

"More, please," Lena begs. Her body curls forward. "Hard."

As much as I want to, I can't deny her while she's in heat for commanding me in such a way. I don't. But I won't make it easy for her to find that next orgasm. Sliding myself from deep within, I pull myself from

my place on top of her. There's no need to punish demanding behavior, but a little correction may help her learn her place.

Lena snarls in angry denial. Her eyes are hard, locked on me as she lies on her back, propped up by her elbows. The glare she gives me is icy despite the desire I can smell.

Fierce faolan. I smirk as I untangle myself from her.

"Finn," Lena growls as I walk away from the bed. I reach for my pants on the floor, and she objects again. "Fuck you, Finn."

Her little temper tantrum draws a laugh from me. *Oh, faolan, you're in so much trouble.* The correction quickly turns into a small punishment.

Picking up my pants, I slide my belt from them. When I look back, Lena's eyes widen, but a battle wages within her. The slightest nibble on her bottom lip is a telltale sign of her arousal.

"You'll remember not to speak to me that way," I warn her, focusing on her. "I am your Dominant. I am your mate. That will be respected even if you're begging and desperate for my cock. You don't make demands here, faolan."

There is no fear in Lena, as made evident in the way she rolls her eyes upon my approach. Is it because she's never been struck before, or because she doesn't think I will? The implication that she's been with other Dominants leads me to think neither is true. *Little masochistic, faolan? What has the kink lifestyle shown you?*

She analyzes me, trying to anticipate my next move. The challenge to keep Lena guessing is one I'm ready to meet. Grabbing hold of her ankle, I pull her toward me. Her body skates across the bed, elbows falling and no longer supporting her; she's flat on her back. Wisely Lena tries to pull her legs together, but I have other plans.

Using her ankle, I roll her over on the bed.

Lena yelps, shocked as the tail end of the belt's leather cuts across her ass. It's a sweet sound, and my cock throbs.

"Ass up, Kathleen," I order.

My little temptress obeys with a large sway of her hips, putting her knees tight together, taunting. She keeps her chest down to the bed, supporting her weight on her elbows. It's a near-perfect presentation and a better view of that sweet cunt. Any doubt that she has little experience in a Dominant and submissive relationship goes out the window.

Stepping closer, I fold the belt in my hand. I run the loop up her calf and

along the back of her thigh. Lena squirms and clenches.

“Anticipation killing you yet, Kathleen?” I growl, running my hand down her back.

I’m rock-hard. I want to fuck her again, take her right here, right now.

Lena breathes deeply but doesn’t answer me. I push her knees apart with my hand, opening my access to her. Sliding my belt up between her legs causes Lena’s body to jolt at the misdirect. Slowly, I pull it up around the curve of her ass before smacking it down on the opposite cheek.

Startled, she yelps.

“What do you want?” I ask her, running the belt back the other way. “Tell me, faolan.”

“Fuck me,” Lena groans as she pushes out her hips and ass, hoisting slightly higher.

“So demanding.” I smack her ass twice more. The belt lands with full, hard slaps against her cheeks.

She moans. The beautiful woman before me moans in arousal, wanting my belt. And I oblige, giving her a dozen more strikes to each side until her moans turn to small whines, and when I stop, it’s only to slide my fingers between her legs and rejoice in the slick warmth of her heat.

Her groan rumbles from deep in her belly as I find her throbbing clit. Rolling it between my fingers is purely to torment her. I’ve never been so conflicted when it comes to a woman. What do I want more, to feast on this delicacy and draw out her pleasure until she’s soaked the sheets and begging me to fill her, or take her now and feel that pussy milk me dry?

“Please,” Lena whines, answering my internal questions. “Please fuck me.”

Lena begs so beautifully. I’ll oblige but on my terms. Withdrawing my fingers, I run my hands down the planes of her back. Bending over her, my cock slides between her legs. Pushing my head against her clit but choosing not to enter her draws a frustrated sigh from her.

Fisting her hair, I pull, and she moves with my guidance off her elbows to upright. Her back pressed against my chest gives my free hand full access to her beautiful tits.

“I love seeing you on your knees for me. I plan to put you on them quite regularly.”

Her gasp tells me everything I need to know. Pulling her head aside, I run my teeth along her neck. She moans and whimpers as I nip harder at the

mating mark I've given her.

"What's your favorite way to be taken, faolan?" I ask, pulling her hair and tilting her head to the side so I can look into her eyes.

My cock is dripping, and I can't tell if it's from me weeping for her or her wetness coating me. Pulling myself from behind her before I take her too quickly is agonizing for both of us. The matching groans a clear indicator we're dancing dangerously.

"However it best pleases my Dominant," she answers, her eyes heavy with lust.

"And before you were such a good girl?" I ask, trying to bring her back to basics.

I'll wipe all her past Dominants out of her mind. It'll only be my rules and protocols in her head.

Lena doesn't have an answer. She swallows hard.

"How is it that no one's taken good enough care of you to give you a preference? You're fucking perfect, and yet no one's treated you like the prize you are." I hope my angry growl on her behalf communicates my loathing for the fools who haven't sated her, but now isn't the time.

I can smell how badly Lena needs me.

"Hard and fast, Lena?" I offer her.

"Please." Lena's voice sounds so desperate.

My cock throbs. I move her back down to the mattress. Pushing her face down, I slide her knees upward, allowing me the deep access I want. Her breath hitches as I position myself behind her.

It's agonizing how slow I move to sink into her wet cunt. But it's a blissful sort of agony. Lena's pussy grips me, her walls squeezing tighter to pull me in.

As I slide all the way in, we vocalize our enjoyment at the same time. Mine in a deep groan and Lena's in a heady gasp. She presses her ass and hips up toward me before sliding down slowly, trying to fuck herself on me. Normally, I'd correct her for taking more than what I'm providing. But the scent of her arousal is so thick and sweet I can't resist. Not right now anyway.

Pulling back slowly, I begin to fuck her. Rutting hard and deep, I listen as Lena's little gasps turn to wild moans. I lower myself over her back and kiss the mark on her shoulder. I bite around it, and she hums with pleasure.

She's fucking perfect. Taking each thrust with cries of pleasure, Lena

comes in long waves. The changes in her noises tell me everything from start to finish about her orgasm. Once her orgasm subsides, I fuck her faster. Lena's body starts to tremble, building toward another orgasm.

Her excitement forces my heart rate faster. I come hard. My vision blurs and flickers as I finish inside her. Coating her walls is a blissful experience, knowing that with every passing moment, she could be carrying my pups.



LENA WAKES ME A FEW HOURS LATER. IT'S NOT FRENZIED OR NEEDY. SHE traces the details of the wings tattooed across my chest with long, languid strokes going out to the ends and back.

"Like what you see, faolan?"

The question startles her. "Shit. Sorry, you're a deep sleeper."

"Answer my question," I prompt her.

"Your artist is superb." Lena still doesn't answer the question. A few moments of silence pass between us before something changes. She elaborates. "I love your art. It's a great style. It fits well with your body and moves excellently." Her eyes turn to mine.

"I don't think I could describe yours as anything less. That first glimpse of you in the sun through the windows." I exhale, fighting away my physical response to the memory. "Those flowers below your tits. They're so delicate with those little leaves. They must have taken hours of work. You've quite a pain tolerance, I take it."

Rolling us so I can finally take a closer look, I trace the petals, trying to remember what flowers these are. Based on her reaction to the roses, I know each has meaning.

The attention, or something else, must embarrass her. Lena's face reddens as she looks away. In the dim light of the room, I almost make out the flush tones painting her face.

She says what she's thinking. "Pain isn't a bad thing if it comes with purpose."

My cock twitches. *Oh, little masochist.* I focus on her. It's not responsible to take her when she's not ready during heat. These moments of her willingness to talk to me have been so fleeting.

I turn her chin back toward me so she meets my gaze again. "Don't hide

your likes from me. I want to know your likes, your limits, and most importantly, all the dark fantasies you want to explore.”

She doesn't say anything. Lena's young, so I don't expect her to have years of negotiating and talking it through under her belt. Sitting up, I pull her with me.

Trailing my nose along her ear, I whisper, “I'm —”

“I'm not obedient. I struggle with authority. You can't punish a masochist with pain. My physical limits outside of activities that may make me require an attorney, a surgeon, or a coroner are relatively limited.” Lena cuts me off, explaining her limits eloquently.

Snaking my fingers back into her hair, I squeeze tight, and her eyes clench closed.

I explain mine. “No death or dismemberment, no children or animals. I'm strictly monogamous. I don't have a switchy bone in my body, so you'd best remember there's no pushing back with me.”

I relax my pull on her hair only to tilt her head back. Lena sighs with the release.

Running my free hand down her neck, I push her for more information. “How far is too far for you to submit?”

She swallows hard but doesn't answer. I tighten my grip on her hair once more, giving her head a small shake.

“Speak,” I order.

No matter what she might say, I'm excited to hear it. Hopeful butterflies bang their wings against the inside of my stomach.

“That limit doesn't exist,” Lena answers obediently. It's cryptic, held with a pause before she continues. “I've never been pushed far enough to find it.”

“Do you want to be?”

That answer, so brave, so beautiful, was not on the list of things I expected her to say.

The butterflies have yet to ease as I wait, holding my breath in anticipation of a decline. It doesn't stop me from hoping it's a yes.

Her answer is hesitant, but honesty rings true. “I don't know.”

“Good girl.” I praise her for answering me honestly.

An unknown leaves room for exploration. While I'll never push her beyond her hesitance, it will be nice to move forward and see what she can tolerate. An ‘I don't know’ is a maybe, and maybes are discussable.

CHAPTER 16

LENA

THE NIGHT PASSES IN WAVES OF EPIC SEX. EVERY TIME HE SAYS THOSE TWO words, ‘good girl,’ I get this stupid little flutter in my heart. Finn brings a whole conflict of emotions into my life, ones I’m not ready to engage in.

In the cool morning light, I wake up to him watching me. His eyes slowly draw me in.

“Good morning, faolan. You look like you’re maybe up to eating this time.” Finn’s hand is gentle along my jaw.

I close my eyes against the intensity of my wolf rushing to meet him. Yesterday, I let myself be vulnerable. It was foolhardy, and since he hasn’t figured it out yet, I’ll do everything I can to not let that happen again.

Finn moves closer, drawing me into his arms, and the touch nearly shatters my resolve again. We’ve spent almost a full day in bed together already. Yet these tiny stupid little touches keep buckling every single wall I’ve ever built.

He knows us and handles us so well. My wolf rolls around inside me in pure bliss.

My body aches in that satisfying way. Finn knows how to *handle* us. With every wave of need, he brings an intensity in bed that I haven’t felt with past partners. And while I know heat changes your perspective, the healing bruises and tender skin from his belt tell me that my admiration of his prowess is not entirely from the haze of heat.

The problem is, Finn doesn’t know what he’s doing to me. *Or my wolf.* With each tender moment, perfect fuck, and example of him caring for me, I’m short-circuiting. I’m growing more and more attached. And it’s pathetic.

I’m positive that if he knew how I felt, he’d leave or tell me I’m

overreacting. Everyone knows you can't trust the feelings you have during heat.

You can't know that. Quit trying to push him away. He marked us back. You're being ridiculous, my wolf snaps. She's frustrated with me, and it's the most backbone she's shown in a long time.

"Kathleen, you can't hide from me." Finn encourages me to answer his question.

"Yeah. I could try to eat," I answer him.

He presses a sweet kiss on my lips before slowly letting me go. I sit on the edge of the bed, trying so hard to remember my place in this. I'm his Alpha Female. He's servicing me through heat. We have mating marks, but the bond between us can be broken, mostly, kind of.

Don't fall apart now. Not after all we've worked for.

"You coming, faolan?" Finn encourages me, not waiting for me to follow.

In the silence, I force away what I can of the emotions and the issues of it all. The opening and closing of the cupboards indicate Finn's wasting no time making me food.

Such a good provider. My wolf swoons.

After pulling on clean sweats, I walk out and sit on the stool that Finn had cleaned sometime during the chaos.

He's absolutely perfect in this. Maybe if I play my cards right, we can do this again in the future.

We could wear his collar, and he'll give us pups. We can obey and be free. You know when we settle with him, it'll be easier to handle how other people treat us. It'll be perfect. In her excitement, my wolf tries to encourage me to give in to the feelings I literally just locked down. She's antsy and excited, which makes this that much harder.

Why doesn't she understand this, him with us, is temporary? Why doesn't she understand that eventually, he'll figure out how needy she is and resent her? We don't have value, and someone like Finn will want a mate worth *something*.

"You're really deep in that head of yours, Kathleen." Finn brings a cutting board with peppers and steak to the island to talk to me while he cooks. He prompts, "Give me ten seconds of honesty?"

No. Absolutely not. Fervently I shake my head.

"I'll go first?" Finn offers.

I draw my eyes off the food to look at him. "Okay? No guarantee I'll be

able to explain it all.”

“That’s okay. Maybe what I have to say will settle you.” He smiles before turning his attention to the knife in his hand.

“Ten.” I give him the start.

“I’m ecstatic that you and I share a connection in the kink lifestyle. It’s the most beautiful thing to think that since we’ve marked each other, our lives are tied together, and we can further explore how we fit together. I want to spoil you and give you a hundred different collars that we can pick together each morning to show you off.” Finn looks at me the entire time he’s slicing the pepper.

Reckless and yet hot.

“One.” I stop him. *Shit. I’ll get better at remembering to count.*

I let silence fall between us, not ready to address his statement. My brain is reeling. Why would he be so willing to collar me? Do I want him to collar me? Would he really want to if he understood the real me? It’s not fair. *Why does he have to be so fucking perfect?*

When I don’t speak, Finn fills the dead air. “I’m intense as a Dominant. I want obedience. I love knowing that you’re headstrong. Bringing you to your knees will only be that much sweeter. Your bratty attitude is alluring.”

Dropping my eyes from him to the countertop, I drum my fingers, trying to push away the view I would have if I were on my knees before him. Finn is big. So much to lick and suck. A throat fuck would be awesome. *Maybe if...*

“You’re mine, and if it comes to it, you’ll ask permission for where you’re going and notify me of your safe arrival and departure. I want to be involved in every aspect of your life.” Finn looks up from slicing the steak. As he catches my eye, I can tell how serious he is. “There will be no more study dates with boys who don’t know where their side of the table ends.”

That’s not what I want. I don’t want someone making all my choices. I want to be free to choose. It’s why I’ve hidden everything away. If I were perfect, no one would know I’m flawed and no one would be able to take everything away from me. Spontaneity is what keeps me sane. Trips to the mini-golf courses when I’m trying to figure things out? They’re a necessity. I spend so much time trying to fit in that sometimes I need to disappear. *No. He’ll ruin everything.*

He won’t. My wolf struggles against what I’m saying.

My growing anger is intimidating enough that my wolf stops trying to

push us together with him.

“You seem upset with this, faolan,” Finn observes. He asks me again, “Do you want to talk it out? Ten seconds?”

“I think so,” I answer through gritted teeth.

“Ten.”

“I don’t like the idea of a Dominant controlling my life. I’m fine having an involved Dom, but that level of control doesn’t sound comfortable. How am I supposed to live my life with someone hovering over me? I don’t want to lose who I am because it’s my duty to submit. I might not want to wear your collar. What if it’s not a good fit with us?” I force out my heated words all at once but stall at the end, wanting to run the clock out.

“One.” Finn mercifully ends this torture.

I wait for him to say something, anything.

He puts the knife down, goes to the sink, and washes his hands before walking around the counter to sit on the stool next to me. Finn turns my stool to face him. I never thought of brown eyes as beautiful, but here they are, glistening in the afternoon sun. Their warmth pulls my soul toward his.

“I don’t want your submission through the obligation of our mate mark. I want your submission through choice, not fear. You hold all the power,” he says solemnly.

Did I hurt him? I study him.

Maybe Finn keeps his Dominance and status as an Alpha wolf separate? I don’t want to depend on anyone. It never goes well anyway.

My words don’t come out strongly, but they don’t need to. “You’ll feel different when my hormones aren’t raging and we’re back to normal. I don’t think it’s a good idea to get our hopes up that this is anything more than good chemistry during my heat.”

“I strongly disagree,” Finn declares. It pulls a smile from his mouth.

“I know.” That’s all I can think of to say. *Of course, he disagrees.*

Finn presses a kiss against my lips. It’s sweet but not chaste as his tongue laps my lips before teeth capture my bottom one and give a short bite. He runs his hands along the side of my face and down my shoulder. Without another word, Finn returns to the business side of the kitchen island.

He’s quiet as he sears steak strips in the pan.

It’s not until Finn puts a plate of fresh fajitas already in the shell in front of me that he speaks again.

He locks eyes with me when he says, “Hear this, faolan. I won’t stop

trying to make this work. I'll find common ground for us. You're perfect for me. I know it. So, if it takes a long time to wear you down and get you to understand that I'm never going anywhere and never letting you leave, then I'll wait."

He tells the truth, my wolf points out, like she forgets that I can hear the strength and conviction in his words.

Finn's under the same hormones we are. He might not be able to think it through all the way right now, but I've thought about it in the past. When the haze lifts and it's not only sexual attraction, Finn will lose interest fast because while I'm a great contender for his mate on paper, I know the truth.

My wolf doesn't like my logic. But unfortunately for her, I'm the one making decisions for us.

"Kathleen." Finn holds my eyes with his. "There will come a day when you'll tell me yes, you'll wear my collar. There will be a day when you'll say yes, you want me to be yours. I don't expect it to be today. But it will come, and I'll be waiting."

The way he says these words has me wanting. But Finn will be waiting for a very long time because I never intend to let someone collar me.

My wolf whines. *He would be so perfect for us.* She tries to compromise. *Just try it. For now.*

Only during heat, what harm could it do?

CHAPTER 17

FINN

“KATHLEEN?” I ROLL FROM MY SIDE TO MY STOMACH, REACHING FOR HER waist. “You okay?”

As I blink against the light, her hand snakes over her shoulder, holding my mark. I hook her waist, trying to pull her against me. She shuffles, fighting back.

Something’s wrong. She’s not in heat. My wolf is quick to observe.

It’s been long enough, her heat could have waned, but this doesn’t seem right. Her body’s hot, and she isn’t strong. The room feels off with unsettled energy.

“Kathleen,” I call to her, “talk to me.”

She shakes her head. “You should go.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” I grab her tighter, pulling her to me.

She’s been extremely connected with me the last four days. After our talk, when I told her I’d wait for her to say yes, she leaned into us. I had started to feel her effortlessly in the growing mating bond. Now, the bond between us is feeling painfully thin. It’s almost thready like the pulse of a dying heart.

Lena tries to pull away, and instead of letting her, I hold her down. Putting my legs between hers, I force her to lock eyes with me. Hazel globes, locked on my own, lack the usual fire.

I urge her to explain. “Tell me?”

Lena shuts down. Her defiance is gone. With a feeble whine, she looks away from me. It’s almost submissive.

Her voice is weak. “When do you want to announce you’ve claimed the Ardelean Alpha Female?”

“You can’t be serious.” I pull on her bottom jaw to bring her eyes back to me. “I don’t care about that.”

“Yeah. Sure. That’s why you let yourself into my place, bit me to mark me as yours, and why we’ve had unprotected sex for the last four days? I was in heat. Chances are I’m pregnant. I . . .” She squirms, fighting under me.

Oh, faolan, what is going on with you?

I hold her still and tilt my neck, exposing my tender shoulder. “You bit me first. You’re not alone in this.”

“You say that now.” A massive tear rolls out of her eye.

“Kathleen,” I rumble lowly, trying to reassure her of my feelings. “I don’t know who has left and hurt you like this, but I’m not going anywhere. If you’re carrying my pup, we’ll talk about it when we know more, but for now, let’s clean up, make some food, and spend time getting to know each other.”

She shakes her head but says nothing. It feels like a dull knife is being forced into my chest and dragged down and out my gut. I know she feels the bond between us starting to grow. From the first night in the bar, she said it herself: my wolf wouldn’t let me walk away.

Sure, it’s only been days of our bond growing, but surely, she must feel some of my happiness and excitement. How does she not know this isn’t about who she is to our people but what she is to me?

Oh, faolan, let me love you. I try to push everything I feel into the bond.

Her stomach heaves. It’s an unsettling sound. I free her and move out of her way as she darts to the bathroom. A second later, a retching sound comes from the bathroom as she empties her stomach’s contents into the bowl.

Briskly I make my way to the kitchen to grab her some water and look for something easy on the stomach. Finding nothing but some plain white bread, I bring her a slice back with the water.

Lena is sitting on the end of the bed. Her nimble fingers work her brown locks into a braid. You’d think after four days in bed, my cock would be spent, but I’m stiff thinking about her whining for release as I wrap my hand around that braid.

I focus back on her needs. She needs me.

Trying not to jostle her, I sit next to her. “Sip slowly.”

Lena doesn’t fight. I press the back of my hand to her forehead. She’s burning up.

“Are you still in heat?” I don’t feel the intense pull of lust from the last few days.

She shakes her head. "I'm sick."

"Wolves don't get sick, Kathleen. This is serious." I reach for the nightstand and my phone.

Lena smacks my hand. "Wolves don't contract illnesses, but we suffer side effects. We might burn it off faster, but if we drink too much, we do, in fact, get hangovers. It's a side effect. It should pass."

"Side effects?" I question with a sinking feeling that puts me on edge, my gut telling me this is more serious.

This has to do with what she does in the lab?

If I push her now, it could make our relationship more strained. I'll nurse her along a bit, and if her condition gets worse, I'll call for backup. Lena, thankfully, does as she's told and sips her water. I run my hand up and down her spine, trying to make her feel my love for her.

"Why don't you rest? I'll stay. Help you get better. You have things for that?" I offer as her eyes close for a moment.

What do I do?

My faolan struggles to stay still, clearly unwell. I expected her to fight me more about staying, but it doesn't seem like she has the energy for it. Lena gives up and curls on her side in the bed.



LENA IS FAST ASLEEP WITHIN AN HOUR. I BEGRUDGINGLY PULL MYSELF AWAY from her side. My wolf doesn't want to leave her, but instinct tells me that the vomiting and exhaustion aren't good. I don't want to disobey her wishes, but my finger hesitates over the screen, and I hit the connect button anyway.

It rings only once before Cade's voice comes on the line. "Hello?"

"Cade, it's Finn." I wait for a response, but it doesn't come. "I don't know how to say this politely, but we have some things to work out regarding Kathleen and me."

"She couldn't fucking listen to me. I should have assumed she was lying about painting before I sent you there." Cade sighs. He draws a deep breath. "I texted you both without answer and assumed you were together. Well, it was either that or she killed you. Though, I suspect after a few days post-heat, you may be wishing one of us will." There's the slightest laugh at the end.

How can he laugh? Our mate is sick, my wolf growls. He knew she had

done something bad and didn't stop it.

I give Cade the benefit of the doubt. How could he know the extent of what this would do to her?

“About that.” I glance back at the bedroom door. Despite how sick she is, part of me expects my little whirlwind to come and rip the phone out of my hand. “I’m not sure that’s what it is. Something isn’t right. I’ve never seen anything like this. Whatever it is, it’s not sitting well with her. It’s like she’s going through heat all over again. She has the chills but feels warm to the touch.”

“She got approval to test run the drug or something she’s been working on.” Cade loses the lighthearted tone. “Fuck. Okay. There is someone I trust in Maine that can help. I’ll fly her in. Finn, we need to keep this quiet.”

“Agreed,” I answer firmly.

Cade moving quickly to problem-solving eases some of the distrust I had toward his behavior.

He doesn’t answer me and the line disconnects.

A few moments later, my phone pings with a message from a new number.

UNKNOWN:

Hey Finn, this is Dinah Alloway. I’m leaving home now. I’ve a flight out of Boston shortly, but I have to start driving. I’ll be there in about five hours. I’ll catch a car. Cade gave me her address. Can you do me a favor?

ME:

I can, yes.

I need to monitor her condition. It sounds like she has a fever. If you don’t have a thermometer, go to the corner store and get one.

I’ll notify you once I know the number.

Wolves, out of respect for The Pricolici, don’t use last names beginning with A unless they’re blood to the Ardelean Bloodline. Assuming Dinah is wolf, she’s related to Lena.

The idea of leaving Lena doesn’t sit right with me. But Dinah’s request sounds important, too important to put off. Using Lena’s shower, I rinse off and put on my clothes from a few days ago. Wearing dirty clothes isn’t ideal, but with no other option, it’s good enough to get to the pharmacy down the

street.

I dart down the block, and my wolf fights me the entire way, wanting to go back to her. Unfamiliar with the aisles, I wander, weaving in and out of them until I find my way to the one I need.

My wolf doesn't like the distance either. He rushes me, reminding me he'd be a faster runner on the way back. But he lacks thumbs for doors, keys, and elevator buttons, and this is my only set of clothes. Nothing in Lena's closet will fit me.

Lena hasn't moved at all since I've been gone. I check her temperature. Her fever is 106. I double-check; it's been so long since I've heard of a wolf running a fever outside of heat. My temperature is 103.5. I feel fine, and hers is significantly higher.

Pulling out my phone, I text Dinah again.

Her temperature is 106. Should I be doing anything for her?

A few minutes pass but they feel like hours.

DINAH ALLOWAY:

How long do you think it's been that high?

About 90 minutes.

See if she has an ice pack, try and bring it down a bit. Between her legs, under her arms, or around her neck, depending on the size of the ice pack and your comfort level. I'll text you once we're in the air.

I head to the freezer. One of the few things in her freezer, next to a bag of broccoli and cheese, is a solid ice bag.

"Finn," she murmurs when I come with the bag, wrapped in a soft towel.

"I'm here, Kathleen." My voice comes out gravelly with fear, and I can't fight it back. "You're really sick, faolan. Cade is sending Dinah Alloway to take a look. She said to cool you off, I've got a cold pack for you," I whisper to stop the quake of fear. I run my hand through her hair. "Where do you want to put it?"

"Go away," she hisses.

The light feeling in my chest from her asking for me slowly fades as she demands I leave.

I inform her, "I'm not going anywhere until you're safe. Let's get you lying on this ice bag."

Pulling her up slightly, I rest the cool bag behind her shoulders and neck.

She shudders hard, her teeth immediately chattering. I pull the blankets off the end of the bed to cover her, hoping it helps with the chills. It seems like the right move. Dinah will be here soon enough to tell me how badly I'm fucking up.

I don't know how to care for someone sick. I've helped with the wounded, the bleeding out, and the ones on the way to death's door but never anything like this.

"I'll be back in a bit, Kathleen. Get some rest." I leave the bedroom door only slightly ajar as I walk out.

I begin pacing and turn on the living room light now that the sun is setting.

Our mate is unwell. My wolf paces inside me. We're back and forth across her apartment. I finish the dishes from our last meal and scrounge the fridge but find no remaining food.

I check on Lena every ten minutes and message Dinah updates about the fever holding steady for the entire flight. She instructs me on moving and removing the ice bag. Lena objects less and less each time.

Finally, a message with hope comes in.

DINAH ALLOWAY:

I've landed at MSP and I'm catching a car to head that way. Cade mentioned you're carrying a firearm. I'd appreciate not seeing it. I'll be coming to the door wearing a set of blue scrubs. You'll be able to see the family resemblance, but in the event not, here's a picture of Lena and me at Equinox this spring.

A beautiful picture of Lena and another woman comes through. They're smiling wide. You'd have to be an idiot to miss the family resemblance between them. In tidying up, I had hung my coat by the door. I look at the chest holster tucked inside and rotate the folds to hide it from sight. I have nowhere to put it besides the rental car, which is a good way to lose an unmarked gun.

DINAH ALLOWAY:

Have you eaten? I know Lena is a shit cook so I can't imagine that you've had anything substantial since before her heat. Text me what you like. I'll get it.

Do you know what she took?

Never mind on the medication, I'll figure that out when I get there.

Not in the last 12 hours, but we ate well during her heat. I can cook. I don't know what she took.

I sit for barely a quarter of a rugby match, trying to distract myself, before there's a knock at the door.

When I'm within talking distance of the door, I ask, "Who's there?"

"Finn, it's Dinah." The voice sounds tired.

Stepping closer, I check the peephole, and sure enough, the woman from the picture is in blue scrubs, carrying a large bag.

"Finn, open the damn door." A well-versed growl accompanies her demand.

I do as the woman asks and let her in.

"Thank you." She walks right over to the counter and sets down the bag. "Help yourself. I'm checking on Lena."

And with nothing more, she beelines for the bedroom. The door closes with a soft click behind her.

Alarm bells go off in my head. I dart over to the door, open it, and stand there watching.

Dinah looks at me and shakes her head with a huff.

I overreacted. I know this, but my mate is ill.

Dinah dismisses my behavior by muttering, "Spends a heat with a woman, gets all overprotective, typical man."

Clicking on the lamp on the far side of the room, Dinah eyes me suspiciously before walking back over to Lena.

Dinah is tender and loving toward her. "Hey, Lena, can you wake up for me? I need a few minutes to check you out. Then we'll get you some food and back to bed, okay?"

Lena stirs. "Finn. Go away."

Dinah looks at me expectantly.

I shake my head. *Not happening.*

With a roll of her eyes, Dinah reasons, "I need Finn to stay for a bit. I might need his muscles. I want to make sure you're okay before I tell him to fuck off. Can you open your eyes for me?"

Lena blinks against the light.

Dinah smiles. "Hey. Good to see you. How you feeling?"

“Like I got hit by a bus,” she groans, and her body shakes.

Dinah starts pulling back the blanket.

Lena shivers harder. “Cold.”

“Well, if you hadn’t decided to become your own guinea pig, maybe you’d feel better.” Dinah sasses her.

I’m starting to like her cousin. She’s clearly got the same high spirit. Carefully, Dinah pulls back the final sheet, revealing Lena’s shoulder. Dinah’s scrutinizing eyes dart toward me. Eyebrows raised, she’s silently scolding, like I’m a schoolboy caught by the headmistress in the school office stealing candy.

I pull my T-shirt collar aside, showing her the matching mark. It’s not enough to appease Dinah entirely, but she does relax a bit. I have an odd suspicion Dinah wouldn’t have hesitated to try and gut me if we didn’t have matching marks.

Lena’s drifting in and out of consciousness, and it causes my wolf to pace back and forth.

Working in silence, Dinah does all sorts of prodding and holding Lena’s body. She watches her clock, counting something. Lena doesn’t complain until Dinah gets to her lower abdomen. Her body curls in pain as she groans.

With raised eyebrows, Dinah looks at me for answers.

Shaking my head, I explain, “She hasn’t complained about it. Nothing was abnormal during her heat.”

Biting her lips together, Dinah darts her eyes about as she thinks. Cautiously she moves Lena’s thighs apart. The smell of blood permeates the room.

Dinah pulls her phone out of her scrub pocket and dials. “I need an MRI and an ultrasound.” Dinah’s voice remains calm, but she doesn’t address the person by name. “Yes. Send me the address?” She nods. Her eyes flick up to look at me. “Go eat a few bites of food. We need to move her. I can’t have you biting off anyone’s head.”

Trusting Dinah, I do as she says and grab the first container of food. The cheeseburger is tasteless in my mouth. I eat it as fast as I can, ready to move forward.

Dinah comes out to the kitchen and opens another container.

Between bites, she explains, “Cade is getting us in at the U. He said you’d be able to help push us through? I don’t want you to panic. She’s sick, but I don’t think this is fatal.”

Her telling me not to panic does nothing for how I'm feeling. *Did I do something wrong?* Spreading my hands out on the counter, I look at the half-empty container of soggy chips in front of me.

"Finn," Dinah says. "You didn't cause this. You being here might be the difference between life and death."

I shake my head. "I couldn't make myself leave. We didn't talk about us first. Obviously, ignoring the connection between us was daft, but it wasn't supposed to be an issue. I wanted to win her over."

Dinah listens while she eats. A few minutes pass before she puts in her two cents.

"Lena has spent so much time pushing people away, this may have been her only opportunity to connect with someone. Even if she'll hate it. It might be nice for her to have someone grounding her and keeping her safe. She could do significantly worse than the O'Brien's Enforcer."

"O'Leary. Ex-Enforcer." I correct her.

Dinah's eyes glint with what seems like a devious flare, something she knows that I don't.



INSIDE THE HOUR, DINAH AND I HELP LENA INTO SOME CLOTHES BEFORE I carry her to the car and again into the back door of the animal science building. Despite the late hour, Doctor Thorpe and a couple of the other medical staffers are there.

They rush us through a wing I hadn't been into during my observations. I set Lena down on a gurney. They quickly undress her. I don't know how to help, but standing here, watching her and being powerless to fix this, fix her, fills my body with cold fear.

"Finn, I know we just met. I know you're scared, but we can't work if you keep growling." Dinah looks at me. She catches my eyes, holding my gaze. Her look pleads with me. "You have to calm down, or you will have to go outside."

I force myself to back away against the wall and hold my hands up in surrender.

My wolf demands we do all we can to stay with Lena.

Doctor Thorpe sees my mating mark on Lena's neck. The most

condescending tone comes from him as he states a disapproving, “Ah.”

A snarl comes from within me. I stride forward while hot anger burns away the fear deep in my gut.

“Finn!” Dinah snaps.

Boldly she puts herself between me and the judgmental Doctor Thorpe. Her proximity stops my snarl. The growl keeps rolling, and my wolf is at the surface, ready to fight, to defend our mate.

She pushes an Alpha command that presses forward but doesn’t compel me. “Go outside. Call Cade.”

“I’m not leaving her alone,” I growl, and my last words come out with a hateful snap in Doctor Thorpe’s direction. “With him.”

Dinah places her hand on my sternum, like Lena had, and speaks with a calm tone and quick words. “Think of what Lena is feeling from you through your bond. She needs you steady. I’ll be here. I won’t leave her alone.”

I step back from her, chewing on my tongue. I try to think of anything that’s not putting Doctor Thorpe’s head through a wall as I step back in retreat.

“It’s clear he’s still experiencing the effects of her condition.” Doctor Thorpe’s voice drips with a tone that makes me see red.

Does Dinah need his assistance? I could remove his head from his shoulders for that.

Drawing my attention to her, Dinah nods me off and doesn’t engage with Doctor Thorpe’s remark. She tunes her attention, strictly focused on Lena. She’s right. I have to take my cue from her. Lena doesn’t need turmoil from me in our already weak bond.

Dinah leans down and murmurs to Lena, trying to be too quiet for me to hear, but I catch most of it and am able to fill in the rest. “When we get you better, I’m gonna be so mad at you first and proud of you second.”

“That’s fine,” my mate whispers back.

It hurts she hasn’t spoken to me. Now’s not the time to sink into the pain it’s causing in my chest. I’ll figure out what’s happened between us, why she’s pulling away, after she survives this.

“Finn.” Dinah looks at me after they’ve hooked her up to various machines. I pull my eyes away from my mate to look at her. “We need to do a pelvic exam in order to figure out this bleeding. Then we’ll do some other tests. If you can’t handle us touching her, you’ve got to go outside. We’re trying to help.”

Don't you dare leave her, my wolf presses. We'll be calm, but we can't leave her.

My wolf is willing to compromise. He sits in my mind anchoring us both.

I nod to her but don't move. Dinah takes it as enough of an answer. My phone buzzes in my pocket. Pulling it out, I force my eyes away from the two of them and their various medical instruments. None of which I have any idea what they do. I glance down only to read it.

CADE ALDEN:

I'm here. Come let us in. I know Dinah's probably working. I hear we need to talk.

"Cade's arrived," I explain.

Hesitantly, I'm turning to leave when Dinah gives me an encouraging nod. She doesn't bother lying to me and saying it'll be alright. The truth is my mate is sick. We're not sure if she's living or dying.

My wolf riots over leaving her, but Lena is where she needs to be. She needs help.

If I want to have a chance to be here when she's better, or until she gets better at the very least, I need to make sure Cade doesn't kill me first. I need to give him a reason not to kill me. Obeying orders is always a good first step toward allegiance.

Opening the door for Cade, I step aside. His blue eyes turn gold as he examines me before smoothly guiding his mate in front of him, letting her lead the way into the building. My stomach hangs low in my gut, filled with shame at seeing them.

How much does he blame me for this? How much am I to blame for this?

Deacon Alden stalks in behind them. I'm unsure why, but I wasn't expecting him even though he's her brother too. Chills ripple through my body as he walks past.

I follow the three of them. Cade either knows where we're headed or follows my scent back to where Lena is.

"Cade, Lena would kill me if you came in here right now," Dinah calls as we approach the door.

Patently and respectfully, I wait with them. Cade is so still that the hair on the back of my neck rises.

My wolf paces, unsettled with the tension between The Leviathan and myself. I don't blame him. With Magnus, I knew where I stood. Our

relationship as brothers, raised from pups, gave us the strength to work together as a team despite both being strong Alpha wolves. The Leviathan is a different creature altogether. Our single pack run wasn't enough to establish any sort of understanding of each other.

A few minutes later, Dinah opens the door to the room where they'd been looking after Lena.

I watch the Aldens rather than looking at Dinah. Thalia clings tightly to Cade's arm and darts her eyes back and forth as she studies Dinah. Struggling, I pull my eyes from Thalia to look at the woman who looks so much like my mate.

"She's stable and running a fever. The bleeding appears to be similar in nature to, but significantly more intense than, the start of another heat cycle."

I expect her to be looking at Cade, but Dinah addresses me.

Cade cocks his head, looking between us before settling his gaze on Dinah.

"We're running bloodwork to see what that'll entail. It could possibly be more like a menstrual cycle in humans. It's a lot of blood, and that's cause for alarm. We're getting the portable MRI down here to take a look and maybe a CT scan. Her body is strong. I can tell you took excellent care of her. She's well hydrated and hasn't lost any weight." Dinah's voice is warm as she explains what she knows.

Her hand finds my shoulder and rests there for a moment.

I wasn't expecting her reassurance in this.

Dinah turns to Cade before looking to Deacon. "Before you go all big brothers on Finn, listen to this again. He took excellent care of Lena. She's strong going through whatever this pill is doing to her. I do not believe Finn did anything to cause this. We'll have to see what we can do. I'm consulting with a few physicians I know who developed the original versions of the heat suppressants. While it's not the same medications she took, I'm wondering if they ever had such a violent reaction in the earlier days. I don't know a lot about any of this, so I don't know what to expect. Doctor Thorpe is combing the data but . . ." Dinah takes a minute. "It could be a combo of taking a med to start her heat and then doing this. It could be the drug she created. I don't have an answer for what's going on. But whatever it is, Finn is the reason she's still here."

Without a word, Cade nods and raises the hand not attached to his mate in surrender.

Looking at Deacon, she gives him a warm smile. “She’s asking for you. She’s decent. Want to come back with me?”

Deacon nods. “Yeah.”

Turning to no one, Deacon snaps, “Fuck’s sake, stay here.”

That must be his gift. I’ll have to revisit this later.

Once they’re gone, Cade turns to me. He runs his hand across the back of his neck. “I’m glad you were there. Thank you.”

I’m not sure what sort of madhouse I’ve found myself in, but there’s something incredibly different about the Aldens from the rest of the Ardeleans. There’s a secret, and it’s one I haven’t quite been let in on.

CHAPTER 18

LENA

I WILL NEVER BE JUDGMENTAL OF A HUMAN WITH A COLD EVER AGAIN. I'LL never ask why they don't tough it out. If this is truly what a cold is like, I don't understand how they've survived as a species. My entire body hurts. I'm cramping again like when I was in heat, except I don't have any energy left to even beg for relief.

My wolf whines, and it's as weak as I feel, but I can tell she's looking for Finn.

I've never talked to Ansel about how I die. I never wanted to know. Maybe that was a mistake. Our dear cousin, with the Ardelean gift of seeing how you die, he's very cautious with using his gift. Ansel doesn't take the information he holds in his head lightly, but if you ask, he won't lie or hold it back. It's why he's so good at his job, which is taking care of mentally unwell wolves. Ansel gives them all the time he can.

Would it be comforting to know if this was it? I could spend the last bit of my time with people I love rather than fighting for my life?

Like our mate? my wolf interjects with a firm growl and snap of her teeth. She's uncharacteristically loud. I can't seem to keep her at bay.

"Hey, Lena, whatcha got der?" Deacon's voice cuts through in a thick fake Minnesotan accent.

It's been our thing forever. Now, more than ever, I'm glad to hear something normal.

"Oh, well Lars, dis here's a thermos. It keeps hot tings hot and cold tings cold," I answer back with as much as I can muster.

"Whatcha got in dat der thermos, Lena?" Deacon's eyes are watery, and he picks up my hand, squeezing it tightly.

His eyes aren't bloodshot. *Is he sober?*

"Vell Lars, I got a popsicle and two cups a coffee." I laugh, and it makes me cough.

Deacon sits down on the bed next to me. His accent falls away, but the levity stays. "You're gonna be okay."

"Yeah?" I ask as his hand pets across my head. "How do you know that? The ancestors figure out how to see the future?"

He huffs and answers, "I texted Ansel. He's sorry you're not feeling well and said you'll have to try harder at the dying part."

"Damn, guess that means you're stuck with me." I smile.

He knew. Deacon always knows what I need. Even if he's sucked at giving it to me sometimes, he's tried. My body melts into the bed. Fear about my situation lessens.

He nods. "You should be talking to Finn. You know that."

I hate when Deacon, of all people, gets judgy. I curl my toes, trying to hide my feelings as far away from my face as I can. "I don't want to see him. He claimed me, Deacon. I'm not free."

Tears well in my eyes. Deacon holds my hand like he did when I broke my leg or when I had nightmares or anytime I struggled in school. "Vell, Lena, I guess it's gunna be like dem der turn signals. Sometimes it'll verk and sometimes it'll not verk."

I nod.

Dinah clears her throat. "We've got the machine ready. Let's get to figuring it out."

Deacon kisses my forehead and lets go of my hands. "Dinah, I want pictures of Lena's heart if you get them. 'Cause, you know, she claims to not have one."

"I'll see if I can find it." Dinah laughs and gives me a wink.

Deacon kisses the top of Dinah's head as he gives her a half hug before heading out the door.

CHAPTER 19

FINN

IT'S BEEN OVER AN HOUR SINCE DEACON CAME BACK TO SIT WITH US. THE instant Dinah comes into the office the four of us have taken to sitting in, I know something is wrong.

“Lena’s fever spiked suddenly. She’s had a seizure.” The words come out of Dinah’s mouth, and it feels surreal.

Dinah’s hand touches my shoulder. “She’s stable, awake, speaking. We were with her when it happened and drew blood right away for analysis. We’re running an EEG. Her vitals are all over the place. Some of her discomfort and the inability to rest we believe to be coming from her wolf. She’s scared and volatile.” Dinah pauses, waiting for me to catch up with all she’s said before continuing. “I’ve been commanding her steady. It helps, but it’s not enough. I don’t think Cade’s command would be any more effective. We can try having you sit with her and steady her wolf, but realistically it might not be enough. I’ve come to ask if you’d give us permission to give her a sedative. I’d like to put her completely out for a little. Or, if you’d prefer, we can do a mild sedative, and it’ll tuck her wolf away. She needs time to let her body do some healing.”

What does she fucking mean commanding her? I want to ask but now isn’t the time. I’ll have to sort out what is and isn’t true about the Ardelean gifts. Right now, what Dinah needs is a decision. My gut instinct is to agree.

Cade starts, “Then, absolu —”

Dinah’s eyes dart to Cade, and she hits him with a stern look.

“What you see fit.” I nod and clear my throat, trying to make it easier to swallow. What I wouldn’t do for a bottle of whiskey.

“Do you want to see her before we sedate her?” Dinah shifts her weight,

beckoning me to go with her with a heavy-handed suggestion.

I follow Dinah back into the lab and the room they have Lena in. Things are stuck to her head, and wires are sticking out from underneath the blankets draped down her body. They've dressed her in a hospital gown that covers the mark I've left on her shoulder. She looks so tiny in the hospital bed. Lazily her eyes open, hearing us approach.

"Do you ever go away?" Lena growls, but it's half-hearted.

Beeping on the monitor picks up, and I look at Dinah. She pushes a button on it with a scowl.

I crouch down next to the bed and take Lena's hand in my own. "It's not that easy with me. You'll come around to the fact I'm never going away. Kathleen, did Dinah tell you what she asked me to do?"

"No, she didn't. Apparently my lucidity is being called into question?" My fierce little mate narrows her brows at Dinah, who, in turn, rolls her eyes.

The tight muscles in my back relax slowly. The dread I've been fighting back and my fears for her safety have been a constant barrage I've tried to tame. It warms my heart to see she has at least that much fighting fire within her. Hearing these medical terms thrown around, I didn't know what to expect, but the high-spirited remarks give me some semblance of hope that she'll be okay.

I stroke Lena's hand, knowing it won't matter in a minute. Once her wolf is under, Lena won't be able to feel anything through our bond.

"I gave her the okay to give you a sedative, but if you're adamant that you don't want it, I'll tell her no. But it sounds like, regardless of your wakefulness, they can get the data you need for your study. There's no reason for you to hurt like this."

"I don't like it," she whines, and it's laced with fear.

She squeezes my hand. Her eyes pleading with me add a pain in my chest that I can only equate with being stabbed.

"I understand. I won't make you do this. But you're giving us all a scare." I try to coax her into it. I know, and so does she, that ultimately it'll come down to her safety. I'm willing to risk her hating me for it. I'd rather her be angry at me than burying her. It's my job as her mate, and Dominant, to do what's right for her, even if that makes her upset with me. "Will you let them sedate you?"

Her legs and feet squirm. My heart aches knowing how stressed she is.

She gives a small nod.

I squeeze her hand. “Good, faolan.”

Dinah doesn’t wait. She plunges a needle into the junction of the IV.

I stay at Lena’s bedside until her eyes drift shut. I kiss her forehead, then look at Dinah.

Before I speak, Dinah does. “Not me. Cade.”

“Take care of her?” I pull myself from Lena’s side.

My wolf whines, not wanting to leave her like this, vulnerable. But I need answers as to why an Alpha wolf is being commanded by another, and I won’t get it from her bedside.

“I promise.” Dinah nods. “If anything changes, you’ll be the first to know.”

When I return to the impromptu waiting area, Cade’s voice comes with a low growl. “A word, please?”

Thalia eyes me with a furrowed brow and wrinkled nose, trying to figure out the change in the room.

Giving a soft nod, I dismiss myself and open the door to the adjacent lab. My head is reeling.

I turn to look at him, squaring my shoulders.

“So, when were *you* planning to tell me that you’ve claimed my little sister?” Cade snarls, The Leviathan surfacing in Cade’s eyes. “Dinah said we had something to talk about, but I assumed it’s because you were putting in an intention, not that you sank your teeth in her.”

My wolf has never cowered before, but now, his tail is between his legs. We divert our gaze and turn our head away from him. Moving slowly, I pull aside my shirt collar, revealing the mating mark Lena gifted me.

The snarl stops but barely. Cade runs his hands through his hair, then down his face before muttering, “Fuck.”

I stand silently as Cade stalks back and forth across the lab. Growling, he shakes his head, glaring at me on each pass. I can’t tell if he’s plotting my death or if he’s coming to terms with what’s happened.

Never having had a little sister, I can only imagine how this feels. If the tension in the room is even half of what he’s feeling, I’m glad Ma chose to stop trying when she had me. All the times she said she’d rather be a bad Catholic than have any more of us running around is starting to make sense.

“You couldn’t have fucking waited? At least give me the fucking time to get Revecca to go away before you claimed my little sister?” Cade snaps, his fists tight at his side.

I imagine if his mate weren't outside this room, he'd have laid into me.

I set my jaw and try to fight down my response, but my smart mouth moves without my brain. "In my defense, she bit me first."

The tension breaks. In an instant, Cade's body relaxes. "Fuck, I knew she'd snap eventually."

Cade braces his hands on his hips, looking at me without saying anything. I stand ramrod straight, tension coiled in my body, returning the silence. He releases a sigh, and my wolf settles as The Leviathan retreats. Cade hangs his head before motioning toward the door back to where his mate is.

I hesitate and ask the question that's driving me nuts. "What did Dinah mean about commanding Lena's wolf? I thought commanding other alphas was only something The Leviathan could do and the influence of The Pricolici not . . ."

The words die in my throat seeing Cade's expression. Raising his eyebrows, he crosses his arms over his chest.

"How did you get through her heat without noticing?" Cade tilts his head to the side. "Lena isn't an Alpha wolf."

"What?" I furrow my brows and narrow my eyes at him.

My heart is hammering in my chest. *No. There's no way. But she's an Alpha Female?*

"You really don't know?" Cade unfolds his arms and pushes his hand back through his hair. "She'll love knowing she fooled you."

Shaking my head, I push him for more information. "Just tell me."

"Lena's wolf is a submissive," Cade says.

None of this makes sense. The way she . . . *No. How the fuck did I miss this?* I turn away from him, resting both hands on the table for support. She submits so easily during her heat, the way she holds back her wolf, how she looks away from me and nuzzles my neck. I told Lena she had a submissive side and looked right through her. My mate said the words 'I'm a submissive,' and I didn't hear it. It's no wonder she's angry with me. I'm angry with myself.

All I needed to do was listen closer. Our bond should be stronger by now, but I wasn't paying attention. Too excited that I found her, in love with the idea of possessing her, only for me to miss the entire point of her existence. My mate is the spare heiress to The Pricolici, and God put her in The Leviathan's pack for balance. Whatever God's plan, he needed him to have a balancing force. I missed it. *You get what you ask for, but God doesn't make*

it easy.

Cade stays silent next to me while I beat myself up.

We have never seen her wolf. There was no way to be certain without seeing her wolf. My wolf assures me I'm not a complete idiot.

Lena never, not even once, let her wolf to the surface to show us a glimpse into her true nature.

"I should have seen it. I didn't see it and shouldn't have ever gone to her home without supervision. She was vulnerable. I wouldn't blame you for taking me out back and shooting me." I hang my head. Gripping the edge of the workbench, I ask him like he can explain my own stupidity to me, "How did I fucking miss it? All the fucking signs were there."

Cade snorts. "You've known her what? Ten days at most?"

I can't bring myself to look at him. At thirty, he's Sovereign Alpha and successfully mated. Until two weeks ago, I thought I had a handle on how life would go. I suppose this is 'tell your plans to God and watch him laugh' or something like that.

Cade rests his hand on my shoulder. It's odd being touched by a near stranger. I turn my head to look at him.

He elaborates. "Like you've spent your life learning how to fight and enforce for The Hellhound, Lena's spent her life learning how to hide who she is from the rest of the world. If not for her sake, for mine. I never should have let her."

Lena has spent her life hiding her submissive? Her whole life? I know submissives aren't valued and held in as high of esteem as they are in Ireland, but this is unacceptable. Having to suppress her natural disposition in favor of self-preservation. I'm angry, and my rage toward Cade is growing quickly. He must know the damage this has done to her and her wolf. Why isn't he bothered by it?

I take a deep breath. Biting his head off about how wrong he was for allowing her to hide her wolf won't help the situation—with my mate or finding amnesty with her pack. As much as it pains me, I choose to focus on how I failed Lena in this.

My wolf is growling and snapping, demanding answers. I pull him back, arguably doing the same thing to him that Lena has done for her entire life, but there's a time for bloodshed and it isn't now.

I hang my head in defeat, turning back to my own shortcomings. "It's no excuse. There were signs, and I missed them. Looking back, I can't believe I

missed it.” I shake my head, bitter words coming out fueled with an angry fire. I shrug Cade off and begin pacing. “I fucking even said how rare it was for an Alpha wolf to have a submissive side.”

“Hind—” Cade starts.

“If you finish that sentence with sight is twenty-twenty.” I give him a stern look.

He holds his hand up in a ‘don’t shoot’ motion. Cade laughs in an attempt to break our tension for a moment. “Don’t be hard on yourself when it comes to her, Finn.”

Shaking my head, I sigh. “I’m sorry.” And despite recognizing his fault in this as well, I am.

“For what?” Cade cocks his head to the side.

That damn grin still painted across his face. How can he find humor right now?

I tilt my head and shrug. “For how big of an arse I’ll be for a little while.”

“Ahh, preemptive.” Cade chuckles and nods. “I mean it though, Finn. There’s only so much I’ll be able to protect you from here. She needs you to be civilized when dealing with others who don’t understand your relationship and the boundaries you two need with others. This isn’t a war zone. We can’t assault people because we want to.” He draws a breath and finishes through a sigh, “Especially idiot humans.”

“Yes, Sovereign,” I answer.

“I’m having sentries come take my mate and brother home. Go check out of your hotel and put your items in Lena’s apartment. I’ll update you if Lena wakes up. Get some sleep at her place if you can. Eat something, and when you’re more stable, come back.”

Cade gives me orders. It’s refreshing to have strict objectives.

The king of last-minute reminders, Cade holds up a finger. “Water her plant. She’ll be pissed if that thing dies.”

I don’t say anything as I leave to complete the tasks at hand, orders given to me by the Alpha I serve.

CHAPTER 20

FINN

FOUR MORE DAYS PASS AFTER ANOTHER OF LENA'S HEALTH STRUGGLES. FIVE more seizures, which were each more terrifying than the last. It was a blur when they had to give her a blood transfusion after something ruptured. She received two more rounds of total sedation. And over the last twenty-four hours, a lighter sedative. My beautiful little mate has been in and out of consciousness.

Never in my life have I been this scared. *Why would God only give us a week of knowing her? Punishment probably. There's no greater penance.*

The healing process has been long, too long. Every time she wakes, when I'm with her, Lena fights me being there a little harder. I don't bend to her will and instead reassure her I'm not letting her go. Ever. As she gets more tired, ever so sweetly, she asks me to stay with her and holds my hand while drifting off.

Cade and I swap places day and night. Nearing shift change, when I'm to leave for the night, my wolf goes on edge.

"Yeah, I brought Lena flowers. I guess I wasn't aware wolves weren't allowed at hospitals. I thought they might make her feel better." Brayden's squeaky little rodent voice sets me on edge.

I was assured he wouldn't be allowed in this wing of the building.

