

HIS
DAMAGED
BEAST

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His Damaged Beast



Asilo

Book 4

Jena Wade & Lorelei M. Hart

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Chapter 1

Emory



Don't let anything happen to him. Please. Keep my son safe.

The words echoed in my mind, like they did nearly every day. Sometimes multiple times a day. They played back like a record on repeat. Or maybe record wasn't the best way to describe it. They haunted me, danced around me, and, at times, enveloped me until I could barely take in a full breath.

Rule number one of being a member of Asilo was don't get too attached to the omegas that we took care of here. It is the quickest path to burning out, and that was only if it didn't crush you. None of the omegas and children who came here were just stopping by on their way to a cruise. They were all here because something horrible happened in their life, or on rare occasions, they were in imminent danger of something horrible happening and needed the safe haven. It was

impossible not to shoulder some of that if you got too close, let them in a bit too deep, loved them too hard.

The Asilo packs and its members did something no other packs were able to do. We were important. We were amazing. But we weren't for long-term. We couldn't be. The emotional impact was too intense. There was no way around that. The only thing we could do was buy ourselves some time by protecting our mental health.

And it wasn't that we were cold or heartless. We wouldn't be able to accomplish jack shit if we were either. And yes, we had made lifelong friends with the omegas and their children—maybe acquaintances was a better word. Many kept in touch, sending us cards and well wishes over the years. But the end goal was always for them to move on with their lives, return to their packs or prides, or find new ones where they were safe and loved and could continue on with their lives.

When it came to Caleb, I had broken the rules—smashed them to smithereens, really. His omega father, Marshall, had come into our care in grave condition, with his son Caleb clinging to his side as the gurney brought him into our clinic. It had been too late for the omega, his injuries too severe for even the most amazing healer. The fact that he had stayed conscious for so long was a miracle in and of itself.

Caleb had been here since his father, Marshall's death. We kept him safe while his alpha father, the scumbag who had beaten his omega so badly that he had died, was on the run. We'd have done it for any of the children who came into our

care, but with Caleb, it was different. It was personal. Seeing him as he clung to his father as he took his last breath did something to me. It changed me irrevocably. I'd vowed never to let his alpha father near him, and I'd take my dying breath fighting for that end.

Without a parental figure for the child, I had stepped in without hesitation. He needed someone and every fiber of my being needed to make the world a better place for him. Maybe I stepped in too completely or maybe I could've given him more of what he needed. All I knew for sure was that I tried my best. It was all I could do.

I'd never be able to replace his omega father, nor was that something I'd even want. My goal was to make sure Caleb knew that he was loved and cared for, to keep him safe, and to help him remember that his omega father had loved and cared for him more than anything and anyone else on this planet.

My goal should've been to find a new home for him. Asilo wasn't a pack you came and joined. It was transitory by design. But the thought of Caleb leaving here and having to begin his life yet another time—that was unbearable.

"I don't think it gets any easier," Niko said. They were visiting from Northbay, and he was one of the omegas who really got what we tried to do here. Had he not discovered Northbay, he could easily have been one of our residents for a time. Not that you'd know it now. He was happy, mated to the Alpha, with a growing family and surrounded by friends.

He was also an amazing liaison and had brought a group of kids and the teacher of their art program here to work with Gabe, learning to paint different things.

He's also brought his son, Thad, who was currently climbing a tree with Caleb, and from the looks of things, it was not Caleb's first time.

"What's that?" I said.

"Watching them do dangerous things. More often than not, my heart is racing, not from chasing them around but from watching them explore the world. But you got to let him do it." Niko sounded so chill about it.

I was not as chill.

"I suppose," I said with a forced smile. "Doesn't mean I don't want to wrap him in bubble wrap."

Niko patted me on the shoulder. "Amen to that. It's all part of fatherhood. And I think more for us than some others. We know how bad the world can be. We just have to be the best parents we can. That's all we can do."

That had my stomach twisting. I wasn't Caleb's father. And according to Morgan's latest research, Caleb actually had an uncle out there who might be able to take custody of him. I hated the idea of him being picked up by a virtual stranger to begin a brand-new life. I also hated the notion that he would no longer be part of mine, but that was a me problem. I couldn't let that cloud my judgment or influence Caleb's future.

They continued to climb, and a few of the other members of Asilo joined us, including Jasper. It wasn't long before Gabe called everyone to join him and our guests for some cookies and juice.

"You alright?" Jasper asked once most everyone had left. He held a sleeping Cora in his arms. Caleb hadn't been tempted by cookies and was climbing even higher up the tree. His partner in crime ran off for cookies, and fair enough. They were good cookies.

"Of course," I lied. I wasn't sure I'd been okay one single day since Caleb and his father came.

"You're getting very attached." Jasper squeezed my shoulder. It was no surprise that he saw me... truly saw me. I wasn't ready to hear it, though.

"I know." I let out a slow sigh. There was no point in denying it. He would see through me, and really, it was nice to have someone who understood and who I could talk to if needed.

"It'll be hard to let him go." Jasper had no idea just how hard. And sure, part of it would be me missing him, but also... the worry. I would fear for his life, knowing that his piece-of-shit alpha sperm donor was still out there.

I shot him a glare, trying to cover my hurt and fears. Did Jasper deserve it? Absolutely not, but sometimes self-preservation won out. "I know," I growled.

"Okay," he said, backing off, and I instantly regretted my reaction.

Caleb leapt out of the tree, spreading his arms wide as if he planned on gliding like a squirrel through the air. My stomach lurched and I took a step forward, hoping I could get there in time. But there was no way. Much to my amazement, though, the kid hit the ground softly, tucking and rolling as he went. Then he popped back up on his feet.

The kid was going to be the death of me.

“Did you see? Did you see?” Caleb beamed with pride.

I nodded, my stomach still in knots, my heart still racing. “I saw.”

“I’m going to do it again.” Caleb bounced on the tips of his toes.

“No, maybe let’s...”

But he was already climbing back up the tree. Luckily, his impatience got the better of him and he didn’t climb too high this time. But he leaped down just the same. The panic still rose in me, but not to the same extent, which was better-ish.

“Oh my goodness,” I said.

Jasper chuckled. “I’m glad this little one is still shy and attached to me.” He held Cora, still sound asleep in his arms. The young toddler was adorable as she curled into her father’s arms, sucking her thumb.

“Just you wait,” I said. “She’ll be climbing soon enough.”

“Oh, I know. It’s going to be an adventure.” He smiled sweetly down at her.

“It always is,” Niko said as he came back out with Thad who was all too eager to play with his new buddy. “I’ve got three now. It doesn’t get any easier. It gets a little different, though. I’ll certainly let the youngest one do a lot more than I let the first one do.” He chuckled to himself. “Live and learn, I suppose.”

“Caleb,” I called up the tree, “why don’t you get started on your painting? I’m really excited to see what you come up with.” At least with painting the damage would be stained clothing and not stitches or broken bones.

Now that the kids had their snack and their play time, Gabe was getting started with the painting tutorial. He had set up a nice “classroom” outside for them. In theory it was so that they could be in nature, but also it was better than spilled paint in the cabins.

We joined them as a whole passel of kids, at least fifteen of them, ran to their easels that were set up.

Gabe walked around each of them, helping them to tie on their aprons, talking about what they would be painting that day. This was not a new program, but it was one of the first times that Caleb would be participating. He seemed to be enjoying it as much as the others all did, and that made me smile. He deserved all the happiness and fun he could get.

The paint-alongs were a big hit with all ages. The adult painting nights we had were always well attended. All of us could sit down with a glass of wine and unwind while we took

instruction from Gabe. I had quite a few cute little sunsets I had painted that adorned my walls.

A while later, once Caleb was done with his painting, he came running up to me, holding on to his canvas. There was just something about the dollar-store canvas that made the paintings feel that much more special to the artist. Caleb held his with pride, as if he'd just created a Picasso. And tilting my head to the side, I wasn't quite sure he hadn't.

"Can we hang it in my room?" he asked, once again bouncing on his toes.

"Absolutely, buddy," I said. "Let's lay it down to dry, though." He had been overly generous with some of the paint, and the last thing he needed was it dripping down the sides.

There were thick blobs of yellow and gold, making what looked to be a sunflower. I had to admit, it was pretty good for a kid his age. I was impressed by the way he'd made good use of the bright colors. Although I probably shouldn't be. That was Caleb to a T. He was a bright spot in the horrible world that we lived in. Caleb represented everything that was hopeful and good about the work we did in Asilo.

It was going to be difficult for me to trust him with anyone, especially a possible uncle whom Caleb had never once mentioned. But Asilo wasn't meant to be a forever pride. We were here to be there for omegas and children if they needed us. And there was going to be a point where I was going to have to admit to myself that Caleb no longer needed us.

Not going to lie, that day was going to tear my heart out, even though I knew deep down, it was exactly what the child needed.

Chapter 2

Shaw



Being discharged from the military and coming home wasn't what I thought it would be. I expected to arrive at my brother's new pride—his cackle—to be greeted by my brother with loving arms, share a hot meal, and, of course, hear all the gossip. I was also excited about bonding with my newest family member, my nephew Caleb. Instead, I walked into my worst nightmare.

After being in the military for several years, I had very limited contacts within the country, and even fewer within the shifter world. It was unheard of for a shifter to join the human military, frowned upon really, because the risk of exposure was so great. But the council never really did pay close attention to the backwards packs and clusters of shifters that

kept to themselves. And I wasn't the type to stay still and just go with the flow.

I had needed out of my pride, and with the education and skills I had, the military was my only viable option. I didn't ask or even tell them. I was officially ask-forgiveness-later guy.

The military seemed like a fantastic place to get away. Sure, I had rose-colored glasses on. But by the time I left, pretty much anything would've looked like a better option for my life.

The only person I stayed in contact with was my brother. And up until a few months ago, it was a pretty steady contact. Then Marshall stopped answering emails, didn't pick up when I called, and I was very rarely afforded the opportunity to call him. It was all very suspect, and both my beast and I were getting frenzied with worry. Frenzied shifters and military service were not the best combination.

The first thing I did when I landed was get my hands on a phone, the one I had overseas not compatible with local service. My animal was trapped beneath my skin, begging to be let out. We hadn't done well in the metal cage in the sky.

In due time, I assured my beast. He was pissed, but there was nothing I could do about that.

My number one priority after landing was to find my brother and make sure he was okay. My gut told me he wasn't, and I feared the worst. I hated leaving him, and I'd begged him to come with me. Heck, I offered to do something other than the military if only he'd come too. My brother was a stubborn one.

Marshall refused to leave with me, refused to leave our pride, and within a year of me being gone, he had mated to someone of our Alpha's choosing. The alpha wasn't even of our pride, or our species—not that I cared about that.

I cared that he wasn't who my brother chose. It was simply thrust upon him and not even by someone who worked to make the best match possible for both mates. No, it was the pride Alpha's choosing, which meant he either got money for my brother or power. Those were his two favorite things, and he didn't bother trying to hide that.

Marshall assured me that he was well taken care of, but I knew it was only a matter of time. I had heard things about how the hyenas ran their cackles, and if their Alpha arranged for one of their own to mate my brother... it sent chills down my back just thinking about it.

I had hoped that my gut was wrong, that I simply called him while he was out swimming or hunting, that he was living a happy, happy life. But when my calls went unanswered yet again, I had my answer, even if I hadn't wanted to or was ready to admit it to myself just then.

I procured myself a vehicle and made the drive to my brother's last known residence. It was a place I never expected to have to go, and I was sure I wouldn't be welcome there, even with my brother's home being there. There was only one way to find out, and I dared anyone to try and stop me from seeing my brother. Hyenas or not, I'd fight for him until my last breath.

The wheels of this human vehicle weren't getting me there fast enough. Between the initial traffic and now the path to the territory being overgrown, it was slow going. I had expected the traffic, but not the hyenas taking so little care of their land. It was obvious that at one point it had been a decent dirt road. But now? Now it was as if it hadn't been used and properly cleared.

When I parked the vehicle and got out, the forest had a stillness to it, an unsettling one. And the air reeked of rotten stench. There may have been other scents too, but after my accident, I wouldn't know. It sucked, keeping my beast on edge, especially in new situations like this.

The buildings, though they didn't appear long abandoned, it was clear that no one lived in them now. One front door was half open. I assumed it was the main house based on the size.

"Hello?" I called out, though I didn't know why. I couldn't scent any shifters around. My heart beat wildly in my chest. There was nothing here, no one, nothing except the stench of rotted food, as if everyone had left in a hurry.

Had there been a sickness? An attack?

I searched through the main house, not finding anything of worth. The place had been emptied of paperwork and any belongings of value. An old cot remained in one of the bedrooms, though from what I could discern, the scent of it was stale. Nothing had slept on there in a long time.

I gave into my animal and let him run loose. Clearly, I wasn't going to find my brother here. But where was he—were

everyone, for that matter? Having the building empty of valuables but not food didn't make sense. They either moved or they didn't.

Or maybe people cleaned this place out afterward. There were far more questions than answers, and I hated it. But really, I didn't care about any of the answers other than where my brother and nephew were.

I ran a long time around the territory, hoping to find something, anything that would indicate where they had all gone. I discovered nothing but frustration. It made no sense. None of this made sense.

The hyenas had never been a particularly large group, but they weren't tiny either. They couldn't have just vanished. Could they?

When I came back to the house after having eaten my fill of a rabbit who had been too slow to escape my hunting, I curled up on the cot and closed my eyes. Sleep was one thing I was good at. After being in the military for so many years, I learned to get a restful sleep whenever I could. And so, I was able to close my eyes and fall asleep just about anywhere.

When I awoke the next morning, it took a moment for me to determine where I was. Then the fear and concern came rushing back.

Where was my brother? And my nephew, of whom I'd only ever seen pictures and talked to on the phone extremely briefly. I'd never seen him in person. He knew me only by name. No scent or anything useful, not that I had my full

abilities. And maybe not even if I had. Maybe I was just a sound over a crappy cell connection and nothing more. Gods, this entire thing was completely fucked up.

I needed a plan for where to go to next and what to do once I got there. Staying here wasn't going to accomplish jack shit. I just wished I had a clue where to go next.

My stomach rumbled, and I decided to grab some breakfast and perhaps a shower in the creek before heading out. In theory, it would give me time to come up with a plan.

I made my way down the stairs of the house to find that another vehicle had pulled in the drive. A nice one. My body tensed. This place was abandoned, and abandoned places didn't house people who owned expensive cars. Who the heck was this?

My beast was on high alert.

The door opened and an omega got out.

I walked out onto the porch carefully. Something about him told me that he wasn't a stranger to defending himself. But at the same time, that he wasn't a threat to me. Unless I did something stupid, that was.

"State your business here," he said.

I held up my hands, showing that I was no threat to him in the way of humans. It might've been a good idea had either of us actually been human. My military years sure had messed with me.

"My brother used to live here," I said. "I thought he still did."

“How long ago?” he asked.

“Last I spoke to him was six months ago,” I replied. “He didn’t mention that he had moved or that he had plans to move. I’ve been in the military, stationed overseas.”

“You’re Shaw?” the omega said, taking me aback.

I sucked in a breath. “How do you know my name?”

The omega sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “It’s my business to know the name of every cackle member’s closest kin. I’m Marcus. I’m from Steelwick.”

“The enforcer pack?” I knew what Steelwick was, everyone did. And suddenly me seeing the omega instantly as someone who could take me down made sense. Steelwick was badass central. They did good work, but they were not to be crossed. “Why did this place need an enforcer pack to come in?”

“It’s a long story.” And from his tone, not a very pleasant one.

“Shorten it,” I said a bit more forcefully than I had intended.

“Tell me where my brother is.”

“Your brother... was Marshall? He had a little boy, Caleb?”

I nodded. My heart pounded and my skin slick with sweat. I didn’t miss the use of the past tense.

“Before I give you any more information, can I see some identification?”

Fuck. That was never, ever, ever a good sign. I’d seen that move far too many times in the military, and it always meant the worst kind of news. No one ever pulled that and said,

“Congratulations, you won a new car.” It was pretty much always something to do with death and destruction.

I pulled out my wallet and handed it to Marcus, not asking why. I knew.

“That checks out. I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but your brother was killed by his alpha.”

I pinched my eyes closed, tears threatening to fall. Hearing the words was like a punch to the gut. Even though my gut told me that they were coming, I wasn’t prepared. Not even close.

“My nephew... Caleb... his son?” My voice was so quiet that had Marcus not been a shifter, the chances were he wouldn’t have heard me.

“He’s alive.”

Relief flooded into me.

“Safe,” he continued. “I can’t tell you where. If you need to see him or want to see him, we can petition to get you access.”

“He’s with one of those groups that protect omegas?” That would be good. He’d be not only safe, but also treated well.

Marcus stood a little straighter. Asilo packs weren’t common knowledge, but I wasn’t a common shifter. “I cannot confirm nor deny,” he said.

I understood confidentiality. And I could read between the lines.

“He’s safe, though? What about my brother’s alpha?” The only answer I’d find acceptable to that one was him being back to

dust.

“He’s on the run.”

My heart sank, and my beast growled inside me. I was barely able to contain him.

“Unfortunately. We are looking for him.” Marcus grabbed the back of his neck.

My animal let out of growl, pushing past my constraints. “I’ll find him. He’ll pay for what he did.”

It might take until my last breath, but the murdering piece of shit who stole my brother from me and my nephew’s father from him was going to bleed out under my claws. Of that I vowed.

Chapter 3

Emory



“Emmy, do we have any more of those cake things?” It was adorable the way Caleb mispronounced my name. I knew that at some point he’d grow out of it and I’d simply be Emory, but not just yet.

I sighed and looked over at the half-asleep child sitting at my dining table. He still wore his fuzzy pajamas, the ones with the feet, and he rubbed his eyes with his sleeve. They were slightly too big for him. He would grow into them in another season, by next winter for sure.

But would I be here to see it? I sure hoped so. And at the same time, I felt guilty for doing so. The more I thought about Caleb growing up without knowing any of his blood relatives, the more heartbreaking that scenario felt.

But also... my heart ached at the thought of being without him. He'd wormed his way into my heart, and I thought of him as family now... my family. I knew I was growing too attached, had grown too attached. There was no getting away from it now. I might as well embrace it.

The aftermath was going to suck, but putting distance between us now wasn't going to make it any better.

"Let me see." I opened up the freezer and pulled out the pastries that I knew were there. "Looks like I saved some for you." I winked at him. Was getting him a sweet treat now the best parenting choice? Probably not. He'd had enough disappointments in his short life. I saw no reason to add another, no matter how small.

He grinned. He had a wiggly tooth out front that was hanging a bit crooked now. It would probably fall out the minute he took a bite. I was surprised it was still in there in the first place.

Despite what he thought, these weren't cakes that I slipped into the toaster. They were homemade pastries. Made from very fine ingredients and with a few extra nutrients snuck in for the little ones. It was one of Dean's recipes and made me feel better about always giving in.

While it warmed up, my phone beeped, and I grabbed it. It was a distinct notification letting me know that there was a visitor on the territory. I didn't think we were expecting anyone. But being that it wasn't the high-alert noise that happened when we had dangerous visitors, I knew it wasn't urgent.

I read the message quickly.

Visitor: Panther, alpha, friendly. Business unknown.

How they knew he was friendly without knowing their business I didn't know. But I trusted my pride, specifically Morgan—the Forerunner who had sent out the alert. Unfortunately, the situation was probably something I was going to have to deal with.

Sure enough, two seconds later, a message came from Morgan requesting my presence as quickly as possible in his office.

I sighed. “All right, dude. Finish up your breakfast, get your day clothes, and let's get you out there and to your class. Looks like they're all getting around.”

He didn't need to know anything about the visitor. He was a child and his biggest concerns in life should be whether or not I let him eat his cakes for breakfast or allowed him to climb trees higher than the roof. The grown-up stuff? That could be kept with the grown-ups.

Caleb hurried up. He loved school and that motivated him greatly. I was glad for it because Morgan wasn't going to want to wait for long.

Jasper and Thomas stood in the middle of the clearing, a few little ones surrounding them along with some of their omega parents. We had quite a few kids on the property now, including some that were permanent members. Unlike Caleb who was still just considered a guest, even though he had no one and nowhere to go, just me, they knew this was their home

—their forever home. All kids needed that. If only I could give it to Caleb. And to be fair, I was trying.

I'd already begun the research, but it was unprecedented for a member of an Asilo pack to adopt a child. Somehow in the history of all the Asilo packs, all children had found other homes or returned to their packs to take them in. It meant we were doing our job as a pack. But maybe, just maybe, there were other options when the situation called for it.

The idea of Caleb going anywhere but with me hurt too much. I couldn't bear the thought, especially not with his alpha father still on the loose. I didn't trust anyone but me to protect him. And cognitively, I knew that was grade-A bullshit, but I couldn't help how I felt. How fabulous it would be if I could.

Once Caleb was out the door and with Jasper, I jogged over to the Forerunner's house. The scent that tickled my nostrils brought me up short. My heart raced and my palms got sweaty.

No, no, no. This was impossible.

Whoever this visitor was, it felt like I knew them. They were familiar, but if I had scented them before, surely I would remember it. Nothing that scented this amazing could be forgotten.

"Emory, I'm glad you're here," Morgan said, walking out the door.

If he noticed my distress, he didn't comment.

"Our visitor..." I began. I needed to know more. Right now.

Is my mate, I thought in my head. There was no denying it. The longer I sat with his scent, the more sure I was. And my beast? He was pressing at me hard, claiming the yet unseen man as our own and clawing at me to go claim him already.

My beast had little patience. And by little, I meant none.

The words that came out of Morgan's mouth next...

"Is Caleb's uncle. He wants to talk about custody."

No. No. No. No. No.

Although maybe that wouldn't be a bad thing. We only had one visitor as far as I knew, and if that visitor was both my mate and Caleb's next of kin—there were far worse situations than that.

That wouldn't be so bad... An idea was forming in my head so quickly, I couldn't tamp it down. If Caleb's uncle was my mate, obviously there would be no reason for me to leave Caleb's life. But more than that, maybe even no reason for us to leave Asilo.

I was getting way ahead of myself... like miles ahead. I had to meet the man first. I pushed past Morgan and went straight for his office, following my nose the whole way.

A tall, broad-shouldered alpha sat in one of the chairs on the opposite end of the desk. He stood when he saw me. His eyes never changing, his pulse never increasing. Nothing about his outward demeanor changed when I walked in the room. I stood for several seconds looking at him.

Why wasn't he rushing to me... scenting me... feeling the warmth of my skin against his... freaking smiling at me? Something. Anything.

He held out a hand. "Shaw Panthos. You must be one of the omegas that helps run an Asilo." His smile was genuine and warm, but it was impersonal... surely not the type of smile you gave to your mate.

I blinked. There was no reaction. None at all. My mate was standing in front of me reaching out a hand as if we were going to become acquaintances. Shifters who simply had business to do together. Nothing more.

Was I not close enough? Maybe the air was flowing in the wrong direction. That had to be in.

I stepped forward more, my scent permeating the room. I knew it was.

I held out my hand and shook his. Maybe a physical touch would help. "Yes, I'm Emory."

His eyes widened in recognition. I let out a sigh of relief. Finally.

Then immediately sank back into despair when he spoke.

"So, you've been taking care of my nephew? That's great. I've heard nothing but amazing things about you." Which was not at all the same as acknowledging me as his mate.

Morgan came in the room next, and I was glad for it. Part of me was starting to think I was losing it—that I was imagining

the entire thing. “Yes, he has been taking care of your nephew.”

“Why isn’t Steelwick here?” I asked. Usually, family members were vetted by Steelwick before they arrived here. Come to think of it, I couldn’t think of a single solitary time that hadn’t been the case. And yet, here Shaw was, standing here with zero vetting from what I could tell.

Vetting was a safety measure, one put in place not only to protect those here, but to give them the peace of mind to know that there weren’t going to be alphas wandering through here at all times of the day and night.

Morgan grimaced. “That’s what I’d like to know. Apparently, even though Shaw here has spoken to Marcus and he knew that his nephew was with a protector pack and was safe, he took it upon himself to find out exactly which one and to come here.”

“The process with Steelwick was working too slow. I have already apologized for coming here unannounced.” He sounded sincere, and really, I couldn’t blame him. If someone told me I had to jump through a bunch of red tape to be able to see my nephew, one who had recently lost his father, I wouldn’t be waiting around for T’s to be crossed either.

“Well, it’s happened now, and you are no threat. We can tell that.” Morgan was always a voice of reason. It was one of the many reasons he was the ideal Forerunner.

“Of course not. The work you do here is very important, and I would never jeopardize that. I’m simply looking for my

family.” The emotion he was feeling ran so close to the surface. If only some of that had been longing to be with me... his mate.

I'm right here, I thought. Why didn't he see me as who I was... who I could be with him?

I looked to Morgan, seeing if maybe he noticed any difference. But it was business as usual for both him and Shaw. It didn't make sense... not any.

No reaction. None. Was I mistaken? Was it wishful thinking on my part? Nothing about this felt that way, but clearly something was wrong. It made sense that it was me who was wrong.

I scented him as my mate before I knew that he was Caleb's uncle. If it had been the opposite way, maybe I could be wish-fulfilling. But it wasn't. This was real.

“Just how did you find us?” Morgan asked.

Shaw grinned. “Your digital footprint isn't quite as hidden as you would like it to be. There's more you can do to fix that. I simply followed the path. The concerning part is that if I can do it, others can too. Your information is safe with me.” He rubbed his chin. “I will erase all traces that I found of you. That will be a start. But you will need to work together to figure out a way to really lock it all down. Your work is too valuable here to have something stupid like a bit of data hacking lead you to danger.”

“How can we trust that you’ll do that?” Morgan asked. His question didn’t come across as accusatory, just information seeking.

“Frankly, you don’t have a choice,” Shaw said. “But also, think about it, I’m not some rando. I’m Caleb’s uncle. Your work here kept him safe until I could come here for him. Why wouldn’t I want the same for all the other omegas here?”

Morgan didn’t answer him right away. Or really at all. We’d all thought we were well hidden and, at the most, some people suspected our existence due to lore. But this? This was hardcore proof that we were sitting ducks, that any rando who was good with a computer could descend on us at any time.

Chapter 4

Shaw



Getting a read on the omega in front of me was not as easy as I anticipated. Generally, I could read people both easily and well, it was part of my job after all. And since the injury that fucked up my sense of smell several years ago, I had gotten quite good at reading others' body language—both shifter and human.

I went from being able to enjoy all the glorious smells surrounding me to only scenting decay with one accident. I thought at first my limited ability meant that I was going to regain my ability, like it was partway there and only going to grow. How wrong I was. Rotten food? That I could smell from a mile away. Stale old air? Death? They permeated my existence. But flowers? Baked goods? Even coffee were a no-go for me. It fucking sucked. I'd rather it be all gone than this.

I'd been caught in an explosion, and whatever chemicals had been used to create the bomb altered my sense of smell to the point where it was nearly useless. Unless I was looking for dead bodies on a mission, all this did was make me miserable.

I hadn't bothered to work with any doctors to figure out how to fix it. I genuinely didn't like the military doctors to poke and prod at me too much, or else they might learn that I was a little more than human. And scenting wasn't something they would be worried about. If we could see, hear, and shoot... that was pretty much all they cared about. It sucked, but what could I do?

If at any time I wished for my sense of smell to return it was now. I needed to know what this gorgeous omega next to me was thinking, was feeling, and if he found me as attractive as I found him. And really, that should not be my focus, but I couldn't help it. There was just something about him.

He was half a foot shorter than me and lean. His eyes were bright, and I could sense the animal beneath the surface. A cat. Perhaps a panther like me? Without my sense of smell, it was impossible to tell for sure.

When he first walked in, his heart rate had increased, and he looked at me with such alarm. I thought perhaps he was scared, but he never once backed down from any of our interactions. Now maybe it my wishful thinking or possibly it was something else altogether... possibly attraction?

I loved how this omega had teeth and he was not afraid to use them. He was not cowering to anyone, and if push came to

shove, I could sense his beast close, ready to spring into action. He was something.

Throughout the course of the discussion, he went from being surprised to outright hostile. I didn't understand the whys of it. Nothing said seemed negative, but he was definitely not okay with the way things were playing out.

“Who's to say that you would be the best candidate to meet your nephew?” he asked, cutting straight to the point.

I shot him a glare. I was many things, but unfit to take care of my nephew wasn't one of them. And it wasn't as if I abandoned them. I was deployed. “I am his family. What do you mean?” I tried to keep an even keel, and it was a challenge and a half.

“You've been in the military. You haven't been near him his whole life.”

“Ask him about me,” I said. “He knows who I am. We have communicated via phone conversations and other things. I have not been some absent uncle. He knows me.” I was hoping that was true, the about him remembering me part. He was still young and had so much trauma in his short life.

“He hasn't mentioned you the whole time he's been here,” Emory countered without skipping a beat. In a way, it made me like him more. He was putting Caleb first. That was to be commended. But also—what the fuck.

“He just lost his only parent, and his terrible alpha father is still out there. Perhaps it slipped his mind that he does have

kin, when he's never seen me in person." And what did it matter if he did or didn't remember me? That didn't make me any less fit.

"Emory," the Forerunner began. "Our goal is always reunification with the family when possible, and that is still the case here." The Forerunner's cell phone rang. "Excuse me a moment. I do have to take this." He slipped out of the room.

"Do you have any interest in taking care of children? What exactly are your qualifications for caring for him? How do we know that you're the best option?" Emory ripped right into me.

"Why are you so sure I'm not?" I asked. "I am his family. I do want what's best for him."