"Oh." Nikki, the wolf from Lena's lab who has come down here specifically to be dedicated to Lena's lab results, panics. She stumbles over her words. "I don't think that's a good idea. Pollen and all. We can keep them out here for when she's a bit better. We're not allowing any visitors."

"Good point, I don't want to make her more sick. I'll pop in and see if she's awake. I won't stay long." Brayden's footfalls indicate the little

shitehawke keeps advancing.

“Uhhh.” Nikki tries but keeps floundering. “Doctor Thorpe was clear with his orders.”

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. He’s out on Saturdays.”

Brayden strolls right through the door, hands in his pockets, like he owns the place.

“Leave.” I let the Alpha command out, hoping Lena is deep enough into her sleep that the command won’t disturb her wolf.

I fight the urge to snap my jaws and put the fear of my wrath into him.

Snap his bird bones. My wolf offers a solution to the hateful bile bubbling within me.

Despite the command, he walks forward. “I want to say hi.”

“She’s asleep and needs her rest. Leave.” I try again, but keeping my voice down is hard.

All I want to do is snarl and scare him out of her room. Lena’s too vulnerable for this creep to be in her space, me here or otherwise.

Rip him limb from limb. Toss him in the river, my wolf chants on repeat.

It sounds like a wonderful idea. If it looks like an accident, none would be the wiser, right?

“Mr. Bachman.” Cade’s cool tone scolds darkly as he steps into the room, startling the idiot.

Brayden turns to Cade. Wearing a suit and looking significantly more intimidating than his usual casual look, Cade doesn’t smile, adding to the predatory nature. His steel-blue eyes cut into Brayden, who rightfully cowers.

“I was coming to say hi,” Brayden repeats himself.

The Leviathan’s eyes glow through Cade, now threateningly close to the surface. Cade nods with an eyebrow raised.

“Well, you’ve come, you’ve given your regards. No need for the Minnesota goodbye.”

Daggers shooting from Brayden’s eyes are enough to make me roll my own. I dislike that it comes down to my Alpha defending my mate instead of myself, but I’ve made a commitment to Cade to keep things less hands-on. The idea of an accident sounds more tempting by the second.

I pull my eyes from them as Lena moans in her sleep.

When the footsteps of my least favorite human are out of earshot, Cade speaks. “I’ll have a sentry or guard from Corinth Security posted here. You shouldn’t have to deal with him.”

With a nod of appreciation, I stand to take my leave. “Thank you.”

Cade looks at Lena while loosening his tie. “Any change?”

“A little more wakefulness today. Dinah says it’s closer to her being awake enough to move home.” I nod.

It seemed implied Lena would be going back to the Aldens’ rather than her apartment. I wasn’t extended a formal invite, but I don’t expect one.

“Get some rest.” He pats my shoulder. “I don’t know too much about Catholicism, but I’m guessing tomorrow morning you’ll be wanting to attend a gathering of some nature.”

He’s not wrong. I’m due for confession and Mass. *Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned . . . I’ve spent a week fucking the most perfect woman in the world outside of wedlock. I’ve contemplated murder of an innocent man. Mostly innocent.*

“If possible, but I don’t expect you to take more time away from your family. I’ll gladly miss Mass for you to see your mate,” I offer in an attempt to demonstrate my dedication to her.

God will have to forgive me for missing Mass for her.

Cade smiles despite the days we’ve spent worried about Lena. He shakes his head. “You and she aren’t obligations. You’re not burdens nor an inconvenience. We all want to be here for Lena, but The Leviathan and I agree it would be easier for you if I’m here when you can’t be. What time should I be here for you to go tomorrow?”

After looking up the Mass times on the website, I calculate the least amount of time I would need Cade to cover. He tells me to take the extra hour and get things done before I come back, and when I shake his hand, he pulls me into a hug.

I’m almost out the door when he says, “Call your Ma. She seems to think you’re dead and doesn’t believe me that you’ve been too busy to call.”

Scrubbing my hand down my face, I go to apologize for her. I know she can be aggressive. “I’m —”

“Don’t apologize.” Cade cuts me off. “We never had that. It’s nice to see someone love you enough to call me and threaten my life.”

Nodding is the only answer I can formulate. Despite my feelings of how Cade’s handled Lena’s submissive wolf, I’ve been blessed with the most extraordinary second family.

CHAPTER 21

LENA

WHEN I OPEN MY EYES, THE UGLY YELLOWING CEILING TILES OF THE EMPTY office, which has been set up as a temporary hospital room, greet me.

“You lucid this time?” Cade’s voice alerts me to where he is in relation to the ceiling.

I roll my head over to look at him. Dread of his disapproval makes its way along my spine.

“Ish,” I answer.

Looking at him sitting in the chair, which Finn had been occupying every other time I opened my eyes, dredges up a hollow feeling inside me. The deepest part of my mind plays right into my insecurities. *He abandoned me.*

I look away from the chair and subsequently from Cade.

My wolf is missing. The mild sedative has kept her tucked away.

“Ish is better than before. Going back to sleep?” Cade squeezes my hand.

“I’m kinda awake.” I yawn and stretch a little bit. My pelvis feels funny, full, but not in an appealing way. It’s swollen like it’s stuffed with cotton. Stiff from lack of movement, my back aches. I look over at him again. “What day is it?”

“Sunday,” he answers with grit in his voice from holding back The Leviathan and, subsequently, his anger. “You’ve been hospitalized for five days.”

“Well, better than six,” I quip.

A knock at the door interrupts us.

“Oh good, you’re awake.” Dinah looks as tired as Cade does.

Without any sort of invitation, Dinah starts a variety of poking and prodding when she arrives at my side. When she presses down a little harder

on my left side, above my pelvis, the pain hits, and I jolt.

The squeak and wince come involuntarily.

“Sorry.” She winces on my behalf.

“Finn is at church, Mass, he called it. He’ll be back to take the rest of the day shift,” Cade says, keeping up with our conversation.

Dinah’s eyes catch mine. She nods before looking at Cade. “I want to check her out while she’s awake and can tell me what hurts. So, unless you want to get . . .”

Cade’s eyes widen, and he looks at me. Picking up my hand, he kisses it. “Love you. I’ll text Thalia and Deacon and let them know you’re doing better. I’d expect Finn in thirty minutes. Apparently Mass is an hour.” He heads out the door, patting Dinah on the shoulder.

He’ll really be back. I don’t know why it makes me feel both relieved and a new form of unease. Am I anxious or excited? They feel the same.

Dinah follows him to the door and closes it with a soft click behind him.

When she turns back around, I ask about the nightmare that’s been haunting me on and off in my dreams. “Am I pregnant?”

It’s been five days since my heat, so being a shifter means it would absolutely show up in a test result. Dinah struggles to formulate an answer, telltale in the way she wags her head back and forth before drawing a deep breath.

Her response comes out as a single exhale. “No.”

“Was I?”

The strain of my condition could have caused a miscarriage. I wouldn’t be surprised.

Again, Dinah shakes her head as she rolls down the blanket. “None of your tests, early or recently, have detected anything to lead us to believe you were ever or currently are pregnant. We can’t know if your pill worked or if it was a perfectly normal reason.”

Emotions hit me hard. Disappointment, happiness, and relief cycle through my body in waves, making me shudder.

I wipe tears from my eyes. “Good.”

“But.” Dinah holds out her hand, and I give her my wrist. She looks at her watch, reading my pulse, before biting her bottom lip. “There’s a chance the pills caused so much damage to your reproductive system that it’ll be too great for your wolf to heal.” Heavy sympathy laces her words.

“You’re saying . . .” My lips move, but the words don’t come out.

Dinah nods, squeezing my hand, and I watch the strongest woman I know fight tears out of her own eyes. “Pregnancy might not be an option for you. Lena, I’ve looked. I can’t see anything definite. I think taking care of yourself, avoiding stress, and embracing your wolf over the next few weeks may be key.”

Her tears trigger my own, and I can’t stop them as a few leak down my face. Pulling my hand from hers, I wipe them away.

‘Might’ and ‘chance’ don’t make for certainties. But wolves have healed extreme traumas before. There’s no reason this couldn’t be one of those cases where it takes longer. I squash my emotions deep down. I don’t need to waste energy on a game of probability. Dinah’s gift of future sight means she sometimes gets a clear picture of what your future holds, and other times, her guess is as good as the next person’s.

She’s used her gift to see, and she’s medically evaluated me. Uncertainty is better odds than no.



DINAH’S RUN A NUMBER OF TESTS FOR THE ‘SIXTY-NINTH TIME,’ SHE CLAIMS as she giggles. Apparently, with each passing minute of wakefulness, it’s a good sign I may be out of the woods. The swelling and pain in my abdomen aren’t alarming, according to Dinah, despite being abnormal. It’s up to my wolf to help me heal.

Giving me a hand as I sit up, Dinah offers to send me real food before sending off the newest set of samples to my lab associate, Nikki, for analysis. Dinah’s assured me they’ve kept my paperwork limited to Nikki for privacy. I’m glad out of all the people they picked, it was her. We’ve been friends-ish for a while. I’m not sure I’m doing friends quite right, but she seems happy with my presence and texts me first sometimes.

Cade isn’t the one who comes back in when Dinah leaves. Finn’s large frame strides through the door. The dress shirt he’s chosen today is green, which makes his brown eyes brighter when a smile paints his face in what looks like it should be joy.

“Faolan, it’s good to see you.”

The dam I use to stave off my emotions is hit hard by a raging river of disappointment. Tears stream down my face, and I can’t hold back the sobs.

Self-loathing and shame come with the reminder that I'll be responsible for telling him I've possibly become worthless as a mate. *I am a submissive and might be unable to bear his pups.*

"Shhh." Finn scoops me up from the bed and pulls me into his lap.

I'm curled up, crying into his shirt, before I can even tell him my failures.

The replay of Dinah's voice stings. The words come again and again: *There's a chance the pills caused so much damage to your reproductive system that it'll be too great for your wolf to heal.*

With my wolf still tucked away from the sedative, I can't feel Finn's wolf nor the bond that was weaving between us. *I'm a disappointment on every level. I can't feel the rejection right now.* He's holding me like he has some sort of care for me. Truly, why would he want me even after all the trouble I've put him through?

His arms around me draw warmth through my body. *This will all go away. Wait until he knows the truth.* I'll miss this when he's gone. I had thought the feeling of being cared for through my heat would be the hardest thing to get over. But that's a little more than two weeks a year. This intimacy, comfort, of letting someone touch me will hurt more when it's ripped away.

Like when Icarus flew too close to the sun, I'm now facing the fall. I'll lose both my ability to have children and my mate, all from two little pills.

"Kathleen," Finn whispers.

His voice infiltrates the sounds of my crying. I try to stop and hold it together. Waiting for him to tell me to pull it together or move past it, I fight all the emotions again. Maybe I can put the dam back together.

"Kathleen, I've fallen so damn hard for you. Don't let whatever thoughts you're having tell you otherwise. I can smell your fear. Don't do this to yourself." Finn's words sting.

He can't mean that he loves me. *That's not what he's saying. He's saying what he is because I'm crying.* I sniffle. Brick by brick, I tame the river behind a wall of self-repairs. *There's no reason to love me.*

"Let me down." Weakly I struggle in his arms.

"No." Finn refuses, holding me tighter.

After days of lying in a hospital bed, and I'm guessing being kept alive by IV fluids and who knows what else, I don't have any energy left to fight him.

Stuck in his arms, I have no choice but to wait for him to decide this is over. I don't get the dignity of calling it off. He'll get to reject me.

“Ten seconds of honesty,” Finn prompts like when I was in heat.

Only this time, it isn't uncomfortable. It's devastating. I shake my head against his chest.

“I'll go first?” he offers.

With a lack of breath control, the number comes out shakily. “Ten.”

“I've never been more scared in my life than I've been in the last five days. Heart crushing to believe I'd found you only to lose you. This fate must have been a cruel twist from God. For every sin I've ever committed, he was punishing me by taking you from me.” Finn speaks quickly, trying to get all the words out, beating the clock.

“Two, one.” I count him out.

The words catch me off guard. I have no idea how long he actually spoke for. Counting is hard when you're an emotional mess.

Finn kisses the top of my head. His nose nestles into my hair, and I can only imagine how awful it looks, smells, and feels.

He murmurs to the top of my head, “Ten.”

“There's a possibility I'm sterile after my heat.” I curl myself tighter into a ball, bracing to be set down, to be let go, to be a disappointment. “I fucked up. I've suffered for all these years through heats. Only to not even consider that the drug I was working on might work too well. Sterile and a submissive. I know it's a disappointment, and I completely understand that you'll want to reje—”

“One.” Finn cuts me off.

I close my mouth, shocked.

“Do not. Don't say that word,” Finn scolds. His voice falls softer as his arms squeeze me tighter when he continues. “I won't. Never. You have no idea how much you mean to me. How perfect you are. If we don't have pups, we don't have pups but never, never, say that word.”

He's promising me with words so fast and full of heart that I want to believe them. Maybe, just for today, I will.

CHAPTER 22

FINN

LENA CRIES HERSELF TO SLEEP IN MY ARMS. I'M STILL HOLDING HER WHEN Cade and Deacon come to relieve me for the night. Cade waves his finger in a large circle at seeing me with her. He indicates that they'll go around and give me more time with her.

Without a second thought, I gladly take the time from them, curling up in bed behind my mate as long-awaited relief from her return to the land of the living washes over me. I close my eyes. The world has become blurry from tears. With my nose buried in her hair, the comfort of having her lucid and alive releases the fear I'd been holding.

I'm angry for her. The world is not fair. It's a cruel and dark place. Lena has suffered so much injustice hiding who she is. Then to suffer every heat alone when she could have taken something to stop them. And now to know that she did it because a small part of her, maybe one she didn't realize was there, hoped that someday she'd have a family.

That moment in the bar, when I knew for sure it was her, feels like eons ago. She told me my wolf wouldn't let me leave. Lena knew then who I was to her. Why would she think I would feel less about her now? She's mine, and nothing will ever change that.

Rejection doesn't exist in my world. 'Til death do us part' is a vow I'll take before God. Somehow, Lena will come to see, my love for her will never falter. Nothing in this life could ever be too much or too hard for me to love her through.



I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG I WAS LYING BEHIND HER, BUT I'VE ONLY BEEN settled in the chair for fifteen minutes when Deacon hesitantly pokes his head in the door.

They're both staying with Lena tonight since Dinah anticipates they'll be taking her home in the morning. As much as I would rather her come back to the apartment with me, I conceded that Dinah would be more comfortable with the Aldens and not sleeping on Lena's couch. Dinah has been critical in Lena's care, and it makes sense that she should be with her a few more days. Yet, no formal invitation has been extended. It may come down to inviting myself.

"The ancestors like you." Deacon laughs when I approach them at the door to leave for the night.

"Uh." I try to formulate a response.

In the past few days, I've learned that Deacon sees and speaks with the dead, whom he calls the ancestors. His gift seems to leave him a bit eccentric.

"Don't worry. I wouldn't know what to say either." Deacon pats me on the shoulder and walks past me.

Cade rolls his eyes and pulls me in for a hug. "Try and rest."

I take my leave for the evening and walk down the long hallway back to the parking lot.

"Mr. O'Leary," Doctor Thorpe calls from behind me.

I turn around to see the doctor locking the door to a supply closet and flagging me down at the same time. I wait for him to catch up.

"With Lena's release back home, I would appreciate it if you were to return to work. I understand that until she's back to herself, you may want to spend more time with her. If you could balance perhaps a three-day-a-week schedule, as it is of the utmost importance we secure the grants and programming we've applied for." Doctor Thorpe doesn't appear to be asking.

Begrudgingly I nod. I want to be angry with his nerve to ask this so early. But I put myself in his shoes. It's been a week since I last worked, and the minimal work I've done hardly counts for anything.

I answer, "Yes, is Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday acceptable for this schedule?"

"I would rather you keep Lena's schedule of Monday through Wednesday," Doctor Thorpe states firmly.

Why does it matter that I'm on her schedule if she isn't here? Four days with Lena is still four days; it doesn't matter which ones.

I nod. "Very well. I'll be here first thing in the morning."

"Thank you for your understanding." Doctor Thorpe turns and walks away.

I don't like him, my wolf comments.

I concur.

I'm almost out to the parking lot when Cade's voice calls me back. Instantly my body goes on high alert. He wouldn't call me back if everything was fine. I turn, looking at him and examining him from head to toe.

"Shit. Sorry." Cade raises his hands. "I wasn't thinking."

I walk back toward Cade. I made Doctor Thorpe come to me, asserting dominance. It's not something I can assert over Cade.

He meets me halfway. "I need the key to your rental."

I don't move for the keys in my pocket, but Cade reaches into his. He fishes out a black key fob.

Offering it out to me, he nods toward the rows of vehicles. "Before you say it's too much, I got it for Lena's benefit. Despite knowing she'll hate that it's not red, I was willing to argue with her on color for its added anonymity and safety features."

Cade leads me toward a large black Yukon, which seems far too impractical for Lena. When Cade presses the button on the fob, headlights flicker and the sound of doors unlocking comes from a smaller vehicle tucked behind it. The next vehicle in the row, with its lights on, is a black Chevrolet version, and it's much more Lena sized. Cade waits for me to get closer and opens the driver's side door.

He starts walking through it. "Bullet-resistant glass, slightly below legal tint limit, steel-plated doors with padding for bullet resistance. All the bells and whistles of the highest-end SUVs, from remote start to heated seats and lane assist. The GPS links back to Corinth Security and me directly."

The black-on-black interior is punctuated with bright red accents. I draw a breath and blow it out in a long, even exhale. Cade pops the lid and shows me the engine. It's significantly more than standard. It's a beautiful machine.

He says, "I wanted it to be able to get out of dodge if needed."

"Cade, this is." I shake my head and fight back the smile. "I can't."

"Well, that's too bad because your name is already on the title." Cade picks up my hand and puts the keys in it. "She's your mate, but she's my baby sister. In addition to my house being overrun by a small Romanian dictator, there's a new potential threat. And I'm not leaving my baby sister

exposed. I'm betting you won't let her out of your sight. This is a good compromise."

"So, you want my rental car?" I, for no apparent reason, choose now to obediently fish my keys from my pocket.

I shake my head, thinking how funny it is that he chose dictator for Revecca. She does seem to dominate wherever she goes. Though, the title of queen implies monarchy.

"I'll get it returned for you." Cade sighs, and I see a crack in his always calm exterior. "You know how it goes. You get to be Pack Alpha, and suddenly, you've a hundred people who all work directly for you."

"I want to be let in on whatever the potential threat is." I probably should have asked sooner, but I'm in such an odd position.

The mate of the Alpha Female is never a position I've had to work with or consult before. We didn't keep one in Ireland. For all intents and purposes, we're a monarchy. I don't know what I'm entitled to or what's expected of me.

Cade doesn't miss a beat talking through the threat. "There's an issue with the press. It seems the magazines are starting to circle in on our family. Thalia's dad had a run-in with them in DC. They were asking questions about us. My publicist's phone has been ringing off the hook for the last four days. Her name is Henri, you'll be introduced later." Cade nods, closing the bonnet. "I have no choice but to believe there is some form of paparazzi here at some point. With attention comes risks, and I'm not willing to take any." Cade opens up the driver's door again. "Oh, I forgot the fun part."

I get an in-depth interior tour of the SUV. It's completely ready for tactile combat. From a place for my handgun alongside the driver's seat to a full-on rifle in the back and ammunition storage.

He buttons up the back of the vehicle and turns to look at me, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine." I lie, poorly.

Cade shakes his head. "Listen, if you don't want to talk, that's fine. Don't lie to my face ever again."

"What am I supposed to say?" I'm so fucking angry, and it's not at anyone in particular. I'm angry, and it's burning me up inside. *How do I explain that?*

"The truth always works." Cade steps over to his Yukon and opens the back. He pulls out two camp chairs, of all things. "Step into my office."

I do as I'm told, sitting down in one of the chairs. Cade sits down in the other and waits for me to talk. I have no idea where to start. But I know I can't start talking about her hiding who she is until I've had more words about it with Lena. It's only fair that I talk about her with her first.

After a minute, Cade opens up the conversation for me. "I heard Doctor Thorpe's request for you to return to work. It might be good for you to do something, not worrying, but I would absolutely have no problem telling the old bat to stuff it if you want to stay longer with Lena."

"I don't know," I answer. *Finally, a somewhat invitation to be with her.* My finger runs over the seams of the armrest on the chair. "On one hand, maybe Lena needs the space. On the other hand, I want to smother her because, apparently, she believes I'll reject her."

Cade raises his eyebrows, and his jaw goes slack. I realize he doesn't know. I cover my mouth with my hand, dragging it through my beard. *Do I tell him what she told me?*

Pack. My wolf encourages making a strong tie to him. *Just because it's new doesn't make it any less our home. We could do well here. They love our mate.*

"Lena's convinced, in the event that she's permanently damaged, I'll reject her for not being able to have pups." I get the words out, but my voice doesn't sound like my own. A sinking feeling fills my gut, dropping lower and lower.

He hangs his head, running his hands back through his hair.

Despite the feeling in my gut, I keep talking. "I don't understand what I've done to make her feel like I would care. Why doesn't she feel the same way about me? What am I doing wrong?"

"Nothing." Cade looks at me and, with a stern voice, drills it into my head. "You've done nothing wrong."

I shake my head. "I don't know what to do, Cade. Do I smother her? Do I give her space? I know nothing about her despite all the time we've spent together. We spent time talking, and I thought we had made progress, and now this . . . it's like she's treating me as a stranger, and I can't figure out what I did."

"Yeah. That tracks." Cade nods his head, leaning back into his chair again. He's quiet for a moment. "Do you want advice? Or do you want to leave this as a solid venting session?"

No one has ever asked that before. Am I venting, or do I want advice?

I shake my head. "I fucked up. I'll fix it."

He shrugs, fighting a smile. "Plan on trying to work this week and coming out to the house on Thursday and staying the weekend. If it's too much to be away from her, then let me deal with Thorpe and come out whenever you want. Gatehouse knows this vehicle and plate number. The house is staffed twenty-four-seven, so someone will show you to Lena's room."

Finally, a whole invitation.

Cade seems to have a contingency plan for everything. It's nice, familiar, to have someone thinking through the options. It settles my stomach a bit. I'm capable of running things on my own, but fuck, it's nice having a friend.

"Can I ask your advice on something?" Cade scrubs his hand down his face before dropping it into his lap.

The shock I'm feeling must pass across my face because Cade sighs, bobbing his head. "I know. Trust me, I know. But I'm smart enough to know when I'm in over my head, and you've a lot more experience on running a, well, not quite a country, but an army. The Leviathan has plenty of ideas on how to deal with my problems, but they're not exactly best practices for this era."

"You and he are quite different, aren't you?" I can only imagine what an odd feeling it must be to have someone so different in my brain. My wolf is there, but we're very in unison.

With an eye roll, he answers, "If I had a beer, I'd offer you one. But you don't know the half of it."

"I don't know if I'll have best practices. I've knocked more than a few boyos' heads in for actin' the maggot, but I hope they're more up-to-date than The Leviathan," I offer.

Hell, it'd be nice to use my actual life experience rather than whatever bean counting the school has me doing.

"I've got shit attendance at pack events. There are truancy issues with the kids still attending the human school. Worse issues with the kids who are supposed to be finishing their degrees through online school." Cade draws a deep breath before continuing. "I've staff at the house full-time because I've enough people coming and going and hanging out. But I've literally had to hang velvet ropes and lock doors to keep people out of our personal spaces. I'm fine sharing the common areas, but I don't need anyone snooping around my bedroom."

I laugh. "I can only imagine."

"I'm having issues finding new advisors, and the accountant is struggling to get the information we need for the pack fund from some individuals. They're claiming they want to go back to the literal outdated ways, and I'm fairly certain it's to fuck with me." Cade shakes his head. "Honestly, humans and the media are becoming easier to deal with than our own people."

"You have too much hay on the fork, but you already know that," I tell him. "You've either got to make a massive statement that no one will be able to dispute or find a way to make the people meet you on your level."

Cade blows a raspberry. "Does that statement usually involve bloodshed?"

I shrug. "Usually. What do you have against knocking a few heads in now and again?"

"I made a promise to the Luna that I'd be better than the old ways. I would follow the course my cousins and I had always said we would." Cade gestures to me. "But now I'm understanding why sometimes bashing a few heads together might be easier."

"There's nothing wrong with not wanting to be the bad guy, but at some point, you have to put your foot down and quit expecting wolves to get along civilly. We're wild at our cores, and that wild we can't control must be met with violence," I advise him.

My phone starts to ring, so I fish it from my pocket.

I look at Cade. "Do you know anyone whose number ends in 4021?"

"Yeah, Deacon." Cade reaches in his pocket and pulls out his phone. He shakes his head, indicating he doesn't have any missed messages.

"Hello?" I answer my phone.

"Cool, hey, it's Deacon. Can you tell my idiot brother he forgot to bring back dinner?" Deacon says quickly. "Also, since he forgot. You should come back up here so he and I can go get food. I'll bring you some back."

"Sure. I'll be right up." I look at my phone only for Deacon to have already hung up on me.

I do a quick hit of save and keep him in my contacts.

"Translation: your mate is awake, and she wants you but is too frustrated to say it herself. You good to do a full twenty-four hours here?" Cade translates Deacon's gibberish.

How the hell did Cade come to that conclusion?

But I'm already out of the chair. I pause. Pulling my gaze from the door, I

draw it back to him and purse my lips. *Do I have to ask to be dismissed?*

Cade shakes his head and, with a laugh, seems to understand my dilemma. “The fuck are you waiting for? Her to change her mind?”

With long strides, I walk as fast as I can without actually running back to Lena’s room.

Deacon just misses running into me on his way out the door. He salutes and heads off without another word.

Lena’s curled up in her bed, facing away from the door. She doesn’t pick her head up when I come in.

“Kathleen,” I call, but she doesn’t move.

I sit behind her on the bed, running my hand up and down her arm.

“I’m sorry,” Lena whispers.

How can an apology break your heart so much?

I shuffle and lie down, wrapping my arms around her. Lena wiggles, fighting for a moment before she settles in. Everything about her is somber and sick with grief. I want to take it all from her, to pull her sadness into me and protect her from ever knowing this hurt again; I would keep all her pain as my own. There’s nothing I wouldn’t shield her from.

CHAPTER 23

LENA

THROUGH THE DULL HAZE OF THE MORNING LIGHT, I WAKE UP TO FIND FINN still sleeping behind me. His body keeps me pleasantly warm despite the cool temperature of the lab. But, more than that, his presence is comforting. At least a part of him has connected with me. No one chooses to sleep in a hospital bed for fun, even more so when they're as large as Finn and trying to share it.

The question remains, however, do I want him to want me?

My eyes feel heavy, and after a few more minutes, I can no longer keep running the pro-con list in my head.



FINN WAS GONE WHEN I WOKE UP THIS MORNING. IT'S FOR THE BEST. I shouldn't be surprised he was willing to get away from me.

I'll go back to our house in the country, take the week catching up with classes. We'll break the bond.

"Morning, Lena." Deacon comes in and kisses the top of my head.

He's carrying a bag of food, and I'm salivating at the first whiff.

"Hey, Deacon." I reach for the bag.

He raises it out of my reach, almost whacking Dinah in the face with it.

Dinah ducks and steps around him. "Come on, enough dying. Time to get on your feet."

"I was not dying," I argue with a sigh.

The truth is, though, it sure felt like it. In part, I may have died. My wolf

still hasn't responded since I've been out of sedation. It's been two days, and even with Finn being here, who she's been obsessed with, she wouldn't come forward. It would suit her to get lost in a slumber and never wake again.

"Mmmm, kinda seemed like it for a hot minute." Deacon opens the bag of goodies.

I'd know that smell anywhere. It's biscuits and gravy from the mom-and-pop diner that's always way too busy when I wake up in the morning because mornings shouldn't start before eight a.m.

Cade walks in the door, and he looks like shit. He has dark circles under his eyes and a hitch in his step. He's exhausted.

The two people I look up to most, Dinah and Cade, will be so angry and disappointed once I'm out of this bed and healed. I'll get scolded for a year. I can practically hear it: how could you be so reckless? Of all people, after I told you not to, why did you take the pills?

It would serve me right if they ship me off to Ansel's to spend time with my favorite orphan and have my wolf evaluated. He keeps the fractured, those at odds with their wolves, until he's sure they're safe to be around the human populous. I won't blame Cade for doing it with my behavior.

My stomach sinks as guilt hits me hard. I hunch, trying to make myself smaller. If you can't see the problem, then there is no problem.

"Quit with the fear, Lena. My lack of sleep isn't from you. It's my alleged 'sister,'" Cade grumbles, using air quotes around the word sister. Cade deflates from the defensive a little, explaining, "She seems to think my hospitality is an invitation into my life and that we should function on Romania time. Who the fuck holds meetings at four a.m.?"

"We'll know within the hour if you and Revecca are a match. Cool your jets, Mr. Dixson Nas." Dinah laughs at her own joke. "But between the matching tempers and the wolves ready to eat whole mooses for breakfast, I don't know why we're still doing testing."

Deacon laughs and jiggles the bag of biscuits and gravy.

'Mooses' even has me fighting a laugh.

The laughter dies as Dinah fusses over getting more vitals from me.

"I'm guessing you've run Deacon and me as well?" I force my eyes from Cade to Dinah.

She sets her jaw and looks back toward Cade. The look is telling — she didn't do it on her own accord. There was a higher order. Cade's order? Or Revecca?

Cade stress yawns before answering, his whole body shivering with it. “Yeah. We did. It was a concession I made with Revecca.” Cade moves forward and reaches out for my hand. I hold his hand, waiting. As expected, his voice drops into the ‘break the bad news’ tone. “The genetic testing shows that we’re not biologically related.”

I exhale a big breath and tilt my head to look at the ceiling. There’s not a lot for me to say. Now they know what I do. No mate. No siblings. Fantastic month I’m having.

“It doesn’t change anything,” Cade assures me with a smile and a squeeze of my hand. “I don’t know where you came from. Fuck, I’m not sure I believe where I’m told I came from. You’re my little sister, for better or worse. You’re my Alpha Female so long as you want the position.” Cade gives my hand one last squeeze before moving out of Dinah’s way.

I nod mutely, willing back the tears that are threatening.

“Uhhm.” Dinah hesitates uncharacteristically.

I bring my gaze to her. Even Deacon turns to look at her.

“I know where you came from.” Dinah’s eyes are filling with tears. “Well, okay, I have a piece to the puzzle. I’m not sure where the piece of the puzzle fits.” She pulls the stethoscope out of her scrub pocket. She clears her throat and tucks back her emotions. “You and I are almost an identical genetic match.”

“Yeah. That tracks.” I blow a raspberry.

I should call Ansel. I’m sure he’s been worried.

“Really?” Dinah scoffs before getting loud. “Lena, that’s all you have to say?”

I slump against the hospital bed in resignation. “There’s nothing more for me to say. We always joked that our birthdays being a week apart was more than a coincidence. Our parents clearly must have planned it. It wasn’t hard for me to figure out where I probably belonged, genetically speaking. Hazel eyes, brown hair . . . Wolf genetics are a lot more complex than Punnett squares make genetics seem. When you factor in my wolf’s disposition: being a submissive, the differences between us . . . Dinah and I . . .” *Fuck.* It’s hard to push out words. “My slight build and more round features are easily explained. Submissives are smaller, weaker, and . . . But it is what it is.” I shake my head at her.

The confirmation of my lineage, at least tying myself to Dinah and the Alloways by proxy, doesn’t hurt as much as I thought. I had always imagined

this moment feeling differently. Instead of being angry, scared, or sad, I feel nothing.

Dinah shakes her head in disbelief, her eyes going glossy. She chokes on her words, putting her stethoscope back into her scrub pocket. “So, how long have you known?”

Cade puts his hand on Dinah’s shoulder, rubbing it gently, comforting her. I drop my eyes, not wanting to look at them. They’ve always been close, and I’ve always been jealous.

“About me, Cade, and Deacon? A while. I found out that none of the Aldens were siblings four years ago during my biology class.” I shrug. Trying to soften the blow, I add, “About you? It’s always been an assumption.”

Silence descends on the room, eyes watching me before the crinkling of a bag breaks the stillness.

Deacon snickers, “Hey, on the bright side, you could be me.”

Turning my head, I see my brother with his nose stuffed into the bag of salty sausage biscuit goodness, drawing deep breaths.

Talking into the bag, he continues. “I’m not related to any of you. Go fish! Though, it totally explains why your wolves look like they were rolled off an assembly line that makes those nesting dolls. One bigger and one smaller.”

“I can’t talk about this right now.” I shake my head.

I don’t have the energy to pretend to care. It’s out of my hands. Cade will decide what he wants to do with me now that he’s no longer obligated to care for me as his blood family. Which, I mean, technically, now that Finn and I sport matching mating marks, his decision doesn’t matter anymore. I haven’t been his problem in who knows how many days since the bond started.

Cade doesn’t let us dwell. He squats down to get on my eye level.

When I meet his eyes, he smiles. “Let’s get you home. Thalia is anxiously waiting for you to get back.”

I try to stand, but my legs are wobbly. Dinah and Cade hold me steady until I get my balance. Walking is hard. It takes a long time and a lot of effort to make it through the lab to the loading dock, where Cade backed his tank, I mean SUV, into.

I’m exhausted by the time I get my seatbelt buckled.

Deacon goes immediately into caregiver mode. He sets up a lap tray before pulling my portion of food from the to-go bag. From Cade’s cooler, he

pulls out a bottle of water, and when I wrinkle my nose at it, he tilts his head toward Dinah in the front seat.

“Deacon, if you hand her a soda, I’ll kick your ass,” she growls.

“You know, last time I checked, you’re addicted to caffeine too,” I quip.
Rude.

Dinah snorts before answering, “Yes, but I’m mostly healthy, and you’re mostly dead. No stimulants until you’re more . . . chipper.”

Cade mumbles something to Dinah, which sounds like, ‘does Lena have a chipper setting?’ but I can’t be sure. I know whatever he said wasn’t exactly nice because Dinah whacks his shoulder with the back of her hand.

“Cade, I don’t have any of my school stuff out at the house. Can you swing by my place?” I can only imagine the barrage of communication updates.

“I’ll have Finn bring it out. I have a feeling he doesn’t make it through the workday.” Cade looks at me through the rearview mirror.

Closing my eyes, I decide not to argue. This isn’t the hill to die on. Deacon stretches his arm out across the entire back seat and pets my shoulder.

Pity party is over. Biscuits and a nap.



MY NAP IS REALLY GOOD MOST OF THE WAY HOME. I SETTLE IN AND CURL UP with a pillow and blanket that Cade keeps in his vehicle, and the only time I remember waking up was when we stopped to fuel. The sounds of my family’s voices helped lull me back to sleep.

As we pull up through the gate to the house, it’s surprisingly good to be here, until I remember my bedroom is on the second story and the elevator is on the opposite end of the house from my room.

Deacon shuffles the hair on my head. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you upstairs.”

Getting out of the car wasn’t as hard as I was expecting, but now making my way into the house, I’m burning off all the fuel that I had gained from breakfast. When my stomach gurgles, Deacon steers me off course from the staircase to my room and into the kitchen. He helps me onto a stool before walking around the kitchen island.

Thalia pokes her head out from the ballroom off the side of the living room, adjacent to where I walked in. Her eyes go large, and she runs over. Once she's close, she slides in her socks across the floor. The impact of her body as she slides in to hug me almost tips me and my stool over. Cade comes from nowhere and prevents our tumble to the floor.

"Should have stuck to my guns about the fucking stools," Cade grumbles.

"Thank you for not dying," Thalia whispers as she squeezes me. "I couldn't stand the idea of losing you."

My back cracks like I'm at a chiropractor. She's forgetting her own strength again. Stepping back, she sits down on the stool next to me. It wobbles, and she steadies herself.

Thalia draws a deep breath with tears in her eyes before she shakes her head, brushing it away, and dives into the juicy details of pack life. "Okay, so Revecca and her henchmen aren't here right now. Apparently she wants to make us some fancy Romanian dish for dinner. I'm worried it's poisoned. However, that goes against wanting to take Cade back to Romania. But Lena, ugh, she's awful. I don't have words. They let her run a country. She's a queen, and I can't even imagine."

"It's good to see you too." I smile. I don't have enough energy to get it to meet my eyes, but I hope she understands I mean it.

Cade kisses the top of my head before standing behind Thalia and wrapping his arms around her. Soon we're all watching Deacon dance around the kitchen, taking the long way to get places.

Interrupting the silence, Cade speaks. "I mean, in Revecca's sole defense, they also let me run a small country. So, I'm starting to believe the requirements to do so are really low."

"From the little I got to see, she's certainly intense," I agree, thinking back to the powerful showdown between Cade and Revecca.

Deacon looks at the three of us and sighs. "Could you tell me how many of these fuckers are real?"

"Deacon, it's the five of us," Dinah answers him, walking through the entryway and straight into the kitchen with a duffle bag strung over her shoulder. She sets it down on the floor next to the counter.

Had she been living at the animal science building this entire time? Guilt hits hard. I sink into myself, feeling more of the shame from before.

"Ugh. I'm too sober again. Note to self, tequila still doesn't work." Deacon tries shooing the ancestors he must see in the kitchen with his hand.

“Dinah! It’s so good to see you. I didn’t know you were coming back.” Thalia beams, confirming my suspicion that Dinah hadn’t gone far from the lab the entire time I was sick.

“Yeah, I’ve a flight late tomorrow. The only option available today was in the back of the plane in a window seat. I’m not getting trapped next to a human and risking they’re afraid of flying.” Dinah scrunches her nose. “Ew. And I talked to Judah. He’s all up in arms that I’ve left him on his own to make decisions. All the more reason to leave him sweating it one more day.”

“Weird, almost like he’s been allowed to run a small country too.” The quip writes itself.

The four of us break into a chorus of laughter. When Deacon explains it to Dinah, she joins us.

Ten minutes later, we’re all sitting with eggs in a hole, and mine has a sriracha smiley face on it because Deacon’s probably the most observant person I know. I started putting sriracha on my eggs a year ago. He doesn’t miss anything.

“So, what are we doing to get rid of her?” I lean, looking past Thalia sitting between us, to eye Cade.

He raises his fork. “For Revecca, since she’s not being forthcoming about what she really wants, aside from her asinine demands that I move to Romania, I see two options. One, we wait. Surely she’ll get bored of us being so ordinary. Or two, we make it a hostile work environment.”

“We can do hostility.” Deacon looks around the kitchen. “We can totally do hostility.”

“Why does this sound like sleep deprivation?” Cade groans, stabbing his egg.

“What? Is that off the table? I have other ideas.” Deacon shrugs.

Dinah laughs hard from the other side of the island, where she opted to sit on the countertop and face us.

With a very thick southern drawl that she’s crafted from her best friend Wyatt, she shakes her head and says, “Oh, lawd have mercy. Get me back on a plane before you start that nonsense.”

Thalia reaches over and rests her hand on Cade’s bicep. My guess is she’s feeling stress through their bond. Before she was turned, Cade and Thalia seemed stuck within their own orbit. Their effortless synchronization has been made evident as I’ve watched their bond grow.

I want that. Where I had felt Finn nestled in my heart when we spent my

heat together, there's a cold vacancy. *No, no, it's better this way.* I lean into the cold empty space. I'll learn to live here, in this solitude.

The sooner the bond breaks, the sooner we can move on. My wolf, still retreated, is the proof I need on the subject. But when was the last time they gave me a sedative? I feel really awake. Shouldn't the whiney bitch be coming back now?

"Lena?" Dinah calls.

I look at her. "Sorry, what?"

"What do you want to do? Back to bed, lounge around down here, maybe try shifting?" Dinah offers her hands out, almost juggling the ideas between them as she presents them to me.

It's heavily hinted that I should try shifting.

"I don't want to lounge, and I don't have enough energy to shift." I shake my head.

I don't want them to know I can't feel my wolf. It's one more thing that makes me stand out. I'm already worthless. I don't want to give them a reason to equate me to a human.

With a very pathetic growl, I look at Cade. "I have no phone, no laptop, and my office still isn't set up. So, I guess I'm in wander-around-the-house mode."

"Your office furniture showed up and is mostly assembled, and I have, as gently as I could, relocated your plants." Cade kisses his mate on the top of her head and looks at me. "I love you. Rest, please."

As if on cue, Cade's phone starts ringing. He takes it toward the far end of the house where his office is.

Thalia looks at Deacon. Whatever face she's making is not something he's happy with.

Face fully scrunched up, he shakes his head. "No, little red, I know that look. I'm absolutely not going down to your creepy room of ancestor stuff."

"Deacon," she pleads with him, "You told me last time there was only one ancestor there, and they didn't even speak English."

"Mm-hmm." Deacon nods at her, sliding himself out of the stool and backing away from her slowly. "And that was one too many. I'm taking a nap. Lena?"

"I'm good, Deacon." I smile, knowing he's offering to carry me upstairs under the probably correct assumption that I won't make it there on my own.

"Can I convince either of you to come down to the archive with me?"

Thalia turns back to Dinah and me.

I look at Dinah and see she's already assessing me. Passing whatever evaluation she's given me, Dinah answers for us, "I could really use a nap in a bed that's soft."

"No, I want a shower first. Please, for the love of all things good. I don't know how you manage to stay around me like this," I argue with a groan.

"Okay." Thalia sounds sad.

"Maybe after I get cleaned up, you could help me settle my plants?" I offer Thalia.

Thalia nods, her hair bouncing with the energy. "I'd love that. I'll go help Cade while you two shower. Maybe an hour?"

"Yeah. That'd be great." I give her a soft smile before she hugs me one last time and walks down the hallway.

Eyeing the stairs, Dinah instructs, "We're going slow. I've done enough running this week, I'm not carrying your ass up there."

"Fair enough." I nod.

Gingerly, I pull myself off the stool and make my way to the stairs.

"Do you want to talk about us?" Dinah draws the words out in hesitation.

"Not especially." I shake my head, focusing on one stair at a time.

At the top, Dinah argues, "We have to talk about it eventually."

I nod, leading her to my suite. I take my spare key out from behind the painting to unlock the door and let us in.

"Damn." Dinah looks around at the sanctuary I've built for myself. She croons, "This is nice."

I cock an eyebrow at her. "You know I'd have no problem dolling up your cabin. You could be living the life of luxury."

"I'm never home. It seems like a waste to have anything more than the essentials." She shrugs.

I roll my eyes while Dinah tests the squish of my sofa. Leading her around the fireplace, standing in the middle of the space, I look at the massive, oversized bed. It's even larger than the one at the apartment.

Finn will fit on it just fine.

It's not a thought I should have, but it crosses my mind regardless.

"Essentials?" I question Dinah, leading her to my closet. "You mean the room you store your scrubs, evening gowns, and running gear?"

"Hey!" Dinah's objection falls silent as her jaw drops, seeing my closet. "Okay, you've convinced me." She walks around the space, looking at the

custom built-ins for shoes, clothes, and jewelry. “Okay, yeah. I need one. But I resent the comment about scrubs, evening gowns, and running gear. I own normal-people clothes. Somewhere. I haven’t found that part of my life again.”

I don’t pry. I have a lot in my life that I don’t talk about too. Dinah suffered a huge loss. If what keeps her sane is running, working, and the occasional formal pack function, then so be it.

“Lena!” Dinah shouts.

I turn toward her from where I’m stripping off my dirty clothes. She’s pulling out a scrub top from where I’ve hung it next to a well-worn flannel I stole from Ansel’s closet.

She shakes her head. “This is mine.”

“What? Do you want it back?” I bite my lips together, remembering when I lifted it from her cabin.

Her nostrils flare. “Okay, so all these years, the boys have joked about how we behave. Now we know we’re actually sisters, and you’ve literally stolen my clothes. I’m fairly sure that’s the most stereotypical thing ever.” She shakes her head. “When did you even grab this?”

“Well, if you don’t know when, it clearly wasn’t missed,” I huff, tossing the dirty clothes into the washing machine. “I snagged it at Spring Equinox when you were getting clothes together for Thalia. Which, rude to not warn me you knew who she was.”

“You don’t like to know the future.” Dinah matches my sass.

I walk naked to the bathroom and turn on my towel warmer before grabbing my brush. Dinah trails behind me. If it were Thalia, I’d have tossed on a robe, but I mean, at this point, I’m not sure there’s an inch of me Dinah hasn’t seen.

“I respect you don’t want to talk about it. But I have to say this, and if after I do, you don’t want to talk about it for a long time, that’s fine.” Dinah is uncharacteristically nervous.

“About?” I look at her, playing dumb. It’s not hard to tell what’s eating Dinah alive.

“About how we’re sisters.” Dinah puts her hand on my shoulder, stopping me from brushing my hair.

I shrug her off with a shake of my head and continue brushing long strokes from scalp to end. “There’s nothing to talk about. It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.” Dinah knits her eyebrows together. “Why didn’t you

tell me?”

After a few brush strokes, I answer with a question. “What would have happened, Dinah?”

Dinah doesn’t answer. She stands there looking at me.

It’s too intense. I turn away from her, looking in the mirror while I finish brushing out my hair. “Fuck, Deacon’s not related to Cade either, so there’s another one for the strange fucked up things in this family. But it wouldn’t have changed anything, Dinah.”

“It would have changed . . .” Dinah shakes her head. “Don’t you want to know why? Am I even related to Judah and Ezra?”

I set the brush down and turn around. Bracing myself with my arms on the counter, I look at her and see the sadness in her softened features. There’s no smile nor a sassy grin. Hollowness, I recognize from within myself, radiates from Dinah.

I nod, biting my tongue. “I haven’t run the test, but clearly, the boys who are still confusing people sometimes are genetically related, and they look a lot like Uncle Elliot, and let’s be real, if you hold up a picture of Aunt Alora next to you when she was your age . . .”

Dinah’s eyes are watering, and she blinks back tears. I stop talking because while I’ve had four years to process and put together the pieces, it doesn’t mean I can will Dinah’s pain away.

“I’m sorry,” Dinah says firmly. “It’s not fucking fair. I got Mom and Dad and the twins and a stable pack when I didn’t need it. You did.”

Ouch. I know she doesn’t mean anything by it, but the implication is that my wolf needs a pack to function. Submissives are weak on their own. They fall apart, which I’m sure is exactly what the fallout of my impulsive decision looks like. I don’t say anything.

I turn on the water for the shower, trying to come up with what I can tell her to make this easier. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but it doesn’t change our circumstances. To me, we’re no more sisters than we were yesterday. I probably should update my lineage card with the —”

“I need to know why.” Dinah cuts me off. “Did you ask Mom and Dad when you found out? Or did you . . .” She fishes her phone out of her pocket and flips through screens.

I know what she’s doing. Seconds later, she has the phone picture pulled up of her and her parents. They’re smiling, arms wrapped around each other.

“Find out why,” Dinah demands.

Her words punch hard. If my wolf was awake, I'm sure it would be more commanding. But still under the effects of anesthesia, she can't be intimidated.

"I don't want to know, Dinah. They're your parents. You need to talk to them." I push her phone down from where she has it extended, and with a nod, I step into the shower.

"Our parents." Dinah reiterates her belief on the matter.

I speak louder over the thunderous sound of the water on the tile and the closed glass door. "I've done fine for myself. I'm sorry I had to uproot your life for a week. But it's happened, and it's over. We're blood related. It doesn't have to change anything."

Dinah growls, "That doesn't mean it can't change."

"Do you really want it to?" I push back with a weak growl. Shaking my head, I draw a deep breath before stating as calmly as I can the facts that I've told myself for the last four years. The only facts that make it less painful. "Dinah. They're my egg and sperm donors. They gave me away." Tears form in my eyes. I let the shower water wash them away and force my voice steady. "And as much as you want answers, I don't. It's easier for me if they remain Aunt Alora and Uncle Elliot."

"I want to be more connected with you," Dinah defends. "We've always been close, but I've always wanted us to make more time for each other. Maybe, this is a good reason for it."

Rinsing the soap, I forgo conditioner and turn off the water. I can't stand being trapped in this glass box with one more life-changing event toppling the remains of my life. Dinah hasn't said anything more.

I stay firm. "For whatever reason, they gave me to the people who raised me — it's between them. I am where I am. I am who I am. Knowing why I was given up won't change it."

Dinah wipes tears from her eyes. "It really doesn't matter to you."

Shaking my head, I wrap my hair up in a towel hat. I take my time drying off, avoiding seeing her in pain. I don't understand her emotions. She was raised by loving parents. Dinah had a family, a good family. As far as wolves go, her life was perfect, so why is she so upset?

She whispers, "I need to know."

"You'll have to take it up with your parents, Dinah. It doesn't matter to me." I sigh. My body is exhausted. *And we promised Thalia to hang out.*

Dinah finally puts her phone back in her pocket. She scrubs her hands

down her face and adjusts her shoulders, holding her head high.

“So, what does that make us?” Ferocity and fire edge her words. “You what? Want to pretend we’re cousins?”

“I don’t have an answer for that. I never thought you’d find out.” I let my words drop off.

I never thought anyone would question the bloodline. Cade was never supposed to need to take back the throne.

Awkward silence stands between us as I calculate another answer the best I can. “I love you. We’ve always been close, but it’s hard for us to find time for each other. We should try harder. But we’ve always been super driven, and life’s challenged us in very different ways.”

Dinah huffs.

As I draw a deep breath so I can continue, it feels like one of Finn’s ten seconds of honesty exercises. Slowly, I explain my logic. “My brothers aren’t my brothers. And it’s not a shock because I’ve known for years. I did the stupid test for biology, but having everyone know, it fucking hurts. Plus, I don’t even know what the new normal will look like yet. What?”

Dinah’s motioning for me to breathe. She coaches by demonstrating. I draw a deep breath and notice the world is spinning slightly.

Using the towel to protect me from the cold tile, I lean against the wall. I’ve burned off the fuel from my eggs in a hole. “I’ve never thought that it would come to this. I’m not an Alloway. I’m not an Alden. We both know what I am, Dinah. I’m a submissive, clinging to the hope that no one will figure it out. Maybe, if things don’t go well when I talk to Cade, I’ll take Ansel’s last name. He always jokes about being alone on the docket.”

I shiver, and Dinah pulls another towel off the rack and wraps me in her arms around me. She holds me for a moment.

Oddly, it becomes my turn to break apart. *Pull yourself together. This isn’t new information.*

“We’re family.” Dinah hugs me tightly. “You’re my sister. I need more answers, but I’ll make that a me problem, not a you problem. It’ll all be okay.”

My face is wet with tears, but I don’t attempt to stop them. She’s wrong. It’s not okay. Nothing is okay. Emotions keep flooding, and I can’t hold them back. *What is wrong with me?*

My words come out fast, and I try to keep them from jumbling. “Whatever answers you think Aunt Alora and Uncle Elliot might have aren’t

my problem. It's in the past, and much like my visions, I can't change that. I'm not worried about the people I only see twice a year, maybe." I pause, drawing a deep breath as I try to ward off the negative feelings. "How many times has Cade said to me, 'It's a good thing you're my little sister'? Now he has an excuse to be done with me. Revecca Ardelean is here. We literally have Romanian royalty in the house. Cade has a blood sister. What does he need me for?"

"Lena." Dinah tries to cut me off, scolding. She stands me up and holds me at arm's length to look me in the eyes.

"No, then to top it off." I toss a glance at the healing mating mark on my shoulder. "I managed to get myself marked by the ex-Enforcer of the Irish fucking Mafia. So, it's not like he has a family for me to join in the event Cade decides Revecca's sassy is more appealing than mine. Plus, Finn will one-hundred-percent reject me for not being whole. Who wants a submissive wolf who can't produce offspring, Ardelean or not?" I'm laughing at the irony as it hits me. "So, yeah. Maybe I should hope that Auntie and Uncle are willing to take me back in, but they didn't want me to begin with. I've never been so thankful to be Ansel's favorite. Maybe, I'll like Utah."

Dinah pulls me close and sways back and forth, holding me. "I promise you, Lena, you are loved. Cade loves you, and had he known you aren't his blood sister, he would have never ever, in a million years, ever said those words to you. You should hear the way he talks about you. That man is so proud to be your older brother. And Deacon, I'm pretty sure you're his favorite person in the entire world."

Ugly tears stop falling from my eyes, and I laugh thinking about my older brother and his peculiarities.

"You will always be loved. You'll never be homeless. Because even if the most outrageous unspeakable things happen with Cade and Finn, you're an Ardelean by blood and have full access to the fund regardless of who you live with." Dinah lets me go and meets my eyes, continuing. "Also, let the record state that you're literally everyone's favorite person. Even if you're grumpy sometimes. If you tell Wyatt that I like you more than him though, you're not getting the awesome gift I got you for Solstice. And third, your mate, who marked you, will never reject you. I've had the pleasure of spending nearly a week with him, and one thing is for sure: that man is head over heels, madly obsessed with you. If you don't have pups, you don't have pups. It doesn't matter to him."

Dinah's every word is perfectly picked. They come from the heart, and I know she believes them. But, deep down, we're both falling apart. The least I can do is pull myself together and hide it away like she is too.

"I need to know why Mom and Dad split us up. When I figure it out or get Ezra to make them tell me, I'll offer you the information. If you want it at any time, it'll be there for you." Dinah shakes her head. "Besides, I wouldn't worry too much about Revecca. She doesn't scare me. I'll give her an attitude adjustment before I leave. We're family. Blood has never mattered. Let's not worry about things we can't fix."

After I pull myself together, Dinah helps me down the stairs and deposits me into my office before bringing me a boatload of snacks. She's yawning and stretching as she walks out the door on her way upstairs to sleep.

CHAPTER 24

LENA

“KNOCK KNOCK.” THALIA’S VOICE COMES FROM THE DOOR.

I look up from the circle of houseplants around me and give Thalia a soft smile, trying to welcome her into my space.

Thalia flops down on the couch. “We need to talk.”

“Uhhh.” I look her over, trying to figure out what this ‘talk’ might be pertaining to.

“There’s a sexy God of the Green Isles we absolutely need to discuss.”

My face heats, and I’m positive I’m as bright red as Thalia’s hair.

She has no problem pointing it out. “Wait, are you losing your cool?”

I draw a deep breath and steel myself. “He sounds sexy, he’s sufficiently endowed, he can cook, and we have good sexual chemistry.”

That should cover the bases. I bite my lips together, hoping it’s a satisfactory answer.

“Okay.” Thalia draws out the last syllable, and if the look of mischief in her eye says anything, she wants to press. I look away. “I mean, does he check all your boxes?”

“Check boxes?” I play dumb, picking at the pot in front of me.

“You know, the list that everyone makes about what they want out of their future spouse?” Thalia rolls her eyes.

“Okay, want to get super personal about it?” I challenge, setting the plant in front of me off to the side.

If it weren’t for an incredibly awful vision, I would worry that my deviant sexual preference would terrify her. But knowing the mischief she and Cade get up to, I’m not super worried.

“He’s definitely experienced, and he’s a Dominant,” I say, watching

Thalia's eyebrows raise. "He's a really good match for the specific breed of darkness I crave."

"Awww, that's so romantic!" Thalia croons excitedly, clasping her hands together in front of her chest.

"So, what's your bond like?" I can almost feel Thalia cutting off the second question she wants to immediately follow up with.

It's one of her quirks that I love, but I suspect she thinks it annoys me when she asks them two at a time.

Shaking my head at her, I shrug. I have no idea how to answer that.

"He bit you, right? Like. He claimed you?" Thalia's voice flutters as though she's second-guessing everything. Her hand goes to the spot where her mating mark sits on her shoulder.

"Yeah. He did." I pause. *That's not fair to Finn to spin this like it's his fault. He didn't do this alone.* I catch her eye, trying to reassure her. "We claimed each other."

"Okay." Thalia chews on her bottom lip.

"Thalia. Ask the question."

Thalia moves from where she was sitting on the couch to sit across from me on the floor. "Okay, but like, this bond thing. Like, I feel things about him."

"Yeah, you're supposed to love him," I answer with a nod.

I feel so disadvantaged in this conversation.

"Not like that." Thalia holds her hands out like she's trying to grasp an imaginary ball. She huffs and drops them to her lap.

What do people usually say it's like? I try to offer things other mated pairs have said about it. "Like you can feel what he's feeling? Or what he wants you to feel? Pushing it to you?"

Her eyes light up. "Yes! And I don't know . . . is that a Cade thing or a bond thing? I know with The Leviathan, he can . . ." His use of his gift on her has been a point of contention between them. She bites her lip for a moment before releasing it. "But he promised not to do that."

I reassure her. "Cade loves you more than life itself. You don't want him to use his gift, and he wouldn't disrespect you by doing it anyway. Not unless you were in serious danger, and it was the only option." Swallowing hard, I try to contain my own worries and fears and be objective. "Have you been able to do the same thing to Cade?"

When Thalia wets her lips and then bites her bottom one, drawing a deep

breath, I have my answer. Which means my lack of ability to do the same with Finn proves, at least in part, that there's something wrong with us already. I don't think he feels anything. I certainly don't, but I'm also a glorified human right now.

I shrug. "The Leviathan's gift is through speech and communication. It's called a command for a reason. If what you're talking about, projecting feelings, truly goes both ways, then why wouldn't it be part of the bond? It wouldn't make sense to be his gift."

"What's the extent of it? Will we ever be talking through it? So far, it's like feelings and vibes," Thalia questions.

"I've never heard of mates talking through their bond. I do know some who have been bonded for a long time get a sense of where the other is at or if they're upset from a long ways away." My reply really isn't answering her questions.

Hanging my head, I give it another moment to see if she's satisfied or if she wants more information. Thalia doesn't ask any more questions.

I want to get close to Thalia and comfort her. She's always been anxious, and while her wolf has given her some confidence, I can tell a lot of Thalia's strength comes from hard fucking work. But what we both have in common is that we don't have many friends.

It feels dumb to give her half answers and nothing more. Moving plants out of the way, I shuffle across the space to be by her. She moves up to the sofa, and I follow, sitting close and leaning against her.

This is the closest we've ever been, but it feels right. "The people who raised the three of us weren't a good example of a healthy relationship. She was dramatic and would throw things. He would yell and command her into silence and to go away. So, as far as what a healthy bond looks like, I don't know."

Thalia holds my hand. Giving it a soft squeeze, she waits.

"Aunt Alora and Uncle Elliot are super weird hippies. I used to idolize their bond. But now, I don't know, Thalia." My chest feels tight thinking about them. All this time, I looked up to my aunt and uncle. But they were more than my aunt and uncle, and that changes a lot of how I view them.

"I'm sorry." Thalia squeezes my hand a little harder.

My eyes meet her green ones. She gives me a slight smile.

"You know we're friends, right?" Thalia nods at me. She leans in a little bit. "I know I'm mated to your brother, but that doesn't mean we can't be

friends. You can tell me things.”

“I know,” I answer her. “I’m trying. I’m trying really hard. I’m not used to having friends or family. It was the three of us for a while, then it was the two of us, and now there are five of us. It’s been a lot.”

For the first time, being in the same space as Thalia is effortless. I don’t worry that I’ve upset her or feel like she’s trying to walk on eggshells around me.

“Thalia, I don’t bite. Ask the questions,” I remind her, moving over a bit to study her face.

“It’s not a question.” Thalia bobbles her head a bit. After waiting a few moments, she finally spits it out. “I know that Cade asked you to talk me out of school for this semester.”

Adjusting my eyes from her, I look over at my plants, trying not to let the worries and fears that she’s upset with me boil up.

“I’m not mad.” Thalia pauses, pulling her hair up into a ponytail. After she has her hair tied up, she continues. “I know I wasn’t supposed to know or figure it out. But Cade feels terrible, and he let it slip when we were talking.”

Clenching and unclenching my fist, I keep composed. I take a few moments before I answer. “The ends don’t justify the means for this sort of thing. I shouldn’t have talked you out of school. You shouldn’t forgive me so easily for it.”

Thalia shakes her head. “Maybe it’s cliché that I met the boy and fell in love and I want a billion babies, pups, running around. But my little archive here and our family feel so much bigger and better than a place at the Smithsonian. He wants to wait to start a family and wants me to finish my degree, but Lena, I . . . don’t want to.” Thalia huffs. “I know you love academia, and I’m sure it sounds ridiculous, but I don’t think I want to go back.”

“Thalia.” I cut her off. “Honestly, I get it.”

Her jaw drops before she closes it slowly.

“Everything changed for you, and my argument with Cade that you should go back was strictly because you should try to have some normalcy. Then, when he reminded me about the wolf archive and what he wanted to do with it . . .” I draw a deep breath. “Getting me to talk you out of going back was easier. It doesn’t make it less wrong.”

“Yeah, but I forgive you, so that makes it better.” Thalia smiles. She bites her bottom lip, and then the conversation takes another turn. “Can we talk

about how you almost died?”

“Going into heat is not life-threatening. I’m the exception, not the rule.” I shake my head, trying to dissuade her fear.

It stings. Of course, trying not to think about it means I’m thinking about it. I’m probably sterile. It’s all my fault, and had I been smart and listened to anyone else, this wouldn’t have happened.

Not done with questions, she continues. “Okay, I know I’m asking for too much information, and if it’s too personal, I completely understand, but it’s literally your life work, so I don’t know why you wouldn’t want to answer.”

The room swarms with nervous energy. Even without my wolf, it’s drowning me.

“Fucking hell, Thalia. Breathe.”

“Sorry.” Thalia wipes a flyaway curl out of her eyes and a tear with it. “How awful is heat really? I know we talked about it, but that was before everything, and I didn’t trust you then. Ugh, I mean, your heat. You were so sick. And what are the warning signs? Because all I keep hearing is soon but no real answer on exactly when.” Thalia’s eyes go increasingly wider as she speaks.

“Thalia, it’s okay.” I grab her hand and squeeze it tightly.

Thalia reeks of fear.

I start with very basic wolf biology and anatomy 101. “Humans have an average of a twenty-eight-day cycle. Wolves’ cycles are about six months long. Which is why our best guess is sometime between six and eight months after you were turned. There isn’t a lot of data on turned wolves. Wolves have never been pro-biting humans.”

Thalia squeezes my hand back, but I can tell she’s not convinced.

“Okay, I know you’re squeamish, but I’ll try to explain it as not gross as I can.” I try to figure out non-medical terms that I can live with myself saying. “You’ll notice some swelling and maybe spotting for about a week. Then the fun begins.”

“Why did you say fun like it’s sarcastic and not fun at all?” Thalia’s eyes go wide with fear.

“It’s not that it’s not fun.” I backpedal. “It’s that nothing I could say would prepare you. So, really it’s not worth scaring you. But Cade will take good care of you. You’ve nothing to worry about.” I leave out the fact that he’s done this before and try to make the symptoms and distresses of heat sound very blasé. “It’s a little pain cramping, a higher body temperature, and

being more horny than you've ever been in your entire life."

"Okay, so what happened to you? Was it the trial drugs?" Thalia squeezes my hand tightly. "I really don't want to lose you. I love my little family, especially you."

"Cade won't let you take a heat suppressant or one of the starters. There's no way he'd risk anything that might potentially hurt you." *And you're too loyal, too good, and too smart to ever do anything stupid like me*, I omit.

Thalia nods. It's obvious, with her short breaths, that she's stressing out over what's very unknown to her. I contributed to her fear. It's understandable she's that much more afraid of heat after what I've been through.

At least one more thing is bugging Thalia. She's chewing on her bottom lip. I give her the space to ask it on her own.

"Your life's work is finding a birth control for wolves. That leads me to believe there's something someone isn't telling me. What are the chances I'm getting pregnant whenever this heat torture starts?"

Better than mine because I'm an idiot. But I reference back to my statistical data rather than snark. "Without a barrier, about eighty percent."

I wasn't pregnant. Statistically, the odds were in favor of it happening. I should have been pregnant. *Unless the pill worked*. I want to be back in the lab and look at the blood work. I need to analyze it.

"So, how do I get Cade to listen to me and accept that I want to start our family and that school isn't the most important thing to me right now?" Thalia asks with a sigh, her shoulders slumping.

"Cade loves you and . . ." I try to walk the fine line between what they both want but favor Cade's preference to wait over starting a family. "He's pretty serious about waiting. Give it time and enjoy being mated. You're happy together. Don't complicate it."

That settles Thalia a bit, and her wolf relaxes, lessening the tension in the room.

Thalia hangs her head. "Yeah. You're right. I mean, he's already stuck with me, so I don't need to go all crazy gold digger, 'make me a baby momma' on him."

I snort. Thalia constantly shocks me with what she's becoming more comfortable saying.

"I like having you as a friend." Thalia nods. "I know you're constantly judging me, but I'm pretty sure you like me."

“I love you.” The words come out easy and unforced. “I am not constantly judging you. I’m continually surprised by how open and accepting you are of people. And wondering how I could get better at doing this while simultaneously keeping up the guise of who I am.”

“If anyone can figure it out, it’s you.” Thalia laughs. “You’re pretty much the smartest person I know.”

“Pft. In one area. I’m shit at history.”

Thalia laughs so hard, holding her hand over the front of her chest. She gasps for air, trying to get out what’s so funny. “Your gift. Is. The past.”

The piano tone on Thalia’s phone startles her from her laughing. She digs around, looking for it. “Oh, it’s Dad.”

“Go. I’m fine. Tell him I say hi.”

“I will.” Thalia gives me a hug.

It’s short and sweet before she walks out my office door, greeting her dad over the phone.



I’VE TRIMMED AND FIXED UP ALL THE PLANTS I WAS CERTAIN WOULDN’T bounce back. I lie back on the couch and stare at the ceiling. My wolf still isn’t there, and the silence is too much. I’m lost and alone with it.

I pull myself to stand and leave my office.

Deacon is in the living room, lying with his head off the back of the couch. “Listen, I want to talk to Lena.” He groans. “No, she almost died. You’re already dead. Sure, there’s a chance she’ll come back and haunt my ass, but this is time sensitive. For fuck’s sake. Go away.” Deacon hops off the couch, walks over to me, and wraps his arms around me in what seems like one fluid movement. “Fuck I’m sick of these assholes. Get drunk with me?”

I squeeze him back. “I’m pretty sure Dinah won’t like that.”

“True.” Deacon gives me one more squeeze before letting me go. He pats the counter. “Luncheon?”

My wolf is still nowhere to be found. Not even food has her awakening from her slumber. Dinah told me I needed to embrace her in order to heal. *Well, if she won’t wake up now, then what’s the point?*

After twenty minutes, Deacon places a massive bowl of fried rice in front of me. He leans against the counter, looking at me but doesn’t say anything.

My bowl is decreasing in fullness while Deacon keeps pushing his food around, but the fork never makes it to his lips.

“Deacon?” I call to him.

“I know you knew.” Deacon looks up at me. “But does that mean we can’t . . . ?”

“Good luck getting rid of me.” I smile at him.

The reassurance is enough. Deacon finally puts a forkful in his mouth.

One down. One to go.

When I try to go upstairs to nap, Deacon directs me back to a spot on the sofa. It’s cozy and warm, and with a pillow to curl up with, I’m drifting off when I hear Deacon whisper, “Thank you for loving me.”

His footsteps slip away before I can respond. I’ll have to find him later.

CHAPTER 25

FINN

I LOOK AT MY PHONE'S SCREEN FOR THE FIFTIETH TIME TODAY, AND IT'S BEEN ten minutes since I last looked at it. It now shows I've lasted exactly four hours and forty-five minutes since my mate and her family left the building. Sitting at my desk, I'm picking at the tacos from a nearby restaurant that the lab techs recommended. They would be delicious if I weren't nursing the pain of a hole boring through my chest.

My phone's screen lights up. Ma's contact card picks up with the ringing alert. I don't dare send it to voice mail.

"Hey, Ma," I answer.

"Don't you 'hey, Ma' me," she snaps and launches into a rant. "You leave me a cryptic voicemail in the dead of the night and not a peep since. You don't answer my calls or my texts. Have you lost all the sense I gave you?"

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, he's sorry. I'll make you sorry. Ya better have a good reason for all this nonsense." I can practically see Ma shaking her wooden spoon at me in the kitchen.

"What's for dinner?" I force out. It's been my way of telling her I'm hurting as long as I can remember.

"Oh, Griffin, good God, what's wrong?" She softens almost instantly.

"Remember when I said there was nothing submissive 'bout her?" I admit my fault to the one woman who will know exactly what I'm going through.

Silence descends on her end of the phone for a moment before she answers. "Fooled you, must be a bloody fierce lass. I had your father fooled too. I like her already."

I deflate in my chair. “I didn’t even notice.”

She answers, “Sure look, if she’s strong like you say, then what’s the issue? She was hiding it from you, and she’s good. Get on with it. It’s a shame you’re out, would’ve been nice havin’ another submissive for balance.”

“I did all the wrong things. I had the best intentions, but Lord knows the way to hell is paved with them. I didn’t treat her how I should’ve.” It feels terrible telling Ma that I did the exact opposite of how she raised me.

“Bah,” Ma answers. “Griffin, she’ll forgive you. I’ve no doubts in that.”

“It gets worse.” I groan, closing the lid on my tacos.

There’s no room left for anything else with my grief taking up so much space in my body.

“Worse how, Finn?” Ma’s suspicious, and her wheels are obviously turning.

“My mate is Kathleen Alden of the Ardelean Bloodline. We’ve marked each other.” I lay it out. No sound comes from the other end of the line. “Ma?”

“Griffin.” Her voice comes out wary and warning.

“You can’t run that to Magnus, Ma.” I remind her of the precarious position we’re in.

Me walking away from Ireland should mean that I leave everything back in Ireland. She shouldn’t be talking to me, at all.

“You mind your mouth, boy. I’ve been the head of this family long enough to know my own damn rules,” Ma answers with a scolding tone that has me wincing from this end. She huffs. “So, what now? I’m guessing she was in heat, and that’s the only excuse you have for not calling me sooner.”

“Yes, Ma,” I answer her.

“Is that why you’ve called then?” Ma’s voice has left scolding and faded to motherly. “You’ve marked her, and now she’s worried you’re regretting her.”

“Somethin’ like that. There were some complications. She’s doing well physically, but I’ve seemed to find a new way to be public enemy number one around here.” I try to explain in not so many words. I don’t know when the lab will be back.

“Ahh. Not safe to talk then,” Ma acknowledges. “Well, it’s like I’ve always told you, you’ve good instincts. Follow them and call me later.”

I’m being dismissed. Her need to push us to be independent is clearly

winning out here.

“Oh, and Finn,” she calls before hanging up on me. “Don’t let yourself forget, God gave you what you can handle. I love ya. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Love you too, Ma,” I answer.

Setting the phone back down on the desk, I close my eyes for a moment.

“What does that mean?” Brayden’s voice pipes up as he pushes my halfway-closed door open entirely.

I hadn’t even heard his ridiculous floppy feet in the hall.

“It means that you don’t know how to knock.” I open my eyes and gesture to the door. “Or do the States not teach that?”

“I meant, if Lena’s different isn’t it something that should be noted in the file for the lab tests?” Brayden’s already talking about things he doesn’t understand.

Made evident by his lack of understanding of privacy. He was supposed to stay out of her case file, but apparently, the weasel found a way in.

“Mind your business and keep my mate’s name out of your mouth.” I don’t threaten him directly, not for lack of wanting to.

“I’d watch how you speak to me.” Brayden tries to threaten me.

I rise to my full height and tip my head to the side, examining him. “You’re out of line and talking about things you know nothing about.”

“I’m the one out of line?” Brayden’s voice falters as I step around my desk.

Growling, I lock eyes with him. “Let me make this abundantly clear. Nothing about Lena concerns you. Her study, research, lab results, anything relating to her is completely none of your fucking business.” I step forward again. “She’s my mate. I know that doesn’t mean anything to you, but to our people, it’s a stronger bond than marriage. There’s no way you get between us. You’re wasting both of our time. Move on.”

When I thought Brayden couldn’t get any stupider, he does. “You come in here high and mighty with your dress shirts, trying to look better than us, but I’ve been reading about bonds. They can be broken. All Lena has to do is reject you. It won’t be hard to change her mind. I’ll make her see I’m the better choice. Would be a shame if something happened, like if you’ve been reported . . . Cade wouldn’t have a choice but to take you out of the picture.”

With a low growl, I roll up the sleeves of my dress shirt, displaying the ink darkening my arms, and correct him. “I appreciate your concern for my

bond, but it won't be broken. She won't reject me. If you want, you can waste your time trying to convince her that you can provide better for her and her wolf. But you may want to think through the consequences of anything before you do it. If you know all about bonds, then you'll know what would happen to Lena if they killed me."

Brayden's scornful and yet defeated look brightens the darkness I'm feeling. He shakes his head, walking off without another word. It's a small victory, and I do enjoy his defeat. However, I'm still on edge from being away from Lena.

We don't need to be here. You can do this job in your sleep. We need our mate. My wolf concurs. Doctor Thorpe will need to wait for more analysis and reports. As is, I've already found a way to make him four grand a month.

I need my mate.

Doctor Thorpe is judgmental of my request to leave, but thirty minutes later, after delivering a brief summary of my findings so far, I'm in the black Chevrolet and on the road back out to the Aldens' property.

My phone rings when I'm halfway there. The Bluetooth I'd connected to my phone for music picks it up.

"Finn, when I said I'd clear you with Doctor Thorpe, I thought you understood that you would contact me to tell him," Cade groans, moving past polite pleasantries.

"Small oversight?" I wince.

"I've handled it. Going forward, communicate with me." Cade doesn't mince words. "We'll talk when you arrive."

The phone clicks off. *He hung up on me.*

CHAPTER 26

LENA

I'M COZY AND WARM, AND I NEVER WANT TO LEAVE THIS SPOT EVER. Problem: the doorbell is ringing and it won't stop. I know someone else is in the house. Anyone else at all could open that damn door. *It's someone else's problem.*

I pull the pillow over the top of my head and roll over toward the windows, blocking out the world behind me.

The doorbell rings again, and despite its best efforts, the little pillow cannot withstand the annoying fucking ding of the bell. With a sigh, I roll back over, abandoning my blissful nap, and make my way to the front of the house.

Cade was right about doorbells. How much does it cost to uninstall one?

My legs are still jelly and I'm exhausted, but I get closer to the front door. Frantic knocking grows louder as I cross the foyer.

"I'm coming. I'm coming," I call toward it. Under my breath, I mutter, "It's fucking open, but apparently you need to be let in."

I swing the door open, and Aunt Alora and Uncle Elliot are looking back at me across the threshold.

Fuck. That's it. I'm never opening this fucking door ever again.

Stepping aside, I open the door all the way and walk away. It's up to them to decide whether they're coming or going.

"Lena?" Aunt Alora calls to me as I walk away.

I should have taken the shortcut to Cade's office through the hidden passage in the wall. But I might need it later, and they don't need to know about it. With a hard right around the island and then a quick turn left, I'm beelining straight toward the hallway where Cade's office is.

When I get there, I'm out of breath. The house isn't that big. *Worthless fucking wolf. Not waking up, can't fucking heal.*

I knock on the door despite it being open, and Cade looks up at me.

"Aunt Alora and Uncle Elliot are here." My voice comes out hoarse and difficult.

I draw a deep breath.

"What?" Cade looks past me.

"Yeah." I nod, raising my eyebrows. "I left them to let themselves in, and I'm sure they'll be right behi —"

"Lena?" Uncle Elliot calls.

From the corner of my eye, I can see them down the hallway, brisk steps carrying them toward me at a fast clip. No escape.

"What do you want me to do?" Cade whispers, his eyes wide. "Do they know we know?"

I shrug and step out of the hallway into his office, moving to stand in front of his desk. "I don't know. I told Dinah I didn't want to talk to them about it. Why are they here?"

"I'm guessing Judah probably called them. He probably didn't get the memo of what we know now. How could he have known not to call them and they're here because —" Cade hisses a whisper to me, but we're too slow.

"Knock knock." Aunt Alora says, crossing the threshold into Cade's office.

Cade stands up from his chair and steps around his desk. With the furniture layout of his office, his graceful steps put him between them and me.

I back away from him toward the sliding glass door opposite the entrance to his office, which would be great to escape through. Except that Cade, in order to resist the temptation of running away from his responsibilities, didn't have a staircase installed from his deck to the ground.

My older brother stands between me and my biological parents. Once again, my shield against the world.

"What's wrong?" Aunt Alora furrows her eyebrows.

I move closer to the sliding glass door and look out the window. In doing so, I can see her reflection in the pristine clean glass. She has her hands raised, ready to clean Cade's aura when she steps closer to him.

"Nothing." Cade lies quite well. "We weren't expecting you. I don't have any rooms made up."

“I’m sure your staff can do that.” Uncle Elliot laughs.

“Fair enough. Lauren was complaining that we have so few rooms and so many people to clean them.” Cade lets Aunt Alora pull him in for a hug.

I turn my head to watch. She closes her eyes and hugs him, but Cade’s whole body is tense. When they break the embrace, Aunt Alora tries to step around him, but Cade blocks her path with a sidestep.

“Oh.” Aunt Alora’s face falls.

“Well, you’d have to assume, with Hugo’s demands at blood tests, that the girls know. We shouldn’t have believed it would stay safe with the crown.” Uncle Elliot sighs.

Hugo, as in Hugo Arcan, Revecca’s uncle? The family tree, while it apparently mixed up a few twigs and branches, isn’t something I’ve spent a ton of time getting to know. But I know his name, and I know his family is next in line behind Revecca for the throne. Well, behind Cade, that is.

Uncle Elliot gives me a soft smile while gently placing his hand on Aunt Alora’s shoulder, where her mating mark is.

I want to raise my hand and rest it on mine from Finn. But he’s not here. If he wanted me, he would be. Instead, I wrap my arms around myself and turn away from them completely, staring back out the window.

Through the door, I eye the railing of Cade’s balcony. *It’s only one story. I wouldn’t even break a leg if I jumped in human form.*

“I don’t think now is the time to discuss this,” Cade states firmly.

“Well,” Aunt Alora starts with a slightly scolding tone, but she’s cut short.

My best guess is that The Leviathan is looking back at them.

Aunt Alora sighs, and silence hangs in the air before three sets of footsteps move toward Cade’s office door.

He encourages them, “Please help yourself to whatever is in the kitchen. I’ll have Lauren get you a suite ready, and once you’ve settled, or maybe tomorrow, we can have a more in-depth discussion.”

“I see,” Aunt Alora says, using her disapproving voice that I recognize from holidays when younger pack members would give her opinions she didn’t ask for.

‘Opinions unasked for are criticism.’ Aunt Alora’s voice echoes in my head.

The moment recalls a memory of her brushing my hair back and tying it into a low braid down my back as she laughs off an unasked for opinion.

Irony: I always wished she'd been my mom.

As he ushers them out the door with more promises to come out and see them soon, Cade's voice is tense, like he's holding back a growl.

The door to Cade's office clicks closed, and then the lock engages with a stupid little jiggle.

I swallow hard and steel myself against a conversation I've been putting off.

"So, do we call Judah?" Cade asks.

I turn back to him. His eyes are wide, and he looks as freaked out as I feel.

"And say what? Hey, I think you lost your parents, better come pick them up before I take them to the pound?" I shrug, letting the joke roll out with a flat sardonic tone. I unwind my arms from around my waist and lift my hands, palms up, in a gesture that I have no ideas.

"Do you think his parents will listen if he asks them to leave?" Cade runs his hand back through his hair. He chuckles as he sits on one of the comfy chairs by his fireplace. "Why does it feel like we've been caught by Mom and Dad getting into the Solstice presents?"

I plop down in the one adjacent to him, and my words are cold. "Because . . . they're my mom and dad."

His eyes divert from looking at me, and he bows his head.

Cade takes a few moments before responding. "If you tell me you don't want to be my little sister anymore, I'll respect that."

His words are filled with regret and don't match the anticipated feelings of rejection pumping in my chest.

"What?"

"I wouldn't blame you." Cade's words drop with each syllable. They're soaked in sadness and remorse. "For hating me after leaving you with Deacon. If you want to take their last name and look at moving to Maine, I'd get it. I wouldn't stop you."

"No." I shake my head. "I don't want that. I don't . . ."

Words are jumbled and come out too quickly. My teeth close together with a click as I try to process.

Cade lets me think for a minute without trying to finish my thoughts.

"Does it bug you that you don't have answers about where you came from? How you're here, and the bitch has been living it up in Romania? And why is she here now?" I swallow hard just thinking about her. I bypass her to

keep talking. “Apparently Hugo Arcan is involved now?”

Cade shrugs. “I’m confused, but I don’t know that it matters. Revecca said she believed our parents were dead and that I was dead with them.” He sighs, slouching farther into his chair. “I have a family. I have a life. I don’t know her, and it doesn’t seem like Revecca’s all that interested in knowing me. It’s more so what I can do for her. Hugo Arcan and whatever games the royal family is playing for the crown aren’t my business. I’m not Romanian. Even the US federal government confirmed my citizenship multiple times. As far as anyone is concerned, I’m American.”

The silence between us isn’t awkward like it is most of the time.

“It’s not the same situation for me as you,” Cade explains after a few moments. “There are people who can give you answers. I didn’t think to have Robert’s DNA tested when we were in the thick of it. I’m back and forth on having him exhumed for a DNA test, but I don’t want to disrupt the pack with it. What will it change if he is or isn’t related to us? Or to the Ardelean Bloodline?”

I completely understand. I pull my legs up in the chair. “Dinah wants to know how and why. But I’m not interested in becoming an Alloway. I don’t know that I want to know, but at this point, it —”

Cade’s phone rings. His eyebrows draw together as he answers it on speakerphone. “Ezra, what’s up?”

“Really! What’s up?” The sound of Ezra’s truck idling matches his voice. He snaps and growls, “What’s up is that my parents can get through your gate without any problems, but apparently, I don’t make the guest list? What is this, some sort of nepotism? Oh, cute,” Ezra snarls. “The gate guy thinks I’m compensating with my truck.” The snarl turns into a laugh, and I can hear the way his lips draw up into a smirk as I’m guessing he looks at the gateman closely. “Too bad he’s not my type, or I’d show him a good time and prove him wrong.”

“What?” Cade shakes his head at me, trying to figure it out.

I bite my lips together, suppressing my laugh. *Only Ezra.*

“I’m at your front gate,” Ezra says, enunciating each word and reining in his excitement. “And the asshole standing here thinking shitty thoughts about my truck” — the laugh resumes — “who is now terrified of me for reading his mind, oh . . . look, there he goes to open the gate. See you in a few.”

The phone disconnects with a beep.

“Ezra is here.” I laugh, uncoiling myself out of the chair. “What’s next?”

Really though. Who else is going to show up?”

“Uhm.” Cade stalls before standing from his chair. “Your mate tried and failed to work today at Doctor Thorpe’s request. I would expect him to be here within the next half hour, or less, depending on how fast he drives.”

My heart thunders in my chest, and I burn hot and then chill quickly. Wrapping my arms around myself, I step to leave Cade’s office.

He pulls me into his arms.

He uses his firm voice. “It’ll be okay. We’ve got each other, and Deacon.” I look up at Cade, and he laughs. “Okay, so Deacon has us. Whatever Aunt Alora and Uncle Elliot have to say, it doesn’t have to change anything between us.”

“Okay, but do I have to do this right now? The Alloways *and* Finn?” I lean against Cade’s chest.

Without a wolf, I don’t feel as comforted being held by The Leviathan, but as my older brother, Cade’s doing a pretty good job.

“Only because I love you.” Cade pauses before whispering, “Sneak out through the service hallway and get down to the archives.” He squeezes me tight.

“I love you too.” I squeeze him tightly before letting go.

I walk as light-footed as I can down the hallway back toward the kitchen.

“So clearly, she knows,” Aunt Alora says.

A click from some sort of dish on the counter echoes as my steps run the risk of being dangerously close to audible range. They seem distracted, but I stay light on my feet and finally take the left toward the guest bathrooms and the secret door to the front entry.

“So, Aunt Alora, Uncle Elliot.” Cade speaks loudly in the great room, being the best distraction of all.

Still taking care to quietly open and close the front door, it’s a breath of fresh air, literally, when I get out of the house and onto the covered deck. I pull a pair of my sneakers out of the deck box and slip into them.

Why would Finn be coming? I shake my head, trying to push the thoughts out of it. *It’s the obvious reason: to break the bond. Lucky duck, doesn’t even have to worry about it. No wolf. No bond.*

Walking downhill toward the archive is far easier than uphill, but it’s still zapping my energy. Definitely having an early dinnertime tonight. Healing takes way too many calories. I don’t even want to think about food, but I know I need to.

Taking a break, I sit down on the low retaining wall on the curve of the driveway. Across from me is where there used to be a path down to the rest of the packs' houses. Now it's cultivated with ferns and manicured hedges. Distant memories of playing as a child tug at my mind. But when they get too intense, I look down the paved driveway instead. *There's nothing down there for me. Never was.*

"Kathleen!" An Irish accent comes at a full shout, and the use of my full name immediately tells me who it is.

Heavy footfalls quickly move toward me.

As I raise my eyes from the paved driveway, he comes around the last bend to where I've stopped to rest.

"Kathleen, where have you been? I found Dinah, and she said she hadn't seen you in hours." He stoops down to where I'm sitting and cups the side of my face. "You're supposed to be resting. Fuck, I find you out here, and you don't even have your phone."

Finn's worry is unexpected. Anger? Possibly understandable, I expected that, but the amount of concern throws me off kilter.

I shake my head and answer, "I am quite literally sitting and doing nothing. It's resting."

"Faolan, please don't disappear on me." Finn pulls my hands out of my lap before he helps me to my feet.

"You say this like I was purposefully hiding from you. You're not even supposed to be here," I grumble.

My body objects to taking a step. I could have really used a longer than two-minute break, but I'm not letting him see my exhaustion.

"Why do you insist on making everything a fight, Kathleen?" Finn takes small steps with me. "I am sorry—"

"Don't." I won't let him reject me, not if I can reject him first. I push out hostility to drive him off. "Don't apologize to me. I don't need your patronizing, self-righteous bull —"

Finn wraps his hand around my arm and stands in front of me. His height forces me to snap my head up and look at him. With the sudden movement, my body trembles. Finn's eyes blitz green with his wolf. Mine isn't there to answer him.

Finn's voice is agonizingly firm. It borders on that Alpha command that could take everything from me. "Listen to me and hear me. I am not repeating this. You almost died, and if it weren't for the fact that we met, you would

have died alone. So, let's not pretend that your ability to stand here is anything less than a miracle."

I look away and bow my head, knowing what the appropriate response should be.

Then, there's a slight, unfamiliar feeling inside me. A growing pressure bends me to its will, and I step forward. My head comes to rest against his chest.

"Now, quit fighting your wolf so your body can heal." Finn's voice drops to a soft murmur as he wraps one arm behind my back, embracing me as the other strokes my head. "Faolan, I'm not going anywhere. It's okay."

The new pressure holds me to him, not wanting to be removed from his embrace. I know Dinah said her wolf changed after all the terrible things she went through. Is this what that change feels like?

A large SUV flies up the driveway, startling me. Finn bangs on the side of it with his fist as it passes us. I don't speak Gaelic, but the way the words sound, I absolutely know he's cussing them out.

"I'll take care of it." I yawn.

Am I tired or stressed? Who am I kidding? It's both.

"No, you won't," Finn corrects me.

"I get it. You know I'm a submissive, but the rest of the pack still sees me as their Alpha Female." I argue with him.

How long before he gives up trying to boss me around?

"That was Revecca's SUV," Finn growls, looking over my head.

When he draws his eyes back to me, his features are softer.

Why does he have to look so handsome?

I shake my head. "Well, maybe she can scare off our other house guests."

"Other guests?" Finn questions as he picks me up like he's some knight in shining armor carrying the princess back to the castle.

If I wasn't so fucking exhausted from standing here, I'd argue with him. But I'm tired, and my body doesn't want to walk up the rest of the driveway. Besides, he's right. I can't deal with Revecca. I can only make her Cade's problem. Though, I'm quite interested in how Deacon's planning to handle our guests who have overstayed their welcome. Our rooms, Cade's, Deacon's, and mine, are soundproofed . . . the guest rooms where Aunt Alora, Uncle Elliot, Revecca, and her henchmen are staying? Not so much.

Finn kisses the side of my face and starts walking the rest of the way up the driveway. It's less than a quarter mile, and with stilts for legs, he gets us

there while Revecca's henchmen are unloading her and whatever they've found to buy at the local grocery store. The brown paper bags printed with their big oval logo gives away their outing for the day. I would pay money to see the odd looks and hear the speculations from her walking around the store with a massive entourage.

"Nooo!" Revecca screeches, seeing the two of us. "Absolutely not. You cannot be with her. I will not allow it. I forbid the two of you to be together."

I squirm, and Finn sets me down. *Why was she addressing Finn and not me?*

Furthermore, what does it say about me that Revecca not wanting me to be with Finn makes me want to strip naked and ride him right here on the driveway in front of her?

"Wasn't asking your permission, Revecca," Finn answers her.

There's a distinct familiarity in the way he addresses her. I'm one-hundred-percent digging into that later. The gift of past sight comes in handy once again. *If I can do it without my wolf.*

"You still need it regardless," Revecca answers.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry bitch said what?"

"Lena," Finn hisses my name, warning me against the shit-stirring I'm doing.

One of Revecca's henchmen comes around to stand closer to me, trying to create a physical buffer between her and me.

"You're an Ardelean. Your mate has to be approved by the family," Revecca answers haughtily.

"Wow, good thing, thanks to you, I found out my family is a bit different than expected. I'll call Judah. I'm sure he'll give me his blessing as my blood-related Alpha." I shrug.

Where are all these rules coming from? I am positive Cade got zero approval on being with Thalia.

Revecca forced the blood test, and now she's got to pay the piper for it. When I start walking toward the front door behind her, her henchman follows my movements, constantly putting himself between us.

She hisses her loathing remark upon my approach. "I don't know what angle you're playing, but you cannot think this is a good idea."

"I'm the reigning queen of bad ideas," I answer, walking past her.

Finn's cool and stable presence trails behind me as I make my way through the foyer.

Does she not know what I've been through? Then again, maybe I should be proud my family is good at keeping things quiet.

I kick off my shoes without untying them and don't bother putting them away. Finn's hand finds my shoulder. He keeps me with him as he toes off his shoes.

We walk across the foyer and into the great room.

"Stockholm is lovely. But nothing could stop us from coming. I mean, if it had been you or Deacon, it would have been absolu —" Aunt Alora's voice cuts off as Finn and I emerge.

Cade looks over my shoulder at Finn.

Is everyone going to start addressing him and not me?

"Just found her. Then had a run-in with Revecca," Finn growls.

"Do continue talking about me like I'm not here though." I glance at Aunt Alora and Uncle Elliot before trying to make a beeline toward the snack cupboard.

Finn tosses me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing.

"I'm hungry," I groan.

"I'll have Lauren run you up snacks," Cade answers.

Revecca comes into my view before Finn can round the corridor. Her eyes go wide, scandalized.

I blow her a kiss and wink for good measure. Her responding scoff echoes across the open space.

I'd like to pretend to be surprised that Finn knows how to go up the back stairwell and through the game room, past the movie screening area, and into the tucked-away hallway that leads to my room. But I'm not. Only when we're through my security door and the secondary privacy door does Finn set me down in the sitting area of my bedroom.

I look at him expectantly. Blowing a raspberry when he says nothing, I fill the dead air. "Fancy seeing you here. Wanna fuck?"

"No, I want Cade to distract Revecca. Then I can take you, and we can go shift." Finn shakes his head, crossing his arms over his chest.

Regardless of the flex of his forearms and the shuffling of his ink, it's arguably the most unsexy thing ever said.

"We can't do that." I turn away from him, heading past the fireplace, around my bed, and to the bathroom.

Dutifully, Finn follows.

"You need to shift. Dinah told me that you need to get more in touch with

your wolf.” Finn’s choice of logical arguments is compelling.

However, it does not change the facts.

Glowering from the doorway, Finn tracks my movements while he furthers his argument. “There’s something not right, you need to interact with your wolf.”

When I walk into my closet, the light flicks on automatically. I’m half-naked when I look at Finn. His eyes are locked on my body. *Typical male.*

Heat fills me, warming my core. It comes out of nowhere.

“Tell me you can’t feel our bond, Kathleen.” Finn’s voice is gravelly as he lets out a commanding growl, “Tell me right now you’re not feeling the desire I have for you.”

“You told me you didn’t want to fuck.” I finish stripping and toss my relatively clean clothes into the washing machine like the ones from earlier.

The builder thought we were a bunch of eccentrics with how large Cade and I requested our bathtubs. I overheard two of them talking about how ridiculous it was that I wanted my own washer and dryer in my closet. But neither of them has to live with Deacon. I’ve lost more dresses to the strange shit he’s left in his pockets than one woman should ever have to grieve in her life.

I go to the chest of drawers where I keep my soft, squishy clothes.

“Besides, I can’t feel our bond because my wolf is gone.” I drop the bomb on him.

Here we go. Now he’ll reject me and leave.

Finn steps forward and reaches into the drawer around my hands. He pulls out my softest squishy pants and slides the drawer closed.

“No, she’s there, but you’re not listening to her.” Finn’s body pressed against me has me relaxing against him.

He doesn’t understand. There’s nothing to listen to.

This leaning on him, craving his physical touch, isn’t conducive to letting him go. I’ll never break the bond if we’re so close all the time. The steps to move away from him are a million miles that I begrudgingly cross.

CHAPTER 27

FINN

“WHEN WERE YOU THINKING OF TELLING ME ABOUT YOUR WOLF, LENA?” I swallow hard, looking down at her hazel eyes.

I know her wolf is struggling. The unsettledness of an insecure animal tugs on my own wolf. We want to steady her and help her find her way back to the surface.

“Oh, I see. It’s Lena now. Given up on the full name, easier to see me like everyone else.” She huffs, pulling on the pair of sweats I chose for her.

The sting of her reaction pulses in my heart. When she’s dressed, Lena walks toward me.

I don’t step out of her way, and she gives a half-hearted growl, “Move. If you insist on talking, I’d like to do it not standing in the bathroom and closet.”

Dutifully, I follow her back to her bedroom. She hesitates by the bed but walks back around the double-sided fireplace to the seating area from when we first came in.

She picks up a remote from the table and points it at the fireplace, and the gas insert springs to life. Much like at the apartment, she has a blanket on the back of the couch, and she pulls it off and begins wrapping it around her as she sits on the couch.

When she’s settled, I grab the corner of the blanket to tuck it under her feet.

She tries and fails to snarl at me.

“Kathleen.” I keep moving, tucking her feet in underneath her. “Faolan, are you always going to bite?”

“Is your plan to keep touching me and trying to make everything okay?”

Lena snaps. “Nothing about you was part of my plan. Especially not telling you about my wolf.” The answer comes out of nowhere, and I realize she’s answering my original question.

I was going to sit down in one of the chairs so I could watch her as we talk, but that’s no longer an option. Sitting on the opposite end of the sofa, I reach under the blanket and find her foot. *I’ll tame you, faolan. You’ll be moaning and craving my touch soon.*

Running my thumb along the top of her foot, I let Lena watch me as I try to feel her more.

Our mate’s wolf is very hurt, mine recognizes. We’re both trying to call to her wolf. I want so desperately to unify them. He keeps looking. *Why won’t they talk?*

“I don’t expect you to want me, Finn.” Lena’s words don’t make sense.

Sitting in silence, I wait for Lena to talk, trying to figure out where this difference is coming from. Her wolf hasn’t woken up yet? Dinah said with how much sedative she received it might take time. *Did someone tell her?*

“I’m not exactly perfect mate material.” Whines slip out between her words, and I can see her struggling to hold them back.

I lean over her on the couch and use my thumb and forefinger to turn her chin to face me. “I don’t care what you say, or what your brain is telling you, or what assumptions you’ve made about me. We’re till death do we part. I fully intend to make you an honest woman and marry you. So don’t say it. Don’t think it. You’re absolutely perfect, and I’ll never leave your side if that’s what it takes for you to believe me.”

Lena shakes her head. It’s too hard to sit this far away from her. It’s too hard to pretend that resting my hand on her stocking-clad foot is enough. I stand and pick up my mate.

“Finn, put me down,” she objects with a squirm, trying to wiggle her way free.

But I’m stronger and bigger than her, and much like our ascent up the stairs, she has no choice but to comply.

Climbing onto the bed, I finally set her down. She tries to roll away, but I wrap my arm around her and pull her back to me. I adjust her so that her head rests on my arm. She’s the perfect little spoon.

Nosing my way into her hair, I draw in her sweet scent before starting with the one thing I haven’t given her yet. It’s something she needs to hear. “I’m sorry, Kathleen. Had I known you were a submissive, I would have

approached us differently.”

Lena wiggles, but she settles, clearly uncomfortable. With one final adjustment, her body relaxes slowly against mine.

With a sigh, she complains, “I don’t want to be treated differently.”

“You are different, faolan. Whether you want to be or not.”

Lena quits breathing, and traces of rage come from her body again. But there’s also a growing presence that feels like her wolf.

I continue. “I’m sorry, Kathleen, because I wouldn’t have given us the opportunity to bond if I knew how much it would upset you. I would have done everything in my power to walk out that door. You deserved to choose me on your own, not in the middle of heat.”

“Fuck y —”

“Don’t. I’m not playing this dance where you insist you don’t want me. Stop assuming that I don’t want you. If you tell me what you need, I’ll give it to you. You’re mine, and I’m not angry about it. I will never regret it,” I tell her, keeping my voice low.

Her little hand finds mine, and the action tells me somehow she’s finding reassurance in my words.

I interlace my fingers with hers. “Your heat bound us together. But the pull of fate between us is real.”

She snarls, and despite it dying in her throat, it’s coming from her wolf.

Shaking her head, Lena mumbles, “I hate how weak I am with you.”

Kissing the back of her head, I squeeze her gently. “You’re never weak with me. Kathleen, you’re the second most fearsome woman I’ve met. Even then, it’s only because I watched my mother rip a man limb from limb. Though, I’m fairly certain, given the opportunity, you might do that to Rebecca.”

She snorts a short laugh. “Brutal. But not what I mean.”

“So tell me.” I drop the rigid frame I’ve been using to hold her against my chest.

Lena’s not fighting me right now. I suspect giving a little and letting her choose to open up to me will win more favors than pushing my dominance over her.

It would be fun to put our mate under us. Remind her the right way we care for her and her wolf. My wolf finds an alternative way to deal with Lena’s insecurities regarding our place in her life.

“Ten seconds,” I offer.

Without waiting for a number to start, Lena speaks. “My wolf is gone. I can’t find her. What I’m feeling isn’t right from what Ansel and Dinah have said about their wolves after . . .” Her voice trails. “You seem to make that feeling be more. But it doesn’t. It’s not.” She trembles a bit. Drawing a deep breath, she lets it out. I give her space to keep talking. “At least when she was talking to me, I could predict what she was doing. It’s dangerous to be what I am without control. If it doesn’t go back to normal, what will I do? Everyone will know.”

Squeezing her fingers to show I’m still listening, I wait some more. However, it hasn’t curbed my confusion. *Dangerous? Why is she pretending to be an Alpha Female?*

“I need something stable until I can find control over her. I’m too weak when you’re here. You need to stay away. I can’t have her latch onto you only for you to get tired of the real me and leave.” Lena makes a demand.

“Won’t happen, faolan.” I try to reassure her. She’s not hearing me. The words I’m using aren’t sinking in. “I don’t want you to feel that way. I want you to feel empowered with me, not diminished. Whatever it is you believe being a submissive is, isn’t what I know. I’d love for you to tell me so that I can understand and help you more.” I pause, hoping she’ll interject. When she doesn’t, I keep talking. “I’m never leaving you. If it means I have to stay plastered to your side every hour of every day, I will.”

Lena shakes her head and says nothing.

If it weren’t for the growing feeling of tension through her muscles, I’d think she’d fallen asleep.

She argues, “Conditioned to be a commodity is not a life I want.”

“Is that how you see yourself?” I ask.

I can’t see her face and need to. Leaning back, I pull her around in my arms.

Lena’s brow is furrowed, and while she’s not misty-eyed, she’s clearly distraught. I try to push love toward her, but either her wolf is still too far under, or she’s not capable or receptive to feeling it.

“Have you ever considered that maybe you’ve been too busy fighting what you think being a submissive should be, so you haven’t been able to experience what it truly is?” I press my forehead against hers. “Faolan, I want to know, more than anything, what it is people have led you to believe about being submissive.”

“Yes. I’ve considered it, especially because even right now, the longer

you're here with me, whatever is wrong inside me, this growing nonverbal discomfort, I can hardly keep it from you. I can hardly keep myself from you." Lena sighs.

For the first time, I watch as Lena's wolf rises into her eyes. The hazel tones become more gold and lit with character but still in that nearly human realm. It's easier to hide her wolf because her eyes are so bright to start with.

Mate is beautiful. We need to run with her. My wolf admires Lena right along with me.

I want to tell her what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling, but Lena's not done talking.

"There's this intense need to do whatever someone wants me to do," she says sadly. "It's worse now that we have you."

"I can help you," I vow.

She swallows hard, moving to look away from me.

I keep giving her the reassurance she's desperately in need of. "You won't have to feel that way with me in your life. Let me in. Quit trying to push me away. Whatever it is you've gotten twisted up in your brain, let it go," I coax. "Especially let go of your preconceived notion of what I want or don't want and what I'll love or won't love. Let those thoughts go. Allow me to give you what you need, and accept that I'm not a runner. I've never run from a fight. I'll never run from you."

Drowsiness wanes over my faolan. "I don't know how to do this, Finn."

"I'll help. Get some rest, Kathleen. I'll be here when you wake up." I rake my fingers through her hair, and she turns her face toward me again.

Hesitantly, she comes to me and gives me the sweetest kiss. She's soft and supple. I kiss back with tenderness. We lie there for a while. Finally, she starts to drift off, and eventually, her room grows dark with the setting sun. Lena looks so young and peaceful as she sleeps.

CHAPTER 28

FINN

I DOZE WITH HER FOR AN HOUR BEFORE MY STOMACH RUMBLES, ANGRY THAT I didn't finish the tacos earlier. I grab a pillow from the head of the bed and slowly swap it out with my arm underneath Lena's head. I hope to get back before she even notices I'm gone.

Lena's room is soundproof, and I find that out when I walk into the movie viewing area. I can now hear loud voices from the floor below, echoing up to the loft space. That'll be handy later. I'll show her all the ways no one will ever love her as much as I do.

When I reach the landing of the main floor, all voices stop and every head turns to look at me.

With a raised eyebrow, I ask, "Can I help you?"

The older couple from earlier is missing, and a dark-haired male I didn't notice earlier sits among the Aldens.

"Who had an hour?" Dinah's voice breaks the silence from where she's sitting on the couch.

"That would be the tall blond henchmen," Cade answers.

"No!" Thalia objects. "It's been ninety-five minutes, that means it's the henchman with the cool palm tattoo."

Through the insanity, I look over at Revecca for an explanation of what's going on.

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "Apparently there's a betting pool as to how long you would stay upstairs bedding that . . . particular disruption in the bloodline. They managed to get the royal guards in on it too."

A rumble starts deep in my chest with her insult.

Jesus Christ, Revecca. We got to start this already? I'm not in the mood

for her dramatics. How does she always seem to turn up in my life when I least need her brand of chaos? Why isn't she in Ireland? Magnus would probably love to see his mate.

"Hey!" Dinah shouts angrily.

Normally, I wouldn't let someone else defend my mate, but Dinah's growl is so impressive I want to see the bite behind it.

"What? It's true," Revecca answers with a wave of her hand to everyone around her.

"Listen, I get it." Dinah stands up from her seat, her wolf pushing forward. "Your mommy and daddy abandoned you in Romania. Then had the audacity to die on their way to, what did you call us? The colonies? Very old-world of you. But you aren't moving in here and taking Lena's place." Dinah smirks.

Revecca raises her head. Dinah's almost a head taller than her, but Revecca's The Pricolici, there's a lot of power there.

Dinah doesn't back down. "First, because she's far wittier than you are. And, second, because no matter how badly you want to be reunited with your brother and have this big happy family vibe, no one likes you. Your guards are paid to be with you, but even they're having more fun hanging out here than you are. Third, we're supposed to be family. Clearly that means nothing to you. But it means something here."

Revecca's jaw drops.

I walk to the kitchen, not wanting to cause any further theatrics. I want to feed my mate, then curl up and relax with her a bit more. But I have to admit that Dinah hit many of Revecca's insecurities. The insider knowledge I have makes it all so much sweeter. I've never wished Revecca ill, but I'm not above wishing for her to be taken down a peg or two.

In the kitchen, the 'henchman' that Thalia made note of, with the hand tattoo, pulls out two plates from a cupboard. I know him as Patrick since I trained him for Magnus. He's from Ireland by way of Dublin. We recently brought him, well, Magnus recently brought him into the inner circle. Regardless, he's loyal, but not to the Ardeleans. There are only a few reasons Magnus would force Revecca to keep an Irish guard, specifically Patrick, with her. Something in Romania is not settled. The queen and her throne are in danger.

Patrick helps me get plates together of the food that Revecca cooked.

"I heard you're out," he whispers.

“Aye,” I answer, watching to see if he reaches for a sharp object or a gun.

“Congratulations.” He nods.

I shake my head. “Wasn’t how it should have been.”

“Finn,” Cade calls, and I turn to find him on the other side of the counter.

“Yes?” I answer.

He points to the plate. “Lena’s kinda picky. Best leave the eggplant down here.”

Thalia snorts, and Dinah laughs.

Dinah’s voice carries clearly across the space as she says, “Lena only wants your eggplant Finn. None of those aubergines.”

I shake my head, opting to plate different food for her. Plating up extras of different options, I’m about to go upstairs when Deacon descends, and Lena steps down right behind him.

“Look who I found!” Deacon laughs, beaming as he spins Lena around in a silly dance.

“Joy,” Revecca starts. “So nice for you to join us. Did you get enough beauty sleep? It’s a disgrace to your title to nap. Royalty should always be available during daylight hours —”

“How odd.” Setting the plates on the counter, I step in and cut her down myself. “I thought you were the disgrace. I mean, with The Pricolici jumping bloodlines to The Leviathan’s. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? Now that you know he’s here, you need him to validate you on the throne.”

Walking out of the kitchen, I smile at her. I turn to catch her eyes over the bar. She glares at me, her bright blue eyes boring a hole into me.

She tries to command me, but it doesn’t come from The Pricolici. “Enough.”

I smile at her. I know Revecca’s secrets, and if she doesn’t want them aired, she’ll back down, “No, it isn’t enough. Why haven’t you told them the truth about why you want Cade to return to Romania?”

I spoke quietly, but we’re wolves, so it doesn’t matter. Murmurs cross over the others of the Ardelean Bloodline.

Revecca shakes her head, and boldly, I give her my back.

Lena’s standing next to Deacon. Having abandoned the shapeless sweats, she’s back in jeans and a maroon T-shirt with ‘meh’ emblazoned across her chest. Her hair hangs loose around her shoulders.

How is she always so sexy?

Given the exchange, it’s no surprise her face holds a look of confusion.

Does she not know she was born with purpose? Not only as my mate but to her bloodline?

I walk over to Lena and offer my hand to her. “I was making us plates. I intended to be back before you woke up. I’m sorry I wasn’t there when I told you I would be. “

“It’s fine.” Lena’s assurance doesn’t hit hard enough.

I didn’t come through on a promise to her.

Wrapping my arm around Lena, I escort her to where her plate was set. It puts me between two of the three powder kegs in the room.

Rebecca is glaring, nearly shooting daggers from her eyes at us.

I press up against Lena, giving her an extra squeeze, further defying Rebecca’s distaste for my mate. “Sit with your cousin, I’ll bring you over a plate.”

“Sister,” Lena says as a matter of fact.

“I’m sorry?” I look between her and Dinah.

Lena nods. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Pft, I’ll tell you now.” Rebecca brings out her high and mighty voice.

I turn to look at her, flashing my wolf’s green eyes.