The omega breathed through his nose. His chest heaving as if he was barely containing himself.

"You've grown attached to my nephew, haven't you?" Even with how little I knew of Asilo, I knew that growing attached wasn't the pack members' job. They were there to help heal and to help the omegas in their care move on.

Emory gave one slight nod, as if giving up that information was hard enough.

I sighed. "It's not hard to do. He's a great kid. Is he still into those Lego blocks?"

Another nod.

I chuckled. "I have a few for him that I picked up before I got on the plane. Before I learned about everything. Perhaps you

could give him one and let him know it's from me? We can start introducing him to me slowly. I'm in no hurry to disrupt his life any more than it already has been. And I need to get settled myself. As long as you all have the space for him here, then he should stay."

He needed to see that I was putting Caleb first. And if Emory cared about him this much, it was safe to say that my nephew cared about him too. Ripping him out of here wasn't in his best interest. And making sure Caleb was well adjusted was all of our goals, even if the how looked different.

"There's always room for anyone in need at Asilo." It was as if he were reading from a brochure. How many times had he said that line to how many people? I hated that this pack and others like it were even needed but was so very glad they were there for those they served. I couldn't imagine what would've happened to Caleb if not for them.

"Omegas in need, right?" I clarified. As much as I hated it, I too needed a place to stay.

"Perhaps once upon a time, but things have changed. There've been some shifts in how we work. Asilo is still run by Morgan, the Forerunner, but we do have alphas who live here."

"Really? Does my solution sound agreeable to you?" I asked.

"I know that I should not have gotten so attached to Caleb. I understand that I'm not his forever home." The way he sounded so defeated had me longing to reach out and give him comfort.

My heart went out to the omega next to me in a way I hadn't expected. So much so that I wanted to pull him into my arms and hug him close, to let him know that it would be okay, that I was here for him.

Goddess, how I wished I could bury my nose in his neck and inhale his scent and have it mean something. Whatever his scent was, I was sure it was delicious. But that was ridiculous. We barely knew each other, and I couldn't go around acting all feral on him. Even if that was exactly what I longed to do.

"He's a great kid. My brother was an amazing dad. I hate that he stayed there... that he mated with that alpha. When I found out about the match, I tried to come home, but he told me it was fine and that if I left, I was putting myself at risk with the military. I hated that he was right, and I hate myself more for listening. No part of it was fine."

"It might've been, for a while. You did the best you could with the information you had at the time," Emory said. "In hindsight, there were some extenuating circumstances. Things have happened recently in the shifter world. I'll have to talk to Morgan about how much I can tell you. But yeah... the hyenas got messed up in things they shouldn't."

That was on brand for what I knew of the hyena cackles.

"Is Caleb safe here?" I hated to ask, not wanting Emory to think I didn't trust them, but not asking would've been neglectful on my end.

Emory noted. "Yes, he is." His eyes turned soft when he looked at me now. At least some of his anger had dissipated.

He just wanted the best for my nephew. I saw that now, clear as day.

“How about I give you the Lego set? You can tell him it’s from me.” It wasn’t the same as getting it from me, but this wasn’t about me. None of this was. I needed to put Caleb first, full stop.

Emory nodded. “Tomorrow we can set up a video chat, or if Caleb wants to see you in person, we can meet at a central location.”

“That sounds good.”

“Generally, in situations like this where there is an outside family member that can take custody, we begin small with incremental visits. First with a chaperone, then without one, then an overnight visit.” He explained everything to me. I loved that they had plans in place... that they put the children first.

This was all happening quicker than I expected, but at the same time, so very slow. Ever since I found out about my brother’s death, I’d been looking for my nephew. I hadn’t spent any time figuring out where I would go or what I would do once I found him. Sure, I had some money to make a new start, but that was in. I didn’t even have a location in mind. There was so much to figure out.

“I don’t have a place yet. I’m staying at a hotel in town.” I’d rather stay on the property, especially now that I knew it was a possibility. But that was for them to offer, not for me to

request. They understood their current residents and what my presence might or might not mean to them.

“We can work with that. Steelwick has resources to help any shifter find a new home, if that is what you’d like.”

Honestly, I wasn’t sure what I wanted. I hadn’t thought past finding my nephew. I reached a hand out, ready to rest it on Emory’s shoulder and thank him for his kindness.

He reeled back as if I was going to strike him. I hated that I scared him, or maybe startled was a better word. Either way, my desire to take it back so he didn’t suffer, even for that moment, was intense. I didn’t understand the pull I felt to this omega. And maybe I never would, but there was no denying that it was both there and powerful.

I pulled my hand back instantly and added no touching the omega to my list of things I learned today. There was so much to think about, between my nephew’s story, the way this pack ran, and what the next steps were going to be. But where was my mind? It was dissecting every last gesture and movement I witnessed from Emory. My desire to know him and to figure out what made him tick was getting stronger by the minute.

What the heck was I supposed to do with that?

Chapter 5

Emory



The nerve of that man, that alpha, to march in here looking all perfect and scenting as if he was my mate only to ignore me and then demand that I let him see Caleb, as if he had any right to be a part of Caleb's life.

Did I mention that he ignored me and who I was to him? What the heck was that about? I could barely breathe in there without sporting a woody, and he acted as if I were nothing but a regular omega who meant nothing to him. What was it about me that made our mating call so easy to ignore?

And the worst part was that even as all of these thoughts were bouncing around my head, I fully understood that I was the one in the wrong. Maybe not wrong so much as the one who was blowing all of this out of proportion, at least as far as Caleb was concerned. The mate stuff? I wasn't even sure at

this point what to make of that. In theory fated mates felt it from both sides, and clearly his side didn't feel jack shit.

And Caleb. Of course, Shaw had every right to be a part of his life. He was family. An uncle. An uncle who was hurting over the loss of his brother. He'd gotten to Caleb as soon as he could, even breaking a few laws along the way. He was probably going to be in a world of shit with Armand, the Alpha-Elect of Steelwick, once they figured out what happened.

That didn't stop my brain from asking over and over again, where the hell was he when his own brother was being beaten to death? Deployment is deployment. He had no choice, and yet... the irrational anger over him not being there was still raw.

My breath came in heavy pants as I stomped across the backyard, where we usually had a yoga session meant to calm and heal. I was so mad I could spit, and yet if someone asked me what was wrong, there was nothing I could say that wouldn't make me look like the bad guy.

Objectively, this was the best-case scenario for Caleb. A family member, one who loved him enough to come here and try to figure out a plan instead of simply demanding the child go with him. He even came with Caleb's favorite toy.

All of the methods I taught the omegas in our charge went out the window as I fought to keep my anger under control. The emotions were elevated, I understood this cognitively, but that didn't make any difference. My heart hurt on multiple levels.

This entire scenario sucked, and I needed to get myself under control. I knew better, which meant I had to do better.

Anger was, of course, a natural reaction to a lot of the trauma that the omegas in our ward faced. But it was a secondary emotion, derived from emotions we weren't quite ready to name.

For me, that emotion was fear.

I was afraid Caleb was being taken away and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I was afraid of never being accepted by my mate. I was afraid of being alone forever. It was nearly paralyzing.

It was unhealthy to give in to the anger and let it consume me, as I was doing right now. I needed an outlet. I needed to do something. Destroy something. Only destruction also wasn't necessarily a healthy outlet.

Not for the first time, I thought about the fact that we could really use a break room in this place. What better way to let out anger than to destroy things in a way that could do the least harm?

If I wanted to be destructive, at least maybe I could be productive.

And like the grown-ass omega that I was, I stomped over to the pile of logs we had waiting to be split. We had a machine for that, one that was fairly easy to use and quite effective. There was no actual need to grab the axe and do all of the work manually. It was more time-consuming and exerted a lot

of energy. But that was what I needed at this moment. The hard work would do me well.

I grabbed the first log and went to work, slamming the axe down hard. The log split into pieces. The first strike didn't make me feel that much better, but the fiftieth finally did wear me down a bit.

By the one hundredth strike, and countless logs that I split, I could barely lift my arms. It was exactly what I needed. Or at least it distracted me enough to give me some reprieve.

“Are you quite done?” Jasper asked.

I sank back, leaning against the shed where we kept the split wood.

“I suppose,” I said.

His gaze roved over my face as if looking for something. There was pity in his eyes. He always saw more than I did when he looked at people. It was part of the reason he was so good at what he did.

“I know what you're going to say. I know I should not have gotten too attached.” There was no reason to pretend otherwise.

He nodded.

“It's good that Caleb has family and that he isn't all alone in the world.” And there wasn't a day that passed by that I didn't wish that person was his omega father. But I couldn't change the past, and dwelling on it too hard never did anyone any good.

Jasper nodded again.

“We’re lucky someone wants to be a part of his life.” Not once had Shaw come across as someone doing this because of duty or the like. He loved this little boy, the one he’d only met via phone. That said a lot about his character and what kind of guardian he was going to be.

Another nod. The pity in his eyes just got deeper.

A sob began in my throat and worked its way out of my mouth. I tried to hold it back, but it tore out of me. I fell into Jasper’s embrace.

“Why did I get so attached?”

“It happens,” he said.

“It’s never happened before, not to me,” I said.

“I know.” He held me close. “I know.”

“He’s such a great kid. He deserves the world,” I cried. “He is... he’s going to grow up to do great things.”

“He will,” Jasper agreed.

“But I won’t get to see them.” Which was selfish. I knew this. But you can’t help how you feel.

“You might,” Jasper said.

“I won’t. Being raised in Asilo is not an option for him.” I contained myself and took a step back, swiping at my eyes.

“Can we find out everything we need to know about this alpha? I want to believe that he is trustworthy, and my instincts tell me he is, but I can’t trust them right now. Not

with Caleb.” Not to mention the fact that my instincts told me that Shaw was my mate, only clearly that was a mistake. Or if it wasn’t a mistake, then I was being full-on rejected and that sucked even harder.

Jasper nodded. “Marcus did a preliminary check when he first found him at the hyenas’ territory. I’ll have him dig a little deeper, but everything’s looking shipshape. Had he not tracked down Asilo on his own, he would have been brought here by Marcus officially within the next week or so.”

I knew that that would’ve been the case. It was on the tip of the tongue to tell Jasper who Shaw was to me, but that was a hurt I was not ready to face. Outright rejection of my mate or at least him completely ignoring me was not something I was prepared to process. Instead, I would just ignore it and focus on the main issue at hand: what was best for Caleb.

“Are you going to spend time with Caleb and Shaw together?” Jasper asked.

I nodded. “I’ll tell Caleb about Shaw tonight. And tomorrow we’ll do a phone call. This weekend we’ll do a home visit. We’ll go through the process. Depending on how Caleb reacts, he could be looking to move in with Shaw within two weeks.”

My gut clenched. In two weeks, my home would be empty, and my heart... I don’t know what shape that would be in. But also, I was happy for Caleb, because as much as I didn’t like it, I knew that this was best.

“Shaw just returned home. I don’t know that he has a place to live yet. Not according to the paperwork I read,” Jasper said,

and he was right. Shaw had admitted as much. But this was one of those cases where that didn't matter, at least not as much as it usually would have.

“No, but I imagine Steelwick will help him find one.” It was what they did, and with Shaw being ex-military, I wouldn't be overly surprised if that place was with them.

Jasper nodded. “They will help him. It's what they do.”

“This is going to be hard,” I admitted.

Jasper squeezed my hand. Sympathy replaced the pity in his eyes.

“I can do this, right?”

“You can.” Jasper smiled kindly. “I don't know what to say, honestly. It was looking like Caleb was going to be here with us for the long haul, and this is a big change from that. It's better for him and all, but we'd been treating him like he was staying, and now... it's going to take some time, especially for you. It's important that family sticks together, but that doesn't make it any easier.”

I shook my head. “Damn right, it doesn't.”

“You have all of us here if you need to talk. You should tell Morgan, also.”

Jasper wouldn't go so far as telling Morgan for me if I didn't fess up, but he would push until I did. And really, Morgan deserved to know everything that could impact Asilo. Keeping anything from him would hurt his ability to do his job well. And this was not a little thing.

“I know that.” Even though Jasper, Kian, and Morgan all had their mates, we were all incredibly close.

I had a mate too, but he acted as if I didn’t exist, and I still wasn’t sure what to do with that. Ignoring it wasn’t going to be a long-term solution, that was for sure. But the question remained, what was the right way to go about this?

Did I ask him why he didn’t want me? Ask him how he could be so cool toward ignoring the mating pull? That wouldn’t get me very far. He would probably just say that he didn’t feel it and I was making it up, because that way he could ignore the problem altogether.

Or maybe he was ignoring it because he thought I was ignoring him? That could be a thing, right? Only his heart didn’t do the pitter-patter like mine did when I first scented him. He hadn’t done any inadvertent scenting of me. And he didn’t hesitate to say he was leaving. Wouldn’t his voice hitch just the tiniest of bits if he was ignoring me because he thought he was being rejected?

No. That did seem like what was going on.

Which all circled around to him not wanting me or the pull being one-sided, and it sucked. And what sucked the most was that I still wanted him. Not because of Caleb, although I’d be lying if I said that was going to sting, but they were two separate issues that fate somehow decided needed to be tangled into one.

How many times had I told my friends that fate didn’t make mistakes, only to be proven wrong in the most heart-

wrenching way possible? Maybe I needed to cut some more wood. At least aching arms would distract me from the ache in my heart.

Chapter 6

Shaw



I was early. And nervous. Not the best combination.

I hadn't been nervous for any of the countless missions I'd been deployed on for the military. I hadn't been nervous when I'd been captured by enemies or had been caught in enemy territory. Nope. All of those situations had me cool as a cucumber. But today?

Today I was so nervous that my beast was wanting to take over—to calm me.

And my anxiety came from different directions, making it more difficult to handle. Not only was I meeting my nephew in person for the first time, but there was also the omega that I knew would be accompanying him to consider. Something about Emory had gotten under my skin—deep. The vision of

him was behind my eyes every time I closed them, and thoughts of him plagued my waking moments, but in a good way. His voice soothed my soul, and I could get lost in his eyes.

I had a feeling that the attraction wasn't one-sided. He hadn't said as much, but the bulge in his pants didn't lie. The only problem was, what, if anything, could I do about it? Nothing. Especially not with things so unsettled with Caleb. We had to put him first and every fiber of my being knew that Emory would feel the same way. He cared deeply for my nephew, and Caleb came first. For both of us. As it should be.

He made no secret that he felt paternal toward my nephew, and I was grateful for it. It meant that during his time here, Caleb was never treated like a burden. It also meant that my nephew probably felt a strong bond with Emory and this pack too. He would in essence be uprooted again. Maybe I didn't have to take him away after all?

I tucked that thought away, unable to think clearly about it or anything else right now. My nerves were taking over, and it was all I could do not to let them overwhelm me.