Not threatened by my glare, Rebecca speaks. “I demanded they complete the blood test, and as I suspected, the only child we’ve been able to locate of the primary lineage is Cade. It appears that your mate is related to the Alloways. However it may be that they chose to split them. Though, my guess is they sent the weak one to live with The Leviathan hoping for him to exert some sort of control over her.” I’m clenching my fists and snarling at her, but Rebecca doesn’t stop. “Which clearly did nothing for the submissive in her.”

“Rebecca, silence!” Cade commands.

The burst of the Alpha command brings me a step backward, closer to Lena, trying to shield her and her slowly returning wolf.

Remarkably, she seems unfazed by it. Perhaps she’s used to the feeling?

Rebecca falls silent. Her henchmen, as everyone is calling them, return to her sides in case a fight breaks out. But between the way Thalia is leaning against Cade and knowing that Cade won’t do anything to upset her, I doubt bloodshed in the great room will be on the menu tonight.

Deacon breaks the silence. “Okay, so can anyone else see the woman screaming?”

“Really, Deacon?” Dinah rolls her eyes. “You think we’d let a woman

scream?”

“Well, to be fair, she isn’t screaming in English and didn’t start screaming until after Cade told Revecca to be quiet. So, it’s not like Revecca can answer.” Deacon defends himself with solid logic.

“What is she saying?” Revecca glares at him as the color drains from her face.

Deacon shakes his head. “I’ve got no idea.”

“Repeat it to me.” Revecca cuts off the insult I know she’d normally spew.

Deacon keeps shaking his head, crossing his hands back and forth in front of him. “No, if you start saying what they’re saying, then they think that you’ll help them. She’s fucking pissed off, and I’m absolutely not dealing with that.”

Revecca reaches for the butcher block and pulls out a paring knife. *Not exactly the right one to threaten someone with.* Magnus taught her better.

Revecca storms over to Deacon, heels clicking on the hardwood floor. Snatching his waving hand out of the air, she brings the knife toward it. Deacon tries to pull it away, but she’s strong, and I can see his hesitation in trying not to hurt either of them. Using the knife, she cuts the palm of his hand.

“Ow. You know that hurts people, right?” Deacon asks her.

“Shut up.” Revecca slices open her own palm.

She forces a tight grip on his hand, mixing their blood together. Her eyes flare bright white.

“Whoa,” Deacon gasps. Awe flashes across his face as his eyes turn nearly black.

Revecca pulls her hand away from Deacon’s and looks at her entourage. “We must leave. Tomorrow at the latest.”

She turns to Cade. “Thank you for your hospitality. I will be leaving tomorrow, but I will return once we handle matters at home. Then we will discuss whatever it is that has happened between Kathleen and Griffin as well as your return to Romania.”

In a short angry huff, normally reserved for when she’s pissed Magnus off, Revecca dismisses herself down the hallway, entourage following toward the rooms Cade has set up for them.

“She made the ancestors disappear,” Deacon mutters.

Leaning back on the sofa, he licks the blood from his hand.

Taking plates of food into the formal ballroom for dinner seems strange, but sitting around one of the large tables with Lena, Cade, Thalia, Dinah, Deacon, Ezra, and myself, it's full. It feels homey.

Lena is quiet, picking at her plate through dinner. I try not to hover and mind everything she does. Try being the operative word. I'm obsessed with her. My wolf is obsessed with her. There's no part of her life I don't want to be immersed in.

Her family, however, chats and catches up on things like Judah — Dinah and Ezra's brother and Alpha of the Alloway pack — and his disdain for a printer. The fact that Dinah, the Alloway's Alpha Female, can't convince him to hire some help because she's not putting her life on hold for a job she doesn't want is telling of the pack dynamic.

Ezra managed to tell me he has the gift of reading minds before I tapped him on the shoulder to offer him a plate. He's apparently quite handy and does everything he can to stay out of Judah's way. That gives Dinah something to roll her eyes over.

Anytime the conversation comes back around to Lena, she redirects, casually segueing into other topics. She's excellent at shifting herself out of the limelight. I want to know more about her, but the faint feeling of Lena's wolf is thready, like the pulse of someone bleeding out.

Cade is recounting a meeting with a Canadian diplomat, who is apparently sending him maple syrup beer, when I finish my plate. I lean back and wrap my arm around the back of Lena's chair. She stiffens for a moment before relaxing into it.

“So, Finn.” Ezra looks at me and then to Lena. “Tell me about yourself.”

Lena huffs before glaring at Ezra and rolling her eyes. “No.”

“I'm just saying, I didn't get to pick him. I don't even know him.” Ezra is nearly pleading with Lena. He pauses, taking his eyes from her before bringing them back to me. “It's no secret Lena's the favorite. I need to be sure you're good enough for her.”

What does he want? With a glance at Cade and his noncommittal shrug of approval, I start, “I have an accounting degree from Trinity College. I've been Magnus's left hand for the last eleven years. And before that, I was one of my father's advisors for five. I've run the pack during Magnus's short-term stints in jail and, for the most part, only knock heads in when I need to.”

Ezra nods along and, when I pause, asks, “And why is it Revecca Ardelean hates you?”

I shake my head. “That’s between her and me.”

Ezra’s eyes narrow, then he pulls them from me to look at Lena.

“Try again.” Ezra pushes.

“You’re more than welcome to come over here and use your gift and pull it from my head, or you’re welcome to have Cade command it out of me. But it’s not my place to speak about what stands between us,” I answer.

Shifting in his seat Ezra turns to Cade.

“I won’t do it, Ezra. It doesn’t matter right now. Revecca’s leaving tomorrow. Let’s be grateful Lena is alive and that we have a new member of the family. One who, so far, we actually like,” Cade adds that last bit in.

Ezra sighs and sets his jaw. He looks again to Lena before nodding and letting it go.

“Alright. That’s enough people for me today.” Thalia clasps her hands softly. “Until tomorrow.”

When she stands, I rise out of my chair. The others at the table look at me in various states of confusion.

Sitting down, I respond to their inquiry, “Not a thing here. Got it.”

“Good night,” Cade answers as he stands and threads his fingers into Thalia’s.

Mine itch to do the same to Lena. But she’s found a way to move over in her chair to not be close again.

“Text me first if you need me.” Cade looks between all of us again before pulling on Thalia to lead her from the table.

She waves, but the hungry look in her eyes is all I need to know that there’s no way in hell I’m bothering them unless the house is literally going up in smoke.

Deacon says nothing but kisses Lena’s head, shakes my hand, and with a brief wave to the Alloways, retreats to wherever his place in the house is.

“Alright, love birds.” Dinah smacks Ezra on the shoulder.

I stand again, this time to take Lena to bed.

Dinah walks around the table and wraps her arms around me with a laugh. “I’m a hugger. Finn, it’s been great to get to know you. I can’t wait to hang out again, maybe in some place more fun.” Letting me go, Dinah turns to Lena, and her tone turns scolding. “I love you, but pull your head out of your ass.” Her tone drops softer. “I’ll see you in the morning. My flight’s tomorrow afternoon, but if Mom and Dad try to stay around, I’ll bump it.”

Lena bristles, her shoulders tensing, and she shakes her head ever so

slightly.

“It was good to meet you,” I assure them both, moving past whatever there is to do with Dinah and Ezra’s parents.

“I love you.” Dinah continues wrapping her arms around Lena. “I think we’re coming here for Solstice, but if not, I want to see you for sure on Equinox.”

It feels personal between the two of them, so I divert my gaze.

Once Dinah walks off toward the hall, I look at Lena, only to hear Dinah’s voice. “Finn.”

I look back at her, and she points between me and Lena. “This is your official medical clearance. But be gentle with her, and if it’s painful beyond what normal fun you two depraved creatures like, stop and give her more time to heal.” Dinah wiggles her eyebrows.

Ezra snorts, following Dinah. “Damn, always knew the little innocent one would turn out to be a freak. Catch you tomorrow, little Lena. Love you.”

I’m floored. I go scarlet and run my hand across the back of my neck. Dinah cackles as she walks away from us and down the hall. I never considered Lena needing time to heal, but despite how attracted to Lena I am, sex isn’t on my mind. I serviced Lena through heat, so why am I turning scarlet because her sister knows what we do when we’re alone?

Lena shakes her head, and when I look at her, the fire that’s been missing lights up in her eyes. “I’m sorry, are you blushing?”

I wrap my arms around her, trying to draw attention away from me. “Let me take you upstairs. We can put on the TV or go back to sleep, whatever you want, but I’m not open for sex until after you’ve shifted.”

“No, no, we’re not walking past this. You’re blushing,” Lena pokes. “Besides, it’s awfully rude to say no sex. Dinah said.”

“I’m not quite okay with your cousin telling us it’s okay to fuck,” I hiss.

“Pft. Who knew you’d be a prude?” Lena speaks at full volume and rolls her eyes.

I grab hold of her chin and tip it up to face me. I kiss her deeply.

Breaking our kiss, I murmur, “Some things aren’t about physical pleasures, faolan.”

CHAPTER 29

LENA

FINN IS THE MOST AMAZING SNUGGLER. THAT HASN'T CHANGED FROM MY heat. So much changes when you're in your heat, but this, wrapped in his arms with the perfect amount of toasty warmth behind me, is — there are no words.

He's asleep, and I've lain here for . . . I'm not sure how long. But I still can't sleep. I tried mimicking Finn's breathing patterns, pretending to be asleep, and running through the periodic table of elements, but none of it worked. Tomorrow I'll face Aunt Alora and Uncle Elliot. There's not a lot that can settle the nervous energy.

Before we lay down, Finn set my phone on the charging dock next to my bed, and the curious part of me wants to at least catch up on school and work stuff. I'm sure there's some drama that I've been looped in on, and it might help to feel normal?

My phone lights up, and it says it's barely after midnight, but it doesn't feel like it. Curled up in a blanket with the fireplace on, it's almost as warm as snuggling with Finn. Settling in, I start catching up on almost two weeks' worth of social media notifications, text messages, emails, and coursework. I delete most of them. It's either too late to reply or has been handled by someone else.

I'm opening the last set of messages when a new text pings through. Nikki is newer to the lab. This is her third year in Minnesota. She transferred, with her parents, from the pack in California shortly before the incident that took wolves public. With lab experience and being highly intelligent, it wasn't hard to make friends with her. *I think she knows we're friends?*

She jokes that she won't adjust to Midwest time, so I'm not surprised it's

her texting me much later than the rest of the world.

NIKKI:

Are you awake?

ME:

Yeah. I think I've probably done enough sleeping for a while.
Gotta get back to my night owl status.

When are you coming back?

That bad eh?

BlackBerry is awful. Data can't be bothered with anything about it of course, because he's human. I'm pretty sure that new guy Finn, YOUR MATE, has contemplated killing BlackBerry at least four times. I saw Finn had him pinned against the wall. FUCKING HOT. Alpha males, yum. Why is it you Alpha Females get all the hot dudes? Kinda bummed you didn't tell me btw.

It literally just happened. It's not like I was hiding him or anything.

I hit send on that last message as Finn stirs in bed.

He calls, "Kathleen? You in pain?"

"I'm fine. Can't sleep is all," I tell him.

There's more shuffling on the bed, and it sounds like he's rolled over to go back to sleep.

I didn't think you were hiding him. It's like IDK we're not close but it kinda feels that way sometimes.

You're the only friend I have. Let's be real.

Awww. I knew you were my friend. Seriously though, I don't know what to do about work. BlackBerry cornered Caitlen, Data says we have to ignore him. At least with you here someone's not afraid to put him in his place. None of us want to be the reason research can't continue.

Hands come to rest on my shoulders, and I jump, startled. Dropping my phone, I look up to see Finn.

He yawns. "You could have woken me up."

"I'm catching up on work and school." I move to pick up my phone, but Finn's long arms get there first.

He holds it out of reach and reads the screen. “Who is BlackBerry and who is Data?”

“Brayden and Doctor Thorpe,” I answer. *Busted.*

Finn hands my phone back but doesn’t comment on the conversation about him.

“That’s it?” I question.

Finn smiles and walks around to sit on the sofa facing me. The way the firelight dances across his tattoos sends needy warmth right to my core.

“If I get one request, it’s that you’re more creative than ‘fish’ for my nickname.” Finn shrugs. “Do you want to go for a run?”

“I can’t. I have to spend all night figuring out what to nickname you now that you’ve taken away the only option I had come up with,” I sass, hoping to hide behind that as the reason. When in reality, there’s only the weird squirmy life inside me. I feel it more frequently, but it definitely doesn’t feel wolf shaped.

Finn’s wolf comes forward, the green of his eyes reflecting in the low light of the fireplace.

There’s nothing I can do. Mine isn’t there. I don’t feel it.

I shake my head, arguing, “How is it that you’re fine with going for a run but getting fucked is off the table?”

The sly smile Finn gives me tickles me all the way to my core.

He offers, “If you come with me on a short run and you still feel up to it . . . there are still some things we didn’t do during your heat that I would love to do now.”

The squirmy feeling pushes forward, hard, and makes me curl up tighter into a ball. It hurts.

I can’t handle this feeling. *Is this my wolf now?*

Finn and my wolf’s bonding will only make breaking our mating bond hurt more. But I need to heal, and I need my wolf on my side to heal. If this is what she is, then I’ve got to embrace it. Never thought I’d miss the snarky little coward. She was bad but better than this mush.

Slowly, I stand. Finn follows me to my feet and offers his hand. Hesitantly I place mine in his. With what I imagine is my wolf so close to my skin, the lightest touch almost feels like our wolves are already connecting.

The vision slams hard through my brain, blocking everything else out.

“I LOVE YOU, GRIF.” A BLONDE WOMAN SMILES. THEY’RE NAKED AND STANDING in a field. Tall green grass flits around their waists. She’s radiant. Perfect tits out and unashamed. Blonde hair, bobbed above her shoulders, dances across her face in the breeze.

Finn’s hand brushes the hair out of her eyes. “I love you, Aoife.”

“Then why won’t you accept me as your mate? Claim me,” she says loudly over the sounds of the waves on the shore below.

Finn cups her head with his hand. “You know I can’t do that.”

“Is it because of her?” Aoife purses her lips.

Shaking his head, Finn answers her quickly. “It’s nothing you’ve done wrong. But I’m not settling with anyone less than my divine mate. I’m sorry, Aoife.”

“You may never find her. You’re not exactly young, Grif,” Aoife growls at him.

He shrugs and shakes his head. “I understand you’re angry. It doesn’t change the facts. She’s out there somewhere. I can feel it.”

“Is it because I’m not submissive enough? What can I do to prove I’m right for you?” Aoife begs him for answers.

“It doesn’t work that way, Aoife.” Finn shakes his head. “I understand if this is the last time you want to run with me.”

“This is the last time we’ll ever be alone together,” Aoife answers.

Her footfalls are heavy as she storms away from the cliff edge above the sea. She shifts fluidly into a black-flecked gray wolf.

Finn lets her go scrubbing his hand down his face. He whispers, “God give me the strength to find her. Please, God, let me find her.”

I BLINK HARD A FEW TIMES, MY EYES DRY.

Finn’s standing there, smiling and waiting for me.

The squirming inside me feels like lava rolling in my gut. It’s uncomfortable. It still doesn’t feel like my wolf, but whatever it is needs to be out.

Motioning toward the door, I usher him out. “I’m good. Let’s go.”

Finn nods and follows me down to the back deck. Frost has settled on the deck railing and the stairs. Down at the bottom of the stairs, off to the left, is the door to the small changing room to keep our clothes in. Finn follows me in, and with the two of us in here, it’s tight. It’s larger than my office at the

university, but the air with him is thick.

“Faolan,” Finn beckons after I pull off my shirt.

I turn to look at him. Tits out, I feel ridiculous knowing the cold’s effects. Raising an eyebrow, I wait for more info from him.

“Am I supposed to ask you about your visions?” Finn’s question is genuine.

No one’s ever asked that before. Most of the time, people get weird about it, or they dive in trying to ask all the questions. Everyone wants to know what I know and if it’s about them.

Dumbly, I shrug. “You can if you want. I don’t normally talk about what I’ve seen, but sometimes I will.”

“So, when you’ve been with me, you’ve had three?” Finn’s pants fall to the floor.

“No.” I shake my head, turning away from him. “I’m not talking about that right now.”

“Fair enough.” Finn doesn’t press.

Why is he agreeable?

It’s barely below freezing as I step out into the cold night air, and I remember how unfair it is that I’m stuck in this awful climate. *Why couldn’t we live somewhere warm?* Sure, the trees are beautiful this time of year, but it’s only getting colder from here.

Finn closes the door behind him when he steps out of the room, and I wait for him. With each minute that passes, I’m more unsure that I’ll be able to shift.

Nervous energy must pour off me because Finn addresses it. “Relax, Kathleen, I’ll make sure you shift okay. Your wolf is there.”

“I don’t . . .” I start to say, but I shake my head.

There’s no harm in trying. He’ll see that I’m actually broken, and maybe he’ll be gone by Friday. No one will want to be mates with a wolf he can’t shift with. Or with whatever’s left inside me.

I push myself forward, and Finn’s hand finds my low back. “When was the last time you shifted?”

“Two weeks before the wedding.” I wait for the judgment and scolding.

“Okay,” Finn answers. There’s no judgment. He doesn’t even comment on it. His hand falls away from me. “I’m here if you want the command. You set the pace.”

Now is not the time to stall out, I grumble at the lava inside.

I try hard to bring it forward. Finn's dominating presence becomes stronger behind me. He steps into my space, and as he does, the lava erupts through me.

Shifting's never been easy, but this one comes more quickly. It's fluid. Four feet strike the grass, and we look back toward Finn.

As suspected, a massive black and gray wolf is in his place.

The beast that's been building inside me isn't the wolf I've come to know. We charge Finn, and I can't hold it back.

I've never fought another wolf before. I've never been aggressive. But this is a force I can't stop.

Our mouth is full of fur. Then a snarl and teeth ripping, pushing hard against him.

CHAPTER 30

FINN

LENA'S GONE. I COULD TELL THE MOMENT HER WOLF'S TEETH MADE CONTACT with my skin. Something's not right. Gently we dislodge her with a push of our shoulder, but the snarly little wolf charges again.

Lowering our snout, we push under her chest, rolling her to her back. Claws try to find purchase in our dense fur. Snarling, we try to discourage the feral behavior, but it isn't swayed. She snaps and rolls. Using her back feet, she attacks again, delivering a blow to our ribs.

Circling, we push her again, swiftly pressing our paw against her to put her back on the ground. Opening our jaws, we put them around her neck. Feet kick and squirm at our feet. Snarls keep growing, and we squeeze tighter around her throat.

It's clear this wolf hasn't ever been in a fight. Her body stills, but when our teeth come off her skin, she rolls away and circles around.

Lowering our head, we bare our teeth. Hackles rising, she appears bigger. Her ears pin back, and she snaps her jaws at us with a fake lunge forward, taunting us.

Keeping our weight backward, my wolf and I agree to let her attack us again. Pinning our ears back, we snap our jaws and curl our lips in a snarl.

The ball of light-gray-and-cream fur snaps again before launching at us with feet high in the air, trying to get a grip from above. Feet connect with our shoulders, and we collapse low before rolling her off our back and tumbling with her, easily putting our jaws around her neck again.

Fur fills our mouth, and we squeeze our jaws hard across her neck. Feet claw hard against us, and we feel the pain of her nails finally making contact with our skin. Lying down, we force her onto her side, restricting her legs

with our weight.

Patience isn't easy. We don't want to hurt her. Focusing on her, we think about how much we want and love her. We try to reach her through the bond. *Something, anything, please get through to her.*

She won't submit. Even with the position we've put her in, her thrashing doesn't end. We try squeezing our jaws on her neck a little tighter. Her fur and loose skin pull against our teeth.

We have to hurt her, my wolf urges. Our mate needs us to put her in her place.

It's killing me. I can't. Not like this. Not . . . *She was submissive.*

She IS submissive, my wolf argues. She's just confused.

Reluctance isn't helping. Remorse floods my brain before we even make a move. Warily, I apply the minuscule amount of extra pressure needed to break her skin.

Her feet connect again with our soft underbelly.

Sweet thick copper hits our tongue, but she doesn't yield.

We pull a bit harder, and finally, a woeful whine follows a loud yelp. Her body stills, but we have to wait. More blood fills our mouth. We squeeze a little more and growl.

The whine grows quieter.

Our heart is breaking and keeps breaking even as her body relaxes.

Releasing her from our jaws, we lie down beside her, and she rolls, licking at our jaws. She submits again. The missing bond warms us. It's not strong, but it's finally back.

We nuzzle into her fur and lick at the bite marks. She squirms and rolls again, giving us her belly.

The shift back for Lena takes longer than when she fell into the frustrated feral animal. It looks excruciating, but we let her move at her pace.

She looks exhausted. Dark circles under her eyes are visible in the light of the night.

Shifting back, I move quickly, lifting her from the frosted cold ground. I forgo trying to dress her in the small changing room and instead take her straight up the deck and to the house.

The door opens before I can move her to reach for the knob. Deacon steps aside, letting us in.

He whispers, "The ancestors said her wolf was unwell. They were worried you wouldn't have what it takes to help her."

Again, I'm left without an answer to something Deacon says. *That's a later problem.*

As I walk across the house and up the stairs, Lena whines, ripping long claw marks through my heart.

CHAPTER 31

LENA

FINN WHISPERS, “OH, KATHLEEN, PLEASE FORGIVE ME.”

My eyelids are too heavy to keep open. “Tomorrow, Finn, sleeping now.”
“I’ll get you cleaned up. You rest,” he says.

Ours. Our mate, my wolf whispers.

The lava is gone, and back is the coward making a nest in my chest. She circles my heart, swoony over Finn.

Go to sleep, I urge her. Or better yet, go heal our reproductive system.

She goes silent and doesn’t respond. Typical.

“Kathleen, it’s okay, faolan. You’re alright. You’re okay.” Finn’s hand squeezes mine.

A warm damp rag runs across my neck.

“Easy, faolan.”

Finn keeps saying those words, but I don’t understand why.

He runs a finger across my cheek, spreading moisture with the movement.

Opening my eyes, I examine him.

His brows are knit together in a concerned expression of sadness and anger he wears so well. Maybe it’s not concern but disappointment.

I hear a whine and then feel it in my throat as Finn wipes the cloth again. Firm strokes run down my neck to my collarbones.

If Thalia hadn’t described it earlier, I wouldn’t have understood, but the new feeling is the mating bond. Finn is in my chest, wrapped all the way around, holding what may be best described as the opposite of disappointment.

It’s a feeling I want more of, and it’s what I was missing to sleep.



I'M UP, AND MY HAIR IS BRUSHED OUT. I HAVE VAGUE MEMORIES FROM LAST night of the monster inside me coming out, and even more vague, Finn washing blood off my skin. I'd wished for so long not to be submissive. But this isn't what I wanted or envisioned. Though, it sort of feels like how Cade described his connection with The Leviathan a long time ago.

I'm not as clean as I want to be, but Dinah and Ezra have texted forty times, telling me to come downstairs as soon as possible. *There better be coffee.*

Finn follows me down the stairs dutifully on my heels, almost closer than my shadow.

As I slide my butt onto a barstool, a cup of coffee is placed in front of me.

"Alright, so Mom and Dad should be up in like four minutes. Mom will be looking for coffee," Ezra says, looking me squarely in my eyes.

"And I care about your parents why?" I raise my eyebrows at him.

I'm perfectly content with the hot beverage and not having an awkward confrontation with my aunt and uncle.

"Well, if you truly don't want to know, maybe you should go and hide? Because I am fully committed to getting the answers today," Dinah cautions me, shaking the spatula in her hand in my direction.

Finn abandons his post behind me and takes the spatula from her.

"Good morning." Cade rounds the hallway to the kitchen.

A chorus of good mornings answer, but Cade makes it a point to walk the long way around the island to me. He leans against the counter and turns my chin to face him.

The Leviathan floods his eyes, and it's not my wolf that rises but the squirmy hot lava again.

Cade nods with some sort of understanding that I don't have. He kisses the top of my head as he circles back around the island to the kitchen.

"The Leviathan says that she can fix herself over time, if you work together. But The Pricolici can fix her all at once," Cade informs me, turning his head to look over his shoulder while pouring a hot cup of coffee.

What? Does everyone know? Fix her how? The wheels of my brain start to turn. The lava has to be my wolf. I shifted, but I felt her. She was fine last night.

The pot runs empty, and Cade goes to start another.

Ezra smacks his hand. “No. I need her caffeine deprived.”

“Hiii.” A groggy Thalia walks around the corner to the kitchen and whines.

“Draga mea, I said I’d bring you your coffee,” Cade scolds lightly but brings her the cup he poured.

I’ve always seen him as loving toward her. He goes the extra mile with everything he does. Today though, I see it differently. Every touch is a dedicated reassurance before he gives her a lingering kiss and slowly departs back to the business side of the island.

I want that. Why do I have to be broken?

“Good morning!” Uncle Elliot sings as he enters the kitchen.

No one should be that chipper having just woken up.

Aunt Alora rounds the corner while making a beeline for the coffee pot. But her whole body bristles seeing it empty.

“So, Mom.” Ezra flashes a smirk. “Have you met the near-perfect genetic match for my sister? Oh, Dad’s pissed.” Ezra laughs as he looks around the counter.

“Ezra John,” Aunt Alora scolds like Ezra isn’t a grown man in his early thirties.

“Don’t bother, Mom, I’m in. Not getting me out that easily.” Ezra smiles at her before hopping off the counter he was sitting on and then, with one hand somehow, vaults effortlessly over the top of the island to sit by my side.

Aunt Alora and Uncle Elliot are wearing matching looks, but they’re not of shock. Rather, they’re expressions of admonishing anger toward Ezra.

They’ve always been the perfect example of a mated pair, the kind of couple who talks everything through. People of the pack turn to them with problems in their matings and how to better communicate.

I guess they probably made the decision together, so it doesn’t matter who we direct our questions to. My heart rate picks up.

Dinah comes from the living room to stand beside me. I’m squished between my . . . cousins? Siblings? And I’m stuck at the center of it all.

Pain is written on Aunt Alora’s face as she looks at Uncle Elliot. When he shrugs, Aunt Alora hangs her head.

“Why?” Dinah’s voice cracks.

I shake my head. *Why do I have to be here for this?*

My squiggle of lava is moving more and sloshes back and forth at my core.

Frustrated by the confrontation, I slide out from between Ezra and Dinah.

“Lena,” Uncle Elliot starts, addressing me rather than his daughter, the one he raised, who is asking the questions. His face is soft, and his disarming smile almost works. “You have to know we assumed you’d be safe and cared for. Cade and Robert were thriving. You were with Ardeleans, and it was evident that Cade had a gift from an early age.”

“I don’t care.” I shrug, looking at him.

I had intended to start the coffee pot Ezra had made sure was drained, but somehow, I end up next to Finn as he fries eggs and bacon on the stove. Turning my back on the conversation, I pick up a piece of bacon from the plate before putting it down.

“You gave up your child.” There’s so much anger and pain with Dinah’s words that I feel it quake through my bones.

Empathy hits because, while I’m not one-hundred-percent sure, I have a feeling I know where this will go, and it’ll gut me as much as the idea of giving up a child hurts Dinah.

“Really, Dad?” Ezra scoffs but it turns into a growl, “Why don’t you and Mom tell her the real reason?”

My toes curl against the wood floor, trying to calm everything: my emotions, this squiggle of lava, the tension in the room.

Uncle Elliot pushes an excuse. “I don’t see what good that would do. You know now. We can define our new family and how that looks.”

Finn transfers the spatula from his right to left hand and wraps his arm around my shoulder. He kisses the top of my head and whispers, “Say the word and we leave.”

I never explained or warned him last night about what could happen today, but Finn would rather make sure I’m okay than stay for this.

His care and presence help quell some of the storm raging inside me.

Aunt Alora must be having a staring contest with one of her children. After a long pause, it ends with a huff, and she explains, this time addressing Dinah, “If Lena and you both had a gift, it would be suspicious if Judah didn’t. We needed to be sure that no one would question Judah as a strong contender for Alpha. I wanted the boys to be able to choose their own paths. When Ebenezer and Karina suggested it — the proposal made sense.”

Ezra, who’s sitting somewhere behind me, snorts.

Because boy alphas are worth more than small little girl submissives. It shockingly makes sense, but it doesn’t hurt any less. My stomach clenches

with the betrayal. It stings up into my heart.

“I see,” Dinah snarls.

At this point, is it even worth asking? Is this my masochistic side coming through?

Apparently, yes, because I can’t keep the words between my lips. “Why not Dinah?”

I force myself to turn around. Aunt Alora looks to where Dinah has taken a seat on the stool I vacated. Tears threaten to fall from Aunt Alora’s eyes.

“Because, even from a young age, Cade’s aura indicated that he carried a strong wolf within him. He would be better able to protect you than I could.” Aunt Alora snuffles. She draws a deep breath, wipes her teary eyes, and continues. “I knew that Dinah’s temperament, her whole aura, would be a better fit with us. You would need more than I could give. I wanted you to have the best chance to thrive.”

Her words cut like a knife. Another gut-wrenching stab wound.

Does she have any idea what I’ve lived —

Finn wraps his arm around me and pulls me into his chest.

Hot angry tears well in my eyes. Pressed against his T-shirt, I draw a deep breath, forcing back tears. *No one thought I was strong enough. No one thought I’d make it.*

The lava sinks, cooling into a rock, anchoring me to Finn. My fingers grip his shirt.

“Why do you think we pushed for you and Deacon to come home?” Uncle Elliot asks before scolding, “When Cade abdicated, we told you both to come live with us.”

You offered once, I answer him in my thoughts.

“No. You offered. Once.” Ezra voices for me.

Why did Dinah think knowing would make it better? My emotions are all over the place. The lava melts and rolls back to a boil. I hate this. I don’t know how to live with this inside me.

“Lena. I can see how mad you are.” Aunt Alora’s footsteps come closer.

Finn snarls. It starts low in his belly, rattles up his chest, and out his mouth.

Like yesterday, the lava pushes me. But it’s not to wolf form.

Gritting my teeth, I spin in Finn’s arms. He keeps his hand tucked around my waist.

If we have to do this, then I’m getting all the answers today.

“Where did Deacon come from?” It’s a fierce snarl and feels so much more intimidating.

Movement in my peripheral vision catches my attention. Cade steps in front of Thalia.

“We don’t know,” Uncle Elliot answers. “He was days old when they announced his birth. They hadn’t come to visit for a while, saying Karina had been unwell. There was no reason for us to believe Deacon wasn’t their son.”

I turn to look at Ezra. He nods, confirming what they’re saying is true.

“We never wanted you to be hurt.” Aunt Alora’s voice cracks. “I thought I was doing the right thing.”

Ezra’s small nod hurts. Good intentions pave the way to hell. I was the one to pay the price of the damn road.

Dinah’s silence is telling. If I were in her place, I would feel thankful it wasn’t me too. I can’t stay here. Not with the weight of all this crushing me.

“What was my name?” I don’t know where the question comes from. *Why does it matter?* “There’s no way you’d pick Ezra, Judah, Dinah, and Kathleen.”

“Delilah Kathleen,” Uncle Elliot answers.

I hear Aunt Alora sniffle, and it’s more than I can take.

CHAPTER 32

FINN

LENA PICKS UP TWO PIECES OF BACON OFF THE COUNTER AND MAKES A beeline toward the glass doors leading out to the deck.

She opens the glass door as the first of Revecca's guards descends the stairs. Revecca arrives on the ground floor shortly after. Before the silence of Lena's departure can be broken, I make eye contact with Patrick and then flick my eyes to Revecca.

He sighs but gives a sharp nod.

Long legs come in as I walk quickly and wrap my hand around Revecca's wrist when I reach her. The she-devil fights briefly before letting me drag her out of the house. Her three other guards hurriedly move behind me, but Patrick tells them to stand down.

"Griffin O'Brien, you let me go," Revecca snaps as I close the door behind us.

I turn her to look at me. She lifts her eyes to meet mine, and then I look down the deck stairs to where Lena's descended and is sitting in a lawn chair. She's facing the fire ring, curled up and wrapped around herself.

"Oh." Revecca's voice falls flat.

I let go of her wrist and nod toward Lena.

Revecca sighs. "No promises. I won't force her to let me fix it."

"All I ask." I cross my arms in front of my chest and watch Revecca descend the stairs.

God help me that they don't kill each other.

Patrick comes out of the house to look down at them with me. "You'll want to go back inside." He chooses his words carefully. "I won't let them kill each other, and I won't hurt yours. She's funnier. The effin' and blindin'

Rebecca gave out about her yesterday.” He laughs. “God help you.”

I step back inside the house into eerie silence. Rebecca’s other three guards stand against the walls, their hands clasped in front of themselves, instinctively guarding their loins.

Alora and Elliot Alloway stand on one side of the kitchen facing each other, while the younger generation sits at the bar, all eating quietly.

Deacon comes strolling down the stairs as I make it to the kitchen.

He turns around, spinning in his socks on the wood floor, and goes straight back up the stairs. The tension in the room is thick, and I don’t blame him for wanting to escape.

“So, I guess you’re it then.” Elliot looks at me with a wave of his hand.

“Guess so,” I answer without knowing what’s happening.

Alora shakes her head. “He’s all wrong for her. Nothing good can come from this. The cerulean-sky color doesn’t go with her dark fern tones at all.”

I run my tongue across my teeth. *That’s enough out of them.*

“Cade, are we still good, running with that preemptive apology?” I look at him before training my eyes back on them.

“Go for it,” Cade growls.

“I don’t know what it is that you and your gift can see. But I’m the one in your offspring’s life. I’m the one who will choose her every day for the rest of my life. It was supposed to be you to protect her, to guide her, and to let her know that the submissive wolf inside her is a gift from God. And yet you failed.” I shake my head at them and clench my fist. “Now, you have the gall to stand here all Holy Joe and tell me that I’m not good enough for her? You’re not good enough for her. You’re not good enough for any of them.” I gesture at the near strangers who are my new family. “So, I’m going to ask nicely once, and then there won’t be any more pleasantries.”

Elliot tries to square up to me. The older wolf doesn’t have a chance in hell. Slouched and full of rage, I’m a head taller. When he squares, I stand tall. Wisely he takes a step back.

“Please leave. And do it before she comes back inside,” I growl to make my point. “And if I find out that you’ve reached out to her before she’s reached out to you, I’ll come and challenge the precious Alpha male you’ve left sitting on your throne.”

“Finn,” Cade cautions.

“He may be an Ardelean wolf, but I’m of the O’Brien line, and I can tell you now, with my experience, it’s a fifty-fifty split if he or I walk away,” I

growl, finishing my thought anyway.

He's weak. Old. We'll kill him in two minutes with our eyes closed. My wolf paces, ready for bloodshed.

Alora shakes her head at me. She turns to Cade. "You're really goin —"
"Aunt Alora, you've overstayed your welcome. I think it's best you leave." Cade backs me up.

She huffs, "I've never."

"And maybe you should have before." Ezra laughs. "So pretentious. Some things never change."

Whatever she's thinking must be damning as she and her mate retreat down the hallway to the guest suites.

Silence blankets the room, and I make a plate of food for Lena.

"She likes sriracha with her eggs," Deacon's voice comes from behind and startles me.

"Also, can we talk about the fact that I'm not sure who's got a sharper tongue? Finn or Lena?" Ezra quips.

CHAPTER 33

LENA

REVECCA SITS DOWN NEXT TO ME IN ONE OF THE OTHER WOODEN CHAIRS. SHE puts her feet up, resting them on the footrest.

“Hmmm, surprisingly comfortable.” She stretches out in the chair. “It’s not terrible in Minnesota.”

“Wait until it snows.” I look out at the trees, the orange leaves still holding on tight.

Minutes of silence tick by between us before she says, “I know your wolf is on the verge of being entirely feral. The Pricolici can fix her.”

“Yeah, and for what, my soul in exchange?” I look over at her.

Rebecca scoffs. “We’re not so different, you and I.”

“I’ve heard I’m nicer and my jokes are funnier.” I roll my eyes. *Why is she even here?*

The lava inside has cooled, and I’m anchored to this chair. At least it’s better than the feeling of wanting to erupt out of my skin.

Rebecca doesn’t press. “You may be able to fix her yourself, but you’ll need to be impeccable in giving in to your urges until the two of you bond wholly. And that will include . . .”

Casting my eyes to the side, I see her biting her bottom lip. Her cheeks turn ever so slightly pink.

No. No! NO! My brain screams. I look harder at her. *Rebecca Ardelean. Griffin O’Leary. Griffin O’Brien, Rebecca Ardelean?* I beg for a vision. Please don’t let it be.

“YOU CAN’T KEEP DOING THIS, REVECCA!” FINN SHOUTS AT HER. HE’S RED with rage.

“That’s not for you to decide!” Revecca shouts back.

She’s wrapped up in a black leather jacket that matches the one Finn is wearing. It nearly drowns her.

“You’re going —”

THE VISION CUTS SHORT. I FEEL A COLD SPOT ON MY HAND FROM WHERE something no longer touches me.

Revecca scolds, “Oh, no. That’s enough of that.”

“Afraid?” I narrow my eyes at her.

She meets my eyes before a hauntingly honest answer leaves her lips. “Yes.”

I don’t know what to do with that.

“If it were me, I wouldn’t want to go through the turmoil of a wolf going feral. It’s not as painful physically as a fracture. But it’s uncomfortable,” Revecca says, her words short before she pauses. “Yet, I understand wanting to do it yourself. Cade and Finn know how to get ahold of me. If it’s too much, don’t be too proud to call. Bringing your wolf back is certainly not painful or invasive to fix.” Standing, Revecca straightens her shirt. “We’re not so different, you and I.”

“Yeah. So you’ve said.” I shrug at her. *Should I let her help? Would she lie about this?* I shake my head. “Thank you, but I’ll do it on my own.”

Without another word, Revecca goes to leave.

“Wait.” I stop her, and she turns back to me.

Raising an eyebrow, she does wait.

“Where does Deacon come from?”

Revecca sighs. “His bloodline left Romania a hundred years ago. To be honest, until recently, we thought they were lost. It’s intriguing, to say the least.”

The answer is heartbreaking. But, maybe Deacon feels the way I do about it — it doesn’t matter. Knowing now doesn’t change what’s happened; it’s only changed my perception of the relationships around me.

Revecca doesn’t stay and wait for another question.

It’s just as well because Finn replaces her in the chair moments later. He offers me a plate of food and a cup of coffee.

Picking up the fork, I start in on the food. There's no sense in going hungry, and cold scrambled eggs are the absolute most disgusting food on the face of the planet. Well, after pickles.

Finn sits with me as I eat. He doesn't watch, stare, or gawk at me as I do so.

I'm pushing around the last few bites on my plate before he says, "The Alloways are working on clearing out. Ezra is going back to Utah? I guess. Dinah promised to make sure that Alora and Elliot are on their way to Maine so that Judah can chew them new arseholes. It seems that everyone needs a few hours to leave."

I don't know what to say. So, I sit with my plate in silence. The fiery demon that is now my wolf pushes me toward Finn. But I'm not ready for that. I'm not ready to let him comfort me, but I can't decide what I want to do with my body. I'm antsy and unsettled.

When I don't speak, Finn shakes his head and stands. "I need to speak with Revecca before she leaves. Are you okay here alone?"

I'm sure they've a lot to say to each other. The interrupted vision, from fishing with Revecca, comes back to me. What were they doing?

When I don't respond, Finn doesn't leave. He steps back over to me and bends down to pluck my plate out of my hand before setting it down on the other chair. Then I find myself pulled out of my chair and into his strong arms.

"Shhh, faolan, you're okay. Whatever it is you think is going on between her and I isn't." Finn nuzzles against my neck.

"Put me down," I argue.

I attempt to push against his chest, but he's a behemoth and unmovable. I'd swear he was a bear shifter if I hadn't seen his wolf last night.

"No." Finn doesn't say anything further.

If possible, I would increase my particle density to make it harder for him to climb up the stairs. But, no. Instead, I've got the gift of past sight. I bet particle density isn't even a gift I could have gotten; the idea is cool though.

Finn easily shifts me in his arms and opens the door.

The main floor of the house is packed with people who all seem content to argue with each other. I'm not super excited to chat with more than half of them right now. Being cradled in Finn's arms is a convenient excuse not to stop and talk.

Past my office and then up to my suite, Finn only sets me down when

he's got me blocked in the hallway with no escape.

"Come on, we're getting dressed and getting out of here." Finn nudges me in the middle of my back.

"Ohh, first stalking and now kidnapping. It's like you're trying to hit all the components of Stockholm syndrome." I walk forward and open the final privacy door to my suite.

"It's not stalking nor kidnapping." Finn follows me, closing the door behind him. "Now, if you'd rather, we can go back downstairs and spend time with the Alloways and Revecca."

My chest vibrates with a growl I don't recognize.

An exasperated sigh comes from Finn. "I take it you didn't let Revecca fix your wolf."

"I take it you haven't learned to mind your own damn business," I snap back with a glance over my shoulder.

Finn laughs. It's that sweet, harrowing, your-ass-is-in-so-much-trouble kind of laugh. One that causes my skin to prick with excitement.

"I thought you'd learned your lesson to not take that smart tone with me." Finn's strides lengthen, and he catches me quickly. He wraps his arm across my chest, grasping my shoulder. Holding me to him, he whispers, "It seems you need a reminder."

My pussy clenches at the promise.

"Get naked, we'll get you clean, and then I'm taking you out of the chaos." Finn somehow changes from drenching my panties to the biggest tease on the planet.

Stupid Doms and their stupid fucking sadistic tendencies.

"Lena, stop snarling," Finn says.

I didn't realize I was. My hand rises to my lips, and sure enough, one's pulled up. The sound is gone, but even the expression is uncharacteristic.

CHAPTER 34

FINN

I KNEW LENA WAS STUBBORN, BUT I WASN'T PREPARED FOR THIS AMOUNT OF pigheadedness. She's started the shower and is undressing while I fire off a text to Revecca.

ME:

You couldn't have fixed her wolf?

REVECCA ARDELEAN:

I'm not fixing your mate's wolf, only for her to continue to neglect it and go through this again. When she can behave and appreciate the animal she has, then I'll have no problem doing it. Until then, let her be stubborn.

Let's not remember that before The Pricolici, you weren't any different than she is. Your second wolf is no different than hers.

Is it childish to try and provoke her into doing what I want? Yes. But I'm not beneath it. My mate is unwell. I can't let her suffer when I know there's a solution.

My decision stands. The spare needs to learn to nurture her wolf, and if she won't, then she can suffer from being feral because she won't listen. It's not my fault the American Ardeleans seem to think they can abuse their wolves and expect obedience from them.

Rude fucking bitch. She wants to be petty? I'll be fucking petty.

You're mad that you didn't go into heat sooner. Then you'd be free of the burden of the crown. What was it? Four? Five days?

Rebecca types for a long time but sends a short response.

You best remember your place, Finn.

That the best you can do? I shouldn't enjoy poking her this much. But Magnus can't get between us anymore.

Why? You telling Magnus on me? Or try severing my wolf again?

You have an hourglass-shaped weakness. Don't think I won't use her against you.

I stifle the growl that's rising in my throat. Of all the wolves that Magnus could have taken as his mate. He had to pick the biggest bitch with the worst —

Rebecca, is there a level you're not willing to sink to?

You going to hide behind Magnus forever?

Strange, was thinking the same thing about you and Cade.

Remember Rebecca, I'm the mate of the younger sister of The Leviathan. You're trying to get The Leviathan to solidify you on the throne of Romania. Don't fuck with the sister of the man you need to like you.

That was mean, even for me. If we were in Ireland, I'd probably give a half-hearted apology and buy her a round as a white flag. But gone are the days of dark pubs and stiff drinks.

I'm letting her live with the product of her own idiocracy. It's hardly cruel. When she's ready to admit she needs to treat her wolf better, like the gift it is, you know how to find me, and I'll fix it. Until then, she gets to be feral.

You afraid you can't handle a little submissive, Finn?

I stop answering. It's not worth my time. Rebecca is looking for a fight, and she's willing to goad me until I react like she wants me to.

Tossing my phone on the bed, I turn back to the Ardelean submissive I get to spend the rest of my life with. The one who is one-hundred-percent naked and ready to be teased until she remembers I alone control her orgasms. Today, we'll work toward that 'yes.' 'Yes, I'll be yours,' 'yes, I'll

accept your collar,' 'yes, I'll be your wife.' The one word I need that will let me truly bind her to me in all ways.

I'm naked and following her into the shower. My wolf is stalking her like our prey.

I don't miss her little groan when I follow her in.

"What's wrong, faolan?"

"Do you have to follow me everywhere? What's next, no peeing in peace?" She sighs.

When she turns to face me, her annoyance turns to scrutiny.

Lena's eyes lock on my torso where angry little claw marks decorate my sides. While she's suffering with guilt over a few scratches, I watch water pour down her hair and across her tits. Too fucking perfect.

She swallows hard, nodding before her tone changes. "I'm sorry. Revecca told me I'll be able to fix my wolf by listening to her more."

That lying, scheming bitch. I want to storm out of here, charge down the stairs, and go head-to-head with her until we're both bloody and she apologizes.

Instead, I nod. "I understand that you like to be independent, but that could take months of heartache, and more than a few scratches."

"Afraid of a little pain?" Lena taunts.

"Yes," I answer her. "I'm afraid of the pain you'll likely go through."

I step closer to her, the spray of water dancing between us. She turns away from me, further wetting her hair.

Reaching for her in our bond, I'm met with a wall of sadness and frustration.

My wolf deflates. *Why can't we make her happy? She was perfectly content in heat.*

It's an excellent and fair question. Something tells me we won't figure it out in this shower. Maybe with some time out of the house, away from a morning filled with confrontations, we can get our submissive to relax and return to the soft woman we know she is deep inside.



DESPITE PREVIOUS OBJECTIONS, LENA LETS ME LEAD HER DOWN THE STAIRS and into the garage. We've almost made a clean getaway.

“No fair. How come I have to stay with the chaos?” Deacon groans.

“Deacon, I’m pretty sure Finn’s about to take me to a remote area and fuck my brains out. Do you want to come?” Lena quips back.

Exhibitionist? Check.

Deacon squints at me from where he’s sitting on the bonnet of Lena’s red SUV.

“Ugh. Gross.” Deacon hops off and heads to the side-entry door, “Come on, idiots. Let’s leave the lovebirds to fuck in peace.”

Lena goes to open the driver’s side door of the SUV.

“Now, where do you think you’re going?” I scold.

“Well, unless you’re suddenly more familiar with the Land of 10,000 Lakes than I am, it’ll be faster if I drive.” Lena pulls open the door.

Moving her safely out of the way of the door, I close it. Spinning her in my arms, I pin her back against the SUV and, like I did in her office, immobilize her hands above her head. When she goes to knee me in the groin, I push it aside, opening her legs.

Lena’s wolf pulls forward to meet mine. And through heavy pants, she holds my gaze for a long moment before forcing herself to listen to the will of her animal and submit to me. When she pushes her head to the side, I lean in and kiss from her ear down her neck. My nose pushes her shirt out of the way so I can nip at the mating mark on her skin.

I whisper, eliciting goose bumps on her skin, “Now, I had every intention of taking you on an actual date, buying you the fried cheese you seem to love, and taking us someplace nice where we can talk and get to know each other properly. But if what you really need is me to fuck your pussy raw and remind you that I’m the one here to care for you, I’ll have no problem derailing my plans.”

The whimper from Lena’s lips is sweet music to my ears.

“Do you need me to fuck you, Kathleen?” I offer.

“Please,” Lena whispers. Then she repeats, “Please.”

“Needy, wanting, and begging. Exactly like I enjoy you.” I deny Lena’s pleas.

I know what I’m doing to her. Her needs meet my own, but I’ll be the one choosing when she comes, when we both come. And it won’t be now.

After I pull one more whimper from her lips, I free Lena’s hands and pull my head away.

When I set her on the ground, I order, “Come with me. We’re taking

something more inconspicuous.”

“Asshole,” Lena mutters, following me away from her SUV.

“If that’s a request for anal tonight, I’ll oblige,” I reply without looking back at her.

Her face is still red when I open the door to the black SUV Cade gifted me for her benefit. She objects when I take the seatbelt from her hand and click it into the mechanism across her lap. The objection falls silent when our lips meet.



THE NATURAL SMELL OF THE WOODS AT THIS STATE PARK IS BEING SULLIED BY the scent of bar food, but the way Lena’s face lights up as she tosses a cheese curd in her mouth is worth it.

“Is this where you use start the conversation with ‘tell me about yourself’?” Lena runs a cheese curd through barbeque sauce.

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary.” I smile at her across from me, opening my box after saying grace.

I lift the pickle out from inside my burger box.

Lena cringes. It’s almost a whole-body affair. With her lip curling in disgust, she’s firm with the single word. “No.”

“No pickles?”

“Not if you want to kiss me again.” Her eyes flick between me and the cucumber.

She wants me to kiss her again.

“Good to know.” I set it down and wipe the juice from my hand with a napkin.

Lena pauses before putting another one of the cheese curds in her mouth. She examines me for a few moments but goes back to eating.

“Ewww.” Lena opens her box with her burger, and her voice falls with a whine.

Her wolf runs to the surface.

“What’s wrong, faolan?” I put down the chip I had picked up.

Her whole body squirms as she examines the contents of her white takeout box. There’s more whining, and she bites her bottom lip.

“It’s fine.” She draws a deep breath, and it comes out ragged. She talks

herself down, nodding, but the words don't sound fully believed. "There's — no, it's okay. I can do this."

Pushing the white lid of the Styrofoam out of the way, I see the problem. Green pickle juice soaks the bottom of her container. Her burger bun is soggy and full of pickle juice.

"Oh, Kathleen, I'll fix it."

I pick up her container and set it next to mine. She watches me as I pick up her burger and tip the beef patties over to the side, balancing them on the top bun in my palm. I pull the top bun off my burger to replace her juice-soaked one. Carefully, I transfer my burger to the top of her fries and my pickle to the soaked bottom of her box. After grabbing a paper napkin, I wipe the tiny bit of juice out of my container before returning the thick burger to it and sliding it back to her.

"You didn't have to." Lena looks at the new box of food in front of her.

Reaching across the table, I tip her chin to look at me. "I know, and what feels like a big deal to you isn't even a minor inconvenience to me."

Lena shrugs her head off my hand. "It's ridiculous. A meltdown over pickles, but I can't. I can't get past it. Deacon will usually catch it if I don't remember to tell them no pickles." Her face reddens, and she begins volunteering information. "Okay, so I know I'm weird about my food. But some things aren't allowed to touch, and then some textures can't be eaten together." She bites her lips together, eyes raising from her plate to look at me. "Deacon used to tell me that it all ends up in the same place anyway. I like what I like, and maybe I have four stomachs like a cow, and everything gets digested in separate places. Which is ridiculous because their stomachs don't work that way, but maybe mine does."

My wolf pushes to be closer to her. *Let her feel love.*

Abandoning my plate, I slide out of the wooden picnic table and move around to her side. Lena doesn't object. I pick up the one bun, that isn't saturated in pickle juice, and my burger with the cheese and bacon and bring it over to eat with one hand. I wrap my other arm around her, resting my hand on her low waist.

Tension simmers off her as she relaxes against my touch. It takes a little bit before she finally picks up her burger and takes a bite.

"Is there anything you don't eat?" Lena asks between bites.

"Any pussy that isn't yours."

Lena bites her lips together, trying not to laugh, but it doesn't work. She

shakes her head, letting out the laugh.

CHAPTER 35

LENA

SINCE WE LEFT HOME, MY WOLF'S BEEN BATTLING WITH THE LAVA FEELING. The closer Finn is, the less of the lava I feel, but now, as the sun sets, I feel less stable. There's less control again.

The SUV's headlights illuminate the two-lane highway as we drive the hour back home. I could really use a shift.

My phone vibrates in the cupholder. I haven't even checked it today.

THALIA:

This message is to confirm your reservation for (2) at: HOME. Your room is ready and the premise has been vacated by all previous guests. Please text back with your estimated ETA so we may have snacks available. Or, text cancel to cancel your reservation. In the event you're pussy deep in Finn dick, please disregard this message.

ME:

ETA 45 mins.

Womp womp. Love you! See you when you get home.

Love you too.

"Home looking for us yet?" Finn reaches across the SUV and rests his hand high on my leg.

He runs his fingers along the seam, the well-worn fabric of my jeans allowing me to feel each stroke as though the fabric isn't between us.

"Yeah. Thalia wanted to know if I was getting dicked down or coming home." My breath catches in my throat, and I clear it.

Finn laughs. "Tonight. I promise."

Heat pours through me.

Need him, my wolf presses.

“I’d like to get you in wolf form again first though.” Finn crashes my rejoicing.

Like the petulant brat I am, I huff a defeated, drawn-out agreement. “Fine.”

“How are you feeling? I know Dinah said you’re clear, but I don’t want to push you too hard.” Finn’s concern is well intended but misplaced.

He cares so much. Listen to how much our mate wants us, my wolf reminds me.

The problem is the reminder hurts. We’ll get him to help us reset so we don’t have molten lava floating around inside and then brace for impact when he leaves us.

Finn is kind, dabbles in the same kinks we have, and today has been a nice reminder of how good things were in heat. But it doesn’t change the fact that I screwed up. I’m most likely sterile, and no man who spends that long looking for his fated mate will settle without the total package. I know he said it doesn’t matter, but the reality just hasn’t set in for him yet. He’ll want a family. *Don’t focus on the rejection*. This is temporary. We’re using him. It’s the same thing as him waiting to see if we’re really sterile or not. *It’s mutually beneficial*.

“Get out of your head, faolan,” Finn cautions me.

He has so much more sense of me than I have of him.

“Why do you keep calling me a little boy’s name?” I ask, looking out the window.

“My grandfather called my grandmother faolan. Woman ran him ragged wearing trousers all the time and keeping up with the work like the young men of the pack. He said that any little wolf with that much spirit deserved the name,” Finn answers, and his words ring true with honesty.

“We lost Granddad about ten years ago, but all his stories were about her. His little submissive who couldn’t sit still. The little shit starter. The woman who couldn’t keep her mouth shut.” Finn laughs. “I always knew that was exactly what I wanted. A woman who was her own person. Because even though you’re challenging me at every turn, it’s because we’re divine mates that it’ll work out between us.”

“You’re going to be that guy aren’t you?” I ask, rolling my eyes and turning to look at him.

“Which guy?” He plays dumb.

“The one who is literally ready to rip off anyone’s head who even looks at me wrong?” I clarify needlessly.

Finn nods. “Oh, faolan, they’ll go missing.”

Our mate will protect us so good. My wolf wags her tail.

There is absolutely something not right with the fact that we find the idea of him killing other people alluring. So messed up.

The fingers Finn had slid between my legs move a little higher. I know he knows what he’s doing. Resisting him keeps getting harder.



“SHOULD I PREPARE FOR YOUR WOLF TO WANT A PIECE OF ME?” FINN’S GRUFF accent masks a laugh. He’s standing behind me, waiting to shift.

I look over my shoulder and shrug. “No idea.”

Okay, not having Revecca fix it was dumb. But she did say I can do this myself. Drawing a deep breath, I think of four feet and the feeling of running.

The shift comes quickly, and I feel steady. Our feet move with trepidation, walking a bit, waiting for something bad to happen.

Finn’s monstrous black wolf comes to walk beside us, and we don’t snap into the terrible bitey, rageful wolf that attacked him before.

Ours. My wolf gleams.

We turn, lowering ourself to the ground. Finn’s head lowers, and he licks our face. Cautiously rising, we skirt ourselves down alongside him.

This isn’t so bad.

Finn leans against us. Turning, he licks and nibbles at our jaw before moving up our head, cleaning, gently scratching, and showing affection.

Mate approves, she preens.

He pushes against us, rubbing his scent down our body while taking some of our scent with him in exchange. Finn steps toward the woods, and we follow dutifully slightly behind him. Circling back around, he nudges us to stay next to him. His stride changes to take smaller steps, keeping us shoulder to shoulder together.

It feels so *fucking* good. Being next to him fills us with a warmth I don’t know I’ve ever experienced. It’s like the first sip of coffee on Saturday morning, knowing that you’ve absolutely nothing pressing to do, or climbing

into a freshly made bed with fluffy sheets and blankets after getting all clean yourself.

Together we, and Finn, work our way down the driveway to the mowed trail along the 'public'-facing part of the property.

Even if it's too good to be true, I want to live in this fantasy for now. We walk leisurely together.

A twig snaps along the fence, and Finn steps in front of us. His black body completely dwarfs ours. We sink low to the ground farther behind him, looking for safety.

Human voices come from somewhere nearby. "Shit, dude, you think this is a good idea? It's trespassing. They're wolves."

"Wolves. Not attack dogs," another man's voice answers him.

Finn looks at us. Knowingly, we slink backward, away from the fence into the brush, watching our feet on the frosty earth.

Lights break over the top of the brick wall.

Finn growls, looking back at us. He curls his lip.

We bolt. Even if I wanted to stay and fight, I'm not the one in control. Our feet move as fast as possible. We make it through the brush to the driveway. Then she listens and watches our steps to purposefully trigger the driveway sensors, hoping whoever is awake tonight hears them going off and meets us at the door. We don't have time to try and shift back.

No one is at the door. Cade's insistence on a knob over my practical suggestion of a lever is now clearly proving once again I was right. But Thalia thought Cade was joking. On our hind legs, we push up our paws, scratching the doorbell over and over again.

Help Finn. Help. Mate. Paws keep scratching it again and again.

Deacon opens the door, looking around. We nip and grab hold of his shirt, pulling him, and he nearly trips over us toward the stairs in the foyer.

"Woah, Lena, okay, going for Cade. Let go." Deacon beats us up the stairs and darts down the hallway.

I wait at the stairs and whine loudly, calling for help.

The Leviathan's red fur thunders down the stairs in a blur, running right past us. He's out of sight before we can even cross the foyer.

Guess he'll follow our scent and make a judgment call when he gets there.

Deacon walks over to us at the door. I turn back to him, and he runs his hands over the top of our head, pushing our ears down. Howls echo from

outside the house. We skirt back behind Deacon, looking out.

Thalia's footsteps approach from behind us. We look and wag our tail low. We hesitantly approach the outside world alongside her, crouched low to the floor.

For fuck's sake, we have teeth and claws, go look out the door. I push my wolf and stand us up tall, head high, looking forward and taking our place next to the Luna.

Deacon opens the door wider for us, and we step out onto the porch to the side of the door. Looking out at the driveway, we see three sentries standing behind the two men who climbed the fence.

The Leviathan walks into the house past us. A moment passes, and he returns, in human form, wearing jeans and a T-shirt.

Where's our mate? My wolf urges us to look for him. But I refuse to take our eyes off the men before us.

"Listen, man. Cade. Your Sovereign, sir. We're really sorry. We were looking to get an exclusive story. Walk around, take some pictures. No one knows we were coming here; it's not like anyone's demanding pictures." One of them starts talking. He's the one who insisted it was a good idea.

The house door opens from the inside, drawing my attention. Finn walks out of the house barefoot, wearing his jeans and T-shirt from earlier. He crosses his arms in front of his chest and walks over to stand behind Cade like he would if he were Cade's Second.

Cade's letting the would-be intruders sweat it. He stands there staring at them on their knees in the driveway.

The one who didn't want to be here, or at least he didn't when he was climbing the fence, tries to beg for their lives. "We should have asked. It won't happen again. Please let us out the gate. People will look for us. They know we were coming here. We won't come back."

"Did you hear that, Finn?" Cade barely turns his head over his shoulder.

"Aye," Finn draws out. "Seems we can't make up our minds if someone knows they're here or not."

Acidic and pungent, the scent of fear hangs heavy in the air. My wolf pushes, wanting us to duck behind Thalia, but I hold us steady at her side.

"Did we find their vehicle?" Cade addresses the sentries.

"Half mile down the road from where they tried to climb the wall." One of the older sentries nods.

"You boys are stupid." Finn laughs.

Cade looks at him. “Right? Who tries to climb the brick wall when they could go over the iron?”

The two idiots look between them.

“Sheriff is on his way, Sovereign.” One of the other sentries comes out of the darkness into the lit area of the driveway.

“Excellent.” Cade sighs, his shoulders rising and falling dramatically. “It’s a shame I haven’t gotten our entire property qualified for the castle doctrine.”

“Wh-what does that mean?” The hesitant-to-climb-the-wall one flounders to the idiot who encouraged him.

“God, do they teach nothing in your schools?” Finn asks with a joking little laugh. “If you break into a home, with occupants inside it, they have the right to use deadly force to remove you.”

“Fortunately for you, the state hasn’t accepted my petition that our home extends all the way to that fence.” Cade laughs. “Too bad, would have loved a good hunt.” Cade turns to Finn, tilting his chin toward the house. “No sense in both of us missing out on the evening with our mates. Please take them inside. Deacon and I can manage.”

Finn nods with a light bow of dismissal.

Once we’re inside with the door closed, we shake. Our whole body moves, trying to release the tension before we follow Finn up the stairs.

In our suite, he sits on the floor in the most spacious part of the bedroom. I’m exhausted from making my wolf listen. I push her the last little bit to walk toward him. Our head drops toward the floor. That is, until she realizes my intent.

No, my wolf objects, putting our feet down outside of his reach. You are not shifting back. We are with our mate, and you refuse to listen. Until you see we need him, I stay.

I whine. No, come on. It’s so much more comfortable sleeping.

“She’s fightin’ you,” Finn observes correctly.

Even in this form, I feel the sludgy rolling fire of the unsettledness between us. It’s that taking-over feeling that I can’t settle. I can’t fight through.

She refuses to even inch closer to him.

If you go to him, he’ll pet us. He’ll hold us. I try appealing to our love for touch. Something we’re starved of, something that I know she craves. It’s no use. She won’t take a single step.

The molten turmoil inside us has fused us in place. I'm stuck in limbo. Even with her help, I'm not sure I could move. She's absent and quiet.

"Oh, faolan. I can't let her keep you this way," Finn says sadly. "I don't want to hurt you either. I know it will though."

CHAPTER 36

FINN

COMMANDING LENA OUT OF HER WOLF WAS MY LAST RESORT. IT WAS HARD and painful for her. My heart wrenched watching her shift back. But sitting here on the edge of the bed with her in my lap, in front of her fireplace, reassures me she's not hurting.

"Finn?" she whispers.

"Yes, faolan?" I answer, matching her tone.

Lena yawns. "You're not moving in here or at my apartment."

Where did that come from? I want to ask, but it's not important. I'm willing to consider compromise. "We'll talk about this tomorrow."

She doesn't answer.

We will not be away from our mate. My wolf presses the subject.

We've always been territorial and possessive. Lena magnifies it.

"Oh, hey." I adjust her ever so slightly, tipping her on my lap to fish my phone from my pocket. "Plants."

Opening the screen, I bypass the messages from Cade and pull up the photos. The most recent ones are of her plant. I zoom in.

"Okay, so I watered it. The internet plant people said I needed to be sure the top dozen centimeters or so were dry before I watered it again and that it wanted to be watered thoroughly. So, I did until the water came out the drainage holes like it suggested online. And I rotated it because it seemed to be leaning a little bit."

The silence is deafening.

I freeze. "Did I do it wrong?"

"No." She shakes her head and nuzzles up against me. "I've never had someone take care of my plants."

“Cade said to water it. So I thought it was something you did?” I squeeze her a little before melting into the comfort of her.

“I should clarify.” She pauses, her body relaxing into my touch. With a yawn, she finishes, “I’ve never had someone take care of my plants well.”

“Back to bed?” I ask, putting my other arm around her to better envelop her.

“Yeah.” Lena tries to pull herself off my lap.

Stopping her, I stand and bring her with me from the foot to the side of the bed before depositing her with great care onto it.

Our eyes meet. Hers are held open by a thread, yet she scolds, “I absolutely hate being carried.”

Kissing her nose, I run my hand back through her hair and tug, pulling her head back and exposing her neck to me. “And yet, you’ll learn to deal with it.”

I bend forward and kiss down the pulse points.

When I kiss her mating mark, Lena whispers, “I haven’t said yes yet.”

“I know.” Slowly, I release her hair. “But when you’re ready to accept, you’ll learn.”

“You’re so sure I’ll say yes.” My defiant little mate shuffles, trying to get under the covers.

I shrug, helping her snuggle in. “You haven’t said no yet.”

I walk around the bed and climb in on the other side.

The moment I lie down, Lena rolls over to throw her arm across me and lays her head on my chest. With my arm pinned between us, I can’t wrap it around her.

Instead, I bend my head to nuzzle against hers. “Good night, faolan.”

“When we’re done being mates, I’ll miss you calling me little wolf the most.” Lena sighs.

Her sleepy state is telling of her true feelings.

Not even five minutes later, she’s making adorable little sleep sounds.

We’ll find a way to make her believe us. My wolf repeats the sentiment I’m feeling. There’s got to be some way to make her accept the bond.

So far, I can easily count the number of times she’s shared something soft and intimate. Many of the times she did, I don’t think it was intentional, but that doesn’t make her admissions from the heart less real.

Tonight, I learned more about Lena than I anticipated. The fear I felt in our bond didn’t match her physical response at all. She stood so tall next to

Thalia. There was no scent of fear, no cowering. But inside, Lena was all but breaking down.

It was almost like she couldn't feel any of the calm I was trying to send back to her.

Our mate's wolf, my wolf observes. Our mate is at odds and now going feral.

Her wolf feels everything that Lena doesn't let herself feel. The realization hits hard. That's heart-wrenching. Why does she do this to herself? How long has this been going on? How do I convince her to let Revecca fix it?

I struggle with these thoughts until, eventually, I drift to sleep.



LENA'S STILL SLEEPING WHEN I WAKE. DURING THE NIGHT, SHE'D MOVED back to pushing her luscious ass against me, and I woke up hard from having her so close. Fucking Lena isn't healthy for either of us until I know more.

Revecca isn't lying. It's possible for Lena to stop her wolf from going feral, but only a few individuals have been successful. I'd rather Revecca fix it for her. It's safer and easier, and supporting Lena has now become my only priority.

As smoothly as I can, I sneak out of bed and grab my bag of toiletries. I slip out the door of her suite, and with a little help from a woman who introduces herself as Lauren, I find myself in a suite with its own bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, I descend the stairs to find Deacon lying on the living room floor, holding a book over his head. Cade's standing at the breakfast bar with a pen in his hand, and Thalia rests her head on the counter, holding a pen with a large cup of coffee next to her.

"Morning," I greet them.

Thalia growls, Cade waves his pen at me, and Deacon doesn't address me. I suppose I should expect as much, given the fact that I stepped into his job last night when I stood next to Cade to address the paparazzi.

"Is it okay if I make breakfast?" I ask, trying to smooth over our relationship.

Cade answers, "Sure. You've every right to be here. There's no need to tread lightly."

“Oh shit. He’s real.” Deacon rolls his head toward me. He puts his book on his stomach and waves. “Oh, it’s Finn. Good morning.”

“I need to talk to you,” I tell Cade, probably a bit harder than I should.

“Figured that was coming,” Cade answers. He writes something down on a piece of paper and puts it in the pile next to Thalia. “Do you need privacy, or is this okay?”

I look at Thalia and Deacon. They’re all her family. *How private is this?*

“I don’t know. How pissed off would my mate be?”

“Ooooo.” Thalia raises her head off the counter. “He wants to talk about Lena. I vote yes.”

Deacon laughs, sitting up on the floor. “Okay, that was funny, but I don’t know if you can really expect that.”

“Deacon, whoever that is isn’t real,” Thalia says, picking up her coffee cup.

“Dammit.” Deacon draws a deep breath and stands. “Sorry.”

“Thank-you notes?” I ask.

Thalia growls, shooting daggers out of her eyes at Cade.

“Don’t give me that look.” He signs another one, and when he adds it to the pile, he kisses her on the head.

Thalia grumbles, “I said we should elope.”

“If it’s any consolation, you don’t have to do one for any of the Irish. I was still the official representative, and I’ve no need for a thank-you.” I shrug.

“Let me guess, you want to know why Lena’s been hiding for so long?” Cade takes another card, signs it, and puts it on the pile next to Thalia.

“Yeah.” First of many questions I need answered.

Deacon comes around the counter with a little bit of a wobble and starts pulling food from the fridge. He moves around the kitchen silently. When I try to help, he walks around me.

“Lena’s hidden her wolf because of who I am. There’s been this long-standing consensus, from the people who raised us and the pack, that The Leviathan wouldn’t have a submissive wolf in their branch of the bloodline,” Cade explains, with the pen hovering over the paper in front of him. “Lena has always tried to protect me by keeping her wolf hidden based on that belief.”

I run my tongue over my teeth, allowing myself to try to understand why he would have thought hurting Lena would be acceptable. I wasn’t here. I

have to give him the benefit of the doubt. This might have been the best he could do.

“Finn,” Deacon gets my attention before pausing. “It’s not . . .” Deacon thinks over his words, waving a spatula around. “Common.” He pauses again, replacing the spatula with a whisk and tossing it into a bowl. He looks at me, and his tone says it all. “For submissives to be treated as well here as they are in Ireland.”

“Cade took the throne the first time because the man who raised them tried to arrange her a mate,” Thalia says, choosing words in the middle of the sentence carefully.

It’s telling of the situation. A sinking feeling falls from my head all the way to where it settles low in my gut. There’s more to her situation beyond what I know.

My wolf starts thinking about new ways to hide bodies here.

“Lena has maintained this wall because she’s afraid of being a victim of a forced pairing,” I voice my thoughts. “And you let her?” I don’t mean that question to have venom, but the emotion slips out in the shortened words and the hardened tone.

“I know I’ve failed her.” Cade sets down the pen. When I meet his eyes, he continues. “There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t regret how I’ve handled my life as it concerns her.”

Hanging my head, I divert my eyes and keep my voice low. “Do you worry about Lena fracturing?”

Cade’s silence is ominous. Do I really want to know this answer?

Thalia’s movement in her chair catches in the corner of my eye. She’s spun her stool to face him. “Cade?”

Raising my eyes but not my head, I catch him nodding.

He finally vocalizes it. “I do.”

The snarl escapes, my wolf pushing hard against me. The anger not well contained. I have this urge to climb over the counter and tear into him. At home, I’d take him out back and rip him to shreds for hurting her like this. Cade may have never raised a hand to her, but to leave her so unsupported? The sheer fact that a submissive wolf didn’t have an anchor. She didn’t have a pack to nurture her, and now she’s shoved into the role of an Alpha. It’s not her core instinct. Cade knew, and he’s known the risk.

Holding out on the benefit of the doubt is done. There’s no more of it. This is neglect.

Somehow, despite the rage my wolf and I are putting out into the room, The Leviathan doesn't engage. Cade's blue eyes stare back at me across the counter. He feels so bad about this that his wolf doesn't react? He, as a man, owns that this is beyond himself as an Alpha and beyond his wolf, so far that The Leviathan inside won't rise to meet my wolf.

How can I be mad at him when he's clearly upset with himself? Compassion for an Alpha doing his best and failing, battles with being an advocate and avenger of my mate.

"The Leviathan says that a fracture in a submissive is reparable, unlike a usual wolf." Cade runs his hand back through his hair. "He's been right about everything else. I trust him to a point. He still says some shit that I don't like, but even if I don't like it, it doesn't make it less true."

Clearly disliking being spoken about, The Leviathan flashes across Cade's eyes only for a moment. It's a sharp, cutting glare that puts me on the self-preservation end of the defensive.

I push my anger down. *Remember my place before I get my ass kicked.* Back home, I was the unbeatable monster. But The Leviathan is nothing like The Hellhound.

I try to help Deacon, but he bats my hands away again.

"I'm sorry," I address Cade. "I'm trying to remember my place but . . ."

"She's your mate, and you'd move mountains to keep her safe and happy," Cade answers.

Instinctively Cade's hand reaches for Thalia. The Leviathan retreats as soon as they touch.

I nod my head and lean against the counter, watching Deacon as he cooks my mate breakfast. I want to be doing it, but clearly, this is a thing for him. Hundreds of questions I am no longer ready to ask stew about in my brain: why is she still your Alpha Female if your Luna is so strong? How do I convince her to let me help her? How do I circumnavigate the eejit and Doctor Thorpe? What's the news with the paparazzi?

"Finn," Cade calls. "Quit stewing and ask some of those questions."

I nod. "I'm trying hard to remember my place. But last night . . ."

"They went with the sheriff, and I'm pressing charges for criminal trespass." Cade smirks with a devious flash. "Apparently, one of them had a knife that he'd never seen before in his pocket."

"And here I thought you did things by the book. Getting all wild with knives." I shake my head. It's funny.

“We’re electrifying the fence. I have a meeting with Peter and Michael from Corinth Security today. We’re addressing the best way to handle the perimeter. The challenge is how large of a space it is. I’m hoping that taking care of all main access points will discourage any people wanting to cross the property line.” Cade assures me of his plan. He continues without being prompted. “I’m also meeting with campus security and the lab security. They’ve been made aware that even without Lena being on campus, the press may still be looking for her. The apartment building was already in the process of a technology upgrade, and I’ve expedited that this morning.”

“If you call the building’s superintendent, can you please see about availability on the same floor as Lena’s or below?” I frustrate myself asking that.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Cade offers. He sighs. “I’m sorry.”

I shake my head. “Don’t be. Circumstances change. Lena needs her space. I’m willing to bend a little bit until she’s ready to accept my place with her.”

“Awwww,” Thalia croons. “He’s playing the long game.”

“Apartment next to Lena’s is already rented out by the pack, and it’s furnished. You’re welcome to it,” Deacon answers my request.

“Appreciate it.” I nod. Perhaps I didn’t piss off Deacon that much by helping Cade.

Cade furrows his brow at Deacon before shaking his head. “I don’t even know why I’m surprised that we do, and I don’t know about it.”

Deacon starts plating up a dish of food, and I hesitantly ask, “Oh, can I have one for myself too, please?”

“This wasn’t for you?” He furrows his brow, tilting his head.

“Oh, then, might I make one for Lena to take up to her?” I ask gently.

Deacon’s eyes widen, and he looks fearful.

What on earth? “I can make it. I promise.”

“Would you like to keep all your fingers?” Deacon is almost whispering.

“Okay, you could have said no food in the bedrooms or that no one gets to cook in your kitchen.” I raise my hands, trying to appease him.

“Oh no.” Thalia draws my attention. She’s sipping her coffee but stops to continue talking. “Lena bites. You don’t wake her up unless you want to risk physical violence. Breakfast isn’t high on the list of things Lena’s willing to wake up for.”

“Not even I wake up Lena for breakfast. She’s more of a brunch-and-

mimosas-around-noon girl,” Cade concurs.

My face must say it all because Deacon stops what he’s doing. “You’ve woken Lena up without regretting the decision?”

“I have.” I’m suspicious of what they’re saying.

Deacon takes out another plate and starts putting food on it for her.

“Oooo,” Thalia pipes up. “Were you waking her up with sex? Because I could see Lena wanting to be awake for that. She says you’re sufficiently endowed and highly compatible.”

Cade looks appalled and turns in his chair to face her. Deacon clears his throat. My face heats.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Thalia murmurs. “How is it you can talk about the fact she’s —”

“Because he’s not normally standing in the kitchen when we do it,” Deacon groans.

Apparently, my ears should be burning. I don’t pry. Instead, I run my hand through my beard.

Deacon pulls himself together and finishes plating. No one can seem to bring up a conversation, so I slink up the stairs, taking breakfast to where she slumbers.

True to their advisement, Lena is still asleep. Setting the plates on the hearth in front of the warm fireplace, I stand, watching her for a moment.

She’s taken up residence on my side of the bed. My wolf notes it with pride. *Our mate looked for us. Faolan settled where she could smell us.*

I realize that if Thalia knew those details, then Lena told her about me. A little flutter of hope fills my chest; maybe Lena is getting more comfortable with the idea of me, the idea of us.

Our mate talks about us to her friends, my wolf preens with the compliment.

“Faolan.” I climb up from the bottom of the bed to rest behind her.

She groans and grumbles, curling herself up tighter into a ball. I pull her and the pile of blankets she’s burrowed in into my arms, spooning her from behind.

She settles in to go back to sleep.

“I’ve brought breakfast, and if you get out of bed, I’ll go get you coffee,” I encourage her.

Lena groans, and it sounds like the murmur she makes could be mistaken for ‘five more minutes.’

“Now, faolan,” I press, pulling off one of the top layers of blankets. She whines, “We were up late, and now I get to sleep.”

“Not a negotiation. I found breakfast, and I’m fairly certain Deacon didn’t poison mine.” I try to crack a joke.

“I wouldn’t worry about that. My brothers love you more than me.” Lena sighs.

Does she mean that her brothers love me more than they love her? Or that her brothers love me more than she loves me? I mean, the last one implies that she’s consciously aware she has feelings for me.

CHAPTER 37

LENA

FINN LURES ME OUT OF BED, STRIPPING AWAY ONE BLANKET AT A TIME WITH praise and kisses to the back of my neck. With the sheet pulled off me, I roll over in his arms. In the low light of my bedroom, I soak him in, not what he looks like, but what this feels like. I'm no longer feeling the burn of my heat, I'm no longer delirious from sedation and pain management, and I'm mostly, almost kinda, working together with my wolf.

Our pups will be so cute. My wolf wags her tail, encouraging me to kiss him.

And, just like that, reality comes crashing down. *We only have pups if we can heal. And last I checked, you don't have a medical degree, so we're fucked.*

My wolf huffs but doesn't leave. She's more present than the warm fire I've felt the last couple of days.

"What are you thinking?" Finn prompts.

I shrug in answer. Moving to sit up, I look over to the fireplace, where there are two plates with what looks like quick hash from Deacon. It's potato-y cheesy goodness. Sniffing the air, I confirm my suspicion. *Yum.*

Finn moves faster than I can. Out of bed, he picks up our plates before I can wander to the bathroom. Upon my return, he's finishing praying over his meal. He's sitting on the couch with the coffee table pulled forward to set his plate on.

"Thank you." I shouldn't, but the push from my wolf is strong, and I sit down next to him, curling up and pulling the plate to my lap.

"You're welcome," he answers me. After a few bites, he breaks the silence. "Your wolf is stunning. How did I get so lucky to have such a perfect

mate?”

“Mmm. See, that’s the funny bit. I’ve fooled you into thinking I’m perfect. You’ll see soon enough.” I don’t mean to be hostile, but the coffee he promised did not magically appear in a cup in front of me on the table, and as a result, there will be no filter.

Finn laughs. “Damn, you also shift into a troll?”

“I never said I wasn’t pretty,” I snap. *Rude.*

From the corner of my eye, I can see Finn stifling any further laughter. How can he be so annoyingly fitting in my life?

He’s ours. We love him, and we fit. My wolf swoons for him.

I don’t argue with her. There’s a delicate balance between embracing her like Revecca suggested and derailing my life for her whims.

“Why has it been this way for you? Why hasn’t Cade or Deacon been there for you?”

Despite not even being in the realm of what we were talking about, Finn’s questions make sense.

Why wouldn’t he want to know why I’ve been masquerading as an Alpha Female? It was only a matter of time before he wanted to talk about this.

“It’s not that easy to explain. Cade’s worked fucking hard to make sure we’ve always had a roof over our heads and that even if we were cut off from the fund, we’d be okay. And I couldn’t exactly ask him to give up his life for me.” I turn to silence and eat, with the hope that the answer is enough for him.

“Deacon?” Finn probes further.

He eats faster than I do and has set his plate back down on the table. It allows him to turn and face me to scrutinize me as I answer.

I shake my head. It’s obvious, should be obvious, to anyone who spends more than five minutes with Deacon. “He can hardly take care of himself, let alone me. He was named my guardian because, legally, I had to have one. But I’ve always been the one to care for him.”

“I’m sorry.” Finn’s eyebrows are knit close together, and his smile turns down.

“Why?” I ask, scooping another bit of potato and cheese goodness with my fork. “It’s not like you could have done anything about it.”

“I could have found you sooner.” Finn’s answer is somber, like he holds real remorse for this. “I know you’ve put together that I’ve spent a lot of time stateside.”

He's not wrong. No one drives that well in Minneapolis and Saint Paul without getting to know the driving culture and that the 'rules of the road' aren't exactly rules, more like who can be the most friendly.

Nodding, I don't verbally respond, but Finn takes the cue.

"With Robert in power, it was easy for us to work here. No one questioned wolves of various accents working underground in secret dealings. All this time, we've been in such a large set of cities but sometimes only minutes to a few hours apart," Finn growls.

My wolf flinches.

"So, what you're saying is that Ireland's been doing business in Minnesota without the Regent's approval, and now that Cade's in office, you're what? Not?" I probe.

"My brother and I aren't doing business together. I don't know what his plan is. The last time I had been here, which was the last of our business in Minnesota, was back in June, shortly before Solstice," Finn answers. He keeps giving me more information. "I know there are still Irish associates here, but as to their business, I can't say. I'm not involved with it."

"But you'd want to be?" I push the last bit of my food around on my plate.

Finn carefully takes the plate from me. "I miss the excitement of it. I miss having purpose. The job at the university, I'll do because you're there and they're sponsoring my visa, but it's not fulfilling."

"So, you could quit?" Gears are turning. I could get him out of the direct paths of my life.

It wouldn't be too hard for me to convince Cade to sponsor the visa. He can put him on the security team and out of my hair if I play my cards right.

No! my wolf objects. She stops all trains of thought about how to get Finn out of our way. *We're keeping him. We need him.*

I draw a deep breath, trying hard to put her back in the little box I've always kept her in. She doesn't want to go. I don't want to argue with her. The more I think about Finn not being around, the larger the heated lump low in my abdomen grows. If I had to guess, it's her lighting a bonfire inside me to send smoke signals for help.

"You and your wolf struggle this much all the time?" Finn changes the subject. He sets my plate on the table. "Let's get you cleaned up."

"No, normally the coward hides herself away, and I can live a normal life." All the bitterness and resentment for my wolf comes out in sharp words

and a huff of disapproval.

I follow him, a little too obediently, to the bathroom.

Finn turns to look at me, brows furrowed before full-on scolding, “Are you talking about your wolf like that?”

He’s genuinely upset by my words? I shrug, walking toward him and my bathroom. “You saw her earlier.”

“I saw her,” he confirms, following me. “She’s beautiful and strong despite how much you’ve been through. You were the epitome of beauty and grace.” Finn spews praise for me and the coward like it’s so easy to see.

I lay out the reality of my life for him. “If it were up to her, we would have left Thalia outside alone. I can’t be Alpha Female and not be strong in front of them.”

“I don’t want this for you.” Finn keeps stepping in my way as I try to go from the bathroom to the walk-in closet.

“Finn.” I motion to the dance we’re doing. “Stop.”

“Why won’t you let me help you?” Finn finally steps aside to let me pass. “Your wolf attacked me. She’s turning feral. I sent Revecca to you because she could fix it. Don’t let your wolf pay the price for your stubbornness. Let me help you.”

I shake my head. “You can’t be with me every hour of every day, Finn. It’s easier if I do this alone.”

He’s right. I know he’s right. But it’ll hurt so much more. Dinah and Ansel live with feral wolves. *I can do it. I can learn.*

“Easier for who?” Finn objects.

From where he leans against the doorframe, Finn watches me strip. His tongue darts out from between his lip before he steels himself.

Why does he have to be so tempting?

“Probably everyone. It’s not like there’s statistical data I can point to.” I snort and finish my thought. I push him away harder. If you can’t ask them to go away, insult them until they leave. “Not that you’d even listen if I showed it to you.”

He laughs with me. “Has anyone else ever gotten you as well as I have?”

No. But that’s not the point, asshole.

“What is it with you and wanting to talk about my exes?” I pipe back, glaring at him until he lets me walk past him again toward the shower.

“Well, I’d like to know if I’m talking to other people who have seen you naked,” he answers as I open the shower door.

I motion my hand up and down my body with an eye roll. “We’re wolves. Everyone’s seen me naked. It’s why I decorated the canvas.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he growls.

I’ve pushed a button. Excellent.

“So sensitive,” I chide, trying to de-escalate him, kinda. I need him angry but not enraged, “Let me put it this way, I’m not a virgin, and mostly, I don’t fuck wolves. I lived with my two brothers, so I have had great encouragement to explore my sexuality. I’ve done it predominantly with humans and within the lifestyle.”

The growl continues even after I close the door.

“You’re slut-shaming me, Griffin?” I snap at him. I let the water soak my hair and run down my body while watching him through the glass as it steams up. “How many bitches in the Irish countryside have moaned your name? Or are you a pig and they’ve never come?”

“I haven’t had any complaints from you, or from anyone else.” Finn steps closer to the shower wall to watch me.

“Doesn’t feel too good having someone accuse you of something dirty, does it?” I question, shuffling my hair so it all gets wet. “What’s worse is you wanting to talk about my exes. Finn, I *see* your exes. I’ve seen scenes you’ve done. I’ve seen you fucking them. Each prettier than the next, and all of them far better submissives than me. So . . . what? I’m supposed to believe this jealousy you’re exhibiting is sexy? Because honestly?” I laugh. “I’m *just* another submissive in your life. One to possess, one to have for a while, and one to let go of when you find someone more fitting.”

Finn’s jaw sets tight. He shakes his head. The eyes of his wolf pull forward and draw mine to the surface as well.

I turn from the glass to get shampoo for my hair. Eyes closed, I work the lather into my scalp when I hear the shower door open.

There’s a blur of muscle and tattooed skin. Finn’s hand finds my shoulder. He pulls me to him and under the water, rinsing the shampoo from my hair.

He growls, “First, I’ll clean you. Then, I’ll tan your ass so you struggle to sit tonight. And then, when I think you understand how serious I am about you, I’ll lick your cunt until you scream my name. Hopefully, then you’ll remember who owns you.”

My mouth goes dry, but the telltale feeling of wetness floods my pussy.

My wolf pushes, reveling in one word: owns. *Our mate claims us.*

“Why is it you always behave better when I promise to fuck you?” His hand tilts my head.

He finishes rinsing the shampoo from my hair. I reach for the knob to turn off the water, but he pulls my arm behind my back.

“You’re not clean yet,” he scolds me.

I stand still. My heart rate picks up. The familiar feeling of what heat was like with him comes flooding back.

“Safeword?” Finn prompts.

I do love when I get what I want.

Swallowing hard, I answer, “Red.”

“Good girl,” Finn murmurs. He guides me over to face the shower wall. “Wall, faolan.”

I step forward and cross my hands above my head, then place them on the wall. Obediently, I step wide, opening my legs for him.

“Beautiful obedience,” Finn praises me.

He runs a soapy cloth up my body, scrubbing up my legs. As expected, pain flares on the largest part of my ass shortly after. It stings, but it’s a warm-up swat at best.

He continues his task, the anticipation building between dutiful scrubbing and varying smacks to my ass. Supporting me when he picks up my foot, he goes so far as to scrub between my toes.

Finn traces up my side where my tattoo starts low on my hip, running his fingers up to my sternum. With my arms supporting my weight against the wall, they’re out of the way, giving him open access. He squeezes both breasts hard at the same time. I tense but don’t let my hands or feet move.

“Good girl.”

His praise hits deep in my soul. No two words should have this power over someone, especially not me. I’ve had past partners say them to me, but when Finn says them, I believe it.

My awareness of him heightens. I start to feel him everywhere, and my body warms, becoming more sexually charged.

“Look at how easily you opened the bond between us,” Finn speaks to the space between my shoulder blades, trailing the washcloth down between my legs.

My head falls forward, enjoying how he treats my body.

I thought for sure he was about to tease me, but then a hard smack falls across my ass. My body jolts, and my hands nearly come off the wall. I have

to stop expecting Finn to behave how I anticipate he will. I draw a breath, steadying myself, waiting for more.

Pulling the handheld showerhead off the side of the fixed spray head, Finn runs it down my body, washing the soap carefully from my skin.

My heart rate picks up. *Is he making good on that promise?*

“Can you feel that energy you’re pushing into our bond?” Finn turns off the water.

There’s nothing different about me. I hang my head. “I’m sorry.”

Even if I wanted to be his, I’m not. Our bond isn’t growing.

“Don’t be.” Finn pulls one hand off the wall. “Hear me though, I’ll always follow through.”

Swallowing hard, I nod. I want to turn, to look at him, to see how he’s looking at me. Instead, I fight the urge, behaving rather than sassing him. Now doesn’t feel like the time to be a brat. Keeping my head bowed, I follow Finn’s guidance out the shower door. He pulls my wet body into a warm fluffy towel against his chest.

His cock is hard. The length presses up my stomach and throbs slightly.

“Braid your hair, faolan.” Finn’s voice is heavy, thick, and deep.

“My hair will be fine.”

“Don’t argue with me, Kathleen,” he cautions.

Stepping away, I pull a hair tie from the bathroom vanity drawer. I start a French braid from the back of my head. My fingers tremble, working their way through my hair.

Finn doesn’t waste a single second when he sees me wrapping the band around the bottom. Capturing my wrist with his hand, he leads me to the bedroom.

With a stern voice, he explains, “I’ll show you once how I want you to position yourself over my knee. Remember it. I have a feeling you’ll find yourself over it more than this once.”

That absolutely should not arouse me this much, but I’m fairly certain I just gushed wetness. Finn sits on the edge of the bed. It’s a very forward seat. Already apprehension floods me. I’ve seen this position. *He wouldn’t really take me over his knee, would he?*

He pulls me between his thighs. When he leans me down over his leg, I’m already beginning to feel the embarrassment this position brings. His other leg drapes over the back of mine, holding me in place.

“If you fight me, if you even squirm, I will pull your arms behind your

back,” Finn threatens.

The uncomfortable, dripping wet feeling between my legs is already making me want to adjust my positioning. *This is going to hurt.*

“Remember this position, Lena,” Finn warns.

Mostly gentle-ish warm-up slaps pepper my ass. I close my eyes, trying to focus outside the pain. When the first heavy slap lands on my ass, my eyes squeeze shut as tight as they can. The second one finds the other side of my ass. With no instructions to count and no warning as to how many to expect, the only thing I can do is embrace the pain and my masochism.

I lose count somewhere after the seventh smack. I try to start counting again, but the flesh is blazing hot and tight from the punishment he’s taking out on my ass. A hard slap lands on my right cheek, and I squeak as my body jolts. I try to hold still, drawing a deep breath.

Finn delivers two more before running his hand, with a delicate touch, across the tender skin. The light touches are soothing to my tense core, but my ass is irritated and raw.

“I never want you to say you’re ‘just another’ one to me ever again. You’re my now, my future, and my forever.” Finn’s voice holds a gravely serious tone.

With calculated movements, Finn moves me from where I am across his lap. Instead of standing me up, he pulls me into his arms. Instinctually, I nuzzle myself against his chest. Finn gives a little hum of approval before lifting me as he stands. He gives me a loving squeeze, then turns and places me on the bed with a gentle bounce. The cool bedding soothes my ass.

His pupils are dilated, and desire paints his face, from the slack jaw to the wetting of his lips. Finn steps back from the bed, and his gaze roams over my body.

“Do you like oral performed on you?” Finn quirks an eyebrow.

Could he be more sexy?

“Does it matter?” I answer.

How do you handle brats, Finn? Tempting him to take it further probably isn’t my smartest move. My ass is on fire, but it could be way worse than it is now.

Finn nods in answer. Movement draws my attention from his face straight down to where he’s working his cock. That’s what I want.

When he was breeding us, that was amazing. Let’s get more of that. My wolf focuses on that. Why wouldn’t she? *Next heat, he could breed us,* she

pushes.

I push her out of my mind to focus on the here and now, not on the improbability of being bred.

“You want to be stretched on my cock too badly, don’t you?” Finn laughs.

Managing a nod, I bite my bottom lip at his thickness, the bead of cum forming at the tip, and the length that hit the deepest parts of me. When he was hovering over me, covering me, it was so primal. So safe.

I start panting even before Finn steps to the bed.

“I want an answer, faolan. Now.”

I draw my eyes back to him, trying to pay attention to something other than his cock. Failing but trying.

“What position did you like most during your heat?” Finn’s eyes are intense, the brown so alive, flickering with his wolf drawing mine forward.

He puts a knuckle under my chin, stopping me from looking down at the prize I want.

“From behind.” My voice barely comes out above a whisper.

“As you wish. Elbows and knees or flat on your stomach?” Finn nods to me, letting go of my chin.

Ass up, head down, resting on my hands, my back arches. I hold in wait.

The cabinet at my bedside opens. Of course he knows where I keep my toys. Something is set on the bed, and something else is set on the table. Anticipation of what he has planned battles against the curiosity to ruin the surprise.

A cap flicks open with a knowing click. My ass clenches.

A dark laugh rumbles from Finn, followed by a taunt, “Did you not think I would follow through, Kathleen?”

I don’t answer. If I answer, he’ll hear the quake in my voice.

“Your fear and arousal smell so good together.”

He approaches, and the warmth of his hands precedes the contrasting chill from the lube.

“Has anyone fucked you here?” Finn probes against my ass with his finger, slowly working the lube.

Why does he have to ask questions like that?

My face heats as I answer, “They haven’t.”

The moan that comes from Finn is followed quickly by a breathy huff. “Good. There’s something I really like that most women don’t.”

It becomes hard to swallow. *Has he fucking hacked into my porn account?*

“I love the way a woman begs when anal hurts.”

His finger pushes inside.

I have a plug bigger than his finger, but this is different.

Again and again, he pushes more lube inside me. A second finger joins, and I jolt forward.

The pull of my braid confirms the suspicion that had my fingers trembling earlier. With my head pulled back, the tension forces me onto Finn’s fingers. My eyes clench, and I bite my lips together.

“Breathe, faolan. You can’t beg and plead if you don’t breathe.”

His coaching draws a ragged breath from me.

Moving slowly, he fucks my ass with his fingers. The deeper he goes, the more it hurts.

I whine loudly, but as bad as it hurts, the more I want it.

It’s been too long since I’ve worn a plug just to feel that fullness.

His fingers move faster, taking me hard.

“Ow ow owww!” Tears form in my eyes.

“You’re doing so good, Kathleen. Such a good girl, taking my fingers.”

Finn’s praise doesn’t soothe my pain, but it does encourage me to stay steady for him.

A third finger presses forward, and I clench. The thought of how much it’ll hurt does not go well.

“Please, no more. Please.”

“I don’t hear your safeword, faolan. Don’t think I’ll take it easy on you.”

A dark laugh laces his promise.

Without my safeword, all my pleas serve to do is encourage Finn. I know it, he knows it, and the pain setting my body on edge knows it.

Applying more lube, Finn goes back to pressing all three fingers inside me.

“Please, Finn, no.” I don’t expect begging to work.

It doesn’t.

“Oh, you can take it, faolan. More importantly, you *will* take it.” Finn’s voice comes with a grumble of approval. “You want to be my good girl and take it.”

Anything to not use my safeword. I refuse. *Especially with praise like that.*

A whine slips from me, and I don't know how loud it is. I fist my bedsheet easily in my fingers, the soft texture the only soothing contrast to the pain.

I pant and blink heavy wet tears from my eyes, but my vision doesn't clear.

His hand abandons my braid, letting my head settle back down against my forearm.

Well practiced, Finn finds my clit, working the sensitive nub with his fingers.

Pain meets pleasure, whines turn to a moan, and my body relaxes. With his fingers on my clit, Finn continues his forceful takeover of my ass.

I'm crying from the pain. "Please, Finn. Please, no more."

His fingers work my clit more dutifully, and my attention is torn between the pain and pleasure.

"Come for me, Kathleen," Finn instructs.

As if there were no choice in the matter, my body follows his command. The thrusting of his fingers into my ass is overruled by the expert touch on my clit. I scream through it. The pleasure washes over me in long, hard chills, my toes curl with it, and I'm panting with each twinge as they jolt through my pussy.

The subsiding orgasm leaves my body relaxed. Finn's three fingers fuck my ass without problem. I can feel his hand pushing hard and fast.

I gasp from the intensity, but it's no longer painful.

"I think you're ready for my cock now, faolan," Finn pants with the telltale of his arousal.

My only response is a meager whimper.

His fingers are still in my ass when something slides between my folds. It's not the warmth of his cock.

"Ohhh fuck." I wiggle my toes, reveling in the idea of double penetration as part of being fucked in the ass for the first time.

This is a dream come true. A filthy, painful, arousing dream, and I'm not ready to admit how good he is as a partner for me. *But . . . fuck is he a good partner for me.*

The dildo is on the smaller side of my collection. As it sinks to the depths, Finn slides his fingers from my ass. His warmth behind me dissipates. After footsteps pad across the floor, I hear the sink run before quicker steps return.

Is this too much? Should I safeword? No. No. No. I can't. I won't. I refuse

to surrender to his intensity.

Finn teases his cock against my ass. He runs one hand from my shoulder, down over the curve of my ass, before the sound of him lubing his cock fills the silence between us.

“Oh, faolan. Do you know how hot it is to be the first to fuck your ass? I already know I’ve ruined all other men for you. Having the pleasure of choosing when to violate you this way is an honor.” Finn’s talking distracts me.

Sexy, soft-spoken, taboo words draped in a thick accent are alluring. His cock slides into my ass. Not stopping.

“Finn!” His name erupts through me in a pained protest. Pained but laced with thick pleasure.

My eyes squeeze shut with fireworks flickering against the lids. The loss of control in my legs is nothing compared to the violent stretch of my ass around his cock.

Finn’s grip on my waist is the only moment I get to prepare. He thrusts hard. I sheath him entirely. My clenched eyelids don’t hold back the tears.

“Fuck, Kathleen,” he moans.

It’s so erotic hearing his voice call my name. Between waves of pain, the thrill of having both holes filled is an unknown level of pleasure.

It hurts too good to stand it. My body contorts, trying to escape him. But Finn’s strength is more than mine, and it’s a pointless attempt. I am wholly at his mercy, and I love it. *I love . . .*

A startling snarl and brutal tempo change everything. The pleasurable pain makes its way down my spine, overwhelming me. I lose the ability to do anything but feel. Feel him in and around me. As I come, my voice changes from needy moans to a heavy scream.

Finn bends over the top of me. His teeth clamp but don’t puncture my mating mark as he comes. Loud groans take the place of the snarl.

I melt. His grip is the only thing holding me. Finn’s support is all I feel.

With heavy pants, Finn slows and first pulls himself from my ass and then the dildo from my pussy. I’m hollow and unstable. I fall, with no grace or intent, to the bed.

Tears keep coming, and I try to breathe through them.

“Shhh,” Finn coos.

The awareness of his absence is banished by the warmth of his return. He lies down behind me, pulling me farther onto the bed with him. The

comforter is wrapped around me, and I'm cocooned in the safety of him. He grounds me as if I were a violent lightning storm finding its way to the earth.

The contrast is unbalanced, and all logic falls apart. Body and mind melt into an uncoordinated and overwhelming sensation.

"Oh, faolan. Such a good girl," he praises, then kisses the back of my neck and shoulder.

The way he nuzzles against my ear and wraps an arm around my body soothes the pain.

"So strong for me," he whispers. "You took so much more than I expected and so well."

CHAPTER 38

FINN

LENA GASPS FOR AIR, AND I PULL HER FLAT, SHUFFLING BACK TO ALLOW HER airways to open.

Her arousal fades, and the intense feeling of sub drop filters through our thready connection. Despite the lack of connectedness, intense whirling emotions fade in and out. She's dropping out of subspace quickly and into the darkness of her own mind.

Lena shivers, her body crashing from the intensity.

Running my hand along her arm, I keep talking, trying to hold her attention. "You were so strong through that. No one has ever handled me so well. I don't have words for how sexy you are."

"Finn," she whispers between heavy breaths.

"I'm here, Kathleen." I kiss her temple.

"Fuck," she whines.

I kiss her cheek. "Words, Kathleen, give me more words. Let me help you."

"Cold," she complains.

Something easily fixed. Placing the discarded sex toys on the bedside table, I move quickly, pulling back the covers and fluffing her pillow. Moving her to the middle of the bed, where she prefers, is effortless. I tuck the pillow I've been using on her left and climb in on the right. Alongside her, I press as much of myself against her as I can and cover us in all four layers of blankets on her bed.

Her teeth chatter for a moment before her nose turns to press against my neck.

"I have feels," Lena whines.

“That’s good. Feels are okay.” I use her word. It’s sweet, sensitive, and vulnerable.

She shakes her head. Her cold nose brushes my skin.

Lena protests, “No. Not okay. I don’t want to feel things.”

“I promise feelings are good things.” I push out all the good feelings I have for her, trying to reach her through the bond.

All the support and love I hold for her in my heart. If even half of it gets through our thin bond, it might ease her a little.

“Losing you will destroy me,” she gasps and swallows a sob.

“Mmmm,” I grumble. “There’s good news. You’ll never lose me, faolan. You will always carry my heart with yours. There will never be a moment you’re truly alone. My mark rests on your shoulder, and when you’re ready, my collar will hang around your neck. Then, I’ll put a beautiful ring on your finger.”

Her breathing slows, and I feel her straining emotions retreat. The acceptance of my words feels so much better than I anticipated. She trusted me, at least in this moment. *Someday, maybe even soon, she’ll say yes.*

“Can we nap?” she asks with a yawn.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I answer before planting a soft kiss on her lips. “Rest easy, Kathleen.”

She mutters an indistinguishable sentence before sleep drapes over her consciousness.

CHAPTER 39

FINN

THE ENTIRE BED QUAKES, AND I OPEN MY EYES TO FIND LENA JOLTED straight up, sitting next to me. I glance around the room, but there's no sign of anyone here. After drawing in a breath, I don't scent anyone else, and with soundproofing, I know I won't hear anyone either.

"Kathleen, faolan?" I call, raising my hand to her shoulder.

She shrugs it off. "Who is Aoife?" Lena asks.

My heart sinks.

"Who is Siobahn? Roisin? Orla?" Lena doesn't look at me, but her voice gets angrier with every name.

The accuracy of how she pronounces the names only comes from someone who has heard them said correctly. Each name causes my stomach to drop further.

"I think you know who they are," I answer roughly.

Sitting up alongside her, I try to pull Lena to me, but she refuses, shuffling farther away. I reach over and click on the lamp. The warm light illuminates the room.

"You need to say it, Finn, because I'm sitting here feeling humiliated or stupid on some level. I need you to tell me. Who are they?" Lena's voice shakes.

She's turned too far away from me, but I can see the tension ripple through the muscles on her back. Her body's wound tight and on the verge of flight or fight. My body mimics hers curling tight, influenced by her distress.

"Kathleen." I coax her to look at me, running my hand up her back toward her shoulder. I breathe, pulling myself back down to a rational calm. "Come here, faolan."

She shakes her head, denying my touch and dissuading me from bringing her toward me.

“I didn’t understand,” I admit.

I was an idiot. Looking past what she told me hurts, but I was dumb to the intent behind her words. “I didn’t understand when you said that you saw them.”

“See them,” Lena corrects me. “I don’t *just* see them once, Finn. I see them regularly. All the time. I’ll wake up in the dead of night like this. I’ll see things you’ve done. Things you might not even remember doing, but I will. It’ll be with me each day after that because I saw it. I saw how happy that makes you.”

“I can’t undo the past, Kathleen.” I don’t know what to say. *That’s already a dumb answer.* “I can’t make my past with them go away.”

My statements aren’t granting me any favors. Lena makes herself smaller, wrapping her arms around her legs as she balls herself up in the sitting position away from me.

Why is she so hard to reach? I slide out of bed and walk around to be in front of her.

If our mate can truly think we would even look at one of them again, she’s unwell. Even my wolf is at odds trying to understand what we didn’t get the first time she said these things and what we’re still missing now.

“Aoife, Siobahn, Roisin, and Orla are my past submissives. You know that from your gift. I can’t take my past back, Kathleen,” I remind her as gently as I can.

I try to tilt her head to meet my eyes, but I can’t pull Lena from the ball she made of herself.

Trying to reach her on her level, I keep speaking, “They will always be behind me, Kathleen. But I promise, I mean it, you’re my now, my future, my forever. I don’t know how to help you with seeing them or not seeing them. All I can do is assure you that I’m not moving backward. I am not looking behind me because everything I have and need is before me.”

Lena shuffles on the bed and raises her beautiful tear-filled hazel eyes to meet mine. I watch in the low light of the bedroom as the greens play with the browns for a moment. The gold glint of her wolf rises to meet mine.

“It isn’t *just* scenes, Finn. It isn’t *just* a glint or a passing instant. It’s not that I’m *just* getting names and dates.” Lena’s voice isn’t her own. It’s hoarse and hesitant.

I want to interrupt her and tell her what she sees doesn't matter to me because none of it has any bearing on us and our bond. Nothing she sees will ever accurately reflect the way I feel about her. But this time, when she speaks, I have to listen. I can't miss another instance of her telling me something and not hearing it. 'I'm a submissive' and 'I see your exes' shouldn't have been passing statements.

"You're all I want. You're all I need, Kathleen. It doesn't matter what I've had before. It doesn't matter what I've done before because there's no one else I would rather spend forever with. There's no other submissive I would rather play with. There's no other woman I would rather sleep with. Even if you are looking back at the time we've spent together, even if you happen to look at us together on Monday. It won't be accurate, Kathleen. Because yesterday is no longer an accurate reflection of how I feel for you today."

"That's fine, Finn. It is. But it doesn't change how this is for me. It doesn't change the reality I live with." Lena tries to spell it out.

But I have a feeling it's difficult for her to explain something that comes so naturally to her, like a duck to water.

She tries more words. "I wake up in the middle of the night to visions of you touching, kissing, fucking them. Even if I wanted to believe at the end of all this that I'll get to keep you . . ."

I try to cut in, and she puts her finger to her lip, indicating for me to be silent.

She's right. I need to listen. *When did I get so bad at listening?*

"How can I submit to you knowing that Orla sat at your feet begging to be collared? The way she asked for you to possess her in every way. It echoes in my brain. Then the way you wrapped your fingers into her hair and nearly suffocated her with your cock down her throat."

Tears no longer well in Lena's eyes. They run freely down her face.

For the second time in only so many hours, my beautiful mate is falling apart.

I only remember that scene with Orla in part. I trust Lena's account of it. My stomach sinks deeper. Chills run down my spine as I try to come up with anything to assure her that what she sees is only part of the story. They're only part of the dynamic with her. I try to draw a breath to give her words. But air doesn't get into my lungs, and I'm left speechless from a physical reaction I can't control.

Lena looks away from me, heartbreak and devastation written all over her gorgeous face.

Dropping my head to my chest, I focus on anything I can to try and breathe. Slowly air seeps in, and I can give her the only defense I've ever held onto. In the twenty years I've been lifestyle, I've always held out hope for this moment.

"I've never offered any of them a collar, Kathleen," I explain. "It doesn't make it better knowing what you can see. Because how could you know? But with every submissive, I've refused to take that next step with them. I've refused to ever own someone the way I wish to possess you. The mark of my fangs on your shoulder isn't the only part of me I've saved for you. I've held out hope for all these years, twenty of them, in hopes that God would give me the opportunity to place a collar around my mate's neck . . . around your neck. That I could earn the privilege of your trust. I have only ever wanted to offer all the permanent things in my world to the one who is divinely mine. I wanted to present you, only you, with the collar of our people and the collar of our lifestyle. It isn't a command. It isn't something I can pressure you into because it wouldn't be true to who we are."

Like one of the delicate flowers tattooed across her ribs, Lena unfolds from the tight little ball. Tension slowly escapes her as each limb unfurls. I wait and watch as she slowly comes to me.

When she moves into my lap, I say my final piece on the subject. "I'm sorry that you have to live with seeing them. If I can help you not see them, I will. Anything I can do to protect you, I will do it."

Lena wraps her arms around my neck and buries her nose at my throat. She draws a slow inhale, taking in my scent.

In the silence of the room around us, she finally speaks. "Break my heart, Griffin O'Leary, and there won't be a hole deep enough on this earth to hide in."

"If I break your heart, faolan, I won't be looking for a hole to hide in. I'll be handing you a knife to cut mine out," I answer her threat.

She hums with approval.

After a few more minutes, Lena wiggles in my lap.

I'm not ready to lose the softness of our moment together, but she grumbles, "I'm smelly and I'm hungry and I have to pee."