Only, ignoring the notion once it had taken root proved problematic. It made sense to keep things as "normal" for him as possible. If only it were as easy as that. What was I going to do? Set up my life in Asilo? There was no place for me here. I was an alpha and, for many of the omegas, probably the worst type. Not in action, of course, but my military training had my posture and mannerisms far more menacing than I wanted. I

could and would work on undoing all of that training, but it would take time.

A car pulled up and parked in the parking lot, which was empty except for the beat-up truck that I was driving. For the first time I became acutely aware of how unprepared financially I must look to Asilo. The truck looked like it was lucky to make it from point A to point B.

Emory got out of the driver's side and pulled open the back door, letting my nephew out. Caleb was taller than I imagined him to be. At seven, he was not a little kid anymore, but not quite a tween. Had his life been what it should've been, he'd be all about playing and his friends at school. But it hadn't been, and I hated how that part of his life was yanked from him. It was a time he'd never be able to recapture.

Caleb's hair was long and shaggy. It suited him. His ears were a little too big for his face, just like my brother's had been at his age, and it sent an ache into my heart. Had I been sent a picture of him in this moment, I might think it was one of my brother from long ago. He truly was his mini-me.

Caleb's eyes focused on the ground in front of him rather than taking in his surroundings. I didn't need to be able to sense his distress and fear to know it was there. If only I could take it all from him.

Caleb lifted his gaze when the wind shifted, his eyes meeting my face.

I waved at him, wanting him to know I was there, but not wanting to push him to do anything. Even greeting him by

name could add undue pressure. This all needed to be in his time, not ours.

Caleb's eyes narrowed in an expression I couldn't decipher.

Emory put a protective arm around Caleb's shoulder and led him toward me. Caleb leaned into his embrace; the omega was a safe place for him. For that I was grateful.

"Hi, Caleb." I stuck out my hand. "It's nice to finally meet you in person."

He looked at me as if not sure what to make of me. He took a deep breath. His eyes weren't quite filled with fear, but they weren't filled with acceptance either. He was unsure, and I got that. I'd have honestly been worried if he hadn't been.

"You smell like him," he said.

"Like who?" I suspected I already knew the answer.

"My dad. You smell like my alpha dad because you're an alpha, but you smell like my omega dad because you're a panther like him, right?"

I cringed, hating that I reminded him of the man who killed his father. But also, it was nice that I brought a bit of my brother to him.

"I am a panther, yes."

"I'm a hyena, like my alpha dad." He looked to the ground. Did he think that was something to be embarrassed about? It wasn't. Or worse, maybe he feared it made him like the murdering piece of shit. Your fathers were supposed to love

and protect you with all that they were, and his alpha father broke that in the worst way possible.

“I know,” I said. “Maybe someday soon you can show me. Not here.” I didn’t want him to feel pressured to share that side of himself.

“I don’t want to be like my alpha dad.” His voice was low, but it broke my heart.

“You’re not. You might share the same animal, but you are kind and smart, like your omega dad. I know it.” I squatted down to be more eye level with him. “When I first saw you get out of the vehicle, it was as if I was looking at my brother from back when we were your age. You look so much like him.”

That at least had him almost smiling.

I straightened myself and looked around. There was no one within hearing distance, but still it didn’t hurt to be more careful.

“Do you want to play on the swings? I know you really liked those at the house,” Emory said, breaking the tension. “Your uncle can push you.”

Caleb shook his head. “Dad always said you were good at chess. Do you want to play chess?”

My eyebrows lifted. I couldn’t have been more surprised if he asked me if I wanted to do ballet dance. I was good at chess compared to my brother, but I was hardly a chess master. I

crossed my fingers that I didn't disappoint him with my skill level.

"Yeah, is there..." I looked around the park. Sure enough, there was a set of tables and a chess set in the far corner. "Did your dad teach you?" I asked as we began our walk to the table.

He nodded.

"That's great. I haven't gotten a chance to play since I've been home. I might be a little rusty." Or a lot rusty. I hadn't made many friends in the military. Making connections with people when you had a huge-ass furry secret between you was challenging, and after basic training I stopped trying.

"I play on my tablet. I'm playing at a master level now." He beamed with pride, and I was confident that he was going to give me a run for my money. I loved it.

I let out a low whistle. "No kidding?" We sat down, and Emory sat next to us. He stayed quiet, letting us have our moment while letting my nephew know that he was there.

Emory pulled out his phone and began looking at it, giving us the space we needed. It didn't take much time to get the board set up, and within two moves, Caleb was showing me just how good of a player he was. I had to concentrate fully in order to keep up with him.

"Check," he said finally.

"Okay..." My palms were getting sweaty now. This felt like a test. Should I let him win? I was past letting him win. He was

skilled enough that he did not need me to be kind in that way. Would I look weak if I lost? I wasn't for any of that macho bullshit, but what would he think if I couldn't win? Or worse, what if he realized I let him win and thought that I didn't think he could handle losing?

This was hard in a way I hadn't expected.

In the end I gave him a run for his money but finally succumbed to his skill. I loved that at his young age he could wipe the board with me. But also, I needed to up my skills so he still felt I was worthy to play with him.

Once he had my queen captured, it was only a matter of time before he shouted, "Checkmate," and folded his arms, leaning back with a smug smile.

I didn't care if it was smug or not, I was just happy that he was happy.

"You are pretty talented," I said. "I'm going to have to practice more."

"Next time I'll go a little easier on you."

I wasn't sure if he was teasing or not.

I chuckled. "I don't necessarily need you to go easier." Although maybe I did. I hadn't seen his checkmate coming until it was too late.

"Dad and I used to play a lot," he said. He got quiet, and it was like a cloud of sadness rolled over him and he collapsed in on himself. Grief was like that sometimes. Hitting us at the oddest of moments and feeling just as raw. He swept his arm out and

wiped all the pieces off the board. “I don’t want to play again. Chess is dumb.”

Emory shot me a sympathetic look. I understood this wasn’t about me.

“I miss him, too,” I said. “Some days it hits so deeply that I can’t breathe.”

“No, you don’t. You can’t possibly miss him. You haven’t even seen him in person ever. Not since I’ve been alive!” His anger was fair, and had I known then what I knew now I’d have made different decisions. But I couldn’t change the past.

And he was wrong, not that I would correct him. I had been around when Caleb was a baby, but I couldn’t possibly tell him that at this moment. It would only come across as defensive and invalidate his reality. Because to Caleb, I’d never been there.

“I want to go home. Take me home, Emmie.”

Emmie. I wouldn’t have guessed Emory to be an Emmie, but there was such affection in Caleb’s voice as he said it that the nickname fit.

Emory sighed. “It’s okay to be angry, Caleb. It’s understandable when that anger comes out. We’ve talked about what to do.”

Caleb took a couple of deep breaths. “I still want to go. I’m done here.”

“Okay. That’s fine,” I said. “Thank you for playing with me.”

Caleb started walking toward the car, and Emory turned to me, his mouth opening.

“It’s fine,” I said.

“Believe it or not, this went really well,” he said, and he put a hand over mine.

My skin tingled where his skin touched mine, and it was like electricity shot through my limbs. Oh, how I wanted to scent him and just rub all over him so that he was marinated in my scent. It didn’t make sense, but what of any of this situation did?

Too bad all that I could scent was burnt cinnamon and an animal decaying off in the distance. It was hard to pinpoint what I had scented, but just like always, it was nothing good. I fucking hated it. After the accident, I grew to come to terms with my nose’s missing ability.

Times like now was when I missed it the most and the frustration returned.

“We’ll try again in a few days,” Emory promised.

“Okay.” Because what else was there to say.

Chapter 7

Emory



I sat by the pond, letting the cool morning air wash over my skin. The water lapped peacefully against the shoreline. There were tiny, colorful buckets and shovels in the sand, just waiting for the kids to arrive to play.

A lot of Asilo was like that now, toys left in places for the kids to return to. We wanted the children to feel like this place was for them too and having items just for them in key places helped with that. It had been Jasper's idea, and we were impressed by how well it worked.

In some packs, Caleb would be considered a little old to be playing in the sand or with some of the other baby toys we had, but that didn't stop him. I loved that he felt comfortable enough to enjoy the things he enjoyed. He loved being a kid, and I wanted to have him be a kid for as long as he could, his

early childhood having been robbed from him, and honestly, he had his entire life to be an adult. Why rush to get there?

I was so confused as to what was best for him. I was sure that Shaw didn't think his first meeting with Caleb since his return went well, but it truly had. I'd been to enough reunifications to know how horribly they could go. Even the best-case scenarios had rough patches. Emotions were complicated things.

Part of me thought that the best option was to let Caleb leave Asilo with his uncle, find a home at a pride where he could play with other kids his age and where he didn't have to deal with the stress and commotion that came with caring for omega needs, like we did at Asilo.

But also, the thought of him and his uncle finding a new home, one that was not here near me, tore my heart in two. I couldn't wrap my head around why I'd been given a mate only for it to be one-sided. It didn't make sense.

I'd pored over history books and for the life of me couldn't find a reason as to why that would occur or an instance of it happening in the past.

Rejected mates, sure. As horrible as that was, I'd heard of that, but I'd never heard of the pull being completely one-sided—I couldn't find a single solitary case. Maybe I was broken and scenting something that wasn't there. I probably should call Franklin. He felt like the person who would understand this best and possibly have a solution. But I wasn't ready to admit it out loud just yet to strangers. I might not ever be.

So instead, I acted like I was five and sulked my day away. And try as I might, I was not hiding my messy mental state from my friends at all. I hated being that friend, but truth be told, it was all I could manage.

I sat at the water's edge, my knees curled up to my chest. I barely heard Jasper come into the clearing and plop down beside me.

"Nice morning," he said.

I nodded. "It's not too bad." And weather wise, that was true.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

I sighed. "I suppose I better." If I didn't, things were only going to get worse. And given how shitty they were now, that was saying something.

"We've all gotten attached to our charges before, Emory, but I feel like this is more than that." Jasper just laid it out there, and I appreciated that.

"It is," I said and braced myself for what I had to say next. I shouldn't be ashamed about Shaw's reaction or lack thereof to me, but in so many ways, it felt like my failure, like it was me who was not worthy of a mate. And whether or not that feeling was accurate didn't change how it impacted me. "Caleb's omega father asked me to watch over him, and I'm going to do that. Even if the best place for him isn't with me. He has a family, and that is our goal, right? To reunite omegas with their families when it is safe to do so."

And just like that, I chickened out and just stuck to the facts about Caleb. If there was anyone I could trust completely, it was Jasper. It shouldn't be this hard.

"It is," Jasper agreed. "But there's more this time, isn't there?"

Jasper was patient and waited as I attempted to brave what I knew I needed to do. He was good like that. He had an innate ability to know exactly how hard he could and should push. I'd seen him in action numerous times and never really got it. But now that it was me he was trying to help... the man was brilliant and exactly who I needed to be by my side right now.

My stomach twisted as I closed my eyes. I could do this. But more than that, I needed to do this.

"Shaw is my mate," I blurted out.

Jasper looked at me with surprise in his eyes.

I could only glance at him and then back at the water. Tears were threatening to fall. It was one thing to say it, but another to explain it. But the band-aid was pulled loose. Anything other than ripping it completely off was a fool's errand.

"You found your mate? That should be a joyous occasion." He was right. I should be, but I also should have a mate who liked me back, who sensed me as his. I did not. I had Shaw who not once even hinted at wanting anything more than help with his new charge from me. It fucking sucked.

I looked up at him, my eyes filled with tears, one escaping down my cheek.

"Oh, Emory, what aren't you telling me?"

“Shaw hasn’t said a word about it. I noticed the first day I met him in Morgan’s office that he was mine. My cat told me so. His scent was unmistakable, but he looked at me like I was just another shifter. Every time I’ve been near him he flirts a little, sure, but no reaction from him at all. His heart rate doesn’t increase, he doesn’t smell aroused. I can’t...” I shook my head. “It’s one-sided. It has to be.”

“That’s not possible,” Jasper said. If only he were right.

“Well, it sure looks like it is.” I choked on my words.

“Have you told him?” The pity in his eyes nearly crushed me. It was bad enough to feel this way, but to see through his glance that feeling this way was reasonable and normal—yeah, it only made it worse. I had half hoped for him to show me the error of my ways, that I was ridiculous or something. At least then it might not cut as deeply.

I shivered. “No. I can’t bear the thought of being rejected.” I already knew what it felt like—but to have that in my face... “It’s... I can’t imagine him saying the words to me... to blatantly tell me that I’m not his. I couldn’t take it. I’m barely functioning as it is.”

“There’s got to be an explanation. He was in the service a long time... maybe something happened.” He was grasping at straws. Nothing in the military had the power to make someone not want their fated. That wasn’t how it worked. Desire wasn’t something that could be whisked away... was it? Crap. I didn’t even know any more.

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Can you tell Morgan?” It was how things should’ve been done. He was my Forerunner. He needed to know anything that had the potential to be a weakness for our pride, and make no mistake about it—I was a weakness.

“I probably should. Even if he wanted to claim me as his, what then? All futures with him and with Caleb point toward me leaving Asilo.” Saying my fear out loud made it even worse. There was no way out of this situation that was good. Better? Possibly. But not without sacrifice and heartache. Maybe that was just how life was sometimes.

“Would that be so bad?” His facial features softened, and I tried to read them, but with my eyes blurry from my crying and my emotions running high, it was all for nought.

“Maybe not,” I said, “but I would miss you all.”

“Of course.”

“I would miss our work.”

“Of course,” Jasper agreed. “But if he’s your mate, then you can make it work.”

“He might be mine, but I am not his. The two are not the same.”

“You have to talk to Shaw.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze.

“There has to be an explanation.”

“There isn’t,” I said. “I wish there were, but there’s not. None that would make even the slightest difference, anyway.”

Jasper hugged me and held me against him. I needed that hug more than my next breath. I was falling apart at a time when Caleb needed me to be strong.

“I’m sorry,” he said, still holding me close. “I really think you need to talk to him.”

“I will,” I sobbed. “But right now, it just hurts too much to think of what the explanation could be. I didn’t even know I wanted a mate.”

Jasper kissed my hair. “I know. I know how it can feel.”

“I know you do,” I said.

“There was a happy ending for me, even if it came eight years later than we thought it would.” Of course he understood better than I was giving him credit for. He suffered for so long, but it was easy to forget when you saw him with his mate so blissfully happy.

“What’s stopping him from claiming me?” I cried. With Jasper’s mate it was a combination of things, and while the entire situation was fucked up, they had been young enough that the full mate pull wasn’t there. That wasn’t the case here. Shaw and I were far past that stage.

“I don’t know, but you won’t know until you ask.”

I finally pulled back and wiped the tears from my face. “Caleb is really taking to him. They’re getting along so much better now, which is good—don’t get me wrong—it’s the goal, but also it means his time here is nearly at an end. Pretty soon they’ll go on their little outing on their own. Then an

overnight. Then Shaw will find a place to live, and it'll be someplace that's safe for Caleb. I'll be a distant memory for him."

"I don't think that'll be possible." He pushed the hair from my forehead. "Caleb will never forget you or us. And Shaw... he won't forget either."

"It is possible." I let out a long breath. "And it's the way it should be. It's our goal, right? We don't want them to always remember their time here. At least not more than a distant memory. Because if they hold on too tightly, they will never move past what brought them here in order to live the life they deserve."

"I'm sorry, Emory."

"Me too," I said.

And then the two of us sat staring at the water, letting the sound of the water flowing past soothe us. I needed this, being together with someone who understood and would give me the space to process it all without the pressure to continue the conversation. Jasper was so good at what he did, what he brought to Asilo.

And maybe my gifts weren't the same as his, but I was valuable here too. Maybe this was all for the best. Maybe this was Fate's way of telling me that I belonged here. It was a harsh way to teach a lesson, but sometimes that was how life was.

Chapter 8

Shaw



I waited in my truck for Emory and Caleb to be ready to go on our latest outing. I found myself more excited with each passing second. This felt huge, like it was somehow the beginning of a new season in my life. And I guess in a way it was, seeing as I was going to become Caleb's guardian, but it felt like more than that—like this had to do with Emory as well.

Last night I dreamed of Emory. It was a nice dream, nothing too knotty. We were sitting on the bank of the river, watching the water flow by and holding hands. That was it. And it had been enough or maybe too much because I couldn't get him out of my mind. That wasn't a new thing, really. I often thought of Emory and Caleb when I wasn't with them.

I wasn't excited just about seeing my nephew, but also about seeing Emory. I couldn't focus on anything else no matter how much I tried. There was just something about him that called to me deeply. And maybe it was unhealthy, but in my mind, the two of them had become a package deal.

The more I thought about leaving, the stronger the pull was. I didn't pretend to understand it. I didn't need to. It felt right, and I was determined to win Emory over. Maybe it was a foolish notion. If he had interest, he'd have given me an indication by now, right? Or maybe he was being respectful and keeping his distance. Argg, this was hard.

Since returning from the service, my panther was clawing at me to settle down. I hadn't wanted that before now. And even now, the desire wasn't embedded in the need to be mated. It was focused on one person and that person alone. Emory. It all kept coming back to Emory.

Based on Emory's skittish nature, I needed to take things slow and learn more things about him before I even broached the subject. At least that was my current plan. I'd had so many flit through my head when I should've been sleeping. But for now, this felt like the best of them.

Today I planned on waiting in my car until the two of them came out, but my beast felt caged and wanted out of the small space. I used that as an excuse to sate my curiosity.

The three alphas who lived in the territory came out of the woodshop, each with a shovel in their hands. They measured out a plot of dirt and then began digging in. It seemed random,

but of course it wasn't. Still, I couldn't make out the whys of it all.

They worked quickly. I was quite shocked at the progress they made in such a short amount of time. Shifter strength for the win. Still, I wasn't sure exactly what they were doing.

It was nice to see shifters being able to utilize their true strength without worry, though. In the military, I and others like me were always hiding. I had had to be careful while on duty not to show off the extreme strength that I had compared to my brothers in arms.

"Are we burying a body?" I asked as I walked up to the three of them. It was meant to be a joke, but once it slipped out, I feared I had crossed a line. Thankfully, they put me at ease quickly.

The biggest of them, Gideon snorted. "We might have to if Dean doesn't make up his damn mind."

"I did make up my mind. We're digging, aren't we?" The other shifter rolled his eyes. I couldn't tell if he was irked or amused. Probably a bit of both, if I were to guess.

"What is it that you're digging?" I asked.

"Master Chef over here thinks it's a bright idea to have a root cellar." Gideon shook his head. "Just like we're living in the 1800's."

Dean, Jasper's mate, rolled his eyes. "Y'all are going to think it's a great idea when you have fresh garden vegetables in the middle of winter. You're all going to like my greenhouse too,

as soon as that project's done. I know you all aren't complaining about the garden I put in."

It seemed that none of them could argue about that. Or maybe they had argued about it enough that it wasn't worth rehashing. But also, there was a respect in their eyes over Dean's plans. Their dynamic was fascinating—and fun.

"A root cellar, hmm?" They were a pretty antiquated idea. At least I thought they were.

"Yeah, he found this idea online and talked with Greycoast. They have one, too." Maybe not as antiquated as I thought. "They took one of those old culverts and buried it in the ground," Gideon explained.

"See, the steel makes it so the temperature stays the same, and then you can build shelves within it. We think this will be big enough for our needs. If we need to, we can expand," Dean continued.

"I think it's a great idea." I grabbed the shovel from Cooper and started digging. I was no stranger to manual work, and I kept up my pace with them easily. "Do you think this is the ideal location?" I probably shouldn't have asked, especially not now that it was this deep, but better now than when it was finished.

"It's close enough to the kitchen that you can just run out the back door grab what you need and come on in even on the cold days," Dean said.

“That was my thought, too. Gideon didn’t want it in the way of his woodshop.” Cooper chuckled.

“It’s in my direct path!” Gideon grumbled. He wasn’t wrong.

“Walk around it,” Cooper said. The two were sniping at each other, but it was in a playful sort of way. No malice behind their words. No challenges made between the two. Just a group of shifter friends.

Cooper rolled his eyes. “This is why I stick to books,” he said as he kept on digging.

It didn’t take us long and we had the entire thing dug out.

“Dirt!” Caleb exclaimed and came running over. He jumped in and began breaking up the clumps of dirt with his hands. “We can find worms! If we find worms, can we go fishing?”

Emory shook his head and smiled at me. His smile dropped when my eyes met his. I hated that. I wished I knew what it was about me that made him uncomfortable so I could fix it. Sometimes when he looked at me, I thought I saw something, but the man was careful to keep his emotional expressions hidden.

Then he turned his gaze away. Okay, so no points for me today.

“I think your uncle already has plans for today,” Emory said.

I shrugged. “I’m not opposed to fishing. Are we fishing in cat form?” I grinned.

“We can do that?” Caleb’s eyes lit up.

I laughed. “I suppose we could, but if we do, we won’t need worms, and they are kind of the fun part. Besides, I’m not sure that we have a river around here that we could fish like that in.”

“My friend Levi is from Fractured Fang.” Caleb did a gesture with his hand when he said the boy’s name. I didn’t know sign language, but I half suspected it was some form of it. “They have a river that goes through their territory. He said it gets big and wild and one of his friends almost fell in it once.” He was bouncing with excitement. I loved that he had friends and a life that wasn’t just being a resident of Asilo. As amazing as this place was proving to be, it was still not a place people chose to need.

“Fractured Fang?” I asked. I didn’t recognize the name, but I was also not someone who followed local pack happenings. Especially not in the past five years. I needed to spend some time with Cooper to relearn about the shifter world. As a historian, he could bring me up to speed quickly.

“Levi is a child of one of the omegas that used to live here, and he visits quite often. He brings his art supplies and teaches art classes to the kids,” Emory explained. “We have been trying to build some bridges with local packs and prides, to make this place still feel like a sanctuary but also not so isolated. It’s a work in progress.”

“That’s great,” I said. Amazing really.

“They said we could go there and fish some time, if we wanted to,” Caleb said.

“Well, then perhaps we’ll have to make plans with them to do that. Today might not be that day, though. Adults tend to like it when things are organized a bit in advance.” I winked at him. This Fractured Fang would probably not appreciate a virtual stranger showing up on their doorstep cause one of the young invited his friend to fish.

Caleb’s shoulders slumped, but eventually he perked back up as he began digging through the dirt again when a worm caught his eye.

“Did you intend to go anywhere that requires him to be clean?” Emory asked. “Because it looks like that ship has sailed.”

I smiled. “Nah, I’d rather he be dirty and happy than clean and miserable. I thought we might try the park again today, or we can shift and run through the woods?”

“Sure. Whatever works.” I couldn’t tell if there was disappointment in his voice over my choices or if he simply did not care. Or possibly it was something else altogether. This was so complicated. How did it get that way so quickly?

Perhaps a solo discussion between me and Emory was necessary.

“You should have a sleepover with us, Uncle Shaw! Tonight we’re doing movies on the lawn with popcorn. And if the kids behave, they can sleep outside with Jasper and Dean.” He righted his shoulders. “I always behave.”

The giggle that followed told me that wasn't fully accurate, which was good. Overcompliance after trauma was a manifestation of said trauma in many cases. Kids were meant to get into some mischief. It was how they learned and grew.

"I'll talk to Emory about that while you see how many worms you can find."

I loved that he was enjoying time digging, and I needed to chat with Emory before making any decisions like a sleepover. It wasn't just my nephew and his current caregiver that I needed to consider. This was Asilo, and the omegas here had certain expectations, and having a rando alpha show up wasn't one of them.

"Ten! I'm going to find ten!" he exclaimed and back to the digging it was.

I stepped back a bit, and Emory followed. "I can make an excuse if you would rather I not be here."

His eyes went wide for a half a second before he schooled them. "No. It's not... Caleb wants you here. He's what matters."

"He's not the only one in this pack. I'm an alpha, and I'm not saying this to be self-deprecating or anything like that, but objectively, I think we can both admit I tend to present as intimidating." It was great in the military, but in a place where omegas came to feel safe, not so much. I hated that that was the reality of it, but it was.

“You are more than welcome. Just the fact that you cared enough to ask about it means a great deal. I promise you, if I thought for a second that you being here would be a problem, I’d have already informed Caleb when he asked. I don’t want to put you in the position of being the bad guy by having to either back out after saying you’d be there or being the one to have to decline.” He looked at the dirt-covered worm hunter. “It’s a huge deal that he wants you here enough to ask.”

“As long as you are sure and not just being nice.” Although, I’d probably be fine with that too, if I were being honest. It meant spending time with both my nephew and the omega I wanted to get to know better. It was a win all the way around, even if the movie turned out to be horrible.

“Not just being nice. You are welcome to spend the night here with us... I mean.... you know what I mean,” Emory said.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I said.

“Look, it’s huge!” Caleb squeed, and I went over to ohhh and ahh over his spoils.

Chapter 9

Emory



Seeing my alpha work with the rest of my pride did something to my insides. It was troublesome enough to watch him interact with Caleb. That warmed my heart and stirred something inside me that I had thought was long gone—a desire for a family. All my omega instincts were kicking into overdrive, and my skin felt alive with it.

But with my pride, it went even deeper still. It was a cross of feeling so right and terrifying. He didn't pick me. I knew this. But also, I kept playing my talk with Jasper over and over again and latching on to the hope that maybe, just maybe, there was a reason, one that wasn't me being vile to him or fate being too cruel for words. I really needed to find a time to talk with him, to brave asking him.

Instead of an outing to get dinner or whatever Shaw had planned for our visit with Caleb, he let his nephew lead. I loved that. It showed that none of this was performative. He truly did want to do right by his nephew. Not that I ever questioned it. It was simply nice to see.

We stayed at Asilo. Dean and Cooper went off to do the work that they needed to get done for dinner and preparing for the movie event. Gideon and Shaw continued working on the root cellar. They both took time to teach Caleb what they were doing and let him help and also to admire the worms. There were so many worms. I had half a mind to help him raise some.

It was both adorable and incredible to watch Gideon and Shaw interact with Caleb like this. Had I not known Caleb's story and had walked in on the scene, I'd have assumed this was his birth pack. It was light and free and filled with so much love.

Watching them was a beautiful thing. It was bittersweet perfection. A glimpse of a future that I was sure I would never have but desperately wanted.

I stayed back, giving them the time they needed to figure out how to make this work between them. Going from losing your only loving parent to being in a pack like Asilo to having an adult step up to accept you into their life—those were huge changes, and neither of them needed me adding any complication in the middle of it.

The day was finally winding down, and Caleb insisted the three of us watch the movie together. I'd have bowed out to

give them space, but this was better. Looking from the outside sucked even when it was important.

The two of them were on a blanket, gazing up at the stars as we waited for the movie to start, with a spot carved out for me when I was ready. Asilo had built a little projector screen out of leftover two-by-fours and a few white sheets sewn together. Even though we had a visitor among us, an alpha no less, all of the omegas felt comfortable enough to sit outside and enjoy the event.

This particular group of guests had mostly arrived after there were some alphas on the premises. At first, that had been a terrifying leap. Bringing an alpha onto Asilo pride lands was unheard of. But over time, it had proven to be beneficial for everyone. We still had spaces that were omegas and children only, but even those didn't feel as necessary as they once did.

The scent in the air was delicious. I loved how excited the kids got from simply a whiff of buttery popcorn. It made helping to bag and pass it out a true joy, one people argued over. It didn't take long for the popcorn to be dispensed to everyone.

I did the bagging, and Jasper and his little one were helping to deliver. It was so promising watching the future generations taking an active role in daily life and not because they had to, but because they wanted to.

Morgan said a few words. "Thank you, everyone, for coming and for all of your contributions to all the changes that we have made here at Asilo. A lot has happened the past few

years, and my team and I couldn't be happier that we're all here together, stronger than ever.”

It wasn't the first time Morgan had thanked us, and the sincerity of his words each and every time only fueled us to do more, to make this pack what it could be. Morgan was amazing at his job. We were so lucky to have him.

I joined Shaw and Caleb on the blanket and laid on the ground with my head propped up with a few pillows. My skin was warm in the evening air, even though it had begun to cool down a bit. And by a bit, I meant that others were wearing hoodies and wrapping themselves in blankets. Me? It was as if the heat wouldn't leave my body.

Caleb lay between Shaw and me, his head propped up on his hands, elbows on the blanket. He was loving the movie, and for all I knew the flick was a masterpiece. I hadn't paid attention enough to even know who the main character was. My thoughts were all about Shaw. Being this close to him, his scent wrapping around me like a hug—yeah, it wasn't the key to paying attention, that was for sure.

Shaw snuck a glance in my direction. “Are you okay?” he whispered.

I nodded. It was true. Or mostly true. True enough.

His eyes narrowed as he looked at me, and he drew in a breath, as if sniffing the air. “My sense of smell is crap, but something about you has changed.”

“What do you mean your sense of smell is crap?” That was peculiar. All shifters had a good sense of smell. It was one of the things that set us apart from the humans.

“Shh, the movie is getting good,” Caleb said. He didn’t even look back, too engrossed in all that was happening on our impromptu screen.

I chuckled.

Shaw ruffled his hair. “It’s just a montage, buddy. We promise we’ll be quiet when the action gets good.”

Caleb went back to watching the movie, and I pretended to pay attention like I had before, only this time I was focused on what he meant by crap sense of smell. Had this been an adult evening, I’d have already dragged him away to interrogate him. But tonight was about Caleb, and that new bit of information was going to need to wait.

A few minutes later, Shaw looked back at me. “Did you drink enough water today? You look a little flush.”