Her honesty with her needs is so pure that I can't help but let out a small laugh. I help her untangle herself from me, and before she steps away, I kiss

her and wrap my hand through her hair.

I pull my phone from the nightstand and look at the time. It's about four in the morning, but Lena long since missed dinner, having been asleep for more than twelve hours.

"Run a bath. I'll go make you breakfast." I kiss her forehead.

She smirks. "And a mimosa?"

"It's Thursday," I deadpan.

"Thirsty Thursday," she corrects with strong sass and a raised finger.

Well, she has a point. I smile at her and give her a nod. "Maybe."

CHAPTER 40

LENA

THIS MORNING, I'VE MADE MY WAY DOWN TO THE BASEMENT, HIDING FROM the hustle and bustle of the wolves coming and going as they spend time with Cade and Thalia. I should be up there with them, but it's easier if I have an excuse that benefits them. I'm involved from a distance, and that's seemingly enough for people. It gives me time to reflect on everything from the last few days.

I'm in bed early every night. I'm eating, arguably, more vegetables than I have in years, and they're not awful. Mostly. My wolf has been a roller coaster. It's back and forth between progress and failures. Sometimes, standing tall and being Alpha Female comes with its usual pressure. And other times, I have to retreat because I have no control over the lava inside me.

Existing in the same room as Finn is all it takes for me to relax. She quits trying to push hard and escape uncomfortable situations. By his side, there's no wallowing in my belly that nearly drags me to the floor any moment someone gets loud and aggressive.

I'm starting to ready for the movie event tonight when footsteps sound across the floor.

Finn, my wolf coos with excitement, feeling his approach.

His arms wrap around my waist, pulling me back from the cabinet I'm pulling supplies from.

"Need you," he murmurs in my ear.

He nuzzles my hair out of his way with his nose and clamps his teeth down at the base of my neck.

"I have a job to finish. I told Lauren I would get this done so she could go

on a date,” I argue, but I can’t help melting into him a little. My core clenches at the possibility.

Finn lets me go. “Show me how to help.”

I turn to look at him. “What?”

“Lena.” Finn spins me in his arms. “It’s our pack, and if the only way you’ll let me take you up to your suite and fuck is to help you assemble things for the pups, then show me.”

So sexy when he wants to be with us and how he says pups. My wolf pushes back toward him.

“Sure, okay.” I indicate over toward the folding tables lined up against the walls. “We need to set up six of those, two at each of the three different heights.”

Finn doesn’t hesitate to walk over and get to work. “Where do they go? Lined up or in rows?”

“You don’t have to help,” I remind him.

“I want to help.” He pushes, “Show me how you want the tables.”

I demonstrate how the tables should go in a mini-stadium effect toward the projector screen, and he continues to do as I ask.

“Seeing you every day this week has been amazing.” Finn smiles as he pops the legs out on one of the small tables.

“I know. I’m really pretty to look at.” I brush off his compliment, going back to pulling out boxes of crayons and coloring pages I’d stored last month.

“That’s not what I mean,” Finn corrects firmly, wanting to make his point known. “Do you know how special you are?”

“Well, I mean, I get pretty high marks across the board in STEM-related classes, but women would be more inclined to study STEM if it was encouraged from a young age,” I sass, crossing the room to show him the chairs for the tables.

Finn intercepts my course. “That’s not what I meant.”

To accentuate that I know what he meant, I roll my eyes. “Having a submissive wolf means I’m rare enough to be seen as a commodity or a prize to be won but not rare enough to be unheard of or mythical.”

“Why are you so pessimistic?” Finn’s hands come to rest on my biceps, keeping me from walking away. He gives me a statistic that I’m sure is unverified. “You’re one in twenty thousand.”

“Mmm, sounds delightful. Nineteen thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine other wolves should be thankful I took this burden for them.” I don’t

bother looking to see the perturbed look he's giving me. Instead, I break away and go back to the chairs.

Finn sets them up while I start making my assembly line on the counter. Crayons, scissors, papers, marker, glue sticks, instructions, cups, caddies for snacks, and more.

I'm well aware of Finn watching me work. The silence between us isn't uncomfortable.

"You've always wanted to be working in the sciences?"

His voice breaking the silence with a change of subject is quick. I wasn't expecting it.

"Uhm. I guess." I shrug, noncommittal. Silence invites me to continue speaking. "I knew what I was, and my father — no." I correct myself. "The man who raised me made sure that his trusted circle knew what I was. He wanted to leverage me, and that part I never understood. But I wanted to matter beyond what I am. There's nothing more lacking for shifter women than the ability to control our bodies. No one has developed anything since the first suppressant for heat. And in a limited number of cases, the suppressant can lead to infertility."

My eyes prick with tears. *No, we're not thinking about it. We're not visiting that I've ruined it.*

I shake my head, but the thought doesn't leave.

I'm not thinking about the fact that maybe he doesn't want me if I can't have pups.

"You decided to make your mark by trying to find a better way," Finn offers as his footsteps indicate walking closer across the basement floor.

"Exactly," I answer. Moving down the line, I make the first of many buckets for the tables. Finn doesn't ask another question in the time that it takes to finish that pass, so I spit out a question as soon as I get back to the start of the row. "What was it like being an Enforcer for the Mafia?"

Finn laughs as he stands next to me, watching as I start the next pass on my assembly line. "Probably more boring than you're expecting."

"Tying cement blocks on people's feet must get pretty blah after a while." I grin.

"You know it does." Finn rolls his eyes. He's fighting back a laugh but does answer my question. "It's people and inventory management. Who is where? What shipment is coming in? Is it all there?"

"So, it's really not any different from what you're doing for Doctor

Thorpe?” I never actually considered he was truly qualified for his job. Which may be a bit more condescending than I should admit aloud.

Finn shrugs it off and starts making up a bucket, following my lead.

“Do you enjoy it? Inventory management?” I grimace because there’s no way I would be able to do that sort of task day in and day out.

“No. And I intend to do it very quickly, with a lot of help from the department heads,” Finn answers with a laugh and then a heavy sigh. “I want to find something with more meaning in life. But I took the first job I was qualified for to get established.”

“I can see where it might be time to do something new. What’s it like back home? I know your brother, well, of him. He’s hard to miss. And you mentioned your ma?” I take this chance to learn about Finn. I feel like I know nothing, but I don’t think it’s because he’s hiding it as much as it is my lack of attempt to connect.

“Magnus . . .” Finn’s hands stop moving for a moment. “Magnus is troubled. I thought it was the weight of the world on his shoulders, but it’s deeper than that. He’s very much his way or the highway. We’ve had our fair share of disagreements, but it wasn’t until recently that I really saw how much some things were getting to him.”

Looking up at him, I see Finn shake his head. It doesn’t feel like he’s done.

After a few moments of silence, he continues. “He has Quartermasters that can deal with him if he goes off book.”

I can’t imagine what it must feel like not to be able to go to your siblings. Even with how busy Cade was when he worked for Corinth Security full-time, he would call me back if I called. And if I needed Deacon, he would sober up as quickly as he could.

“And Ma” — Finn’s face lights up — “is a submissive.”

“What?” I question densely, dropping the bucket I’d been working on.

Finn nods in confirmation.

“Your mother, didn’t she run the entire place after your father was arrested?”

This doesn’t compute. My brain cannot wrap my mind around how intense she must be. The control she must have to squash her wolf down so low that no one would know.

“Stop,” Finn interrupts my chaos-filled brain. He sets his bucket on the counter and runs the back of his knuckles along my jaw before cradling my

head. “Your wheels are spinning, and I can see it.” He waits for me to adjust and pay attention to him. “Everyone knows Ma is a submissive.” Finn’s words shut me down entirely.

“Everyone knows?” I repeat slowly. “No. I had no idea.”

Finn snorts. “Well. I guess not everyone, but those who worked with her were all very much aware that Ma’s a submissive. That doesn’t stop her from getting business done.”

“How?”

There has to be an answer, a way, a logical answer I can quantify. If I could do what she’s done, life would be so much easier.

“You won’t like the answer, faolan.” Finn’s hand leaves my face as he crouches down and picks up the bucket I was working on.

“It doesn’t matter,” I answer him. “I need to know.”

“Ma balanced her submissive through Da,” he explains while setting my bucket on the countertop. “A submissive wolf stops being outwardly submissive everywhere in their life when they have a safe place to be themselves.”

Told you we needed a mate for a reason. My wolf snorts. The high and mighty flick of her nose and soft wag of her tail is the ultimate ‘told you so, I’m right’ if I ever did hear one.

I bite my tongue and wrinkle my nose.

“You see the irony in all this, right?” Finn is fighting to hold back a smile, the corner of his mouth threatening to turn up into one.

“I don’t mind being submissive during sex. I think that should be enough.” My chest aches. *Why couldn’t it be anything else? Why did it have to be this?*

“Faolan, you submit so beautifully in bed.” Finn bites his tongue for a minute before refocusing. “And when you submit outside of the bedroom, it’s like that first pull out of the bottle.”

It feels like I’m in a different conversation. I can count a few occasions where I’ve said fuck it and didn’t fight him. Is that what he means?

“Sometimes it’s not worth fighting with you.” I roll my eyes.

Picking my bucket back up, I reorganize it and start down the line again. I find my eyes wandering back to him. He’s always there in my peripheral vision.

“Every time you let me care for you, it’s a little bit more submission that you freely give,” Finn assures me.

I bite my lips together. “Yeah. But was it submitting?”

“Wasn’t it?” Finn pushes the question back. “Lena, I wish I had a way to explain to you that it doesn’t have to be a constant fight. Yes, there are some things I’m not willing to negotiate on, but I don’t think they’re truthfully that difficult to manage. I want to know where you are. I want to know you’re safe. I want to be sure that you’re doing what you can to stay healthy.”

Finn stays right with me, walking our buckets down the countertop.

“It’s getting impossible to tell my wolf no,” I admit, having to dig apart my emotions to find words. “All she thinks about is finding and seeing you. It’s this constant worry about doing things to make you happy. She loves this idea of listening to all your damn suggestions.”

“Rules,” he interrupts.

“Suggestions.” I continue. “It’s getting to be that I’m no longer in control. I no longer matter. It’s you and her, and I’m stuck between the two of you. There’s no . . .”

I can’t say the last word. I can’t.

“Choice.” Finn completes it. He says that stupid word.

CHAPTER 41

FINN

LENA NODS WHEN I OFFER THE WORD CHOICE. I FOLLOW HER, TAKING THE bucket to the smallest children's table and then back to the beginning of the assembly line. She walks fast as if she thinks outpacing me in the basement will get her away from the conversation.

"I'm a nightmare to love. I don't want to be held or comforted. I don't want to be doted on, and I don't need someone to buy me flowers. And I'm okay with that. I'm okay with no one to love on me because I know that it's impossible. I'm too independent, too much chaos, and too much work to try and keep up with. The most I can hope for is a nice quiet life where I'm not constantly forced into boxes of someone else's making." Lena stops when she reaches the countertop.

"Kathleen," I growl, cutting her off.

My chest aches with anger that this is how she sees herself. This — *God, this is how she sees herself.*

When she falls silent, I turn her to face me and raise her chin to look me in the eye. "You are not hard to love. You are not a nightmare or impossible. It's okay that not everyone can handle or deal with you. It's okay that you won't fit in the little molds others have tried to put you in."

Her body squirms, starting with her shoulders stiffening and flexing. Lena says nothing.

I continue fighting the urge to pull her close. "You say you don't want hugs and comfort. You don't want someone to take care of you or bring you sentimental things. But, Kathleen, what is it you need? What language do you need someone to express their love to you? Because I'll do it. Kathleen, I've been built for you. Everything in my entire life has led me to you. All I'm

asking is for you to let me show you, try it my way, and let me give you what you need.”

“How?” Her voice croaks.

Is she actually considering this? I nod, not looking a gift horse in the mouth. “Let me lead. Stop with your smart mouth and hear me. Think it through when I ask for something from you. You’ve called me a control freak and always read into things way too much. Why would I ever leave you half-cocked?”

“Why does this sound like if I don’t follow you to a T, I’ll spend hours at a time being uncomfortable sitting down?” She starts with a snarky tone, but by the end of the question, she’s all but become earnest.

I smile, giving her that look I’ve seen her react to so very well. “I can come up with much more creative punishments if you don’t want to be spanked.”

Lena cocks her head. There’s an air of disbelief around her before she shakes it. “I need to be free, Finn. I need to have choices and to be able to make them.”

“But not too many,” I state my observations with her wardrobe, “because they get too overwhelming.”

Her eyes widen, and she speaks again. “I need some spontaneity. I don’t like to do the same shit all the time. I need to do things because I want to.”

“All I need is for you to ask me,” I tell her. I don’t dare breathe for fear she’ll shut down.

She averts her gaze. “I don’t want to be told no.”

“If it’s safe and we don’t have other plans, why would I say no?” I smile.

Lena negotiating with me is so fucking sexy, and I want to reward her so badly.

“You can’t be with me every second of every day,” she growls.

It’s adorable how she’s connecting better with her wolf.

“I’ll make do,” I sigh and concede. “Know that I want to be. I want to be ingrained in your heart so deeply that there’s not a moment you ever feel alone.”

She waits for the edge of my negotiation, and I provide it. “You need to keep your phone on and with you. Don’t make me hunt you down. Be responsible.”

“But I need space.” She shifts her body, leaning closer to me in contrast to her words.

“I will respect your space under the condition you eat three meals a day and go to bed at a reasonable hour.” I pause. *Shit*. “Coffee, hot chocolate, water, alcohol, and single fruit or vegetable don’t count as meals. Reasonable meaning you need more than five hours of sleep a night.”

Lena puffs her cheeks out. “I need . . .”

I wait for her to pick her thought back up. She hangs her head before rolling it back up to look at the ceiling. Bringing her hand to her shoulder, she rests it on the spot where my bite mark has healed into a beautiful silver scar.

“I need . . .” Her voice trails off again.

“This isn’t a one-and-done conversation, faolan,” I explain. Lena’s eyes fall back to meet mine. “I’m willing to negotiate with you anytime we’re levelheaded like this. No anger and snap decisions. If we can stop and talk calmly, we can negotiate.”

Lena seems suspicious in the way her body shifts and tightens. After a few tense seconds, Lena nods. “Okay.”

I fill the space between us and wrap my arms around her. Lena nuzzles in against my chest, resting her arms around my waist.

“I suppose, let’s get these done,” Lena says after a few more moments of our embrace.

Slowly, and begrudgingly so, I unwrap myself from around her. However, the little minx moves when I try to kiss her forehead, and I end up planting a kiss on her lips, which she intensifies. Her tongue slides into my mouth, and her hand slides behind my head, looping into my hair.

“Thank you,” Lena whispers after she breaks our kiss.

“Anytime?” I question.

She steps away from me back to the workbench. “I don’t know if I can do this. But I appreciate the effort that you’re putting in.”

Part of her sentence doesn’t come out. The words fall off, but it’s like she’s not trying to be suspicious about it. I don’t push for what she may mean. I let her have that bit. At least for now, she seems content to let me show her love.



LENA HAS A WHOLE EVENT PLANNED OUT, AND IT TAKES A COUPLE HOURS before the basement is finished to her liking. I don’t mind the work. It’s

purposeful and something I've been missing since leaving home. Being dedicated to Lena is no hardship, but having something to do, together, is nice.

On the way up the stairs, Lena walks ahead of me, putting her ass in my face. I take the opportunity to bite the back of her leggings, and she squeaks.

At the top of the landing, the fun giggling of our flirting comes to an end.

A group of women is hanging about in the living room. They start almost leering at us, and Lena whispers to me, "Let's go."

"Go?" I question, not wanting to let them intimidate her.

"Lena." The way one of them says Lena's name makes me uncomfortable. "Hey, have you seen Deacon? Or maybe Finn wants to hang out? I mean, you too."

"Oh." I whistle low and come up with the first, albeit pitiful, excuse I can think of to get us out of the invitation. "Unfortunately, Lena's left her SUV in town and asked me to take her to pick it up. Apparently, she doesn't think I can drive on the correct side of the road unassisted."

Lena shrugs, playing along. "It's true. Can't trust him to not get lost."

"Oh." One of the women bats her eyelashes at me. "Well, that's too bad."

CHAPTER 42

FINN

BEFORE FULFILLING LENA'S REQUEST TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE, I SET OUT to find Cade. He's in his office with the door open. Deacon stands against the sliding glass door, looking across the deck at the tree line. When I knock, Deacon doesn't even cast a glance over his shoulder, but Cade pulls his eyes off the computer screen.

"Finn, good to see you." Cade doesn't stand but closes the lid of his computer and motions to the large chair across from his desk.

Deacon says nothing.

I'm getting the cold shoulder? For what?

"We're heading out, Lena's feeling a little drained." I advocate for her with words I hope she'd approve of.

"Then that means you're here for keys." Cade opens his desk drawer and pulls out a set of keys. Setting them on his desk, he takes a moment, drumming his fingers. He sighs. "She's going to be really pissed at me for doing this."

Cade pulls up his cell phone and, after a few taps on the screen, sets it down. "Scan this with yours. It's the security software that I had Adam set up."

"What would I need this for?" I ask, in no hurry to pull my phone out of my pocket.

Cade grins. "It'll show you tracking information for the four of us in the event that you were to need one of us or couldn't find one of us."

The heavy hint of 'us' indicating Lena makes it significantly easier to justify letting her go to class by herself come Monday.

I open my camera and scan his phone. A software download starts

automatically.

“Of course, that will let me see where your phone is too,” Cade informs me after the fact. “But I think it’s a good compromise.”

With a nod, I tuck my phone into my pocket to let the technology update.

“I’ll walk you out.” Cade gestures to the door behind me before he follows me out of his office and into the kitchen. When we get there, Lena’s still upstairs.

His next words are measured. “How are you liking living in the Ardelean Pack?”

It feels like a trick question. I stall. “It’s different but not a hard adjustment. You haven’t asked for much. And expectations have been reasonable. Obviously, there are some things to work out with my mate, but overall I like it here.”

Cade nods. “I appreciate you helping me handle the issue with the paparazzi who jumped the fence. It was good to have someone cool under pressure.”

“You’re welcome,” I assure him.

He hands me the keys to the apartment next to Lena’s. “Keep her safe, please.”

“With my life,” I promise him.



SURPRISINGLY, LENA LETS ME HELP HER CARRY OUR BAGS TO THE SUV. There’s only one objection to me driving, and it’s so half-hearted that I think she feels the need to be contradictory for no good reason whatsoever. I suppose that’s her charm. If she submitted easily to me, it wouldn’t be her. It sure as fuck wouldn’t be the woman I’ve fallen for.

We’ve settled into the drive, and Lena’s engrossed in her phone for a few moments before she releases an enlightened huff.

“Problem?” I ask, dragging my eyes off the road to look at her.

“You’re only a little older than Cade.” Lena shrugs and laughs faintly. “Not awful.”

“What do you mean not awful?” I’m twelve years older than her. It hardly makes me old. Though, it’s probably an eye-brow-raising difference to others.

Lena gives me a sly smile. “I’m saying you can still keep up with me. I was with Doctor Thorpe for a while, and while it was good, he had a hard time keeping up.”

My vision turns red. “You were fucking Thorpe?!”

“It was a few summers ago. There weren’t any ongoing projects and he wasn’t my superior at the time,” Lena defends. “Completely above board.”

“Doctor Thorpe has seen you naked.” My fist clenches, and the steering wheel creaks in my hand.

The judgment and snide remarks from him are starting to make sense. This feels like justifiable violence. He touched what’s mine.

My wolf snarls, snapping his teeth. *He touched ours.*

Then he has the gall to allow that predator into the lab with women he’s taken responsibility for.

Why the fuck did this never come up when I asked about her exes? He’s not some one-night stand she’ll never see again. He sees her every fucking day. I wonder how many times he’s thought about fucking her while working alongside her.

I’m so mad I can’t even see straight. I pull off to the side of the road and unbuckle my seatbelt. Once I’m out of the SUV, I’m fighting my wolf for control. Thorpe is probably back on the pack property for the weekend. I could go back and end him. *End him right now.*

I pace back and forth in front of the SUV, then down and back across the road, trying to walk the anger out of my system.

“Finn.” Lena’s right behind me.

“I can’t, Kathleen. I fucking can’t.” I shake my head.

I have no control right now. This isn’t how it should be.

“Finn,” Lena repeats my name. I stop walking away from her and turn to face her. She shakes her head. “Take a breath.”

“I can’t just take a breath, Kathleen. I have to work for a man who fucked my mate. He fucked the woman I love.” *Fuck.*

The words come out, and they’re honest, but they’re not delivered the way she should hear them.

My hands hang by my sides, and my shoulders drop. “I love you,” I tell her again, this time letting the words come out as they should be said the first time.

Lena’s jaw drops. I don’t know what to expect. The wind picks up and blows her hair about her face.

She shakes her head at me. “I’m not having this conversation with you in the middle of the road in the middle of fucking nowhere. This is not where you say those words for the first time.”

She’s absolutely right. I nod, drawing a deep breath.

“You have a hold of yourself, or do I need to drive?” Lena gives me a once-over. She wraps her arms around herself from the cold and the confrontation itself.

“Yeah. Let’s go.” I nod back toward the SUV.

Lena quips as I take my first step toward her, “How many people do you think you can honestly kill before making me look like a black widow?”

She cocks her head to the side, and it disarms me. I’m still actively debating how to kill both Brayden and Doctor Thorpe and make it look accidental, but the look she’s giving me brings back the center of it all. She should be my focus. My submissive. My mate. And I royally screwed up telling her perhaps the most important thing in a fit of rage.

“I can’t wait to break you of all the bad habits they’ve taught you.” I stalk closer to her, holding her eye contact. “Break you down to the basics. I’m so glad you’ve had other experiences. That means you know exactly how good it is with me.”

She shivers, keeping her head high, but diverts her eyes.

“Good girl,” I whisper.

Lena’s eyes flash to mine then she looks away, turning her head to expose her neck for me. *Sweet submission.*

I rest my hand on the base of her neck for a moment, comforting her, before pulling her into a hug. She snuggles against my chest, and I use it to ground me further.

She wants to be with me. If she had wanted to be with them, she would have been when I got here. Lena doesn’t do things halfway.

“I love you, faolan. I fucked up saying it this way for the first time. I’ll say it again later, and I’ll do a much better job expressing it to you,” I repeat. Then I clarify, “You don’t have to say it back. This isn’t some sort of emotional manipulation. I’m not lording it over your head. I feel it, I said it, I own it. But it doesn’t have to be reciprocated.”

She nods against my chest but doesn’t say anything. Her silence isn’t unexpected, but it doesn’t stop the sharp poke of disappointment in my heart.

I pull her chin up to face me and plant a chaste kiss on her lips.

Lena kisses me back, and she slips her tongue into my mouth. I let her

control the kiss. She pushes herself up and wraps an arm around the back of my neck, holding me to her. It's blissful feeling her. She's lit up our bond with all sorts of pleased emotions.

Based on the sporadic use, I'm fairly certain that her constantly fighting her wolf causes the bond to flicker. But, right now, the feelings I get from her all but make up for the words she hasn't voiced. I can live with these feelings being the only confirmation I have that she's with me. I can live in these feelings, for she is my homecoming that I feared would never come.



I WHOLEHEARTEDLY EXPECTED LENA TO KICK ME OUT AFTER I DROPPED HER and her bags off at her apartment. But Lena looks around and draws a breath to release a huge sigh after opening her door and crossing the threshold.

In a nearly possessed fashion, she tilts her head up toward the ceiling, then farther back to see me and asks, "Want to order food?"

"I know you're a shit cook. You have some weird obsession with cheese. What do you consider to be food?" I ask hesitantly.

"Mmm. I don't know. I'm hungry, but I don't know what for." Lena walks farther into her apartment.

Before bringing my and Lena's stuff to the pack property after she was cleared to go home, I had taken the time to clean up. The roses had wilted, so I removed them and stored the vase back where she had it.

"I'll take you out to dinner. Want to change?" I nod toward the bedroom.

Lena shrugs. "Yeah. I guess."

While it isn't enthusiastic, it is, in fact, an agreement, and I roll with it.

Lena makes her way to her plant, testing the soil before heading back to her bedroom to change.

She calls over her shoulder, "What is it with you and dress shirts anyway?"

I follow her path to the back of the apartment and lean against the doorframe, watching her inspect her wardrobe.

She's shimmying out of her leggings when I answer, "It was easier to fit in with the business class to close deals, they hide the ink well, and after a while, I got used to it."

Lena's T-shirt goes next, and my jaw drops as I admire her. She grabs a

long-sleeve green dress from her closet and pulls it over her head. The form-fitting garment drapes to her mid-thigh, and while I'm sad to lose the view of her ink, the way it hugs her curves leaves me salivating, nonetheless. After pulling stockings from a drawer, she sits on her bed and pulls them up her thighs. If she's trying to seduce me, it's working.

CHAPTER 43

LENA

FINN DRIVES US DEEPER INTO MINNEAPOLIS TO A BEAUTIFUL RESTAURANT. It's known for needing reservations, and given we're at the dinner hour, I'm not expecting a table. But I should have known better. Finn walks up to the host stand while I wait at the door by the few other couples seemingly waiting for a table. The host leaves his station and returns a few minutes later with another man in a suit coat.

He shakes Finn's hand fervently before turning to me by the door. With open arms, he invites me into their conversation. "For you and yours, of course. We'd be glad to be your hosts this evening."

I'm skeptical as to what Finn could have possibly told the man. Finn gestures for me to walk ahead of him, and I follow the man to one of the booths toward the quietest part of the restaurant. Patrons occupy the other booths, but with how they're situated, it feels like we're secluded.

I let Finn do all the talking, tuning out while I take in the beauty of the ornate restaurant. Dark wood paneling with brass elements gives it a rich, warm feel. It's inviting but formal. A few minutes later I realize why we have a table. The server approaches us and speaks with the same accent as Finn.

Dare I say . . . Dinah was right. It's nice to have him look after me. Not that I'm admitting that to her . . . or him.

Our mate is a good provider. He's starting to learn what we like. My wolf wags her tail in appreciation.

The booth is both long and wide, but despite the large table, my feet reach his underneath. It's not enough to be sitting here. I rest my shoe against his. The slight touch is better, but not quite enough. I'll survive. I have to detox for class on Monday. Doctor Thorpe won't like it if I try to drag Finn out of

the lab and to class with me.

The server comes to the table and sets a glass of water and a glass of beer on the table.

“Should I read into the fact that it seems you’re still connected to Ireland?” I ask, leaving the water and reaching for the beer.

“Pick up my beer, and I’ll be getting something of yours in return.” Finn flashes me a devious smile before answering my question. “I’m allowed to have friends outside of Ireland. The accepted terms are that I’m not welcome *in* Ireland. If they were to choose not to continue our friendship forged beyond that of a working arrangement, that’s up to them. But there are mutual benefits.”

I pick up the beer and take a sip. The amber liquid fills my mouth, and it’s pleasant and heady. When I set the glass on the table, Finn’s devious smile turns into a wicked grin.

His voice edges right on the cusp of an Alpha command. “Go to the bathroom, take those red panties off I saw you put on earlier, and bring them to me.”

The heavy look in his eye begs me to misbehave.

“And if I refuse?” I press.

“Then tonight, I’ll go back to my place, and you can go back to yours, and dinner is simply dinner.” Finn picks up the glass of water. “But, if you’re a good girl, faolan, I’ll give you a reminder as to why I’m yours.”

“You’re mine?” I question.

Oh, the panties are totally coming off, Finn. Just not how you’re expecting.

Finn nods. “I’m your Dominant, your Alpha, and your mate.”

Those words have no business being that sexy together. But they are. I turn my head to look out of the booth. No one seems to be on a course toward us. Lifting my hips, I use my hand on the inner side of the booth and slide it up my thigh, then hook the fabric of my thong. With a slight adjustment, I run the waistband down past my ass. In seconds, I’ve shimmied them down my legs. Stepping out with one shoe, I trail my other foot up his leg, resting it on his inner thigh above his knee.

“Oh, you’re always out to do things your own way. Always difficult, aren’t you, faolan?” He laughs.

With a shrug, I bring the beer to my lips and take a drink. Finn runs his fingers up and down my leg. He slips my panties off over my heel, and I

salivate when he pulls in and bites his bottom lip.

“Faolan, why are your panties wet?” he muses with a sly smile.

The panties get tucked into his coat pocket.

I play it off with a noncommittal shrug of one shoulder. “The server is kind of hot. He has a cool accent.”

“Ahh, yeah. The Irish accent is a panty dropper.” Finn quickly adds, “Or so I’m told.”

I swallow hard and push off the memories of the visions I’ve had. It’s not fair, but it’s not his fault. It comes with being gifted.

“Tell me about a fantasy you have that you haven’t acted out yet?” I hesitate to ask. Despite having difficulties hearing other patrons, I don’t want my voice to carry.

Finn smiles, his hand capturing my ankle like he’s done in bed a few times. The reminder of how he’s pulled me to him ignites my core.

When he’s sure he has my full attention, he speaks. “One specific fantasy. Came to me recently. I want my submissive to ride herself to completion on my thigh. I want her to use only the friction between my pants and her cunt to come.”

My jaw drops, but I close it quickly, the first time he touched me in my office coming back. How easy it was to move for him. How badly I wanted him.

Our mate pleases us so well. My wolf reminds me of how he’s brought us some of the best orgasms of our life. Every single instance is pushed forward like a mountain of evidence.

My face heats, and I look away.

“You’ll have a wet spot on your dress when we go to leave?” Finn pops a smirk.

Fire burns low in my belly, and I know it’s coming through our bond.

What do I even say to that? I take a sip of the beer, and the plates of food arriving on the table save me from having to respond.

After our meal is set in front of us, I give Finn a moment to say his prayer, and then I’m no longer saved from Finn’s sexual magnetism.

After raising his eyes from his plate, he returns my question back to me. “Tell me about a fantasy you have that you’ve yet to do.”

Tell him something juicy. My wolf gives me plenty of the things we’ve seen others experience. The beautiful shibari, the pet play, the needle and knife play. How I’ve wanted to be chased and taken in the woods is at the top

of her list.

I have an answer though. My own personal fantasy. Do I dare say it? It'll only encourage him.

Seconds tick by, and Finn waits for my response.

"I want . . ." It's hard to force the words out. After I say this, there's no going back. "I want to not have a choice during sex sometimes. I don't want to be asked. But I don't want it to be about . . ."

"You want your partner to know you well enough, to know that sometimes when you're acting out, what you really need is to be taken hard. You want a partner to hear any objection you have as another reason you won't care for yourself." Finn somehow pulls my feelings out of my head and voices them. He defines the behavior. "You want to pre-consent to not consenting."

I wet my lip for a moment and finally raise my eyes from the food to look at him again. "Okay, but sorry, it's nowhere near as provocative as your fantasy."

"I wholeheartedly disagree, faolan." Finn gives me a wicked smile before picking up his knife and fork. "I don't think I've heard a more alluring kink."



"WHERE ARE YOU STAYING?" I ASK HIM WHEN WE GET TO MY UNIT.

Finn nods, acknowledging that he took me seriously about him not moving in here. "Your brother apparently rented out the place next door. And he's graciously loaned it to me for the time being."

I nod and jingle my keys, debating what to do. "I should probably do some painting, but you can stay. Watch whatever sports ball television things are on that interest you. I'm guessing other than the basic utilities, Deacon hasn't gotten around to putting any actual entertainment in at his place. You can bum off my Wi-Fi if you'd —"

Without any hesitation, Finn lifts my keys from my fingers and unlocks the door before ushering me inside.

What the hell just happened? I'm dazed. I don't babble. I don't diatribes.

My wolf wags her tail happily as Finn runs his hand across our shoulders. *Our mate makes you nervous. That's because he likes me better than you, and it's a first.*

Her smug attitude is probably correct. Why wouldn't a Dominant and an Alpha wolf not want a submissive wolf? I'm far from obedient. But there's that little inkling of an issue. *We're broken. When he realizes how broken we are, he'll leave.*

I don't believe it. My wolf raises her nose in opposition.

Every day it's like she's growing a backbone. If I didn't know any better, I'd say maybe she's not submissive after all. *One can dream, can't they?*

After we pull our coats and shoes off, Finn turns to me. "Can I see what you're painting?"

"Sure." I gesture to where I'd set up the canvases by the window. The sun has set so I'll need to paint by the LED lights I've bought. But it's okay. The lights are pretty realistic.

I pull out the canvas I've been working on for the Smithsonian exhibit. The Leviathan and Thalia together blocked in nicely. As Finn stands there, the dedication with which he looks at my painting is intense. It reminds me of when he looks at me. Does he actually care?

"You're talented. I can't wait to see it finished. Do you have others?" He motions to the supplies.

"Yeah. Darren, Thalia's dad, asked that I put together a few pieces to make it more homey here." I point to the shipping crate we used to store the paintings.

"May I?" Finn nods to the box.

With a nod, I wrap my arms around myself. I don't normally exhibit my art. I agreed to the Smithsonian because it's the fucking Smithsonian. But I'm mortified about it. Waiting as Finn looks at my work like this now is what I imagine it will feel like when we get to opening day, only less scary.

Finn lifts the lid and, with a delicate touch, draws the canvas from inside the box. He pulls out the painting of birch trees first. White trunks with beautiful gold and yellow leaves reach toward the sky. Thalia's dad wanted bold colors with nature themes, and short of painting him walls full of flowers, autumn seemed like the best way to accomplish that.

"These are stunning. How long does it take you to paint them?" Finn asks as he props the paintings up on the couch, ensuring they don't fall forward.

"Depends on a bunch of things. These were all really quick because we wanted it to look and be more organic. Detail wasn't super important so much as the feel and vibe." I point to a red maple tree with fall foliage. It's the most detailed of the trio, and I explain, "This one took the most time. It

was about three weeks.”

He leans forward, looking closer at each of the paintings. At that distance, he can probably see the brush strokes in high definition. After a few minutes, I start to feel uncomfortable with his examination of my work. Wanting to be more comfortable, I walk toward the hallway leading to the bedroom.

“Why aren’t they hung up?” Finn’s voice is closer than I expect.

I jump and turn to look at him. He’s practically right behind me.

“Short people problems.” Shaking my head, I turn away from him and continue to head back to my bedroom.

“May I hang them for you?” Finn offers.

I reach for the hem of my dress to pull it off over my head. As I slide it up my thighs, I realize why Finn followed. *He has my panties in his pocket.* I look over my shoulder, bending forward, giving him a show as I rotate my knees apart and drag my dress off. Well aware that with my heels on, my ass has to look pretty fuckable right now. Finn’s hands on me don’t come as a shock.

He takes my dress from my hand and tosses it across the floor. The relief from my bra unclasping becomes second to the pleasing sensation of Finn’s teeth clamping down on my shoulder.

With a growl, he slides the straps down my arms. “You know what surprised me the most in cleaning up your toys?”

“I bet you tell me,” I sass.

When I turn my head to meet his eyes, they turn bright green, showing me his wolf.

My wolf floods to the surface, and I try to stop her, but between the way he’s holding me and the intensity of his gaze, it’s a losing battle. Then, something changes. I’m feeling the submissive head space. Being a brat is fun, but there’s something between us, and right now, I want to listen.

“It’s that there was a collar in your toys,” Finn whispers.

My heart rate picks up. My breathing stops. *Of course he found it.*

Piqued curiosity is wrapped inside a caring tone. “Do you want to be collared during play?”

“I’m not saying yes to —”

The stern look on his face silences me and my desire to explicitly state the boundary and my need for a separation between sex and . . . love.

He asks again, “Do you want to be collared during play?”

“Yes,” I answer the question and only the question that he asked.

He groans with approval. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Finn steps away from me and walks to the opposite bedside table. Reaching it, he opens the drawer. It’s not the one I use, so I’m confused, watching him pull an object from the drawer. It’s a glossy white cardboard box. I can’t take my eyes off it as he brings it around the bed and stands before me.

“I understand you’re not ready to wear a collar full-time. And I understand you’re not ready to accept us as mates publicly, yet.” He slides the lid off the box. “But I’d hoped you’d accept this, at least in the spaces when we’re alone.”

A beautiful green rolled leather collar with brass hardware sits in the box.

The corners of my mouth threaten to tip up into a smile seeing the tag attached. ‘Faolan’ is etched in delicate script and hangs around the D ring.

Finn brings his fingers to my chin and tips it up to look at him before giving me a soft command. “Put your clothes and shoes away. Return to me at a kneel.”

His words are so firm. The urge to brat back doesn’t hit as hard as the desire to be possessed. I’m sure to sway my hips, taunting as I walk to the closet.

Finn doesn’t hide the tent in his slacks when I walk back through the door. It’s powerful to see the effect I have on him. But even more so, that being myself gives us both what we want.

The way Finn watches me, you’d think I’d have earned an accolade of some nature. It’s proud, approving, and laced with desire.

I return to barely a step in front of him and sink to my knees. Tilting my head, I bow it to him and avert my eyes from his. Resting my hands in my lap, I feel calm before him. With other Dominants, this always felt awkward, but here, below Finn, it’s right.

“Knees open,” Finn instructs, “palms up.” As I move, adjusting my position to meet his command, he speaks again. “This will be how you always kneel for me.”

From the corner of my vision, I watch as he sets the box on the bed. He lifts the leather collar from its box and returns to me. I resist the urge to whisk my hair aside and make room for him to place it around my neck.

The way my heart beats in response to accepting ownership from him should scare me. *Should*. But Finn’s always come through on what he means. If this is intended for play, then this is only for play. He isn’t trying to give

me anything more than an anchor during sex.

Finn steps around behind me. The soft thud on the floor tells me he's come to kneel behind me.

His hand passes the collar in front of my neck. "I'm collaring you for play and only play. I respect your desire to remain with me but not as mine."

My wolf doesn't like those words. The warm fire feeling in my belly ignites.

"Know, at any time, we can make this permanent. But also know that I don't take this lightly." Finn pauses, letting that sink in.

The collar comes to rest on my collarbones, and he clasps it tight.

I want to squirm and free my hair from it. Suddenly uncomfortable, I can hardly stand it.

Finn slides his fingers along my jaw, pulling the hair out from under the collar.

He kisses the top of my head before his words come with a heavy suggestion. "I always take good care of my toys, faolan. And I'll expect you to be willing and accept my doing so."

Finn stands, his hand dusting my shoulder as he walks in front of me. I shiver.

That's from his touch and not the promise of being his sex toy. I lie to myself.

"You're going to eat well. I need you healthy if I'm going to use you like the good little fuck toy you are." Finn pulls my chin up to meet him.

I'm dripping wet, and I curl my toes.

"You're going to drink water." He smirks. "Because I know how wet you get." He slides his fingers along my neck to the collar where the tag has come to rest by my throat. "You'll also always let me know where you are. Because you never know when I'll want to play with you."

His logic is flawless, and for once, I don't hate the idea of him knowing where I am all the time. My heart beats a little harder.

He rumbles with a small growl. "And when I text, call, or ask you a question, I come before anyone else. I am your priority because you will always be mine."

We want to be his, my wolf reminds me. She pushes forward the way he fucks us.

Finn's hand leaves the collar and, without a word, points to the spot on the floor like one would a dog commanding them to stay. He steps away,

turning his back on me to walk to the end of the bed.

He sits down on the end of it before turning to look at me. “Come, faolan.”

I push myself back onto the pads of my feet to stand and walk to him.

He snaps his fingers. “I didn’t say stand, faolan.”

My lips part as my jaw goes slack, but I press them together, swallowing hard. I’ve never. Once upon a time, I said I would never. But here I am, on my knees, dropping to my hands to crawl across my room to a man.

Finn watches me with heavy eyes. His breaths don’t come at an even rate. The intensity is laced heavily with arousal. When I come to a stop at his side, I move back to the same kneeling position as before.

Leaning close, Finn slides his fingers into the collar, pulling and repositioning me to kneel before him.

The devilish smirk is back. “Good girl.”

If I wasn’t already, I’m absolutely positive I’m now wet. There’s something so special about this sort of dynamic. He can make me wet with two words, and I can make this stop with a single one. But I would never. *I would never.*

Finn leans back, sitting upright and pulling me up by the collar. I crawl up his body, following the pressure, navigating to his lap.

“Straddle my leg, faolan.”

His large muscular thigh makes it difficult to straddle, but I keep myself up off his leg with my knees barely on the bed, making balancing hard.

Finn nods in approval as his two fingers fall away from the collar and skate down my body, teasing against my nipple.

He looks down between us. “Comfortable that way, are you?”

I shrug. Finn grips my hips, guiding me down so my weight rests on his leg. He holds me there. The firm touch of his fingers is unyielding, and it’s becoming increasingly evident where this is going. The fabric of his slacks rubs against my inner thigh and now rests snugly against my apex.

“The look in your eyes when you realize I’m about to use you is so sweet.” Finn smiles at me, shaking his head. “The question is will you behave?”

My wolf pushes me to look down away from him. I do. Pulling my eyes from his face, I focus on his shirt collar.

“Good girl.”

Finn’s praise hits me hard, and my heart flutters.

My wolf revels in it, belly up, pushing me to do anything Finn asks as long as we can hear those words again.

“Are you wet, Kathleen?” He trails his left hand along the skin of my thigh and then down to where my weight rests on his leg.

He slides his finger underneath, brushing my clit. I fight the whimper and fail. I’m soaked. I’ve been uncomfortable, nearly dripping wet, since he secured the collar around my neck. This isn’t a new development. There’s no way he hasn’t smelled it already. But the way he plays coy like he’s amused, is humbling, and I’m embracing the feelings.

“Oh, so wet for me. I can’t wait to see the mess you make.” Finn slides his finger back out, purposefully pushing hard on my clit.

I clench every muscle I can to keep the noise locked inside.

He huffs a laugh before I get my next instruction. “Ride me, Kathleen. And I want to hear you. Remember, faolan, you’ll ask to come. Ask early because I might not let you right away. You might need to beg to convince me.”

When his hand returns to my hip, my face flushes when I do exactly as he asks. It’s awkward. I can’t stabilize myself very well. But I push myself down, grinding hard against his thick thigh. Finn’s hand hooks my wrist and guides me forward, pressing my chest against his, arm resting against his shoulder.

“That’s it, stabilize yourself against me,” he coaches. “Use me for your pleasure.”

I barely feel the woven texture of his pants. The awkward kneeling I’ve been doing isn’t effective. I let my hips fall farther.

“Good girl. How does it feel, faolan?” Finn coaches.

“Mm-hmm,” I confirm, drawing a slow breath, which escapes my lungs in a low moan.

Finn fists his hand into my hair and draws my head back. I look at him through the heaviness of my eyes. Tipping my head to the side, Finn pulls me forward. The adjustment intensifies the pressure and the growing feeling of my pleasure. Finn kisses my mating mark, and my eyes fall closed with the connection.

“Finn, please, can I come?” I slow my grinding, trying to pace myself as he warned.

“No, Kathleen.” He denies me.

My body riots as I stop trying to breathe through and ease out of the

encroaching orgasm.

“I didn’t say you could stop, Kathleen.” He kisses my neck. “Fuck my thigh, now.”

I’m so close, panting, grinding on him. I’m shaking from trying not to come.

It feels so degrading when the words come out of me. “Please, fuck, please let me come.”

“Come for me,” Finn whispers.

Toes curling, I lean hard against him. The world becomes a slow-motion movie as I take myself over the edge. I feel him pressed tight against me. And I hear the tone of Finn’s voice, but there aren’t actual words, only incoherent murmurs.

My legs are shaking. I’m trying to draw deep breaths, turning to jelly from the post-orgasm high. Time begins to move regularly as I pant, barely holding myself upright.

I try to move off his lap, but Finn’s fingers find the collar and hold me in place. “I didn’t say you could move, faolan.”

CHAPTER 44

FINN

LENA WHINES FROM WHERE SHE'S STRADDLING ME. I'M ROCK-HARD, throbbing. A devilish idea crosses my mind to make her work for one more this way. I want to see her become an overstimulated puddle, so well used that she lets her guard down and melts into that soft, mewling, trusting wolf. The wolf that gives me everything and tells me what she's thinking.

I shouldn't be this hard over wanting her to open up.

"Arms around my neck, faolan," I instruct Lena before shuffling her to straddle me wholly.

She squeaks, her legs squeezing my sides as I stand to drop my pants. But being disconnected from her touch isn't possible right now.

Stepping out of them, I wrap my hand under her ass to take some of the weight off her arms and bring her to the nightstand, where I pull out the two toys I have in mind for this.

Lena whines, feeling the cold of the stainless-steel plug against her skin. She tries to get away from it by climbing me a bit more.

"Is that an attempt to safeword already, or was it cold?" I pause.

"Cold," she murmurs.

The laugh slips out. "Well, I guess you'll have to warm it up then."

She grumbles as I bring her back to the base of the bed before bending down. Knowing what I want, Lena lets go and lies on her back, looking at me.

The tag on her collar glints in the light. My throbbing cock almost makes me drop right between her legs. I own her. She doesn't see it yet. But that's my woman. My submissive. My mate. The trust she's giving me is a damn near religious experience.

I lube the plug, watching her eyes. The torturous anal I put her through almost a week ago led to an intense drop. And yet, the hesitation is minimal. Arousal is still the predominant emotion in the space between us.

“You know how I want you, faolan.” I nod my head, and Lena doesn’t stall in her movements.

Her knees settle wide, and she lowers herself onto her elbows. The arch in her back, presenting her ass to me, gives me the perfect view of her swollen cunt. As I slide two fingers into her slick hole, Lena moans loudly. It comes deep from in her belly, and her body reacts, relaxing.

The plug slides in easily, but she clenches around it before curling against herself.

“Let that thought go, faolan. You’re already wetter with it in.” I fuck her cunt with my fingers, demonstrating, and her body uncurls.

Giving her a playful slap on the ass, I instruct, “Up.”

Lena raises up from her elbows to look at me over her shoulder.

When I sit next to her, Lena moves to a kneel and eyes my cock hungrily. But I watch as her brain does whatever little calculations of how she thinks we will or won’t fit together in this position, her legs shifting apart slightly. I pull her into my lap facing me. My cock runs up against her stomach.

“Faolan.” I draw her attention to my face. She looks into my eyes when I instruct, “Hands on my shoulders.”

Her slight weight in my hands becomes inconsequential when a heavy moan escapes her as my cock sinks deep inside her.

After steadying her on me, I drop my hands from her legs, and she settles in with a small wiggle.

Using her collar, I drag her face to mine and kiss her deeply, sliding my tongue into her mouth.

Breaking the kiss, I whisper, “Ride my cock.”

Lena rises and falls with purposeful movements. I claim her mouth again and again, taking deep kisses. When I pull on her collar, she nearly cries out. I feel her slick running down my balls.

She whimpers when I won’t break the kiss and let her ask to come.

Sharp nails dig into my shoulders, and she whines hard.

I give her a single breath of space, and she cries, “Please?”

Nodding, I move my nose against hers. “Come.”

Her scream is just short of ear-shattering as she drives herself up and down. The fluttering of her walls breaks my control.

Snarling, I pull her down hard, thrusting up to meet her hips, my fingers surely leaving bruises. I coat her walls. "Fuck!"

Panting, she rides until her orgasm subsides before coming to rest on my lap.

Lena lays her head on my shoulder as she draws deep, ragged breaths.

"Feeling better about us, faolan?" I whisper.

She nods.

A smile paints my lips. *She'll accept me soon.*

CHAPTER 45

LENA

FINN WRAPS ME UP IN A BLANKET BEFORE CURLING HIMSELF AROUND ME.

His voice is gravelly. “I don’t think I’ll ever get sick of you screaming my name.”

“Mmm.” I have no intelligent answer.

I lost track of the number of orgasms I’ve had, and I’m not sure I ever want to move from this spot.

The bed dips as Finn leaves it. I roll to face the door, watching his naked ass walk out of sight.

What am I doing? It’s a great fucking question, but I don’t really want to answer it. Monday will come soon.

Bonding with our mate. Obviously. My wolf stretches inside me.

It causes a massive shudder. I’m yawning as Finn strolls back through the door.

“Yours too, hmm?” Finn carries a glass of water and one of my emergency granola bars in his hand.

I grimace at the granola bar when he tries to hand it to me. “Those are for if I’m starving to death and there’s no way to order food.”

“Well, I’m not taking you to get food, so this is the best offering I have for you, and you should eat. You’ll be sore.” Finn pushes the granola bar toward me.

My wolf urges me as hard as she can to take it from him like it’s some sort of treat.

Begrudgingly I take and open it. Despite it being my desperate food, it’s one of the strawberry ones and they’re my favorite, so it’s not the end of the world to have to eat it. Taking a bite appeases Finn, and he sits down on the

bed. Wrapping one leg under himself, he looks at me and runs his hand back through my hair.

“Are you planning on being difficult all night?”

Despite the accusatory tone, Finn wears that soft smirk that reminds me he does find my lack of adherence to his rules a little charming.

I shrug, chewing and giving myself some time before I have to answer. *Better to get it over with.*

I swallow. “No, I’ve got to paint. Maybe it’s time you go back to your own place.”

He doesn’t miss a beat. “After you finish your water and granola bar, I’ll give you some space.”

The willingness to leave is unexpected.

My wolf is wary. She paces, head tossing back and forth. *No. No. No. He doesn’t leave.*

Squashing her down deep, I ignore the panic she wants me to feel. He’s a grown man. Finn’s respecting my boundaries, and there’s nothing wrong with that. There’s no reason to believe this is anything more than what it is.

I grab the water from him and wash down the granola bar. After taking the glass back from me and placing it on the nightstand, Finn starts getting dressed.

The silence between us is uncomfortable. I dress in my painting clothes and follow him to the living space while putting my hair in a ponytail.

Finn picks up his coat and bag and turns back to me. With a curl of his finger and then a point at the floor, he beckons me over to him.

“I know you didn’t just point to indicate where you want me to be,” I growl at him.

Finn chuckles. “I could command you to crawl.”

I run my tongue across my teeth. Half of me thinks there isn’t a single idea that comes out of his mouth that isn’t fun on some level. The other part of me is very much pissed off that he’s willing to express this control.

Lazily I close the space between us.

“Good girl,” he praises, and my heart flutters.

Stop. Just stop, I urge my body. But between his words and how his hand reaches to grab hold of the ponytail at the back of my head, I can’t help my body’s involuntary reactions to him.

With ease, he tips my head and places a chaste kiss on my lips before doing exactly what I asked.

He locks the door behind him on the way out, including locking my deadbolt. *Asshole made a copy of my key.*

I pull my phone out of my purse and start clearing notifications from all the social media apps. The people who actually know me text me. It's easier that way.

NIKKI:

I've a question if you've got a minute. No rush.

CADE:

Love you, Lena. Text me if you need anything. Even if it's to kick Finn's ass. Family first.

THALIA:

Aw man. You didn't tell me you were leaving. I wanted a hug. Rude. Love you anyways. See you when you get back this week.

ANSEL:

Call me tonight again? I've a question about this damn book you sent me.

HENRI (CADE'S PUBLICIST):

We should talk. There's some stuff going down, and since you're in the city more, there are things you need to know about how to handle questions from the media.

Only one of those text messages is important.

Tucking the paintings back into the storage crate and closing the lid, I sigh. They'll get hung up eventually.

I open my phone, and the only person I want to talk to is sitting right at the top of my contact list. I click his name, and the phone starts to ring.

"Hello?" Ansel picks up after the second ring.

"Hey, Ansel." I walk over to my bookshelf. "Which book are you looking at?"

"*Treasure Island*," he answers, and I can hear the frustration in the way he grumbles out the book's name.

I pull the identical copy I bought myself off the shelf and plop down on the couch. "Alright, what's up?"

"Are they actually looking for treasure?" Ansel sighs. "Or is this one of those metaphor things?"

"The plot is actual treasure," I confirm for him. "But the treasure is a metaphor."

“Okay, so this is like that ‘all that glistens’ stuff?” Ansel’s phone rustles, making it sound like he’s holding it to his ear with his shoulder.

“Exactly like that,” I answer.

I wait for more questions. Even though he sounds super frustrated, I know he’s not angry. Ansel asked me to help him get better at reading, and like the movies I send him, I preview everything. He’d be so proud of himself if he knew what level he was reading at. I’m saving a whole progress chart for when he celebrates his birthday though.

We spend ten minutes talking about *Treasure Island* before Ansel wraps it back around to polite conversation. “How’ve you been?”

“Good.” I stall talking about myself. “How have you been?”

“Doin’ alright.” Ansel’s slightly grumbly tone tells me he knows I just dodged him, but with his usual patience, he answers me. “It’s been touch and go since Cade left. Was sorry I had to miss the wedding, but there was no way. You know how things go with the guys. I hear wedding cake is an experience, and I wanna try some. So I’ll have to catch the next one.” Ansel laughs before circling back to me to try again. “What about you? You feelin’ better? Gave us quite a scare, Lena.”

“I’m feeling better. Everyone is so concerned about me and my wolf all of a sudden, but what’s new?” I let my brain focus on remembering how he looks when he talks.

“You’ve always been special. I suppose it’ll all work out in the end.” Ansel sighs and goes silent for a minute. “Do you wanna know? I know you never have.”

“No.” That answer is easy for me. I don’t want something affecting my choices. I swallow hard. “I do have a question for you. And . . . it’s not, I don’t know.”

Ansel blows a raspberry. “I’m not gonna like this question, am I?”

“Probably not,” I concede with a groan. “What’s it like? With Harry being not right?”

“Oh, Lena.” Ansel’s voice holds sorrow and sadness as he says my name. “I don’t know any other way than to have him this way. I don’t think other people would tolerate it all that well, but he and I make it work.”

My body shivers, and I try to brush off my emotions, pulling the blanket off the back of the sofa.

“I’m sorry.” I sigh and close my eyes. *So insensitive. Why did I ask?*

“Don’t be sorry, Lena. It is what it is, and if somethin’ happens, you

know I'll do everything I can to keep you together." Ansel somehow makes it all better with sage wisdom delivered with a slight twang. The one man who probably could use the most therapy somehow knows what to say. "Give yourself some time to heal."