I wiped the sweat off my brow and ran a hand through my hair. Being this close to my mate but not being able to touch him, knowing that he didn’t see me as his, turned my stomach. And then there was the whole *maybe he can’t scent me* vibe stirring inside of me. I was a mess. There was no other way around it. My skin felt tight, and my muscles twitched with restlessness.

“I’m fine,” I said, not quite sure how accurate that statement was. “Maybe I’m coming down with something.”

“Let me get you some water.” He hopped right up and went over to the cooler.

I couldn’t help but grin. I loved that he was caring for me, even if he was just being nice and it wasn’t because of the reason I wanted it to be—because I was his. Nevertheless, I took the bottle of water and drank it down.

“Thank you,” I said. But as he laid down next to me this time, it was as if the heat had intensified. I couldn’t sit still, even as the movie played.

Caleb fell asleep. So did many of the others around us, adults and children alike. When the credits started to roll, I pushed myself up. The kids planned on sleeping outside, and Dean came around to help carry the little ones into their tents. Some of them barely stirred. Others insisted that they needed another movie.

I stumbled on my feet, trying to walk. Shaw gripped my arm.

“Emory, are you okay?”

My skin tingled beneath his touch. “I think so,” I said. “Maybe.” My vision blurred until all I could see and sense was Shaw’s presence.

“Your scent. It’s weird... I can’t even scent good things, and I’m... You’re sure you’re okay?”

He stood so close to me now and the heat intensified until realization dawned on me.

“No,” I breathed. The two of us stood so close together. Everyone around us seemed to have cleared out, going to their

tents or back to their houses.

My cock was incredibly hard between my legs. Slick gathered in my hole. Fuck. This couldn't be happening.

"Oh shit," I said. "I'm... I've got to get inside." And away from everyone. Had it not been slamming into me so intensely I'd have been embarrassed. I probably would be soon enough. But for right now? Now I was freaking panicking.

Heat. How could I be going into heat? I'd never even had one before. I wasn't sure I knew anyone who had. What was I supposed to do with this?

His nostrils flared. "Oh goodness," he said. "I haven't been able to scent this deeply in a long time, and not this... Never mind."

Even though I could barely stand, I needed to know. "What do you mean by that? You keep mentioning your sense of smell."

He looked away. "I don't like to talk about it, but there was an injury while I was deployed. A chemical bomb went off and fucked with my scent. Mostly I can't smell anything good... ever. But you... you smell good. So good."

He couldn't scent me. At all.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I whispered.

"Because... for our kind it will only bring pity, and humans don't get it. I only share it with people I can trust."

My eyes widened. "You can't scent me, or you couldn't until tonight?"

He grimaced. “Not at all before, sorry. I... I know that makes me weak—”

Need overtook any logic that was in my brain, and I launched myself into his arms. I planted my lips on his. The kiss was slow and hesitant at first, but then Shaw’s arms came around me and held me tight. The pressure of his touch fired something in me. I loved how it felt. Safe. Protected. Loved.

“That explains so much!”

All of the rejection hadn’t been rejection at all. Jasper had been right. If only I had asked him earlier, so much hurt could’ve been avoided.

“Emory?” His gaze held a whole lot of questions, but underneath that was desire. Lust. For me. “I don’t unde—”

“Take me inside,” I said. “Please. I need to get away from people.” But not him. He was my mate. I was his. If there was anyone I wanted around me to help me through my heat it was Shaw. Did I wish we had talked about his abilities sooner? Absolutely. But it was too late for coherent thought now. It would have to wait.

He looked around, making sure that everything else was taken care of, jogged off to tell Jasper something and then came back to me. “Jasper is going to keep Caleb until you are ready. I’ll help you inside.”

“Stay?” I asked, but he didn’t respond, instead wrapping his arm around my waist and slowly walking me to my cabin, my feet unsteady and the entire outdoors spinning around.

His touch, his scent, his attention was only fueling my heat. It was slamming into me now, my underwear full of slick, my cock pounding at my zipper to get out, my head starting to get confused about anything and everything other than the alpha by my side.

I attempted to breathe through my mouth, thinking it might clear my head. I failed miserably. Knowing his rich scent was there made it impossible to ignore. Instead, I found myself scenting him over and over again, unable to stop. Each time, it was richer, sweeter.

My feet stopped in their tracks, and I pulled Shaw to me, wrapping my arms around him, burying my face in his chest. “I need to be touching you.”

“No, omega. You need to go home where it’s safe.” He scooped me up in his arms and carried me home. I didn’t even pretend to argue. As long as I was in his arms, I didn’t care where he was taking me. I was already home.

Chapter 10

Shaw



It had been so long since I'd smelled something so sweet. Actually, it was never. I had never scented something that scrumptious, and after all this time of only smelling badness, it was overwhelming in the very best of ways.

I was tempted to bury my nose in Emory's neck and never come out again. I wanted his scent on me, in me, totally surrounding me. And he wanted that, too. He made that clear on our way back here, to his home. Only, heat was not the time to claim—at least not without a talk prior. Heat was the time to make him safe and protect him from other alphas. Jasper had promised me he'd keep this area clear and the other alphas here weren't anyone I'd be worried about. But still, my protective side was kicked into full gear.

So many sensations and feelings were slamming into me all at once. First there was scenting anything close to pleasant for the first time in too long, but then having it be my mate... in heat. Mixing that with my already growing attraction to him as a person and a hottie and... it was getting difficult to think straight. My beast wasn't helping any. He kept calling him my mate in the background, and I wanted it to be so, but also...

How could I be sure? Especially with my broken nose. Which led to me second-guessing the way my beast was calling him mate. Did I want it to be true? More than anything. But what if it was my beast confusing something not smelling wretched with the mating pull? Whatever the answer to that was, Emory had started a fire in me, and it set me on edge. Like I couldn't quite trust myself, and I hated that feeling.

Judging by the lust in Emory's eyes, I wasn't the only one affected.

I carried him into the house, nodding to Morgan and Gideon as we made our way there. They, and the others, would make sure Caleb was taken care of while I saw to Emory's needs. Only problem was, I didn't want them near Emory. Cognitively, I knew they were safe, but I wanted—no, needed to be the one to make sure he was safe.

Once the door was closed, I set him down, preparing to leave so I could take my fur and stand guard. Emory wasn't on board with that plan. He whirled around so fast I didn't realize it was happening until he planted his lips on mine.

I soaked in the sensation of it all, allowing myself to experience our kiss without allowing anything else to get in the way. Not my fears, not my worries, and not my overthinking.

My arms came around and wrapped him in a tight hug. We were chest to chest, groin to groin, lips to lips. I swept my tongue inside his mouth, wanting to know if the taste of him matched the scent. It did. And more.

He moaned against me.

“Why didn’t you tell me we were mates?” I asked against his lips, everything suddenly making sense all at once.

“I was scared. I thought you’d rejected me, that I wasn’t what you wanted. I wasn’t brave enough to risk hearing the words from your lips,” he said. “I wish—”

“I would never... could never reject you. Even without scenting you, I was drawn to you in a way I’d never been drawn to anyone before. I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me until now that we might be mates. I planned on wooing you the old-fashioned way.”

He opened his mouth to say more, but it turned into a moan, his heat pushing at him hard. I cut him off with a brief kiss.

“Let me take care of you. You’re suffering because we went so long without claiming each other. That explains the heat, and I feel awful about it. I’m so sorry. I should’ve known, should’ve made you feel safe enough to come to me.” There was so much more that I needed to make right with him, but he was

beginning to shake in my arms. He needed me to help him through this heat. The rest could wait. “We can make up for lost time, though.”

“Please do.” It was a plea.

His cock was hard against my hip, and I sank to the floor. I made quick work of opening his pants. I needed to take the edge off so that my mate was no longer bursting with need for me. He wouldn’t be able to think clearly until I did. Heck, he wouldn’t be able to think much at all.

The scent of his slick was thick in the air. I savored it. I was sure I’d never be able to scent anything like that again, yet here it was just for me. And if this was the only time I was ever able to take it all in, then that was enough. I had this moment, and I was going to make the most of it.

His cock jutted out from his body, and I nuzzled it against my cheek. The velvety skin was smooth against my cheek. I buried my nose in his groin. “Mine,” I growled.

Emory’s fingers threaded through my hair. “Yours. Please. Please.”

“Please what?” I asked, grinning up at him.

“Suck my cock, Shaw. I n—”

I took the length of him in my mouth and sucked. My cheeks hollowed, and I worked my way down his length. My hand found his balls and cradled them.

“Holy hell,” he shouted. He fell forward, catching himself on the wall. I held his hips steady while I worked his cock. I’d

always known I'd enjoy giving head, but I never knew how much until now. The noises he made had me hard in my jeans, and as much as I wished to touch myself, I wanted both hands on Emory right then.

“Oh Shaw! So fucking close.”

My tongue flicked over the underside of his cock head and his hips jerked. A few more times down his length, and he was spilling down my throat, holding back a shout as he came.

His knees buckled, and I caught him as he fell.

“Oh fuck. That was... something else.” He was panting, and I loved it so much, loved that I could make him come undone like this with only my mouth.

I grinned. “Not bad for a first time,” I sassed.

“I knew our first time together was going to be great,” Emory said. “I just didn't know it would nearly kill me.”

I held him tight. “Well, I actually meant that was my first time sucking a dick.”

“What?” He looked up at me with his blissed-out expression, only now confusion was there as well.

I shrugged. “I'm not a virgin, I just never wanted to do that casually with anyone. Hopefully, my skills will improve.”

It was important for me that he know that he was more than just a body, that I was all in and this wasn't casual. It made confessing my inexperience an honor instead of the awkwardness it could've easily been.

Emory laughed. “If your skills improve any more, you really will kill me.

We both chuckled, and then after a moment, I lifted him into my arms and walked us toward his bedroom.

“I can walk, you know.” He snuggled into me, making no move to do so.

“Maybe you can now, but when I’m done with you, you won’t.” I kissed the top of his head. “And besides, I enjoy carrying you in my arms. It’s where you belong.”

He kissed my neck, sucking and nipping at the skin beneath my ear. “Promise I won’t be able to walk?”

I set him on the bed gently and immediately missed his skin against mine. We both made quick work of getting rid of the rest of our clothes. No time for romantic slow reveals. He was too far away from me, and I was too far away from him. It needed fixing and now.

“Need you,” he pleaded.

His heat was already beginning to build again. His skin was flushed with a sheen of sweat, and his eyes were laden over with lust. And his skin, it was hot to the touch. “Need your cock. Please.” He gripped his own cock and spread his legs, the invitation clear.

“Such a polite omega, waiting for his alpha’s cock. Should I let you have it, or make you beg some more?” I took in the sight of him, wanting to lock it down in my memories.

Precum beaded at the tip of Emory's dick, and he worked his hand over his shaft. "I've been dreaming of this, Shaw. Each night after the territory goes quiet, I long for you to be in my bed with me. Filling me up so completely. Please, I need you."

He reached between his legs and slipped two fingers into his hole with little resistance. When he scissored his fingers and slick seeped out of him, I knew he was ready.

I groaned. "I love watching you." I licked my lips, and he gave me a knowing glance. "Someday or maybe later tonight, we'll see if you can make me come without touching me at all, just touching yourself."

His breath hitched and his cock twitched as if he might come. I was sure he could go on, but I couldn't wait any longer.

"I'll take care of you, Emory. Always. You're my omega, all mine." I covered his body with mine and nuzzled against his neck where his scent was strongest. I nipped at the skin and took a taste. He bucked his hips to meet mine.

I lined my cock up with his hole and pushed forward. I wanted to be buried in him until we were one. I wanted to sink my teeth into his neck and have my scent intertwine with his. Everyone would know he was my mate and I was his.

"Harder," he cried. His hips met mine thrust for thrust until I was buried deep.

"So fucking tight, baby. Goddess, you smell good." I held myself up and pistoned my hips. His body clamped down

around me, and he cried out as my cock grazed against his prostate.

“No! Too fast.”

I stopped, afraid I’d hurt him. “Sorry, baby. Are you okay?”

“Yes!” he shouted. “Don’t stop. Don’t fucking stop. I just don’t want to come so soon.”

I grinned. “Don’t worry. You’ll come again tonight. In my mouth, my hand, on me. Maybe even in me. I’m not done with you, Emory.” I took it slower now, letting my cock slide in and out his body at a leisurely pace. It wasn’t my turn to lose control. This was about Emory.

He groaned again, his body clamping down on me even harder. I rolled my hips. The base of my cock began to swell. My knot. Though I knew it through his scent, and from what he told me he knew as well, I was ecstatic that my knot confirmed it. Emory was my mate.

“Claim me, Shaw! Mark me as yours,” he cried out.

“Only if you’ll do the same,” I said. The world around us was lost, and it was just me and Emory, together as one.

Emory’s eyes clouded with desire, and his canines dropped. He licked his lips. And that was my undoing. I thrust into him one last time, my knot then locked me in place and cum filled his channel.

I bit down on his neck where it met his shoulder and gave him my mark. He did the same to me. The sting of pain soon

subsided when he licked over the wound. I shivered at the sensation and then hot cum splashed between us as he came.

“I’ll lick you more often if that’s the reaction I get,” he said.

I chuckled. “Please do, omega mine. Please do.”

Chapter 11

Emory



I woke up in my bed alone. The space beside me was warm, telling me that it hadn't been long since Shaw had gotten up. The sun still hadn't begun to rise, but the air had that morning scent to it. Maybe he just needed to use the bathroom, and he'd be back in a nanosecond. I was going with that.

We'd had the most amazing night, and I wanted to spend the early part of the morning wrapped in his arms. Of course, then we would need to get up and be responsible adults. And we needed to talk to Caleb. Our claiming changed everything for him, too.

My phone pinged and pinged again. At first, I thought it must be Shaw letting me know where he wandered off to, but then I remembered that I'd given his number a special song because apparently I was sappy like that. Who in the world would be

calling me this early? If there was a problem with the pride, they'd come over or send a messenger. It was faster ninety percent of the time.

I picked it up and swiped at it until I was able to answer. I hated phones, despite understanding the value of them. They were a pain in the ass. Most of the time they were unnecessary since everyone I would want to talk to lived within walking distance.

"Hello?" I pushed myself up to sit. I was half expecting it to be a wrong number. It wasn't a number I recognized and didn't come with a company name under it. It also didn't warn of spam.

"Give me back my son, you piece of shit!" the voice boomed on the other line, and a chill went down my spine. It was Caleb's alpha father, and my blood ran cold.

"Who is this?" I asked, trying to buy myself time to think. I already knew, and it had me terrified for Caleb.

"Give me back my fucking son." The voice was even angrier than the first time.

"Who is your child?" I said. "Are you calling about...?" I didn't finish the sentence, not wanting to give them too much information. If I didn't have special security features on this phone thanks to Steelwick, I'd have already hung up and destroyed the stupid thing.

"Give me back my son!" The voice was even louder. Each time they spoke, their voice got angrier and angrier, sounding

a little more unhinged with each volume increase.