"You sure?" I ask softly. "What if I can't do it?"

Ansel laughs. "I'm sure. Quit being so hard on your damn self."

"Everything good out there? Need anything?" Ideas run through my head of things to send him with his next care package: jeans, flannels, T-shirts, more movies, a do-it-yourself science kit, baking supplies.

"You know me, makin' do." Ansel laughs. "But it's gettin' late. I'll let you go. Text me some pictures from the lab. I wanna see more of those microscope things." Ansel makes a request for entertainment, and it breaks me out of my funk, even if it's only a little bit.

Smiling despite the heartache, I answer him, "Yeah. I'll see if I can't get some cool samples for you. We're coming into winter. Lots of fun cultures to look at."

"Love you, Lena. Don't kill that new mate of yours." Ansel seems to remember out of nowhere the last thing he wanted to talk about.

The thought of Finn makes me roll my eyes. "No promises. If I kill him, I get to come live with you, so that might be tempting."

"You're always welcome here," Ansel reminds me. "No murder necessary."

"Love you too, Annie. I'll catch you later." I pull the phone away from my ear and hang up.

Hanging up with Ansel is hard. Talking to him is easy. His whole deal is that if someone wants to talk about their troubles, he's available but never pushes. It's pure and wholesome in his own dorky way. Once we disconnect, I make a note in my phone to send him a better mix of reading levels next month. He's stressed, and some light reads will be better.

But after I don't have anything to distract myself with, I get that hollow, lonely feeling. Up off the couch, I head toward the canvas and turn on my lighting setup. I sit and stare at my blank canvas, hoping for something, anything, to jump out at me as a place to start working. But no inspiration hits. I don't know what to put on this canvas. Why did I let Thalia sign me up for this? *Because it's an impressive accolade to add to your collection of accomplishments*, the greedy little gremlin part of me reminds me.

It's not worth sitting here and staring at it. Turning the light off, I feel

even more alone with every passing minute. Better to turn the television on and fall asleep.

Or go and get our mate. We literally don't have to be alone. You're isolating yourself because you're stubborn and won't let us be loved, my wolf snaps.

This attachment I've let her form isn't healthy.

He will reject us. You know that, right? One more heat and we don't get knocked up . . . he'll know something's wrong, that it's true we're sterile.

She goes silent. Clearly no witty comeback for that. Further proof I'm right. But she has a point. There's no reason we couldn't snuggle for one more night. I'll adjust when I go back to school Monday. Once I've seen more people and am overwhelmed with school, work, and people-ing, it'll be nice to have the quiet again.

I pull my keys out of my purse, slip on my clogs, and walk out of my apartment. *I can't believe I'm doing this.* He's probably not awake. And if he's not, then I'll go back to my place. Problem solved. My feet make it down the hall to his location but only that far.

Standing there, I raise my fist, but I don't know what to say. I didn't have a plan beyond knocking. My fist lands on the door. Once. When the door to Finn's apartment opens, he's standing there shirtless. There's no game plan. No words come out.

"What's wrong, faolan? Miss me?" Finn taunts me.

It hurts that he's not surprised. He knows me better than I know me.

When I don't say anything, Finn reaches over alongside the door. I hear him pull his keys from his coat pocket.

As he steps toward me, his voice loses the mocking tone and goes to that simple, reassuring one. "It's okay, Kathleen."

He cares, my wolf chimes in. I push her back again.

Finn wraps his arm around my shoulder and leads me back to my apartment, where he opens the door and leads me inside.

"You can always text me, faolan. I know we're the only two people on this floor, for now, but I'd appreciate it if you'd be safe and not leave at night alone."

Finn doesn't scold, but shame drapes over me. I slouch under its weight.

"You always get softer after night falls," Finn observes when I slip off my shoes.

"Listen, I don't want to be a bother. You can go. I shouldn't have

asked —”

Finn walks deeper into my apartment toward my bedroom, ending our conversation.

I double-check the lock before following him. When I get to my room, Finn is straightening the sheets and fluffing the pillows.

He steps back and tilts his head at the bed, and I struggle with myself. *Did I make a mistake?*

Crossing the room, Finn wraps his arms around me. “You get soft when you get tired. It’s isolating being in the city without a pack. You didn’t have someone here for you, but now you do. It’s okay to know now that you’re not alone and crave that connection.”

He’s so fucking warm, and he’s not wrong. *I’m so fucked. Please don’t break my heart.*

He won’t, my wolf growls.

CHAPTER 46

LENA

“I UNDERSTAND THE CIRCUMSTANCES WERE BEYOND YOUR CONTROL; however, at the high level of your classes, your professors believe that it’s in your best interest to take the rest of the semester off and carry on in the spring. I’m sorry, Ms. Alden.” My advisor apologizes for the fifteenth time during this meeting.

I’m struck speechless. I don’t have words.

“I can say that the school has agreed that this is not an instance where academic probation would be appropriate, so your status as a student is still very much intact. Your supervisor was able to file the paperwork, and the university is maintaining your employed status,” he tries to offer in an attempt to lessen the blow.

He seems to be waiting on me to say something, anything.

I go with the polite answer. “Thank you.”

Leaving his office, I walk down the stairs to the main lobby of the building and head out to the courtyard of the main campus. What do I do? Go back to the lab, I guess. Can you go into shock from an emotionally traumatic event? Does this qualify as an emotionally traumatic event?

The four-mile drive, despite midday traffic, is over in an instant. I’m parked in our lab lot and sit there, staring at the building. *How am I supposed to go back in there?*

Hot angry tears well in my eyes, and I push them away with the sleeve of my sweater. I shake my head.

Do I go home? Text Dr. Thorpe and tell him I’m sick? It’s not false. My stomach is a mess of jumbled nerves.

My wolf whines but offers no guidance.

I open the door to my SUV and grab my purse off the seat next to me. When I turn around, I come face-to-face with someone I didn't anticipate seeing.

"Lena!" Brayden says excitedly, trapping me in the door well of my SUV.

"Brayden, I'm on my way to the lab," I answer him sharply.

I don't intend for it to have a bite, but it does.

"Yeah? Don't you have class? You're normally in your Immunology class right now." He braces himself against the door of my SUV.

It's creepy that he would know my schedule. But I don't have the energy to deal with this. *How do I answer that?*

"Yeah, I'm not participating in classes this semester." I give him a nod and swallow hard. "There's been an issue with my schedule. I'll pick it up next semester."

"What?" Brayden gets defensive and pulls his phone from his pocket. The silver spoon he keeps in his mouth comes out, and he waves it around. "I'll have my parents fix it. You were in the hospital; they'll make an exception."

"Brayden, stop," I tell him. My voice breaks. I shake my head and push on his hand, trying to remove it from my SUV's door. "It's fine. I just want to go inside and do something I'm good at for a little while."

For whatever reason, for the first time in the history of knowing him, Brayden does what I ask. He steps back and gives me room to close my door. It's so uncharacteristically like him that when I turn, I'm surprised Finn isn't standing on the other side of us.

When I walk into the lab, it's full of its usual activity, and no one seems to notice me. It's refreshing to belong so intensely that my presence isn't acknowledged. I pull out my key ring to open my office door but find it slightly ajar. I draw a deep breath. *Finn was here.*

Opening the door to my office, I flick on the light, and there are objects that most certainly weren't here the last time I was. A small stained glass Celtic cross in leafy green and cerulean blue hangs from a little suction cup on my window, and next to it sits an air plant, in desperate need of water, in a little glass capsule with decorative gravel.

I pick up the card on the counter next to them.

Kathleen,

Your office didn't look enough like someplace you'd want to be. I know you like to work, but you need something bright here. And maybe something a little Irish too. I'll see you for lunch TODAY. I'm down in the pathology lab if you want to come and save me from their chaos. I can't wait to see you.

Finn

I lose it. Slumping down in my chair, I toss the card aside. I rest my head in my hands. Suppressing silent sobs, I let the breakdown happen.

"Knock knock." Nikki's voice and her fingernails clicking on the laminate wood door interrupt my moment.

I pull it together. "Hey, Nikki, what's up?"

"Oh no. Lena. What's wrong?" Nikki walks into my office and moves the door to mostly closed but doesn't let it latch.

Shaking my head, I wipe a tear and grab a tissue for my nose. "Rough day. It'll be fine."

When I look at her, I realize there's one thing, one someone, I didn't put back together. *Shit.*

The expression on Nikki's face says it all.

Nikki caught a glimpse of the submissive wolf locked inside me.

Somehow she comes up with words anyway. She whispers quickly, "Okay, before you freak out. You're my friend. I don't care if you're an Alpha or a submissive. It's like I'm pack, and I'm pretty sure it doesn't bother you that my bloodline is severely underwhelming. Does it? Second, it's no one's fucking business, and I won't say a word. You're safe. Third, I kinda already knew from your lab work."

I'm still reeling, but I nod my head because I should do something, probably.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Nikki sits in the other chair in my office.

I've considered putting her name on it because of how many hours she's

spent sitting in it.

Drawing a breath, I blow a raspberry. What's happened is real regardless if I say it out loud or not. Brayden will tell the entire lab by noon. Rolling my head to look at her, I try to force my wolf under. She slinks back.

"I've been dropped from my programs for missing too many classes."

The words aren't any more real this time when I say them. This can't be happening.

Nikki doesn't say anything. She waits for me to keep speaking.

"Brayden knows about me not being enrolled. He found me in the parking lot on my way back here from campus." I pull my hair out of its ponytail and let it down to breathe for a little bit. Drawing a deep breath, I continue. "I'm sorry. You've done so much for me already, and now I'm dumping this on you."

"You needed to get it all out and vent. You would . . . maybe . . . do the same for me." Nikki shrugs with a smile.

"Yeah. I'm a shit friend. I'm sorry. You're a lot better at this than I am." I shake my head and sigh. "In my defense, it's not like I've had a lot of practice."

Nikki laughs. "Well, I was coming to see if you wanted to do something friend related, but I don't know if this is the right time to ask."

My door slowly swings open, revealing Finn, who leans against the doorframe. His arms are crossed in front of his chest. He can't figure out what's happening between us, as made evident by the way he's furrowed his brows and pressed his lips into a firm, thin line.

Turning to Nikki, I give her a soft smile, and she understands. Dismissing herself, she stands, and Finn steps aside to let her out of my small office. She walks past Finn with a friendly pat on his shoulder.

Finn remains on high alert, observing me. I've gotten myself calm and have everything under control with Nikki.

But it doesn't stop him from asking, "What's wrong?"

"I don't want to talk about it here." I shake my head at him.

Even thinking about saying the words out loud again brings me back on the verge of tears. *How did it get to be this fucked up?*

"Okay, let's go." Finn shuffles, pushing the door open.

"Go where?" I question. I defend my need to be here. "I just got in. I need to start looking at lab results."

"I saw you with Brayden. Now you've been in here with Nikki. I know

something's wrong, Lena. We're on our way to lunch. Let's go early, talk about it. You can come back without another break in your work," Finn offers with impeccable logic that I can't argue with.

With a sigh, I pick up my purse and follow him out of my office.

Of course, we couldn't simply sneak out to lunch because my life apparently isn't sunshine and rainbows this week. In the hall outside the lab are Doctor Thorpe and Brayden. They're talking loudly, and despite the door separating us, I have no problem hearing what they're saying, and neither does Finn.

"We can't let them do that to her." Brayden gestures toward me, well, more intentionally, my office.

"There's nothing I can do. The university has made up its mind. Her research can continue. She is simply delaying classes. If anything, it gives her more time to work in the lab. I'm not about to write a letter or attempt to do anything behind Ms. Alden's back. If she wishes to speak with me regarding her recent suspension from the academic program, that's between her and me," Doctor Thorpe says, gesturing between himself and my office.

Finn's hand finds its way to my shoulder. The weight of it doesn't help as I'm already falling apart.

My wolf whines.

Shame feels like a thousand pounds crushing me. I've never failed. I've never been suspended. I've never, not once, ever been in a position to do anything less than perfect. And now I'm failing left, right, and center.

"There's not a back way out of the lab, or I would take you out that way." Finn acknowledges the obvious. "If you want to go back to your office, I'll clear everyone out and come back for you."

Glancing over my shoulder at him, much like with Nikki, I know my wolf is right there, resting behind my eyes for the world to see. I close them and try to push her down. Try to make my wolf small and disappear so I can hold on to some semblance of dignity left for today. But I know she's there, waiting and watching.

Fishing my sunglasses out of my purse, I put them over my eyes. I don't want to be here any longer.

Finn moves his hand from my shoulder to my low back. He steps closer, and our physical connection increases.

I can feel him bow his head over the top of me, and he whispers, "I'm here. I'll do all the talking. You're okay."

When we open the door, Doctor Thorpe and Brayden look at us wide-eyed. They're ironically shocked that in a laboratory full of wolves, somehow, I've overheard them talking about me. I shake my head, angry with them.

"I'll be taking Lena home this afternoon."

Finn doesn't bother asking. He doesn't have to. In pack hierarchy, I outrank Doctor Thorpe, and being mated to me, so does Finn. It's Doctor Thorpe's lab, but this isn't a lab matter.

As I follow Finn out to the car, my whole body feels like it might fracture apart. My skin itches, and I'm on edge with the need to shift. I don't like to shift in the city, but a run tonight might be in order. I guess we'll have to see after lunch.

"I'm so sorry, faolan," Finn offers the moment he's closed us into the car.

"It's not your fault. This is self-inflicted," I answer him.

Finn doesn't dispute that, but he does give me a sigh and starts the engine.

"Where do you want to eat?" Finn shifts the car into gear.

"I know a place. Can you head to St. Paul?" I lean my head back against the headrest, looking up and hoping it keeps more tears from spilling down my face.

"Do you want to tell me what's happening?" Finn's words come slowly as he navigates toward St. Paul.

"I'm pretty sure you got the gist of it?" I question.

He nods. "Okay, well, where are we going?"

"There's a microbrewery over there that has great pizza and wings. I want to get day drunk and make some bad decisions today," I tell him earnestly, waiting for all sorts of objections.

Finn, if he's judging me, chooses to do so silently. He doesn't vocalize any dismay as he drives. Following my directions, he parks and takes me into the building. Per usual, on a Monday afternoon, there's not a large crowd. Despite it being the end of October, it's warm enough today to sit outside without raising too much suspicion about us being different. Not that we'd need to worry. Wolves are out to the public anyway. Life is strange that way, I guess.

"Nice place." Finn looks around, making small talk.

We need our mate, my wolf reminds me. She pushes forward again.

"Kathleen," Finn coos. "You're not holding it together very well, faolan."

I shake my head. “I don’t think I’m required to. I think today I get to feel all the things that I locked away.”

Our server comes to take our order, then leaves, and Finn doesn’t fight me on ordering a beer.

After a few more minutes of silence, he asks a single question. “What do you want to do?”

“I’ll brush the dirt off my butt and go back to the lab tomorrow and start analyzing the data I have. Then, I’ll take the findings of my incredibly flawed trial run to the board and see if they can provide any guidance. I’ll spend the next six months to a year reformulating, and maybe we’ll find a better option or better answer. We’ll have to run —”

“Kathleen. I don’t mean with your research.” Finn stops me from talking about the one thing keeping me sane in all this.

I’m starting to feel like a table tennis game with how much I’m shaking my head. “I don’t know, Finn. I’ve never failed before. It feels like some sort of sick punishment for lying to Thalia on Cade’s behalf. I told her it would be better for her if she took the year off. And now, here I am in the same boat, not even six months later.”

“God is not punishing you, Kathleen,” Finn tells me.

He reaches across the table to pick up my hand and holds it in his own.

“I don’t understand your belief, but I appreciate you saying that. I sure feel like somehow the universe or God or karma has my number and is calling in for the shitty things I’ve done.” I pause.

The waitress sets our beers on the table and asks if there’s anything more we need. After reminding us that our food will be out soon, she walks back to wherever she’s been working in the meantime.

When she’s gone, I continue. “I’ve never failed, Finn. I’ve never, not once in my entire life, done anything less than perfect, with the exception of having a wolf who doesn’t fit her role in the pack. I’ve hit every single goal. I’ve aced every test. There was a question when I got hired for the lab team if it was my last name that got me in the door, and while yes, being a shifter was a nepotistic part of the hiring process requirement . . . it wasn’t my last name that got me in the door. It was that I worked my fucking ass off. To what end?” I’m laughing. I don’t know why, but I’m laughing. “It’s some sick karmic joke.”

I pick up my beer and take two large swallows. *I think today calls for wasted before dinner.*

“Slow down. That’s the only one you’re getting,” Finn cautions.

Shaking my head, I look him up and down in a quick bitch move. “I didn’t know you were in charge of me.”

I’ve let Finn run my life since my heat. It was easier. He was practically glued to my side. Sure, it felt good, but there’s no way I’ll live that way full-time.

“I thought you and I had come to an understanding that I am.” Finn tilts his chin down, looking at me with a firm, glaring scold.

Shaking my head, I put the beer glass down for a moment. I tilt my head, further expanding the look of my confusion. “You can’t be serious. Things said in heat can’t be taken seriously. You marked me. That doesn’t give you permission to micromanage my life. The last week was fun, but it’s not sustainable.”

“I’m as serious as a heart attack, Kathleen.” His voice is stern.

His words make my wolf prickle against my skin, looking to appease the angry and grumpy noise he made.

I shake my head. *What is this day coming to? First school and now this?* “I’ve evidently let you get away with this idea of grandeur so long that you actually think I’ll be perfect and submissive all the time. It’s bad enough that I have to live with her. You can’t expect me to just . . .”

Our waitress comes back with our food. I hope the pizza is a big enough distraction to turn the conversation away from me.

“Before you keep ranting about what you can and can’t do. Perhaps, if you’d listen for a moment.” Finn pauses, catching my eyes. “I don’t have sex when drunk, and I would much rather blow off steam that way with you than call for a cab to get us home.”

I bite my lips together.

After a moment, I come up with a witty answer. “In my defense, I’ve never had that as an option to blow off steam before.”

When I shiver, Finn moves from his chair around the table and sits next to me on the bench.

He wraps an arm around me and whispers in my ear, “Getting drunk is an option for forgetting your problems, and if you’re dead set on getting drunk, I’ll be your sober cab. But it also means I’ll forgo all my ideas to help you relax.”

The beer glass on the table is alluring, but I’m flooding my panties, and Finn knows it.

I look at him. “I can still finish this one? Because you haven’t had the pizza, and with the beer, it’s really an experience together.”

He nuzzles in and, with a gruff growl, further ignites my body. “Yes, faolan. You can finish this one.”

Cutting my pizza into bite-sized pieces only gets a single raised eyebrow from Finn, but it allows me to eat it with a fork while I lean against him, looking at the river. He eats his slice like, I suppose, a normal person.

Halfway through my second piece, I whisper, “I got kicked out of school.”

“I know, faolan. You’ll be okay,” Finn assures me.

CHAPTER 47

FINN

THE NEXT DAY, THE LAB IS IN CHAOS. DESPITE BEING NONE OF THEIR business, Lena's suspension from the university and subsequent absence has seemingly split the lab into two distinct factions. There are the Lena supporters, who want her to be reinstated because they're positive she can catch up and make the grades. And there are those who are critical of her. On more than one occasion, I've caught different groups gossiping exactly what Lena said they would say: nepotism and that she'd bought, fucked, or used her last name to make her way into her position. My heart aches, knowing that she's likely heard many of these conversations herself.

Doctor Thorpe strolls into my office and begins speaking. "Where are you at with the reports for the pathology department?"

"I'm printing them for you now. I emailed them to you ten minutes ago," I answer him, and the growl I'd been suppressing comes out with it.

Extremely unaware, or lacking any and all care, that the growl was meant for him, Doctor Thorpe carries on the conversation. "Excellent. Could you please begin on large animal next?"

I nod. *Can he really be that dense not to know?*

Doctor Thorpe bobbles his head for a moment and changes his mind. "Though, it would be nice if we could get the veterinary services out of the way."

"Whichever," I answer him, trying to get him to leave. "I have a system in place, and I'll be able to get them done before the holiday break in November without issue."

Doctor Thorpe raises an eyebrow in suspicion but leaves my office.

He touched our mate, and we need to kill him. My wolf is bloodthirsty.

Predator. She was too young. Is too young for him now even. He's twenty years older than she is.

My wolf's idea is alluring. Especially paired with the memory of what blood tastes like, the metallic sweetness in my mouth drives that thought further, but that's all it can be: a memory. I can't do this to Lena.

For Lena, my wolf snarls.

The truth is, I do have a system. After talking to lab technicians, pathologists, veterinarians and their technicians, doctors and nurses that I wasn't aware were here . . . I've come up with an effective way to get the data Doctor Thorpe hired me to process in a year down to a few weeks. It came down to managing people, not supplies. I'll finish my contract as quickly as I can if it means not having to be his inferior.

I'll have to talk to Cade about other options for me. Being here, with Lena, is preferable, but I refuse to continue to behave and pretend to be nice to this asshole.



I HAVE A SOFT SPOT FOR EQUINE. SO, WHEN DOCTOR THORPE SENT ME TO large animal for the day, well, it wasn't a hardship. As I open the steel door to the barn section, my phone beeps in my pocket. Stepping to the side of the door, I pull it out and take a look.

UNKNOWN:

Hello Finn and Lena! I've attached a screen grab of the latest news headline. It appears that the media is starting to circle in on Lena being Cade's sister. It looks like the intent is to treat the Aldens as royalty. I would like to have a meeting to discuss what the expectation will be. Please let me know what time works for you both. Together or separate is fine.

I click on the photo. It's from yesterday. Lena and I are sitting on the patio of the brewery. My arm is wrapped around her, and she's smiling at something. Closing my eyes, I think back to the view. Where must they have been to get the shot? The angle would be the building next door.

At least when someone is shooting at us now, it's photographs and not bullets? my wolf snarks, trying to find the good in this.

We've been too at ease here. This could have easily been a bullet. Just because there haven't been any threats doesn't mean that people from the

past aren't looking for us. I shake my head. I've been lazy.

The headline is perhaps the most telling of the situation. WHO IS LENA'S NEW MYSTERY MAN?

At least they haven't dug up my mugshot, yet.

Updating her number in my phone, I text Henri back that we absolutely need to meet and ask if Friday is soon enough. I notice Lena viewing the messages. Bubbles along the bottom pop up, indicating she's typing before stopping. A message does come through.

HENRI GREENE:

That should work as long as there are no new updates. I'll keep you posted. If you start seeing people taking photographs or any sort of media, please let me or Cade know immediately.

Lena doesn't say anything. Her text bubbles stop. No messages come through. I turn around and head back toward Lena's lab. I have a pit in my stomach and feel her tense through our bond.

When I get to Lena's lab, her purse is in her office but she's not. I look at Nikki when I come out of Lena's office. She shrugs her shoulders in an indication that she doesn't know.

Lena knows the issue with the photographs. I'll get more work done for Doctor Thorpe and hopefully get a way out of this nightmare.

Back into large animal, I start by taking a detour through the stalls. There are a few sheep and goats, but then I come to two stalls. The first has a mare and foal. She rushes the stall door, ears pinned, and I step wide to give her room. I don't blame her. Predator comes walking, and even if I look human, her foal would be a quick snack for my wolf.

The next stall, though, has a familiar kind of horse. A chestnut-brown scruffy-looking Irish Draught stands in the stall, but what catches me is a pair of sneakers and dark blue jeans peeking out from underneath.

"I don't know what I'll do." Lena's voice is soft, talking to the Irish Draught.

I hear the telltale sounds of a brush running through the start of a thick winter coat.

"He doesn't listen to me." Lena sighs.

The horse turns its head, and I catch a glimpse of Lena's hand. Then I watch as the horse gets its treat and goes back to watching and chewing.

Lena continues. "It would be easier for both of us if he stopped

pretending that in a year, we'll still be together. I've what, two cycles before he realizes I'm serious about being sterile and he bolts?"

I draw a deep breath. I should announce my presence, but I need to hear more. The horse gives a big shake as Lena works her way toward the back of the horse.

"What's worse? If I do, by some miracle, end up pregnant, what happens if he realizes in a few years the burden it is to have a submissive mate and takes our pup?" Lena pauses, and the brushing stops. "No, that would probably be better. I'm not sure how good of a mom I'd be. He should . . . well, see, he's ex-Mafia, so maybe not. Ugh. I'm worried about hypothetical pups."

She pulls the horse's tail to the side, and I know before long, she'll come back around, to either exit the stall or keep brushing, and see me. But I wait a little bit longer.

"I don't know what to think, Cricket," Lena murmurs before sniffing. "I don't suppose you have any sage advice or anything."

Cricket flicks their tail and almost rats me out.

"Kathleen?" I beckon softly.

"Fuck," Lena mutters.

A moment passes before Lena walks over to Cricket's head and looks at me. Her face is a mix of emotions, from upset to slightly happy to see me. Lena runs her hand up and down Cricket's forehead.

"Who is this?" I lean against the stall door, folding my arms over the top of it.

Lena steps around the horse and goes to work, brushing the side facing me. "This is Cricket. She's a frequent flier."

"Poor lass. What's it this time?" I cock my head, looking at the horse.

Standing still anyway, she seems to be looking okay.

"She keeps biting the studs they want to breed her with." Lena states the fact of the case. "They wanted to make sure it wasn't a medical issue before they tried again. Apparently, she took a pretty good chunk out of the last stud."

I bite my top lip, and God, I try so hard not to laugh at the irony of our situation. I bow my head and look away from the two of them.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Lena hisses. "Cricket, bite this asshole."

I lift my head slightly to see if Cricket listens to Lena. While a frequent flier, it seems that Cricket is no more inclined than any other horse to listen.

“Females, biters, every last one of ya.” I smile at Lena and try to keep it light. “Do you suppose I could get the media to call me something less ridiculous than Mystery Man if I asked nicely?”

Lena laughs and turns to look at me. Shaking her head, she averts her eyes up to the ceiling. “Finn, it’s only a matter of time before they figure out who you are. It’ll turn into some sort of princess-and-the-mobster type nonsense. I wouldn’t be surprised if Henri’s advice for us is to not be seen in public together anymore.”

My little mate goes back to brushing the horse.

“That would suck. You’re probably my favorite person I’ve met stateside.”

Lena bristles at my words. “Probably?”

“Easy, faolan.” I smile and raise my hand to get her attention.

Lena turns to look at me.

The smile on my face disarms her.

“Alright.” I tap on the stall wall. “Dinner tonight? I’ll cook?”

“Maybe?” Lena goes back to brushing. “I’ve got to get some painting done.”

“I’ll find you at the end of the day.”

She seems content in her space, and I still have work to do. I don’t want to leave her, but the sooner I get this done, the sooner I can do something better suited for me.



I STOPPED BY AND VISITED CRICKET A FEW TIMES WHILE WORKING IN LARGE animal today. But Lena hadn’t been back. This department will take me a long time to finish. They have more moving pieces than the other departments I’ve worked on. The level of work is a problem for later. Now there’s an obstacle in the hallway, of the skinny little human variety.

“I don’t think you understand, Finn.” Brayden crosses his arms in front of his chest when I push past him into my office.

“For fuck’s sake, would you be well?” I walk around my desk and sit in my chair, giving me the best position to keep a piece of furniture between us in the event killing him becomes more than a fantasy.

“I want you to stay away from Lena,” Brayden answers with the dumbest

request I can think of.

I shake my head. "I will, yeah?"

Does this eejit ever shut up? He's so frail. We could snap every bone in his body before he even knew we were attacking him. My wolf creates a compelling hyperbole.

"Let me spell it out for you." He huffs and clenches his fists, pulling his lip up in a ridiculous humanoid snarl. "I thought you knew that Lena and I were starting to become a thing. She and I have been friends for a long time. We're working toward a real relationship."

He's as thick as manure and only half as useful. I tilt my head to examine him further. I draw a deep breath. He doesn't smell diseased.

Brayden goes to lean against the door, but it's open too far and doesn't rest against the wall. When it moves from his weight, Brayden stumbles, nearly falling over.

I do everything in my power not to laugh, but I know the corner of my lip twitched.

His attempt to convince me that he's more important than he is isn't working, but I humor him. At the very least, listening to a madman's ranting is interesting.

"Lena and I will be together, and I thought I made it clear you needed to walk away or I would make you walk away." Brayden seems to be stuck on this idea. "I saw the photo of the two of you together. You had your arm around her. That is not stepping away." Brayden's voice goes up in anger.

"Let's keep it down, there's no reason the whole lab needs to hear this. You wouldn't want to upset Lena any further. She's had a rough week." I keep my voice low.

If he cares at all about Lena like he claims, he will. Let's see how deep the delusion goes.

Brayden draws a breath, and his shoulders rise and fall with it. His tone does come down. "You may not care if I report you."

No. I shake my head. *He wouldn't. There's no way this boy is that stupid.*

"But from my understanding, the law is pretty clear. If a shifter is reported as being dangerous to humans, they only have a few days to be bailed out and prove they're not dangerous to the people the report is against." Brayden smiles like he knows something I don't. He keeps talking. "If Lena were to get reported as being dangerous. Well, that would be really bad. Say someone said that she's a danger to the university students. What

are the laws? If Cade can't prove she's not dangerous . . . Is there enough money for that?" Brayden pauses.

I'm starting to see red.

I'll show this fucker dangerous, my wolf offers, jaws snapping and snarling.

But this isn't the time to embrace violence. It's time to put on the coldhearted killer. It's time to be the calculated Enforcer I was back home. My jaw is locked tight, and my wolf is pressed so hard against my skin that I could shift in an instant. I'm positive I look half-feral.

Yet, Brayden shrugs, then lays out the full extent of the threat. "If I can't have Lena. No one can. Including you."

His lips curl up into a smile. He cocks his head and stuffs his hands in his pockets before turning to stroll out the door.

He looks over his shoulder. "I think we've come to an understanding then, Finn?"

I don't answer. The grinning fuck walks out my door, turns to walk down the hallway, and is out of sight.

The arrogance in thinking he's won is evident, but what Brayden doesn't know is that he signed his death sentence.

We will rip him limb from limb for even implying hurting our mate like this. I'll piss on his corpse and make sure not even the vultures will eat him. My wolf starts coming up with the most disturbing ways to mutilate Brayden's corpse.

With a new focus, my wolf offers other options. They're less incriminating options, but each is more bloody than the last.

Issue with the toaster in the bathtub? Or maybe an accidental drowning? Random mugging? Skip it all and send him out with a bang? My wolf offers slightly less bloody options first.

I grab the burner phone out of the bottom desk drawer. *Even better*, I assure him.

The mighty must fall. If I'm breaking the rules, it'll be glorious. Brayden threatened to kill my mate.

Pocketing the burner phone, I pull out my regular cell phone.

ME:

Hey, faolan, I would love to watch you paint tonight. I'll order food, pick it up, and meet you at your place? Maybe I could hang those paintings for you?

KATHLEEN ALDEN:

You can watch, but this isn't 'painting' which leads to fucking. I need to get at least something done for the exhibition.

I promise no funny business. Food and silent observation.

No hammering?

Only a few nails into the walls.

I want Chinese. I'll send you the website and my order. If you give them my phone number, they get it right every time.

CHAPTER 48

FINN

EVERY TIME I'VE SEEN BRAYDEN TODAY, THE ONLY THING STOPPING ME FROM shifting and ripping his head off is the reminder that I wouldn't be able to sit and watch Lena paint again. The way her ponytail flicked back and forth with the sharp adjustments of her head as she looked at the small details mesmerized me. How she held the brush in her mouth, tongue darting out along its shaft, well . . . that was a different vision altogether. But those moments are the only reason Brayden's more than a puddle of blood today.

With two hours left, I leave the large-animal wing to head back to my desk. I stop by Lena's lab with the intention of talking to Nikki loud enough for Lena to hear me when I hear Brayden's voice. Drawing a deep breath, I scent who is there. It's a mix of the humans and wolves of this floor.

"Brayden. That's too funny." One of the gals from across the hall laughs, and it doesn't sound forced.

"What can I say? I just walked into the bar." Brayden hams up whatever story he's telling.

"What are you doing for Halloween?" one of the voices I recognize as one of the women from Lena's lab asks.

"Well, I was hoping to get invited out with a lovely group of ladies," Brayden hints. "Maybe Lena would want to come? It's been a long time since she's been out with everyone."

"Uh. I'm not sure what's up with Halloween yet. Joys of being Alpha Female." Lena's voice is hesitant, the words picked carefully.

"It would be so much fun. You both should come!" the human answers.

"Well, Lena, we do need another for our costume. I'll have Nikki show you the details. It could be a good time," the wolf prods as well.

I step forward and see a glimpse of Lena's grimace.

She answers, "I'll see. It sounds like a good time, but things are complicated."

Nikki walks up behind me. "Oh God, are they cornering Lena about Halloween?"

"You knew?" I ask, looking at her.

"I was supposed to ask Lena last week if she wanted to be part of our costume." Nikki winces when she looks at me. "I'm guessing you'll say she can't go."

"Is that how she paints me? That I won't let her have any fun?" I ask earnestly.

"Uhhhh." Nikki's eyes widen. "Lena doesn't say jack shit about you. But you're kinda uptight for ex-Mafia."

I turn away from the door. "I'm headed back to my office. If Lena wants to go to Halloween, and I can find a way to make it safe for her to go, then she can go out. But you absolutely have to be there."

"I will." Nikki nods.

An hour later, I've done everything I can with the data I collected on usages and head back out toward Lena's lab to see if I can't catch Lena alone. Passing by one of the windows, I see Brayden getting into his ridiculous little sedan and driving off.

Nikki and Lena are where I left them, and Lena looks over at me with a heavy eye roll upon my approach in her doorway. "It isn't even five o'clock. We're not done yet. Come back later."

Looking between the two of us, Nikki closes her mouth and bites her lips together.

"Faolan, you best mind your tone when talking to me like that." I encourage her to behave.

Lena scoffs and rolls her eyes. "I'm not ready to leave yet. We drove separately anyway. If you're in a hurry, go. I'm fine to figure out how to get home without you. I've done it plenty of times before."

Nikki audibly gasps. She slides her chair out to escape the tension growing in the room.

"No, Nikki, you can stay." I stop her.

"He's not the boss of you, Nikki. You don't have to stay if you don't want to," Lena says flatly.

"I'm more dominant than she is, and I'd be willing to bet that Cade will

take my side on this.” I logic away the objection.

Nikki stays frozen in the chair.

Lena turns her eyes from Nikki to me. She holds my eyes with a glare. But even when I push my wolf forward, Lena keeps hers under control. She’s feeling well today.

“You’re headed to the pack property tonight, correct?” I ask, not delving further into her attitude.

She nods. “Yeah. Why?”

It kills me not to put her in her place for that sort of language, but now isn’t the time.

I draw my attention back to Nikki and ask her, “Where are you headed tonight?”

“Oh, I commute every day. Had a place, but long story short, my roommate was a disaster who kept buying crickets and letting them loose in the apartment.” Nikki shudders.

I’m very confused but don’t question her story.

“Go together at the same time. Ride together or follow each other but don’t leave the other behind anywhere,” I order Nikki rather than Lena.

With a nod in response, she answers, “Yes, Finn.”

I turn to Lena. I lower my voice and tilt my head toward her, emphasizing my point. “We will talk when I get out there tomorrow, Kathleen. And you better start thinking of all the ways your smart mouth will make up for how you spoke to me.”

Lena huffs, “Whatever.”

But behind the eye roll, shrug, and defiant tone, I catch a glimpse of Lena’s excitement. It’s time my little masochist learns that the pain I have given her previously is nothing like real punishment.

Leaving the two of them in the office together wasn’t ideal. But with Brayden not being there and him thinking he’s won by getting me to back off, I’ve got to move quickly. It won’t be long before he realizes there’s no way in hell I’m handing my mate over to him, and by that point, the wheels need to be in motion.



“HELLO?” I ANSWER MY PHONE.

Nikki's number came up on the screen as I walked through my apartment door after a few quick errands.

"Okay, so don't be mad," Nikki starts with appeasing tones and a soft whine. The whine disarms any thought that there's trouble.

"What is Lena asking you to do?" I ask and hear Lena's voice in the background with what I think is, 'I told you so.'

"Could we grab dinner first? It's a long way home, and I don't like to eat while I drive because there are deer." Nikki's voice raises a little.

"Stay together. Make sure Lena leaves her phone on. If something happens, call me right away. I'll come to you."

I would rather they not, but I won't have them driving unsafe.

"Thank you!" Nikki answers before the line disconnects.

And while Lena's dinner with Brayden did not go well, I have a distinct feeling I can trust Nikki.



BUT TRUSTING NIKKI DOESN'T STOP ME FROM USING THE SOFTWARE CADE gave me to keep tabs on Lena's cell phone movements while I cook dinner.

A knock comes to the door as I put the leftovers into the fridge. Lena's phone is still in the restaurant she and Nikki went to. Walking light across the floor, I cross as far away from the door as possible to the side where my coat and holster sit. I don't bother with the peephole. If you're looking to be shot, the best way to do it is to stand behind the door, trying to figure out who's there.

When I open it, the man darkening my doorstep is the last person I suspected.

"Deacon, what's the sermon?" I ask, stowing my gun back into the holster by the door.

"Depends." His eyes dart to the holster with my gun. "If you don't like what I have to say, are you shooting me?"

I give him a smile. "No offense, but you're not worth the trouble."

"Good, we're already on the same page." Deacon steps across the threshold.

"Your sister knows you're here?"

Deacon looks around the bare-bones-furnished apartment and back at me

but doesn't say anything for a long time.

He then shakes his head. "Lena wouldn't like why I'm here. But I've got good information that she's not here."

Trying to be a good host, I motion toward the seating area before stepping back into the kitchen. "Get you something? Make yourself at home. I suppose it kind of already is yours?"

In his own quirky way, Deacon sits down on the arm of the sofa. His hand is in front of his mouth like he's seen a ghost. Which, I guess he probably sees more than one.

"Why did you give up your position as Second or, I guess, Enforcer?" Deacon's squinting at the chair in the corner.

"I'm sure you know what it's like, working with your brother. It can't always be the easiest thing." I avoid the question.

Deacon shakes his head. "Try again. You and I both know you're haunted as fuck. One doesn't ask for amnesty and a place within another pack without reason."

A chill hits me. "If you know, then why are you asking?"

"Humor me." Deacon rolls his eyes. A knowing grin crosses his face.

In the time I've spent with him, I haven't gotten a good read on Deacon. He's a conglomerate of personalities. They range from stoic to downright goofy and back again.

I pass him a beer and the opener before answering his question. "I couldn't be a loyal soldier to his army anymore. He sent kids to their death like it was inconsequential."

The words feel strange. It's the first time I've talked about them since I left home. *I suppose Deacon is used to talking about the dead.*

Deacon waits patiently.

"I had the choice to challenge him and try to take the pack or leave. I took the coward's way out. I don't want to be an Enforcer for the family. I'm too old for war."

Hoping that satisfies him, I wait.

Deacon doesn't open his beer. Instead, he plays with the bottle opener. I watch him as he thinks. His head tilts back and forth a few times.

"You're not haunted, Finn." Deacon looks at me with a smirk. "You have visitors, but they've all been kind and loving. Sure, you've a couple pissed off at you but —"

"Not —" I cut him off accidentally.

“Not what you’re expecting.” Deacon interrupts me back. “We want you to challenge me.”

“Who is we?” I’ve learned that Deacon is off his rocker. *Maybe it’s the ghosts giving him ideas?*

He nods in affirmation. “Cade and I have talked. You’re the best man for the job. It’s time.”

“Listen. If you want me out of the territory, all you have to do is ask. I’m not here with a death wish.” I shake my head and take a step back.

Deacon puts the unopened beer on the coffee table. He stands up and squares his shoulders. Seeing Deacon at full height, I realize he’s nowhere near as large as Cade. A good five, maybe six inches shorter than Cade, and it puts him right under a foot shorter than me. If I’ve learned anything about him, it’s that Deacon’s more than recreational with his drug use. There’s absolutely no fear in Deacon as he lets me size him up. I don’t think he’s currently under the influence. But it’s not Deacon I’m worried about when it comes to a challenge fight.

“Cade’s said that he’s willing to fight any challenge made on my, Thalia’s, or Lena’s behalf.” Deacon voices what I’m thinking and continues. “If you challenge me, I’ll accept the fight, and you’ll be Second. Cade and I both want it that way.”

“Why?”

This seems suspiciously too good to be true.

Deacon looks at me with an expression I can only equate to the insult, ‘who ties your shoes in the morning?’

But he humors me and demands, “Tell me you’re not better suited for the job.”

I can’t.

“Tell me that you don’t miss being in charge and having control.” Deacon waits.

I can’t.

“Tell me that you like living here and working at the university.” Deacon looks around at my secondhand furnishings.

I shrug. Seeing Lena every day isn’t bad.

“Tell me the only reason you shrugged wasn’t because of Lena.”

I huff. He’s good.

“Tell me that you don’t love my sister and are trying to protect her from the world and herself.” Deacon’s eyes are softer when he mentions her.

But again, I can't argue with him.

"Tell me that you haven't debated killing Doctor Thorpe every second you have to spend with him?" Deacon laughs with that one.

Shaking my head, I run my hand down my face. I still haven't found a good place for a shave and a haircut. That's my own damn fault for not taking the time. But Lena's been much more important time-wise. I'd rather give every spare moment to her right now.

"Thalia's heat is approaching. We're watching and waiting. But it's looking more and more like it'll be right before the full moon." Deacon voices the hard truth of the situation.

Bile rises in my throat. Wolf laws dictate that challenges issued must be fought within the same lunar period. Meaning any threat between now and the full moon must be answered by the full moon. Cade being unavailable as Alpha is dangerous. If Thalia goes into heat, Cade and Thalia are exempt from fighting, but Deacon and Lena would be exposed to challenge fights. If Lena and I were more formally out to the pack, I would technically be able to fight her challenge for her, but Deacon would be on his own.

Deacon blows a raspberry when he's sure I've made the leap in logic.

He urges with a strong tone, "Take my job. I'm not strong enough to fight that many potential challenges within a week. Not to mention any that come in for Lena."

"You're positive this is what you want?"

He cackles. "If I hadn't made a promise that I wouldn't actively seek out death, I would ask you to challenge me to our final breaths. We've been waiting for someone to come along we could trust. Someone who'd be strong enough to hold the position. We need someone who has a reason to be loyal."

I cross my arms over my chest. There's no way I could bring myself to kill Deacon. He's harmless.

I nod. "Lena knows about this?"

"No." Deacon puffs out his cheeks. "I'll sweeten the deal for you, not that you've been able to fight any of the logical reasoning. I'll give you some insight on Lena now. Call it good faith."

I wait, and Deacon does give me a tidbit of information. "Lena's primary love language is physical touch, but it makes it hard for her to contain her wolf. So, she goes without it a lot of the time despite how badly she needs it. Lena denies herself."

I've never had such a light bulb moment. Something I do causes Deacon

to smile.

“We’re all having lunch at the house on Saturday about noon. Should have twenty or so witnesses.”

There doesn’t seem to be anything more to debate. Deacon hands the beer and opener back to me before making his way to the door.

He stops and turns back before opening it. “Oh, and Finn.” Deacon stalls at the door.

“Yeah, Deacon?” I ask him.

He hangs his head. “Don’t tell Lena. She’ll only get upset by it. It’ll be easier when she doesn’t have a choice but to deal with it.”

That’s the truth. Lena will be pissed that I’ve found another way into her life. Especially one that affects her job as Alpha Female. Theoretically, it should make it easier for her. I guess if she sees it that way.

CHAPTER 49

FINN

I COULDN'T SLEEP. I HAD TOO MANY OPTIONS AND THINGS GOING THROUGH my head. I've run various scenarios until my eyes burned from the morning light as much as from the lack of sleep. Lena didn't text me back any of the times I texted her, but her phone moved around the pack house a few times and then settled in on her end of the house shortly after midnight. Sitting in Cade's office, waiting for him, gives me enough assurance of safety that I have to fight falling asleep.

"Sorry about the delay." Cade's voice startles me, and I sit up in my chair.

Cade rakes his eyes over me, examining me as he moves behind his desk to sit down.

He's still studying me when he comments, "You look like hell."

I scrub my hand down my face. I'm knackered. Maybe I should have grabbed an hour in bed with Lena before meeting with him, but this is too important. It needs to be done.

"Lena's in danger," I inform him as politely as I can.

"You'll have to forgive me for not seeming shocked, but that's about as vague of a statement as we can get around here. Both of your pictures ended up in the news two days ago. I've a pile of death threats for all of us." Cade sits back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

His body language now mimics mine. We're both guarded.

I circle back to where the conversation truly needed to begin. "I had a visit from Deacon."

Cade nods. "That would be good since I sent him to talk with you. I was told you left Ireland after a difference of opinion with Magnus. I know what I

was told. But what really happened doesn't matter. You're a strong Alpha wolf, you're already tied to the family, and I would rather put you in position than risk someone else forcing their way in."

"I would rather have some control over my own life," I confirm.

"I'm exhausted, Finn. Fuck, you look how I feel." Cade gestures between us. "We need to support each other. We haven't had a chance to figure out really where we stand with each other. The Leviathan likes you. The bit of time we've spent together has been proof enough to me that we're a good team."

I nod. "I like that I like my mate's family. It could have been so much worse."

"Speaking of your new family. It seems you know Revecca Ardelean better than I do." Cade is hyperfocused on me, and I feel his scrutiny. "You wouldn't happen to know why she's here?"

"Revecca Ardelean and Magnus O'Brien are married." It feels weird speaking of Magnus not as my brother but as who he is, the head of a pack. But the formality seems necessary in this instance. "Best guess is if you take back your rightful throne in Romania, it gives her a little more freedom in her life. I tend to keep out of her and Magnus's business, but I know she doesn't like Hugo Arcan as next in the line of succession."

"That makes sense." Cade groans. "Six months ago my biggest worry was where Peter was sending me and for how long. Now it's if I'm going to end up king of a whole fucking country."

I laugh. "Well, as long as you don't vacation in Bucharest, you'll probably be safe."

Cade snorts. "Crossed right off the list of potential vacations."

The pause after that sentence seems to be a redirect, and I wait for it to happen.

"I'll level with you." Cade's body becomes more rigid, and we lock eyes. "Time is of the essence with figuring out what I'm doing. My mate is coming due for heat. If she goes into heat at the wrong time, it'll leave Lena and Deacon at risk to fight their own challenges."

I don't envy his position.

Heat with Lena was fun, but from my understanding, Thalia's a new wolf, and this will be her first. Tensions run high with the unknown. Then, to worry about his pack in addition to her . . .

"Deacon mentioned your mate's timing," I confirm.

Cade being open with me does help with the assurance that this isn't a trap or misdirect.

"I'd like you not to kill him." Cade lowers his voice. "I know Deacon will push. I know he'll fight until he physically can't. And I need you to try and leave him alive."

"There's something off about him, isn't there?"

With a shake of his head, Cade looks up at the ceiling. "Deacon hasn't been okay for a long time. He's made a promise not to attempt to end his life prematurely within a period of time, but I don't trust that simply giving his word will be enough to truly fulfill that promise, given his gift and the constant struggle he lives with."

Taking Second is an easy decision. I'll be taking the place at Cade's right hand.

"I will be . . ."

Cade's phone rings. He flips it over to look at the screen. His eyebrows knit together, and he lifts it to show me the phone.

My stomach sinks reading the name. *Doctor Thorpe*.

"Hello, this is Cade," Cade answers the phone and taps it on speaker.

"Sovereign Alpha. We have an issue," Doctor Thorpe says quickly.

Cade rolls his hand around over the phone like he's trying to hurry him up. It seems I'm not the only one with a distaste for the doctor. I pull my phone out of my pocket and start tracking Lena's location.

"There are news crews. People with cameras and microphones outside. They say they want to speak with Ms. Alden." Doctor Thorpe's voice is sharp with anger. "They're blocking the sidewalk in front of the doors. The patients can't get in and out."

"Lena isn't there, is she?" Cade looks at me, but I'm one step ahead.

My phone finishes loading, and I turn the screen to face him. At the very least, Lena's phone is upstairs. Cade opens his laptop.

"No. Ms. Alden isn't here," Doctor Thorpe answers him. "She doesn't come into the lab on Thursdays. She shouldn't come in at all if this is the sort of thing that we should expect. This is very disruptive."

"I agree. I can't have Lena exposed to potential security issues like this," Cade corrects him.

He turns his laptop around and shows me Lena's red SUV parked in the garage before closing the lid.

"I will start the paperwork for a sabbatical for her," Doctor Thorpe says.

“No. I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I interrupt the conversation.

“Who is that?” Doctor Thorpe is quick to answer.

“It’s Griffin O’Leary,” Cade answers. He nods to me to keep me talking.

“The media hasn’t had Lena in their sights long. Undoubtedly they’ll move on. She’s a researcher, not a socialite.” I try to put in sound logic.

If they cut her from the lab, I don’t know what Lena will do. As is, she’s already handling not being in school a little too well. There’s a very good chance she’s letting it simmer under the surface with that mess of her feral wolf.

Doctor Thorpe growls on his end of the phone, “They’re trying to get in the building. I’ve called for security.”

“I’ll send Corinth Security and the police there as soon as we get off the call. However, I agree with Finn, this is likely temporary. Once they realize they can’t find anything gossip worthy about Lena, then they’ll stop. Let’s see what happens after the police explain that they can’t be there.” Cade pushes back against Doctor Thorpe.

Doctor Thorpe stumbles over his word. “Well, how long? We have patients and their families.”

“Shorter, if you let me get off the phone with you, but I won’t do that until I know you’re not about to do anything to risk Lena’s place at the lab,” Cade threatens.

“Very well.” Doctor Thorpe sighs. “Hurry.”

Cade hangs up the phone and runs his hand back through his hair. “I fucking hate that guy.”

“You and me both,” I answer with a nod. “Becoming Second, if for no other reason than to escape working for him, is reason enough.”

Cade laughs. “Alright. Close the door on the way out. Text me if Lena isn’t in her room. God forbid she went with Nikki today. I’ll take no text from you as answer that she’s here.”

“No news is good news,” I confirm, standing up out of my chair.

Cade is already on the phone again before I close the door to his office.

Please go find our mate so we can sleep. My wolf pushes me down the hall. It’s before 7 a.m., and even if I hadn’t seen on the app that her phone was on the far side of the house, I know my faolan well enough to know she’s still curled up waiting for me.

Lena’s bedroom is dark and peaceful. She’s sleeping right in the center of the bed, sprawled out and perfect. I stand there watching for a moment before

stripping down and climbing in next to her. Setting an alarm for eleven, in the event she hasn't set one, I put my phone down and let my weary body relax.

CHAPTER 50

LENA

THE SHIFTING OF THE BED STIRS ME FROM MY SLEEP. FINN CLIMBS INTO BED behind me, pulling off my warm cocoon of blankets to give me a much more pleasurable heat.

“Took you long enough,” I murmur, wiggling my ass against his cock.

A little groan of pleasure rattles my body as it exits Finn’s chest. “Behave, foalan.”

With a huff, I settle back into bed — not unintentionally — pressing back against him as I do so.

“Have it your way, faolan.” Finn’s voice is dark and devious.

His large hand slides along my skin down my hip into my pajama pants and past my underwear. I’m moaning, needing him, before he even gets to my clit.

“So needy, faolan.” He rumbles his accusation.

I gasp as his fingers slide past my clit. Hot pain stings through my body as Finn squeezes my clit between his finger and thumb. My hips buck back against him as I try to escape. But the way he holds me to him, commanding me with his strength, has me soaking wet. I’m already anticipating how good he’ll fuck me.

Finn releases my clit, pulling his hand from between my legs. He strips away the covers in one smooth movement, and his gaze darkens, looking at me like a man starved, ready to devour me.

He moves his leg over the top of me, laying me on my back and pinning me to the bed. One hand skates down my side to my stomach to pull my shirt up. Lifting my hands, I allow him to pull the soft cotton fabric up my body. Finn braces himself over me and captures my wrists above my head.

“Can you be completely silent, Kathleen?” Finn gives a small chuckle, his smile pulling up the corner of his lips. “The only noise allowed being your safeword? Can you handle that, faolan?”

My single nod, a silent agreement, is all it takes. Excitement flutters in my chest.

Methodically, Finn lets go of my hands and moves down my body, pulling my pajama bottoms off as he does. I’m stripped naked before him, cursing the chill that nips at my exposed skin, but I know it won’t last.

Finn steps over to the nightstand on the far side of the bed. I follow his movements as he pulls out a white box, similar to the one he seemingly planted in my apartment. It’s a larger box, deeper, and seems heavier.

With an expectant look, Finn nods to the bed space in front of him.

My wolf wags her tail, excited to go to him and follow his directions.

But if I’m forced to behave and do as I’m told, it’ll be on my terms. Stretching out, I tease him as I arch my back and push my tits out. I turn over onto my hands and knees and crawl to him, shifting my hips in tempting swings for the few paces across the bed. Once I’m before him, I press my tits toward him as I move to kneel.

The raised eyebrow and glint in his eye at my sass feels like praise. It sends a warmth of desire through me.

Finn opens the box, and I’m pleasantly surprised to find another beautiful leather collar, this one deep brown. My throat constricts at the intimidating two-inch thickness. It’s larger than anything I’ve ever worn.

“Take it. I want you to get a feel for it.”

I don’t hesitate at his instruction.

‘Finn’s faolan’ is etched into the tooled leather, marked in blue ink and studded with pearl-capped buttons. The steel ring set in the middle is strongly secured between the two strips of leather, and the back is clasped with two delicate buckles rather than a larger one. *When did he order this?*

Custom leather collars take time to make. He knew that this time would come. I have conflicted feelings with that thought. A second collar feels too much too soon.

Finn sets the box on the nightstand and takes the collar from my hands when he comes back in front of me.

It’s just for play, I remind myself. Just for play.

The buckle opening jostles the tag. Finn raises my chin to meet his eyes. A soft smile of approval paints his face, and I let my apprehension go.

My wolf and I are in harmony within this moment. She pushes forward, flooding my every thought, and whispers: *submit*.

Taking the collar, Finn unbuckles it before wrapping the leather around my neck. The buckle cinches securely, and I swallow, testing how it feels. It's tight and strangely comfortable. When he pulls my hair out from under it, I feel the full weight. It's physically heavy but emotionally freeing. My shoulders fall as I release the final bit of tension I've been carrying.

In his collar, there isn't anything beyond this room or beyond Finn and what he gives me. With my submission to Finn comes a freedom I've been craving. My thoughts melt away.

Sliding his index finger into the steel O ring on the front of the collar, Finn gives it a light tug before letting go. He slides his hand down my sternum before turning and sliding under my breast. His thumb runs across my already hard nipple before his other hand follows suit with the opposite side.

In tandem, Finn plays with them, musing, "I do think we'll get these pierced."

Mmm? My brain focuses on the way he handles them, pinching both nipples between his thumb and index finger. The squeeze sends a delicious throb through my body, electrifying my senses.

Finn squeezes harder. With a thrust of his chin, he directs me back to the middle of the bed. Obedience is effortless and without force. Wincing, I pull away from his touch and embrace the pain as he holds on to my nipples a second longer.

"On your back," Finn rumbles in approval.

Returning to my nightstand, Finn reaches in, and I recognize the metallic clank.

He withdraws a pair of padded cuff restraints. "I know you wouldn't keep toys that you can't escape on your own. No way you'd risk that embarrassment. So, I'm trusting you to respect my wishes and stay cuffed until I can get locks."

I open my mouth to promise not to escape but remember my instructions to be quiet. Closing my mouth, I let it be.

"Good girl." Finn approves as he pulls my first wrist into the cuff and buckles it tightly.

He pauses for a moment, the thoughtful and calculating look leading to a smirk. Sliding his hand between my legs, Finn manhandles me. He rolls me

by the leg to my stomach, pulling my arms behind my back like I'm nothing more than his fuck toy.

It's delicious.

My wolf sighs, contented. *Ours.*

Face down and turned away from him, I'm deprived of seeing what's coming next. A light sting to my ass startles me. My second wrist is locked into the cuffs, the fluffy padding protecting me from the cold metal clasps.

"What haven't I punished you for this week?" Finn muses, the words coming with a knowing, gentle scold. "Not answering me last night?"

The crack of his hand against my ass comes before the pain. The pain that's soothed by his hand as it slides across the heated skin, then between the cheeks and down to my pussy.

"I'm starting to think this cunt is always slick and waiting for my cock." The bed dips to my left as he draws closer.

With an expert touch, he slips two of his fingers into my pussy, straight into the core. He fucks me with them while his other hand fists my hair, pulling the strands tight in his grip. Finn lowers himself beside me.

"Your punishment for making noise," Finn whispers. "I'll force another orgasm from you. How long will it take before you're overstimulated and a dripping mess?"

He raises the stakes but nowhere near enough to safeword. Not now. *Not ever.* It's toxic and wrong to feel like using my safeword is failure, but I won't fail being his. *His? Maybe.*

I let out a withering breath, stifling the whine behind my exhale. My first near noise and *almost* failure is early as Finn retracts his fingers from inside me. Feeling empty and missing his punishing touch, I want to beg for him to return the near-painful fullness of my pussy.

Finn shakes his head, wiping the slick from his fingers across the inside of my thigh. Easily, as if I weigh nothing, he moves me until I'm centered on the bed. Lying on my back with my wrists cuffed together gives plenty of room for my arms to lay at my sides. My hands come to rest, nestled squarely underneath me, supporting my hips. The placement further pushes my pussy upward in a vulnerable position. Instinct has me pulling my legs together.

Finn rests his knee at the bottom of the bed. As he descends, he slides my legs out of the way. I bend my knees and tauntingly block him from access. He chuckles and, with little effort, pushes my knees apart as he lies down. Pulling my legs over his shoulders, Finn wets his lips like I'm the most

delicious meal he's seen this week.

Finn has yet to do anything halfway. Punishment is inevitable. There's no way I won't moan or cry his name. Especially not when I feel this soft and submissive for him.

His beard tickles as he runs his face up the inside of my thigh. Losing myself in the sensation chases out the fear of failure. Finn trails more kisses against my skin before pressing his nose through my folds.

The subspace, brought on by feeling his collar resting on the base of my neck, had been a wave of decompression to my system. But the strong lap of his tongue, sliding through my slick heat, melts the tension from the rest of my body. As I contain my moans, swallowing hard, my hips rise and fall involuntarily.

With a growl of displeasure, from me taking any sort of control, Finn drapes his muscular arm across my pelvis. I'm held firmly to his face where he wants me. I curl my toes.

Drawing deep breaths, I focus on staying perfectly quiet. But it's impossible to draw slow, steady breaths. My heart beats hard in my chest as his tongue drives in circles around my clit. I bite my lips together, hoping to hold all the sounds inside.

Finn slides his other hand up my leg, and his fingers sliding into me is my undoing. My head rolls back, and the moan I've been trying to hold escapes. It's long and loud, coming from deep in my stomach.

"One extra." Finn speaks against my pussy, taking a fraction-of-a-second break from his dedication to driving me toward an orgasm.

Disappointment in my failure resonates inside my rib cage. But it's chased away as his fingers work in short, quick thrusts. Like the snap of a rubber band, I'm brought back to the vulnerable submissive space.

Finn knows that perfect spot. His fingers push hard on it, deep inside, daring me to the edge of the orgasm I'm chasing. My toes curl. I need to come, and he's giving it to me.

He sucks on my clit, and the orgasm quakes my entire body. I'm arched, stuck as my muscles lock so tight there isn't a place I don't feel it. I gasp for air, forcing it deep into my lungs to try and silence myself. There's no room to relax because Finn doesn't stop.

It's the best kind of torture. Unable to fully relax from the first, I'm pushed toward a second orgasm.

Holding my breath isn't working. Light-headed, I'm nearly delirious as

my body writhes, fighting through the intensity of pain and pleasure.

Finn doesn't stop there. He doesn't stop as my body shudders through another orgasm. It feels never ending. I've never been held in this violent of an orgasm. The exact pressure of his fingers and pattern of his tongue have me captive.

Don't whimper. Don't cry. I fight myself. *Must obey.* I'm slowly losing all self-control.

He pulls his fingers from my pussy while running his tongue in circles around my clit.

I swallow my gasp as his fingers find my nipple. He squeezes hard, pulling on my tit, and I arch into it, trying to reduce the strain.

Teeth press against the soft skin between my legs before he crawls his way up, kissing a trail up my body, following the lines of my tattoos.

Finn, pleased with himself, flashes me a smug smile, drawing a smile from me. Planting one chaste kiss on my lips, he moves to kneel between my legs.

Watching him wrap his hand around his cock makes my pussy throb, searching for him. He works his shaft, the bead of cum on the tip glistening in the low light of the bedroom.

My mouth waters, and I ache to offer my throat for his pleasure in exchange for a taste of him.

Sliding between my legs, Finn massages the tip against my sore clit, messing with my brain function. My head falls back to the mattress, and I draw long, deep breaths. *Stay quiet. Stay quiet. Stay quiet,* I chant to myself as the anticipation of another orgasm draws nearer, tingling all the way up into my abdomen.

"Eyes on me, faolan," Finn presses in a more commanding tone.

I open my eyes to watch as he moves to position himself above me, resting on his forearm. Finn's cock slides from where it was pressed against my clit to my entrance. In one thrust, he fills me to capacity.

Long, slow thrusts of his cock threaten to push me over the edge again. Finn's tip slides back and forth against the most sensitive areas inside.

He whispers in my ear, "This time, I want you to scream, Kathleen. I want to hear you."

The moan I'm fighting back escapes, and he kisses me into silence anyway, his tongue playing with mine.

Finn's cock hits my deepest point as he continues to drive, hard and

steady, inside me. My stomach clenches with the pain and pleasure of it.

Breaking the kiss, Finn whispers, “You like feeling me all the way in you, hmm?”

“Mm-hmm.” I can’t form words.

The way his pelvis grinds against mine creates the desired friction to work me toward another unnumbered orgasm.

“Next heat, I’ll take your cunt like this again and again,” Finn promises.

He thrusts harder, punctuating his point. Fully sheathed in me, he grinds against my cervix.

“You don’t believe it yet, but I will breed you, faolan.”

Finn’s wolf rises in his eyes, the bright green color calling to my wolf.

She answers, rising to the surface. I let her dance with his wolf.

“I’ll fill your belly with my cum, and then you’ll grow round with my pup,” Finn tells me, and it’s exactly what I want.

He keeps rocking into me, nearly pulling out each time. I feel every delicious inch of him.

“I’ll leave you a dripping mess each time. I won’t ever pull out. Then I’ll lie by your side, push it back into you if it tries to escape.” Finn’s words heat my body.

I want to be fucked every day. I want to be fucked by *Finn* every day.

“You want my cum, faolan?” Finn asks, nibbling on my ear

My wolf whines, *yes. Need it.*

Her whine escapes me. I echo her words, “Need.”

“Yes, you do.” Finn agrees before moaning, “God, Kathleen, you feel so good pulsing around me, faolan.”

His praise and the dirty talk do me in. I can’t take it anymore.

“Please. Hard,” I beg. “Please, Finn. Harder.”

Hard and fast, Finn delivers. It isn’t only me who comes undone. Finn snarls as he comes, the sound almost deafening.

I feel his teeth biting without breaking skin, almost claiming me again. In heavy pants, he comes to rest, draping his body over mine. The bite turns into gentle kissing on my neck.

“I love you so much,” Finn vows and starts right in on the praise. “You’re perfect. My good girl.”

CHAPTER 51

FINN

I HAVE NEVER TURNED OFF MY ALARM AND GONE BACK TO BED. BUT WHEN WE wake up from our post-sex nap, it's nearly two in the afternoon and only thirty minutes before the meeting with Henri.

Lena's sleeping next to me, half covered by the blanket with her hair draped down her chest and across the pillow. It's beautiful and a shame to have to wake her.

Rolling to her, I brush hair from her face, running my hands across her skin.

Beautiful hazel eyes flicker open, startled at first, then diverting as a shy smile crosses her face.

"Good afternoon," I greet her, planting a kiss on her lips.

Lena's stomach growls, and her hand flies to cover it.

"Good afternoon to you too," I say with a laugh, moving my hand to meet hers.

The way I fucked her comes back to me. *If only breeding her was that easy. She'd be so fat and happy.*

I kiss her forehead. "I'll go hunt down some food."

"Okay, but can you start in the fridge because I'm not really in the mood to eat bunny rabbits." Lena smiles and sits up.

"If I must." I give her one last squeeze before heading to the main portion of the house.

My mate's family is already in the kitchen with Lauren, their housekeeper, and a woman I don't recognize.

Thalia is quick to introduce us. "Finn, this is Henri Greene. Her technical title is pack publicist, but I think that's a vast understatement for what she

does.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Henri.” I incline my head toward her.

“Pleasure is mine. I was hoping we could go over how to best spin your previous employment with the press.” Henri gives me a tense smile.

This really isn’t optional, so I’ll have to try.

“I was hoping we could discuss dinner plans for the evening first.” I look around at them all with a kind smile. “It hasn’t exactly been explained how things around here work for food or meals.”

“Oh Lord.” Lauren laughs, pointing a spatula at me. “If you figure it out, would you let me know?”

“That’s on his list.” Cade looks at Lauren with a sharp raise of his eyebrows.

“Oh.” Lauren holds the O shape with her mouth.

Apparently everyone knows I’m taking over for Deacon tomorrow.

I turn my attention back to Henri. She smiles.

“I think it’s best if we do everything we can to not discuss my past. I’m assuming you’ve figured out who I am.” I run my hand through my beard.

Henri nods. “I don’t know if we’re able to completely avoid the topic. Until we can’t, saying nothing about it is the best plan. Ideally, you and Lena won’t be having discussions with the press without it being a preplanned interview.”

“No interviews.” I press hard into my wolf, leaving the statement short of an Alpha command.

Cade clears his throat. I draw a deep breath and hang my head. *Yeah. Probably not appropriate.*

I try rephrasing. “I would rather we not put Lena in that situation unless it’s impossible to avoid.”

“She’s Pack Alpha Female. At some point, she’ll need to talk to the press and make more regular public appearances. I’m sorry if you don’t like it, but the fact of the matter is, she is a necessity to the education element of Cade’s campaign,” Henri argues. She’s firm and stands her ground.

I admire her spirit, but my answer is still the same. “It’ll be a while before she’s ready for anything like that.”

“I don’t understand.” Henri raises an eyebrow.

Interesting. I turn to look at Cade, giving him the same expression Henri gave me.

“She doesn’t know.” Cade confirms my suspicion is correct.

My little mate is so good at hiding herself and her wolf away from her pack that someone with access to their entire lives doesn't know who, what, she is.

With a nod of my head, I go with the answer I hope will satisfy whatever curiosity I've sparked with Henri. "As her mate and given the complications this school term has given her, I think it'll be a while before Lena is ready to face any more complications."

Diplomatic language has never been my strong suit, but I figured that would solve it.

"Oh, I see." Henri nods. She turns to Cade and squares her shoulders. "Where did we end up with security for the university and the lab for Lena?"

"I talked to Doctor Thorpe. There was no sign of anyone loitering. I'm calling Michael from Corinth and checking in with his team after we eat. I think Finn made the right suggestion that we simply wait and see if they can't be shuffled off." Cade smiles at her. He rests his hand on her shoulder. "I know Lena and Finn will be difficult to navigate, and I appreciate your understanding that we have to work around their limits. I won't make them do things they're not comfortable with."

"Okay. I guess that's all I needed from you and Lena." Henri side-eyes me like she's searching for answers before looking back at Cade.

"Yes. I know it presents a problem that he's taking over for Deacon tomorrow." Cade sighs. Lauren shoos him with a wave of her hand to get to the sink he's blocking. "We'll have to cross that bridge next week."

"Alright," Lauren cuts in. "It's my kitchen. Get out. Finn, you and I will have some serious talks. I've let the four of them run my house for too long."

Cade lifts his arms in surrender, trying to appease Lauren, who has now picked up a knife. Cade walks around to our side of the island in a hurry.

Thalia laughs loudly and covers her mouth. She gains some composure. "I was wondering when we'd drive Lauren nuts."

"Oh, that ship has sailed, darling." Lauren chuckles.

"Do we have a time tomorrow?" I hate disrupting the lighthearted banter.

"Lunch with the pack is served at eleven," Lauren informs me. She shrugs. "I can keep a plate warm for you if you'd like to challenge him before and eat after, or if you'd like to make it through the meal first. Either is fine with me."

"Challenge first," Cade answers. "I want the pack to know where he and I stand before the day is up. That way, Deacon can have some peace and eat

and heal in one go. No nervous energy floating about through the meal.”

“Understood.” I nod.

There’s no nervous energy in the room right now. Cade is so easily giving me a shot at his Second, and those around him aren’t hesitant about it at all. Pride swells in my chest.

Earning my place back home, despite it being right in the lineage, wasn’t an easy feat. Da’s approval was never something I felt like I had earned, and Magnus always made it clear I was there to support him. I had a place and a job. Here, I have both of those things, but more than that, Cade’s accepted me as family and welcomed me into the inner circle of the pack.

CHAPTER 52

LENA

LATE OCTOBER IS BEAUTIFUL IN MINNESOTA, MOSTLY. TODAY, IT'S COLD AND threatening to snow. Standing in my bathroom, I examine the contents of my walk-in closet, looking at the options of what to wear and scrutinizing every single choice I could possibly make. We're wolves. We run warmer. But I like to be extra cozy. Just because it takes more for me to freeze to death doesn't mean that I don't get cold. While today will be in the forties, brunch will be served outside. Lauren assured me twice that the propane heaters will be on, so I won't freeze to death, but that doesn't change my dilemma. What to fucking wear?

I know what Finn is wearing because it's what Finn always wears: one of his six dress shirts and a pair of slacks. Today, it's my least favorite, white. It has nothing to do with how he looks in it but everything to do with the fact that I own nothing in white. So even if I wanted to match, I can't.

Not that I should be matching him. By now, everyone's seen the tabloids, and they know what they think is happening. But there's a difference between dating someone and being intended.

The pint of lava rolling about in my stomach gets angrier. It does so anytime my wolf gives up trying to convince me that Finn and I will work it out. Her being half-feral means I only have to put up with the whining and pining for him half the time. The other half, fire burning on the inside my body, is an inconvenience.

Thalia sends me a picture of what she's wearing. The long-sleeve green dress with a twirly skater-girl style skirt looks cute on her.

"It's brunch with a small group of the pack, Kathleen," Finn says with soft encouragement.

I shoot a glance over my shoulder, ready to fire back a sharp response. *He absolutely better not say what I think he's about to.*

Finn walks past me to the row of dresses hanging up and pulls one of them free. He folds it over his arm and picks up a pair of shoes from the rack, then pulls a pair of leggings off the stack. He then displays his outfit choice for me. It absolutely works, and it'll look perfect.

“Wear your hair down. And if you'd do me the honor —” Finn walks out of the closet and through my bathroom.

I follow him, my heart rate picking up.

He comes back, holding a small green velvet jewelry box. *Oh fuck. Not this conversation.*

“I don't want to rush you into my collar, but I'd hoped since there's no denying how much time I've spent at the pack house, you'd consider a small step in embracing our relationship publicly.” Finn opens the box.

The view is breathtaking.

Inside the green box is a stunning moonstone ring flanked with diamonds. The hexagon cut sparkles brightly. It's beautiful. I struggle for words. The world has seen us together. Everyone in the pack knows by now that he and I are together. It's not like I'm showing off my mating mark. *Why can't I say yes?*

The answer is obvious: because it's a human idea of intention.

Finn moves to close the box. Disappointment hangs heavy in the air.

“I'll wear it,” I agree. “For today.”

“That's all I can ask.” Finn steps toward me.

I tilt my chin up to meet his eyes, and he plants a soft kiss on my lips before murmuring against them, “Go get dressed.”

Walking back to the closet, I go to my underwear drawer and pull out a bra and a pair of panties. I hear a tsk of a tongue.

When I turn to look at him, Finn shakes his head. “I'll give you a bra but no panties.”

“You have to be kidding me. We're having lunch with the pack. You expect me to go commando?” I snap at Finn.

“No, I gave you leggings, but that is a great idea. Show those great legs off for the last time this year. Forecast calls for snow next week.” Finn's wolf flashes behind his eyes as he watches me. “Dress, no leggings, no panties.”

Do I dare argue?

I put the panties back in the drawer, followed by the bra. There's always a

loophole. I pull out a cute undergarment romper.

Finn chuckles but doesn't argue with me.

It is, after all, 'a bra,' at least in part.

Dressed and hair done, I'm giving myself one last look over. Finn comes to stand behind me in the mirror. His broad shoulders dwarf mine, and his chin rests just above my head without any need to bend.

Wrapping his arms around me, he kisses the crown of my hair. He gives me a soft squeeze before moving and picking up my left hand. With very little effort, he slides the ring on my finger.

The fire in the pit of my stomach is smothered by his hands on me.

"I'm impressed it fits." I look at the stone.

It's even more beautiful than when it sat in the box. *The man knows his sparkly.*

"Truthfully, I am as well. I didn't have it sized. It was my Nan's." Finn wraps his arms around me again.

I lean back into him. "You asked me to wear your Nan's ring?"

"Faolan, I'm keeping you for the rest of our lives. Don't be shocked that I want you to share my heritage with me." Finn's voice is so calm it works to relax me from the inside as his arms do the outside.

Our mate wants us, my wolf reminds me as she rises out of the ashes of her feral behavior.

The alarm on my phone sounds from where I left it on my bed.

"What's that for?" Finn slowly releases me from his arms.

"It's quarter after. Time to get downstairs," I answer before letting him lead me through the bathroom and back into my bedroom.

Finn grabs my phone and silences it before handing it to me. I toss it back down on the bed, and he raises an eyebrow.

"People don't believe you're paying attention to them if your phone is in your hand. Plus, my dress doesn't have pockets." I shrug and motion toward the door. "Besides, the only people who would call me, if they aren't downstairs, know not to call me before noon."

Finn escorts me from my room. We're halfway down the stairs when I draw a deep breath and steel myself against the soft and tender emotions of my wolf. The Alpha Female has to be present.

Plenty of people are milling about inside the house and outside on the deck. While the packhouse has been open and we keep someone staffed on hand around the clock, not all the pack has felt comfortable coming inside

and hanging out with us here quite yet. I don't blame them. From what Nikki has told me, Robert kept the house locked up. The only time people were brought into the pack house was holidays. It's not how Cade wants to do things. It's why our bedrooms have deadbolts and soundproofing, so we have spaces that are our own from the pack, but the rest of the house is fair game. It's good to see people utilizing it. It's far too big for the four of us . . . five, if you count Finn, I guess.

Studying pack members' names from their social media pages has been helping, but I still get some wrong. I finally take my place next to Thalia at the table. Forty-five minutes passed quickly. I'm hungry, but at least a bunch of finger foods and a sparkly glass of champagne are already on the table.

Deacon sits down across from Thalia but doesn't say anything. Curiously enough, though, he doesn't touch his champagne glass. Cade and Finn come out of the house as the rest of our pack members settle. Finn approaches Deacon's side of the table.

I freeze. *He wouldn't.*

My stomach is in knots.

I turn my head to look at Thalia, but she doesn't meet my gaze. I look past her at Cade. He gives me the smallest nod when I catch his eyes.

My breath hitches in my throat, and I have to fight to control my emotions.

You've got to be kidding me.

"Deacon Alden." Finn's voice is firm, his thick Irish accent rumbling with it.

I don't listen anymore. I can't. I know what they're saying. The words may change, but the result is always the same. It's a challenge fight to submission or to death. Finn wants Deacon's spot as Second.

I know Cade sanctioned this. No one had the decency to tell me. I struggle to keep my breath and my hands steady.

Deacon stands up from the table. So, it's happening.

No. How can I be expected to watch this? This is Deacon. *My Deacon.* And Finn is my mate. As much as I still fight him, I can't deny how much I've grown accustomed to his care, his presence, and his reassurances in my life. A challenge between the two of them feels like an impossible situation. One of the men I care about is getting maimed, or worse. *Probably Deacon.*

My wolf riots when I try to stand. I focus on pushing myself out of my chair, but I'm frozen by the ferocity of lava brewing deep inside. Cade,

Deacon, and Finn walk down the deck to the yard below. Thalia touches my shoulder, and it's only with her insistence that I break free from the chair.

My wolf is long gone, retreated into the monstrous wolf of fire and anger. I focus on containing the lumpy feeling in my stomach, clenching my core and holding it all still.

By the time we get to the deck railing, they're naked. Cade steps back from between them, indicating the start of the challenge. Their wolves explode from their bodies. It's when I quit watching.

Snarling and growling erupt with the fight, but my eyes are trained on the distance beyond them. I hate watching fights. The blood and gore are too hard to ignore.

Despite my gaze looking out at the tree line above where they're fighting, I catch Thalia's movements from the corner of my eye. She winces and wraps her arms around herself.

I can't watch Finn kill Deacon. I don't know how she can stomach it either.

Bile rises in my throat, fueled by the unsettled fire. I can't decide if I'm about to puke or shift.

I draw deep breaths trying to stop these feelings.

The fight ends a moment later with a large yelp. The snarling stops, followed by a large whine.

Thalia's hands are over her mouth. She's not breathing.

I turn to her and pull her hands from her mouth. "Breathe, Thalia. You can't pass out right now."

She draws a deep breath.

"Is there another challenger for Pack Second?" Cade asks at a normal speaking volume despite the distance from him to us on the deck.

I finally examine the field below. Deacon's chest rises and falls. His body shifts back slowly, and he lies on the ground, looking up at the sky.

Finn's black wolf paces back and forth. Blood smeared across his coat glistens in the sun. Wet splotches across his muzzle and down his shoulders indicate it wasn't only Finn who got some good bites in.

His green eyes lock with mine. Despite my anger at him for doing this, the call of his wolf excites me and beckons the feral animal within me.

"I challenge for Second," a man whose name I still don't know shouts. "I also challenge for intention of Kathleen Alden."

If I thought the sea of lava was violent before, I was wrong. Nothing

could tame the tides now. The snarl escapes my mouth before I can stop it. I look to the man down below who has challenged for me. He's built like your typical wolf. Longer and leaner than Finn. He's clearly a runner over a fighter. That he thinks he could be a good mate for me is laughable.

My lip curls when he looks up at me. A flash crosses his face, and I'm fairly certain he's regretting thinking he could handle me.

Cade throws a wayward glance at me, and when The Leviathan flashes in his eyes, it silences the fire inside me. He helps Deacon to his feet before sending him with Lauren and a member of her staff into the house through the doors under the deck.

Thalia whispers, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

I shake my head. I don't want to hear it. I don't want to talk about it.

The man who challenged for Second, and for me, strips. He shifts quickly and charges Finn head-on.

The fight is over before it even begins. I don't even have a chance to look away before Finn easily lays him out with a quick move of lowering his shoulder and locking his jaws around the challenger's leg. The yelp and crunch indicate a dislocated shoulder. And from the way he's lying on the ground, my guess is several broken bones in his leg.

"Is there anyone else?" Cade sounds irritated.

I lean over to Thalia and whisper in her ear, "Next time we do pack brunch, we all need to get up early and have breakfast first. I'm guessing this was Cade's idea, and now he's hangry."

She bites her lips together to keep from laughing. The truth is, even though I'm furious with Finn, Cade, and Deacon, the timing was not well planned.

Had they consulted me, I would have suggested a big breakfast, after making it known this was a stupid idea. *But they didn't, so they can be hangry.*

Seconds of silence tick by, and at last, Finn shifts back. He looks directly at me. I shake my head and hang it low between my shoulders, half in sadness and half in anger. I want to go downstairs and check on Deacon. But I know my place.

Regardless of the man's intent when he challenged Finn for me, he officially outed our relationship. If the media stirred up whispers of speculation, he confirmed them.

I leave the deck rail and head upstairs to my room, knowing that's where

Finn will want to go to get cleaned up before we eat.

A few minutes later, Finn meets me in my suite. He walks carefully across the floor, avoiding touching the furniture and the walls, straight into the bathroom.

I lock the bedroom door behind him and then stand in the bathroom doorway.

“I’m sorry,” Finn starts apologizing while tending to his wounds.

“You could have killed him.” I try to growl, but my wolf isn’t there. The fire burned out in my belly, and I’m left with a measly huff.

Finn shakes his head. “Cade warned me that Deacon may try. It’s why I fought the way I did. I made it impossible to keep going.”

There’s nothing for me to say. I pull my dress over my head and abandon him in the bathroom. After resting my dress over a chair, I flop down on the bed.

Finn turns on the shower. The weight of his ring on my finger is too much. I pull it off and set it on the nightstand. The longer I lie here, the more emotions brew about it all.

How long was this planned?

I curl my toes and relax them again and again, fighting the anger. Clenching all the muscles in my feet and then relaxing them. I slowly tighten and release all the muscles up my body. But try as I may, this grounding exercise isn’t helping. All the emotions continue growing.

By the time the water turns off in the shower, I’m back to boiling with rage.

I go to the bathroom and look at Finn drying off. His wounds are healed over into large scabs.

“You could have killed him.”

It’s a dumb statement. We’ve already covered this reaction, but I say it again anyway. If repeating myself is what it takes to get his attention, I’ll do it. I’m done playing nice. I’m embracing the chaos.

Raising an eyebrow at me, Finn looks concerned at my statement. He shakes his head and readdresses the topic, “We covered this. I knew he might try, and I chose how I fought him to make sure that I didn’t hurt Deacon any more than I absolutely needed to. Kathleen, I’m not ill-equipped to end a fight without unnecessary bloodshed.”

“How long did you know that you would be removing the last part of my life that allowed me my own space and separation from you?” My voice gets

louder. I clench my fists at my side.

Finn keeps drying off. “Deacon and I talked on Wednesday evening. Cade and I talked yesterday.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” I shake my head. “What is this? Everybody hides things from and lies to Lena? Why don’t I warrant knowing things that are going on in my life? Is that what my submission is supposed to be to you? Because I’m starting to see how you think this will be.” My jaw clenches tight, and anger turns to fury. *This isn’t what I want.*

“That is not at all how this was supposed to be,” Finn defends. “That’s not what you or your submission means to me.”

“But that’s how it is!” I’m shouting.

The words echo back in the bathroom, but apparently, I have to raise my voice to be heard.

Finn doesn’t match my volume. “Deacon isn’t strong enough to fight Alpha challenges for you and him. Thalia will go into heat sooner or later. What did you want Cade to do? Let you fight your own battles? Do you think your wolf could handle that? Even with the feral in you, I’ll remind you that you’re kind of shit at fighting.”

“Don’t you think I should have had the choice? Do I not get a say in what happens in *my* life? I think I deserve to have at least the choice to step down rather than be forced into this situation. Now if I step down, it’s because my mate is the Pack Second.” I didn’t realize this was how I felt. It’s true though. I would have rather stepped down.

Finn’s face falls from the confused, angry scrunch to a relaxed but worried frown. He steps toward me. “Do you want to step down?”

“Maybe,” I admit, tossing my hands with a shrug.

“Then we’ll talk about it,” he assures me.

He reaches out to rest his hand along my jaw, but I turn my head away from him.

Finn withdraws his hand and finishes drying his body off. He doesn’t give me any more sage words of wisdom or offer any well-intended lies, telling me that he’ll talk to me about important decisions in the future. The behavior is telling, Finn may regret not telling me, but he doesn’t intend to avoid doing it again, and that negates the apology. To truly apologize, you have to want to change the behavior.

“You won’t be sleeping here anymore. There are full suites on the far end of the house. You’ll have a space by Cade, which is where the Second should

be,” I inform him.

I pull my dress back on and shuffle my hair around out of the neckline.

“Don’t say things you don’t mean, Kathleen.” Finn’s warning sounds ridiculous.

“I won’t, Finn.” I shake my head, turning my back on him. “I don’t want you here. I’ll ask Lauren to set you up a space and move your belongings. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

CHAPTER 53

FINN

LAST NIGHT LENA WAS SERIOUS. SHE DIDN'T WANT ME TO SLEEP IN HER room. I found myself down on the far end of the house in a guest suite across the hall from Cade's. My body called for rest, and I slept in short bursts, only to wake up this morning to try and win Lena over through early morning cuddles, but she wasn't in her bed. It was cold and smelled like her but wasn't fresh.

Scouring the house hasn't turned her up.

"Have you seen Kathleen? She isn't in her suite. I haven't been able to find her anywhere. I hoped you knew where she was?" I ask Deacon the moment I find him.

Deacon's lying on the floor outside Henri's office, as indicated by the small nameplate to the right of the door.

He doesn't even look at me. "You two fighting? Or is she done putting up with your bullshit?"

"She's a little mad. I would hardly say we're fighting," I growl, frustrated by my situation.

"Tomato potato." Deacon puts his phone down but doesn't sit up. "You tried calling her?"

I grumble, "She turned off her phone."

He goes back to looking at his phone. "Ahhh, she's golfing then."

"What? Kathleen doesn't golf? And it's like two hours before she'd like to be out of bed." I shake my head.

He's clearly fucking stoned or hammered again. Then again, off the hook with the job, why wouldn't he be?

"You truly know nothing about her." Deacon sighs. "She must have left

earlier for mini-golfing. It's her happy place. Explains why she said goodbye."

"Where is it?" is what I ask him, but the second question is, what is it?

She said goodbye, and he's only now mentioning this? I want to chew his head off, but it isn't worth it. He won't care.

Deacon scratches his nose with his palm. "Probably the mall. But there are a few other courses she frequents to change it up during the winter. Call and ask if she's there?"

"Deacon, where?" I snap at him, frustrated.

This cryptic speak and half answers aren't helping what I'm feeling. *Why the fuck did she turn off her phone?*

"Oh, you're hopeless. Here." Deacon sits up and scoots his butt against the wall.

He starts scrolling through his phone. It's a second longer than I have patience for, and it finally rings.

"Putput and Gogo, this is Matt." An over-enthusiastic man answers the phone.

"Hey Matt, it's Deacon. Is Lena there?"

There's common familiarity in the conversation.

"Uhhh . . . Yeah, looks like she's here. Don't make me go get her. She got really mad last time." His tone changes to nervousness.

"Nah, that won't be necessary. Can you tell how many games she bought?" Deacon seems to know exactly what to ask.

He's done this before.

"Uhhh two, on the eighteen-hole course," Matt answers with a long pause. "She just got here. Second hole."

"Cool, thanks." He hangs up.

"Where?" I jingle my keys.

I'm so ready to go and find her. *What the fuck is she thinking leaving alone?*

My wolf paces inside. There's no telling who has access to her, and the media has made it clear they're not concerned with her privacy if they turned up at her work.

Deacon shakes his head. "You go down there now, she'll blow up. And get mad at Matt. Then she won't go back there for a while, so you'll be chasing her around the Twin Cities to different courses."

"What do you propose I do then?" I snarl.

Deacon, per usual, doesn't even seem intimidated. He truly has no fear of anything.

But the brother of my mate takes pity on me. "Go back to your apartment, Finn. Break into her place, steal her favorite sweatpants and shirt. Then leave her a note and take them to your place. Toss the clothes in the dryer. Then if you're fast, cook a meal or order in comfort food. She'll be back at her apartment about three hours from now. When she gets back, listen. Because after mini-golf, she's usually ready to talk."

Deacon's step-by-step instructions feel like he's said these words before.

The glutton for my own call for violence presses the words out of my lips. "How many men have you taught this trick to?"

"You really don't know her at all," Deacon repeats the sentiment. He slides himself up the wall before standing. "Lena doesn't date. She fucks and dumps. I'm telling you this because Cade likes you. Her favorite pj's are the ones that are almost falling apart and are super soft."

"I don't know what I've done wrong," I admit, hanging my head.

He's done nothing but help me. Deacon doesn't deserve the tone I've taken with him.

"She'll tell you, once she gets over the breaking and entering." Deacon sighs as he stumbles a bit.

I go to catch him, but he doesn't fall. "You okay, Deacon?"

Laughing, he stands up, shaking his head. "Oh, and Finn, just because Cade won't threaten you . . ." His voice goes hauntingly dark. His wolf's dark eyes come forward, punctuating his point. "Hurt my little sister and some bodies from your past won't stay buried. Ghosts are chatty, they'll help me make sure you find an early grave. Count on it."

Out of respect, I drop my head. "I understand."

Maybe the fight with Deacon was a little too easy on purpose.



I DO WHAT DEACON SAYS, BUT I TAKE IT ONE STEP FURTHER. IT'S A BOLD choice, but I grab her pillow off the bed. I noticed that she's been carrying it back and forth between the pack house and her apartment. It was the one she always pulled to sleep with each time I'd brought her enough comfort to sleep during her heat. After a last-second grab of her phone charger and

laptop, I make it back to my apartment.

I start making boxty. It's not fancy, but it's homey.

The step-by-step instructions from Deacon pairs well with the information Cade gave me. She's not used to relying on someone. She's not used to having someone care for her.

Yesterday, no. Not yesterday, fuck, this entire week. I did the wrong thing by not letting Lena know I would be stepping into Second. I knew she would be angry. My decision protected my peace, not hers. How is that any different from all the other surprises she's had sprung on her over the past month? Deacon is absolutely right, I've made a mistake, and my beautiful submissive was hurt because of it.

The potatoes are nearly cooked when I catch the sound of a slamming door. Only seconds later, my door rattles with the pounding of Lena's fist.

I don't grab my gun when opening the door. Lena tries to barge past me, but she's trapped as I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her back against my chest. The door falls closed behind us.

Her arms push down on my hold around her waist. "Let me go, you fucking bandit. I want my damn pillow and my fucking pj's and to never see your shit-eating grin face again."

"God knows I love a woman who can swear, but Kathleen, if you don't watch your mouth, I'll take a spoon to your ass," I threaten with a whisper in her ear, wrapping my other arm across her shoulders.

She's stuck against me, squirming to escape. The thrill of holding a feisty woman in my arms, *my* feisty woman, makes my cock twitch. Even if she does behave, maybe I'll see about taking a spoon to her ass anyway.

Lena goes quiet, and her body stills but doesn't relax. She's trapped in the rage she's harboring inside, and it permeates our bond. I refuse to let her live in that rage. I kiss down the side of her neck and then her shoulder, where my bite mark sits beneath her T-shirt. With a soft rumble, her body relaxes a fraction, but it's only slight relief.

"Good girl." I loosen my grasp to match the way she relaxed. "Your pajamas are in the dryer warming up, and your pillow is on the couch. I was an ass. I want to talk."

Lena's body unwinds, tension floods off, and she slowly looks around. "You made dinner?"

"Yes. I made you dinner. It's nothing fancy." I kiss the top of her head when I let her go, stepping away and running my hand across the back of her

shoulders.

CHAPTER 54

LENA

I'M ANGRY WITH HIM. I'M SO ANGRY. HE BROKE INTO MY APARTMENT AND stole my shit. But I'm also hungry, and he made dinner. My full-speed-ahead angry rage hits the pause button. I should stand my ground about this and keep being mad, but I don't want to go back to my apartment and eat who knows what so I don't attack a delivery driver.

"You're out of snacks," Finn says smugly.

I look back from the door to him, seeing his side-eyed look while plating food.

Conceding, I head to the back of his apartment, where the washer and dryer should be in the layout. The dryer is still spinning when I open the door. My sweatpants, T-shirt, and three of Finn's T-shirts fall to the bottom of the drum. The last of the warm air bellows out toward me. Finn's scent of fur and warm salty bread is thick. Based on how strong his scent clings to my clothes, those weren't clean T-shirts.

Clever asshole.

I swipe my items out of the dryer and head to the bathroom, leaving the dryer door open. Slipping out of my clothes and pulling on the dryer-fresh ones, I relish the warm, soft fabric against my skin. Holding up my shirt collar to my nose, I draw in a deep breath.

My wolf does a happy dance at the memories it brings of his touch and closeness.

Focus. I opt to go commando. *Two can play that game.*

I toss my underwear and bra in with his shirts and restart it. *If I have to smell like him, he has to smell like me.*

My wolf is practically preening with the way we're enveloped in his

smell. *So safe and cozy. We can live like this forever.*

Once I head back to the kitchen, Finn has put plates on the table. A beer sits next to one, and a water glass next to the other. I slide my butt into the chair with the beer and start taking my hair out of its messy bun.

Coming back to the table, Finn eyes me reaching for his beer. I pick it up and draw a swig. *It's mine now.*

"Don't you work tomorrow?" he scolds.

"And? Don't you?" I answer.

Keeping the beer in my hand, I press the bottle to my lips. The hoppy taste isn't my favorite, but it's the principle.

He sits in the other chair and prays over his food. I sit quietly while he finishes. Once he's done, I pick up my fork, playing with the top of what looks like a pancake with beef broth.

"Boxty. Potato pancake. I make them savory," he explains.

I take a bite, and now I understand what Thalia meant when she said Cade was sexier when she found out he could cook. Okay. So maybe I already knew he could cook. I mean, the food he made for me during my heat was some of the best things to ever go in my mouth. But it's a well-known fact that everything hits differently during your heat. Things taste better, they sound better. It's rose-colored glasses on all accounts to mask the pain of the cramps.

Sitting here though, I savor every bite. Finn can cook. Like *really cook*. His caring for me has remained consistent. He's never given in or even made it seem like I've asked for too much. He might not have always cooked for me but I've always been fed. Everything he's done has been consistent. Even after he found out my flaw, he's been nothing —

"I'm sorry, Kathleen," Finn says solemnly. "I should have told you before I put in the challenge."

Yeah. *That's why I'm mad.*

An apology wasn't what I expected. It's disarming, and I lean back in my chair watching him. When I look at Finn, he's hanging his head and pushing a fork full of food around his plate. It's actual shame, and it decommissions my anger.

"I knew you would be mad, and that wasn't an excuse to leave you in the dark about something that affects you." Finn raises his eyes to meet mine. "I will do better."

Finn's gaze is an intense sadness that seeps into my bones. No one has

ever taken responsibility like this. Cade keeps me in the dark all the time. Deacon is the dark, a black hole of lost information. Neither of them has ever really tried.

My wolf squirms. *He's trying to do the right thing. Now would be a good time to listen.*

I let my wolf yield to him as emotions swirl in my chest.

Nodding, I close my eyes and look away. If I don't look at him, maybe it'll stop me from feeling all the things.

It takes a moment before I can say the words he deserves to hear. "I accept your apology."

"Can you please explain why me being Second is so detrimental?" Finn's voice is softer. "I want to understand."

I shake my head. "It doesn't matter. It's done."

"It does matter. You. Matter," Finn says firmly.

Do I though? I don't voice the self-loathing remark.

Finn extends his hand across the table, offering to hold mine. "Give me ten seconds of honesty. I'm asking for a chance, Kathleen. It's all I want."

Disregarding that he wants to hold my hand, I draw another swig from the beer bottle.

My wolf is begging me to do anything he requests while my pride, self-preservation, or self-reliance wants to tell Finn to fuck off. It's like being torn down the middle between impossible choices. *How much more of my life do I keep sharing with Finn?*

All of it, my wolf answers with frustration, pointing out the obvious.

"Ten seconds. It's three sentences. If you talk slower, it's less." Finn tries to sell the request.

"Fine." I exaggerate a big sigh, putting my fork down.

"Ready?" He makes a show of looking at his watch.

I nod, and he takes a beat. "Go."

"It's the last place I had left that was mine. You were friends with Cade. But I had a seat at a table that you didn't. It was the last part of my life you hadn't found a way to permeate." I pause, letting the clock run out.

"Two, one." He reaches his hand across the table and touches mine. "Thank you."

Waiting for more of an interrogation, I'm pleasantly surprised when Finn pulls his hand back and eats a bit more. I go back to eating my boxty.

Just like Ansel, he doesn't push or pry. He accepts what I have to say and

how I say it without being reactive or getting upset. It's logical and rational. He lets me have feelings and doesn't try to overpower them. *Why does he have to be so good at this? Fuck.*

I pick up another bite of boxty.

"Bloody hell, Kathleen," he mutters.

"What?" I put my fork down cautiously, trying to figure out what 'bloody hell' is referencing.

"That sound. You'd think the boxty was eating you." His voice is a gravelly rumble mixed with the growl of his wolf.

Uhhhhh. Heat floods my cheeks. "I didn't realize I was making a noise. I'm sorry."

Finn's eyes lock with mine, and his wolf floods forward. Desire crosses between us, and I crave him low in my core as an unsettled, empty feeling lodges there.

He mutters under his breath, but I don't catch it.



FINN'S EYES HOLD A MISCHIEVOUS HEAT BY THE END OF DINNER.

"Alright, well, big day at the lab tomorrow. I've put off going over my data, and I should —"

He lets me stumble over my excuse as I gather my things and migrate back toward the door and start slipping on my shoes.

It's awkward trying to dismiss myself, mostly because I don't want to go alone. It's not like I can simply tell him to come back to my place after all the growling and demanding I did. Can I?

Before I even get my hands around the doorknob to leave, he curls his fingers, instructing me back toward him.

I follow his request. As I approach, Finn stands and reaches for me. The soft, warm smile on his face brings butterflies to my stomach. His hand comes to my chin, tilting it up, and I expect a kiss. Except the world blurs. Finn's hand finds my neck, and I'm pressed against the wall. He grabs my thigh and lifts me up, resting me on his knee with the wall at my back.

My heart is beating a million beats per second. And I'm smiling like a fool.

"Good girl," Finn praises before kissing me deeply.

The way his tongue easily slides inside my mouth calms my rampant heart.

Finn slides his other hand along the waistband of my sweats.

Chest to chest, Finn smiles. "Are these panties wet?"

What panties? I choose to shrug instead of voice my previous brat behavior. I can hear the dryer still running in the hallway. *Okay, he'll think this is funny later.*

"You know, the more you're a brat, the more I want to punish you until you behave?" Finn threatens me with a good time.

I arch forward, my pussy begging for more of his touch. Finn obliges, finally sliding his hand along my skin. The warmth of his fingers sliding lower further melts me.

"You made such a big deal when I kept your panties from you, and here you are without," Finn says with mock offense.

He slides his fingers lower, brushing over my clit. Finn isn't wasting time. He knows my body so well that it's nothing for him to work me to orgasm. The hand on my throat moves, and his thumb presses over the top of my jugular.

It doesn't take much before I'm getting light-headed.

"What's wrong, faolan?" Finn releases his hold on my neck.

It pulses and messes with my lucidity.

I draw deep breaths trying to focus on the feeling of his fingers fucking me. The building orgasm is equally enticing.

A moan escapes, and Finn's fingers retreat. He pulls them out of my pants and pats my pelvis.

"I'll let you have your space." Finn lets me down from the wall.

"No," I whine and push toward him. But I'm light-headed and have zero strength to make any sort of demands.

He waits until I'm steady on my feet before kissing the crown of my head and backing away from me toward the door.

My feet answer his suggestion, my brain reeling. Finn follows me out into the hallway as I walk down the short distance to my apartment door and let myself inside.

As I stand alone in the silence of my apartment, the realization sinks in: Finn disarmed my anger, made sure I was taken care of, and gave me enough of a reason to miss him with hopes that I'll come back for him. *Clever asshole indeed.*

You don't get to punish our mate. My wolf huffs in displeasure at me. Apologize. Maybe he'll fix it. Go get him.

Too stubborn to do so, I head to the bedroom and flip through my phone notifications.

FINN:

Remember, faolan, I control your orgasms. I'll allow you one tonight. But only one.

ME:

And how would you know if I had more than one?

He wishes.

If I didn't know that the apartment was soundproof, I'd think I could actually hear Finn laugh while typing his response.

FINN:

Well, faolan, if you want to be that way . . . I'll assume that you're misbehaving and will handle your attitude problem when we're together again.

I set my phone on the nightstand and curl up under the blankets.

He has no business being this good. That man walks right around every single one of my bratty behaviors. He's the fucking perfect Dominant and the most compatible I've ever been with sexually. He's a protective mate, willing to shed blood for me.

Beyond that, he cares for me, even if I don't want him to. He has no problem stepping in without me asking, and sometimes, even if I don't want him to. There hasn't been a problem, a person, or a situation that Finn isn't ready to deal with.

He sticks by my side and hunkers down to weather the storms as they come. Finn has seen the worst of it, my family, work and school, my ex, and my wolf. Through everything, he's steady and patient. *Mostly.*

My brain replays what happened on the side of the road when I told him about Doctor Thorpe. His accent and the anger in his tone plays back in my head, 'I can't just take a breath, Kathleen. I have to work for a man who fucked my mate. He fucked the woman I love.' *Mostly steady.*

There's something about Finn that draws me to him. It's the same thing that makes me think he'll never leave me.

My wolf rolls her eyes. *He won't. You're being stubborn again.*

I have to be the stubborn one because I messed up.
My phone buzzes from the nightstand.

FINN:

Sleep well faolan, I love you.

I've let him into my life, and where I didn't, he made a door for himself. We're now irrevocably attached and waiting for heartbreak. In all those little things, the tiny gestures, in the moments of just being there, I fucking love him.

Even if I don't understand how he can love me . . . *I'm in love with him.*
Agonizing for ten minutes, I finally settle on a message.

Take me to the lab tomorrow? Good night Finn, x.

CHAPTER 55

FINN

OPENING THE DOOR TO LENA'S LAB, I STEP IN. THERE'S SOMETHING different about Lena this week. She's found me for lunch and smiles when she sees me on my trips around the different lab departments.

And this time, when Lena sees me, it's no different. Her face lights up. It's a stark contrast to the glare I'm getting from Brayden.

Sick of his constant proximity to Lena, I take to tucking my hands in my pockets to stop me from hitting him.

"Speak of the devil." Brayden rolls his eyes.

"Lena, you ready to bunk off for the night?" I ask, trying to choose the high ground and ignore him altogether.

"She has work to do." Brayden answers for her. "You'll just have to go home without her."

"I will, yeah?" I try to stop the sarcasm.

Lena clears her throat. "Yeah, give me two minutes to get cleaned up?"

Brayden glares at me while I answer her. "Of course, foalan."

"Finn, can we have a word?" Brayden asks with a pathetic little human growl.

He's going to be more trouble than he's worth. I nod. "That'd be grand."

Brayden bumps elbows with me on his way out of the lab.

"For fuck's sake, the audacity of that ass," Lena whispers under her breath.

"Don't worry, faolan, I won't kill him with witnesses," I whisper to her, heading out to the hallway with him.

Brayden's pissing mad, and with a wave of his gangly arms, he insists we head a good two meters down the hallway to speak. His face turns beet red all

the way up to his ears. With his cheeks pinched in as he tries to draw his lip into a thin line, he looks more like a toddler about ready to throw a tantrum than a grown man ready to have a conversation.

“Out with it then,” I growl.

He shakes his head, crossing his arms in front of his chest before throwing them up in the air. “I thought we had an agreement, Finn.”

Oh, this again. My wolf rolls his eyes with me.

“Sure thing, the problem that you’ve missed is that Kathleen and I are mates. It’s not something that I can simply let go because your pea brain can’t figure it out.” I try to keep the insult out of it, but the pea brain slipped out. “Kathleen —”

“She doesn’t even like you,” Brayden cuts me off, starting on a rant. “She doesn’t want or need someone like you. Lena is special and needs someone who can handle the difficulties that come with who she is.” If Brayden is trying to talk in code, it’s not making a lot of sense. “You’re just all wrong for her, and I don’t think you see the kind of trouble you are for her. You’re going to hurt her, and she’s too nice to tell you to leave her alone.”

“I appreciate your concern for her, but Kathleen’s perfectly capable.” I try dismissing him again.

“You know what, Finn? I don’t think you understand.” Brayden shakes his head, his lip pulling up into a ridiculous sneer. “Fuck her and fuck you. Whatever happens now, it’s on your head. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He takes off down the hall, muttering under his breath, “Going to show that Irish prick what it means to have a woman. Dinosaur can’t fucking . . .”

He could be trouble. My wolf and I agree, listening to him go. I should follow him and see what trouble he’s up to, but the click of the lab door opening distracts me.

Lena is waiting for me with her jumper on and her purse strap draped across her chest. Her face lights up when I turn to look at her.

It’s another new development in whatever it is that’s happening with her this week. *Smiling.*

“Ready to go, faolan?” I step toward her, letting my eyes roam, admiring her.

Her long hair, draped down her shoulders, catches in the fluorescent lights, shining beautifully despite the lights’ harsh tones. “Yeah.”

Something’s not right. Nervous tension fills the air despite how smiley she is.

“Everything okay?” I ask as she approaches.

Instinctually, I run my hand along her cheek, wrapping my hand around to the base of her neck.

“Yeah,” she answers me again.

“Ten seconds?” I offer her, trying to open up the conversation.

Lena shakes her head. “No, it’s . . .” She sighs. “Later. I’m okay. I promise.”

Her words are sincere, but my wolf is locked on her, trying to examine her. I let him to the surface, trying to coax hers to rise as well.

Lena’s wolf doesn’t push forward to meet us. And when I send love into the bond, it’s dark and unresponsive.

Not wanting to force the issue, I usher her out the lab door. Once we get into the hallway, I walk with my arm around her, leading her to the parking lot.

“Lena!” Brayden’s squeaky voice calls out behind us.

Persistent, my wolf growls, but I suppress the rattle in my chest.

“Gotta go, Brayden. See you for Halloween!” Lena waves her hand over her shoulder at him dismissively.

Her coldness toward him is uncharacteristic, appreciated, but uncharacteristic.

I squeeze her a little tighter. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?” Lena leans in against me.

I rub my hand on her shoulder. “Just checking.”

Lena lets me open her car door and tuck her into the seat.

“Finn?” She starts to say something before cutting herself off. “No. Never mind.”

My heart is hammering in my chest. I don’t understand what’s different with her. She doesn’t seem unhappy. But whatever it is, it’s bothering her.

Driving back out to the pack property, I place my hand on her leg. She picks it up immediately, wrapping her little fingers around mine, increasing our connection.

“If there is something wrong, you’d tell me straight?” I ask her as I squeeze her hand.

“Cross my heart.” Lena does so, drawing an X across her beautiful tits with her free hand.

I embrace her words, wanting to relax into our weekend together. But I can’t shake the threat Brayden gave me. I should have followed him.

CHAPTER 56

FINN

SLEEP ENDS WITH A RIOT OF NOISE. INSTINCT KICKS IN. THE LOCK BOX ON MY nightstand opens, and my gun is in my hand in an instant. One of the noises is my phone lighting up on the nightstand. Ma's name is blinking on the screen. She'll have to be pissed at me for not answering later.

Another sound is the banging on the door.

Stalking through the apartment, my wolf lends me ears and eyes to navigate the unfamiliar space without turning on the lights. We've one focus: get to our mate.

Walking on the balls of my feet, I approach the apartment's door. The banging stops as I move forward. Whoever, whatever, is on the other side of the door is between me and my mate.

All I need to know is that Lena is safe. Fuck, why did I let her have her space after last night? It went against every bone in my body with the press out there, even if she is just next door.

A loud bang hits my door again. Ready to fight, I draw a deep breath. Cade's scent is on the other side. Gun pointed toward the floor, I stand to the side and open the door slowly.

"Get dressed and grab a bag. We've got to go. Two minutes and then you're waking Lena up," Cade barks.

I'm pulled off my course to Lena to get dressed.

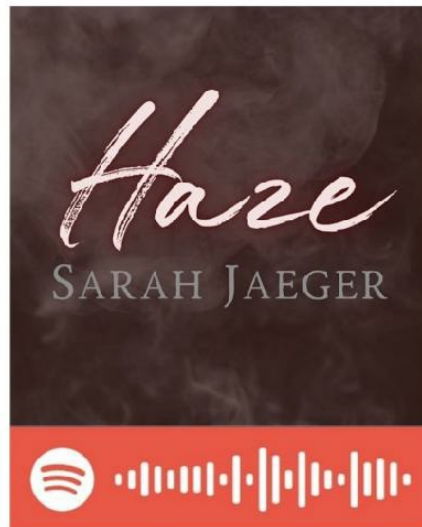
When I come back to the kitchen, Cade's leaning against the counter doing something on his phone.

"What's going on?" I push him for more information with a small growl, "Where's Lena?"

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