And then just like that they hung up.

What the fuck? That was not how I wanted my first morning as a mated panther to go. It wasn't how I wanted any day to go.

My number, like many of those, all of those within Asilo packs, was protected information, in theory. We didn't share it out of safety. The fact that someone got ahold of it was scary enough. The fact that my gut told me it was Caleb's alpha father—it was a thousand times worse.

What confused me was how he never mentioned who the child was. Wouldn't he want to say it to hear my reaction? That would make the most sense. But then again, none of the call made sense.

I would have to let Morgan know right away and see if we could get someone from Steelwick to chase down who had called us. If it was the alpha in question, he would be dealt with. And if it was someone else, it would be handled in the way that was appropriate for their case. In any case, the omegas and children were safe here. We just had to be diligent to keep it that way.

Having Steelwick as a friend of the pack made such a difference. We were so lucky to have them on our side. They were amazing in so many ways, but their compassion shined above them all.

Although our new liaison from Steelwick hadn't been appointed yet, now that Marcus was otherwise occupied working as a liaison with the centers, they were shorthanded.

I got up, pulled on a pair of joggers, and padded to the kitchen to find Shaw.

Shaw grinned when he saw me. He stood at the coffee maker holding out a cup of what I hoped was coffee.

"Are you a coffee drinker?" he asked.

I nodded. "I am. Did you get out of bed early just to make a pot?"

"Yes, I made a pot. I thought you might like it. Gotta be honest, now that I've putzed around the kitchen, I'm a bit worried about your habits, mate." He glanced around my kitchen with a raised brow.

I groaned. "If you're concerned about the kitchen's lack of food and obvious untidiness, I'll have you know that I don't cook in here very often. Since Dean's been here, he provides most of the meals that we need. It's his passion. And I'm the only one who uses that coffeepot, so it's set up just how I like it."

"Barely cleaned out?" he sassed.

I went over to him and pressed a kiss to Shaw's lips, not even pretending to address it.

"You scent normal today. Normal in that I can hardly scent you at all." He seemed saddened by the fact, but I was just

happy that my heat didn't last too long. I had work to do, and who would care for Caleb if both Shaw and I were occupied?

"Perhaps you should talk with Mortimer. Maybe there is something that he can do or possibly Franklin."

"Perhaps," Shaw said, and he buried his nose and my neck.

"So much time lost, mate. If only I had known."

"I should have brought it up. I'm sorry I didn't." My reasons seemed silly now, but they had been monumental at the time.

"You had no way of knowing about my injury. It's not as if I was broadcasting the information, and you had no reason to trust me." He pressed a kiss to my neck. "I didn't give you one. That's on me."

It was on both of us. We'd both been foolish.

"Will you tell me about your time in the service sometime? I would like to know more about you. And if there are any things we should avoid... loud noises, fireworks. I want to make sure nothing we do is triggering."

Shaw smiled at me and it was almost too much for me to look at. Never had anyone shown that much... adoration for me. Maybe love. But it was too soon for that.

"Thank you, Emory. That means a lot. I can tell you about my time in the service. There isn't a lot, and as far as I can tell, I don't have any PTSD. Most of my work was investigative behind a computer."

"What now?" I asked, even though the answer to that question scared me.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’d like to ask Morgan if I can stay here temporarily. It would allow us to spend time together and for me to see Caleb more. After that... I just don’t know. There are a lot of things we could do. I want to learn more about you, mate. I have spent all this time learning about Caleb, and now I want to get to know you and you to get to know me.”

“We will,” I said. “I just don’t want to—”

We were interrupted before that conversation could go any further. “Are you up?” Morgan asked as he poked his head in. I hadn’t even seen or heard him outside.

I glanced at the clock on the coffee pot. “It’s barely six. Why are you here?”

“Okay, so you are up.” He pushed his way inside. “Did you get a weird phone call?”

That brought everything rushing back. It had been sitting there, stewing, but I had allowed the first glimpse of my mate to temporarily distract me.

I stood up straighter, my heart thumping. “How did you know?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He sent out a quick text message to someone. “That’s three of us here and several other people from various Asilo packs.”

“Phone call? You didn’t mention a phone call,” Shaw said, his face filled with concern.

“It happened just before I came out here. I couldn’t make out who it was. They just kept saying ‘give me back my child,’ and at first my gut said they meant Caleb, but then I felt like I was being paranoid. But if other packs got the call too...?”

“Do you think it’s Caleb’s alpha father?” Shaw asked, his body going rigid as if he was going to battle right there.

I put a hand on his shoulder, and he calmed. “It could be, but if a whole bunch of people got the call, then it could be something else.”

“What else could it be?” Shaw asked. Unlike the rest of us, he didn’t fully grasp the horrors we saw on a regular basis. I wished that Caleb’s case was unusual.

“There are a lot of angry alphas out there when the omegas that seek help from Asilo packs are ‘taken away’ from them. They lash out. That’s why we keep our locations and information on a need-to-know basis,” Morgan explained.

Morgan ran his hands through his hair.

“I don’t understand why this can just be a normal day. I’ll need to get a hold of Armand and have someone start investigating. Since more than just our pack was hit, it’s going to be a logistical nightmare. The problem is everybody’s stretched pretty thin. And with Marcus now with the Centaurs, we don’t have extra people.”

“I was doing investigative work within the military,” Shaw said. “Give me access to some of your resources and I can start digging in. Hell, I can dig without some of your resources. I

doubt they've had the time to close the back doors I had already opened when finding information about Asilo.”

Shaw had managed to do what was supposed to be impossible. If that was his skill set, he was going to be a great asset in figuring this out. And the thing was, as much as I didn't want this to be about Caleb, I didn't want it to be about anyone. These children had been through more in their short lifetimes than anyone should during their entire life.

Morgan looked over at my mate carefully. “Do you think you could tell who would get access to all of our phone numbers? We don't keep them all in one place and they aren't on official phone plans to add a layer of anonymity. Plus, it's not as if we have a master list of Asilo pack numbers.”

The list of Asilo pack wasn't even acknowledged publicly. We were hidden from the others to avoid this exact thing.

“I can see what I can do,” Shaw said.

Morgan nodded decisively. “Do it. Don't make me regret it. I'll let Armand know that you're going to dig into it with them, but don't be surprised if he contacts you and wants to put you on some official payroll. I don't know how Steelwick works.”

“No problem, whatever I can do to help.” Shaw grabbed the back of his neck.

Morgan left then and it was back to being just the two of us. Only, in those few minutes we had guests, everything had

changed. We went from the morning after heat to being on full alert, just like that.

Shaw put his hands on my arms. “What was the phone call?” he asked.

I leaned into him. “I was going to tell you. It was weird because at first, I was sure it was Caleb’s dad, but the more he talked, the less I did. I think I am so focused on Caleb that I sometimes forget he isn’t the only child in Asilo’s care. Makes me not so great at my job.”

He wrapped his arms around me, hugging me close. “You love him. It isn’t a failing on your part. And you are great at your job. I see the way the pack and your guests interact with you. Don’t second-guess yourself. You. Are. Amazing.”

“Thank you.” It was something I needed to hear.

“Now, about the call?”

“Just some guy asking us to give his back his kid. I don’t know anything other than that. He was loud and he had a deep voice, but I couldn’t tell you much more about it. I have the number that called with.”

“I’ll need it. But first we should enjoy our coffee.” Shaw kissed the top of my head. “And I need to try to whip up something healthy for you to eat out of this disaster of a kitchen.” He was teasing, breaking the heaviness in the air.

“Hey, I’m sure there are some chips somewhere.”

He rolled his eyes so far back, I wouldn’t have been surprised if they got stuck there, just like the older omegas always told

the kids.

Chapter 12

Shaw



I didn't go back to the hotel after our first night together. Even being apart when he was working or I was helping around the pack lands was rough. There was no way either of wanted to be apart overnight, and there was no real reason to be. And after several days of me just staying at Emory's home, we decided to make it official.

It was weird driving to the hotel that day, but checking out? That felt amazing. It was officially the end of my old life and the beginning of my new one in a way. I stuffed all of my belongings into my duffel and headed back to Emory's home.

"Is that everything?" he asked when I returned.

I nodded.

“You travel light.” He looked down at my bag, and he was right. There wasn’t much here, but I didn’t need much. I hadn’t even really felt the lack of clothing the past few days I was without. I’d been wearing—or not wearing, as the case might be—the same clothes, and aside from needing to do wash too frequently, it didn’t bug me.

“Believe it or not, this is everything I own,” I said. “This and the truck outside. I haven’t been in one place for a very long time, and in the military, they are big into the government-issued clothes. I didn’t need much of anything there.”

“Is that something you want—to move around often?” He spoke low, as if he was almost scared of the answer.

“I don’t think so. I can see the appeal of growing roots, and I think it would benefit Caleb greatly. And really, it wasn’t the travel I was looking for when I went into the military.”

“What were you looking for?” he asked.

I shrugged. “A sense of purpose. To fight for something outside of myself. To get the hell away from my pride. I didn’t know then that there were different prides out there. I mean, I knew there were others, but for some reason, I assumed they would all function as mine did, which was horrible. It wasn’t the type of pride I wanted to remain in or raise a family in.”

“Were you all alone in the military?”

I shook my head. “There were a few shifters, but not many and not with each deployment. I learned a lot from those I did meet, though. We, of course, had to keep quiet and keep our

discussions about ourselves to a minimum, but it opened my eyes to a lot of things.”

“I can’t imagine spending that much time with humans.”

I smiled. “They grow on you. They’re just like we are. They have their own lives, their own hopes and dreams. They just can’t change into animals. Is this going to be a problem?” I asked. “Me staying here?” I took a step forward, putting his hands on my chest, until they snuck their way up around my neck. The beast inside me settled. We liked having our mate’s hands on us. I bet my cat would love if I shifted and Emory could run his hands through my fur.

“I don’t think anyone could tear you away from me right now.” He looked up at me, a soft smile that reached his eyes on his face. “I know I don’t want to.”

I held him closer, putting my hands on his hips until our bodies were flush against one another.

“I’m happy to hear that,” I said. “I feel the same way.” I pressed my forehead against his.

“Uncle Shaw?” Caleb’s voice called from behind me.

We flew apart quickly. There was nothing to be embarrassed about. We were mates. But this was all new to Caleb, and we didn’t want to rush everything. We planned to do the mate talk soon but were waiting for the right time. Caleb needed time to adjust. We all did.

Our eyes landed on my nephew, who had come out of his bedroom clutching his teddy bear. “Buddy, I thought you were

in bed,” I said.

“I heard you guys talking. Uncle Shaw’s truck is kind of loud.” It was really bad. That’s what you get for the kind of money I paid. At the very least, it needed a new muffler. It was in my plans. I just had to get it done.

“Sorry, buddy. We didn’t mean to wake you.” I walked over and squatted down so we were at eye level.

“Are you two mates?” he asked. I adored the bluntness of children. It was so much better than the games adults played, even when they didn’t realize they were doing so.

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. I glanced at Emory hoping that he had a solution for what to say. We had spoken multiple times about how to tell Caleb and none of the conversations got very far. Caleb had been through so much already.

“That’s kind of a private question,” he said, and I wasn’t sure exactly which way he was going on that. Was he trying to teach Caleb about not asking people about mating status or was he not wanting to share just yet?

I was officially kicking myself for not completing a conversation on this already. The fact was, it was a difficult one and neither of us wanted to mess it up. Not when Caleb was the one who it would impact most. But now, here we were, just the three of us muddling through it.

Parenting was hard.

“We’re family. We shouldn’t keep things like that from one another.” Caleb righted his shoulder.

Oh, bless the logic of children. He wasn’t wrong.

Emory sighed and knelt down beside me so that he was eye to eye with Caleb.

“Yes. Your uncle and I are mates,” he said. “We just recently found out and so we’re figuring things out. We were planning to talk to you about it as soon as we worked things out. How does that make you feel?”

“Good.” He twirled around with his teddy bear in his arms. “Now we won’t be separated. I don’t have to choose to live with you or live with Uncle Shaw. We can all be together.”

The kid wasn’t wrong. He was two for two. If only it was that simple. But also, maybe it could be.

“Yeah,” Emory said. “That’s going to be our goal.”

“Okay.” Caleb smiled so bright that he was competition for the sun.

I loved how Emory did his best to reassure Caleb without making promises that he couldn’t keep. I was sure we would find a way to be together. We just didn’t know how that was going to look and even hinting that we did to Caleb would be setting him up for potential disappointment.

My mind was already made up. This pack—Asilo was my home. There were obstacles in the way, of course. I’d have to find a way to convince the Forerunner and the others in Asilo that I could stay here like the other alphas. If they could do it,

why couldn't I? Not that my situation was at all like theirs, but having them live here gave me hope that it was possible.

"Why don't you get back to bed, buddy?" I stood up and held out my arms, and he jumped up into them. "We have a big day tomorrow."

"What are we doing?" Caleb yawned mid-sentence and it was a muffled mess.

"I don't know, but I'm sure it'll be a big one."

Emory took my duffle and carried it to his room. I assumed that would be where I was staying now that Caleb knew who I was to his guardian.

I carried Caleb to bed, tucked him in, and told him the story of a little squirrel who wanted a garden until he was so bored that he fell back asleep. It was my go-to bedtime story because even I would start to fall asleep when it came time for him to plant his carrots.

"He's asleep." I walked in to find Emory snoring softly in bed. "I guess you are too, mate." This time I whispered.

I got ready and climbed into bed, Emory's body curling up next to mine as if on instinct. There was a lot to figure out for the three of us, but things were going to work out, of this I was sure. The question was how.

At least I had bought us some time. Working with them to figure out the phone call was one of the many projects I put on my plate. It felt amazing being able to help around here. It was

a thousand times more fulfilling than any work I did with the military, that was for sure.

I spent the last few minutes before falling asleep coming up with plans for the next day. Caleb wanted something special, and I was going to give it to him. He deserved it. He deserved everything.



Waking before the sun, I climbed out of bed as quietly as I could. I didn't want anyone to wake up until my surprise was ready for them. After cleaning up, I went into the kitchen and started to gather the ingredients I needed for my animal pancakes. I snuck to the grocery store with Jasper after the first morning's discovery. I stocked the place full. Emory had thought I overdid it, but both he and Caleb had been enjoying the spoils, which was my exact intent.

"Is it morning?" I turned around to see Caleb standing there, his eyes sleepy and his teddy bear under his arm.

"Almost. You can go back to sleep. I'll wake you when breakfast is ready."

"Can I help?" he asked, his face suddenly showing zero signs of sleepiness.

"Sure, buddy. Go do your bathroom business and we can do it together."

He ran off, and I made sure things were lined up and ready for him when he returned.

The two of us set out to make breakfast. It took three times as long, the pancakes looked nothing like animals, and we made a mess the size of a country. It was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

“What smells so good?” Emory came out, his eyes going to the mess and forming a smile. “It looks like two of my favorite people have been busy.”

“We made bacon and bacon. There’s also coffee.” I pointed to the pot that was just about done brewing.

“We made special pancakes, Emory. There are bears and dogs. I tried to make a hyena just like me, but it looks like a blob.” He was bouncing up and down on his toes, excitement flowing off of him.

“It’s a good thing I woke up hungry.” Emory padded over to me, kissed my cheek, and hit up the coffee pot. “Let’s eat and you can tell me all about how you made this all.”

That was the only invitation Caleb needed. He described in painful detail how we measured everything, what the different ingredients were, and how he was even allowed to flip some of the pancakes.

“I think I’m going to be a chef.” He shoved a forkful into his mouth but continued talking anyway. “I can be the person who makes dinner for everyone in the pack with Dean. He works hard. I bet he can use a helper like me.”

And that right there solidified my resolve to stay here. Caleb didn’t feel like a visitor. This was his home. He saw a future

here, and if this was where both he and my mate longed to be, it was the only place I desired to grow roots.

“I bet he could, but first you need to finish school. Remember how I had to read the recipe on the box and we had to measure everything out? That’s reading and math right there.” Caleb seemed to like school well enough, but emphasizing that it was useful as well as fun didn’t seem like a bad idea at all.

“I like math best. Did you know that a triangle…”

I never wanted to learn more about a shape than I did in that moment, and good thing, because Caleb had a lot to say. More than I knew about the shape, and I wasn’t sure how much was factual. I’d have to google it later.

“We should do this every week.” Emory took the wet bowl from me and began to dry it off. “Thank you for a beautiful morning. Both of you.”

“Uncle Shaw is the best.” Caleb nearly knocked me over with an unexpected tackle hug.

“That he is,” Emory said. “That he is.”

Chapter 13

Emory



Exhaustion wasn't a feeling that I was used to. Sure, the work I did was grueling on an emotional level, but for the most part, I was never exhausted. Even during the first days that Caleb was with me when he spent the nights crying in my arms rather than sleeping, I was not this exhausted. Emotionally, it took a toll, but that wasn't the same.

But today I woke up, not at all rested, with fatigue weighing me down like I was carrying weights on my shoulders. It felt almost as if I had just fallen asleep and something startled me awake. In actuality, I'd gone to bed early, slept an hour later than normal, and had no recollection of waking up in the middle.

My limbs were like heavy, dragging me down, and lifting a hand to wave at someone took significant effort. It was a

struggle just to make it through the bare minimum, and I never allowed myself to slack that much. Only today. Today I was going to have to. I had no choice. My body wasn't allowing me to do more.

My workday was going to begin with a leaders' meeting that included the rest of the permanent members of Asilo. Caleb had already run off to school, tagging along with the other omega children that were here. He had a renewed interest in doing well now that he decided he wanted to be one of the pack chefs when he grew up. It was adorable how excited he was. Would that be his actual job when he grew up? Who could tell? He had a great many years to decide, but having a goal he was excited about made me happy.

Shaw continued doing what he did every day, which was a combination of working on his laptop and also tracking down leads. For what, he wasn't totally up front with me about.

Plausible deniability, he'd said.

He would also carve out time to help the others with any building projects they might have. He was already beginning to build some friendships and bonds. It only emphasized how the two of us needed to sit with Morgan and figure out what was next for us. We had some time here before that happened, but not much. The goal of reunification was to connect the child with their relative and send them on their way when they were ready. The argument could easily be made that we'd already accomplished that.

I thought about Shaw's work a lot and how it might or might not be connected to Caleb. I wanted to believe it was all me being paranoid, and it probably was. But the what-ifs never left.

It made sense why I didn't and shouldn't know, though. If I was filled in, then someone could question me about it. Not only would it mean I knew about this situation, but also about the kind of access he had to information I suspected was super-secret and technically not his to view.

My gut said the possibility was strong that he was looking for Caleb's alpha father. The man had gone underground and was dangerous on a good day. He probably lived out in the woods alone somewhere. That was the thing about shifters. It was a bit easier for us to disappear than it was for humans. We could take our animal form and live off the forest and whatever we found there. No paper trail. No need for money to buy food. We could truly be off-grid. Sure, it was easier for some beasts than others. A squirrel shifter could hide just about anywhere, whereas an elephant shifter had far fewer places to be, at least here.

I was sure that eventually Shaw would find the alpha. He might not have been the person who called, but he needed to be dealt with. As long as he was free, he was a danger to Caleb. I'd seen firsthand what he could do, and it still sent shivers up my spine at the mere mention of it.

Before my meeting, I checked in with Jasper about this week's activities and then walked over to Morgan's house. Not too

long ago, the place had been our central hub, and it still was, but it had changed dramatically. Where there used to be spotless order and tidiness, there was now a more chaotic and homey vibe. Toys littered the living room. It looked as if their two kids had a Lego party after racing cars. I loved it.

Morgan's youngest was in his arms. As the meeting began, each of us had our notes out. This was a pretty typical thing that we had to do as leaders of Asilo, knowing who was coming, who was going, and what sort of programs we needed to have in order. We also kept notes on the various omegas that were there, so that way their care could be turned over to their permanent homes. We were about healing and moving on with our lives.

We used paper and pencil to keep things safe. Sure, technology could organize things faster, but at what cost? Organizations far bigger and more well-funded than ours were breached on a regular basis. We couldn't take the chance. And in a way, I was glad. It had us slowing down a bit, something we tried to instill into our community anyway.

Asilo was just a transitional place for most people who came. Not for us. For us it was our home, and until recently, it hadn't really felt like a home, not a traditional one anyway. There was always a part of me that thought I was the reason for this. Maybe I wasn't allowing myself to fully settle in or maybe I hadn't learned to trust them enough. But now that Shaw was here, I understood the truth of it; I was waiting for my mate.

I should've realized that long before now. When Morgan found Gideon, Jasper had reconnected with Dean, Kian and Cooper joined, I saw the difference in them. Being mated was more than finding the person for you, it was becoming the person you were meant to be. Your mate completed you, as cheesy as that sounded.

Kian had adjusted beautifully to his life here. He even sat in on the leadership meetings now. The young lion had grown up so much since coming here. Or maybe because of the circumstances that led him here. In any case, he was a true asset to this pride, and we were lucky to have him.

“Okay, so let's talk about the elephant in the room,” Morgan said.

“We're getting an elephant?” I said, hoping to keep this conversation from going where I knew it was already going. It wouldn't work, but it would give me a few seconds to prepare myself. I wanted Shaw to stay, and until it was discussed, he definitely could. It was only after we had this discussion that things might change.

Morgan quirked a brow. My stomach turned, although I didn't think it had anything to do with the conversation. I was getting more convinced I caught some sort of a bug by the minute. That would explain the nausea and the fatigue.

“Do we have to talk about it now?” I asked and let out a long breath. Ignoring things didn't make them better, but that didn't make me suddenly have the energy for this conversation.

He sighed, but then his face changed to one filled with worry. “You do look a little bit under the weather. Are you feeling all right?”

“Tired,” I said. It was more than that, but tired worked.

“Your alpha’s keeping you up all night? They do that,” Jasper said with a laugh.

I groaned. “Is this what we’re reduced to? Teasing? And for the record, I went to bed early and slept in late. Not that it’s so busy. So maybe... can we not?”

My intention hadn’t been to snap at him like that.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“No. I’m sorry about the innuendo. It wasn’t very professional.” Jasper took in a long breath. “We’ve been so busy, I haven’t been able to address the fact that you do have an alpha living at your house and you did not get our permission to do that.”

I sat a little straighter. “No, I suppose I didn’t. And I wasn’t honest with you all about Shaw being my mate.” And it hadn’t been out of a desire to decide. Not that it made it any better.

Morgan nodded. “Well, I haven’t done my due diligence either, in addressing the fact that you are too attached to Caleb.”

My stomach turned again, and I was so sure that I was going to lose my breakfast. I put a hand over my stomach as if that would calm it, trying to hold back the bile rising in my gut. I

nearly bolted from the table to find the toilet. But as quickly as it came, it passed. This was definitely more than being tired.

“However, I’m not going to worry too much about that,” Morgan assured me. “Our animals recognize family. There’s a reason you were attached to that boy.”

I opened my mouth to speak. With all that had gone on, not once had I examined it enough to come to that or any conclusion.

“I guess I hadn’t really thought of it that way,” I said. “He’s just an amazing kid and his dad told me to look after him. I took my vow to him seriously and got attached.”

“I know that.” Morgan swayed a bit, his little one starting to stir. “We’ll never know for certain, but perhaps Marshall instinctively knew you were family also and that you would be important to Shaw.”

My throat grew tight. “I had spoken to Jasper about being Shaw’s mate. I didn’t keep it to myself. I recognized my behavior for what it was.” For some reason I needed him to know that.

Morgan nodded and glanced at Jasper. “I suspected as much.”

“When Shaw arrived, for a brief moment I thought it all made sense, and it could be the three of us as a family.” That was the easy part. “But then he didn’t recognize me as his mate.” I felt comfortable sharing with them what Shaw had shared with me. “As he puts it, his nose is crap.”

“He doesn’t have a sense of smell?” Morgan’s eyes went wide.

“No. I mean he does, but not a normal one. It was a war injury that damaged his sense of smell and now he pretty much only smells bad things. I can’t imagine how awful that is to adjust to.” Especially with our senses being heightened as shifters. “And to be blunt, it messed with us for a little bit. I thought he rejected me, and he couldn’t figure out what was going on with him. That’s what triggered my... you know.” The last thing I wanted to do was discuss my heat.

“Things are good now?” Morgan said, skipping the heat conversation like the amazing Forerunner he was.

I blushed. “Yes.”

“He’s welcome to stay,” Morgan said, without skipping a beat.

“For how long?” I tried not to get my hopes up that it was forever or even a year.

“I don’t know,” he said. “We’ll need to determine the best course of action there.”

The rest of the alphas that stayed here had jobs they did for the pack, but what would Shaw’s be? And would he even want to stay? It was possible he would want to move on to a different territory. There was so much up in the air.

“Thank you,” I said. “He is a good man.”

“I know.” Morgan smiled. “And he’s a lucky one to have you as a mate.” He leaned in the tiniest of bits and scented the air.

“You really ought to talk with Mortimer.”

“I’m just a little tired, probably stressed about this meeting. I’m fine.”

Morgan shook his head. “You’ve met your mate. You went into a short heat. You don’t think that you might have a little baby growing in you that is causing you to look like you’re going to throw up any second?”

I hadn’t thought about that. We were so new. But now that he said it, I couldn’t really deny it. It was the only thing that made sense.

Oh goodness. Our lives were about to change. Again. “I’ll go see Mortimer tomorrow.”

Chapter 14

Shaw



I came in the back door of Emory's house after finishing up my discussion with the other alphas. Emory was on the living room floor doing some sort of stretch. He was bent in a way that I didn't know was possible. I stopped dead in my tracks and watched him. I couldn't tear my eyes away, even if the goddess herself walked in the door.

He'd mentioned that he did yoga, but the only thing I knew about that was from a sloth meme. I'd hardly call that being educated on the matter. Now that I saw it in action, it looked amazing on him. Painful for me, but he bent and twisted in a graceful motion that had my cock pressing against my zipper.

He looked up at me and then bounced back onto his two feet as if he hadn't been in what I considered a nearly impossible position. His brow slick was sweat.

“Hey,” he said. “How was your day?”

I swallowed thickly, trying to tamp down the arousal that had flared through me as I took in his form. Sometimes it took me aback just how stunning he was. I wasn't sure what I did for fate to shine down so favorably upon me, but was I glad for it. Go, past-Shaw.

“Just fine,” I said, not bothering to bore him with details. “I brought dinner. Dean made up these family dinner packs for whoever didn't want to eat on the patio outside.”

It was a brilliant idea. Sometimes omegas didn't want to be surrounded by people when they first came, or possibly ever. This gave them an easy way to ask for that without getting into details they might not want or be willing to share.

“Sweet. I'm starving, which is new and different from how I've been feeling all day.” He stepped up on his tiptoes, stretching his calves. At least I thought that was what he was doing.

I raised a brow at his comment, unsure what he meant by “feeling all day.”

Emory waved his hand in the air. “We'll talk about it later.”

He didn't seem to be fazed by whatever it might be, and I let it go.

“Where is Caleb?” I asked.

“Here!” The cub bounced down the stairs. He was already in his PJs with wet hair. It was a bit early for bedtime.

“Hey, buddy. Looks like you’re all ready for bed.” I gave him a hug.

“Not bed, movie night.” He righted his shoulders. Caleb loved movie nights. He didn’t say but I had a feeling treats like movies were few and far between in the hyena packs.

“Movie night, huh?” I said. “Didn’t we just have one of those on the lawn?”

Caleb giggled. “This is one we have here in our house.” Not the house, but our house. And maybe the word choice didn’t really make a difference for him. It still warmed my heart. “I’m going to get my bear.” And up the stairs he went.

Emory took the food dish for me. “Oh, look! Super-easy instructions!”

I couldn’t tear my gaze away from his ass as he walked out of the room, giving it an extra little shake and looking over his shoulder as if to make sure I caught it.

Less than a minute later, Caleb came barreling down the stairs, his bear in hand.

“Uncle Shaw? Can you help me with my new Lego set?” He covered the bear’s ears. “He’s not good at Legos. Only snuggling.”

“Noted.” I gave him a nod. “And I’d love to build with you.” I couldn’t remember a time when I had actually played with Legos, but they were quite popular with human and shifter children alike. There was something about creating something out of the tiny cubes of plastic that was very satisfying.

We sat down on the floor and pulled the coffee table close to us. Emory must have pushed it out of his way to do his yoga. I kind of wanted him to return to his yoga later when it was only the two of us.

Emory came back a few minutes later and sat down on the couch. “What are we building?” he asked.

“It looks like it’s going to be some sort of dinosaur,” I said. The toy came with a very detailed instruction booklet, one I was grateful for because turning the little piles of plastic into the picture on the box without it felt impossible.

“It is a dinosaur,” Caleb said. “A diplodocus. Did you know the diplodocus’s front legs were shorter than its back legs and it had over 100 verti...verta... back bones.”

“I did not know that,” I said. My pride never taught about dinosaurs. They only wanted us to know about our pride history—their version, not reality. The rest of the world didn’t seem to matter too much to them. It was one of the many things that sucked about them and why I was so eager to get my brother and me out. If only he had agreed.

“We’re doing a whole unit on dinosaurs right now in school.” He grabbed a brick from the pile. “It’s pretty cool stuff. Do you think there are dinosaur shifters?”

I hadn’t even considered it. But then again, why wouldn’t there be? Or had been, at least. It made sense, given there were shifters of so many other varieties.

Emory snorted. “Well, there are Centaurs now, so I guess we can’t rule anything out, but I think if there were these big Tyrannosaurus-rex shifters walking around, we would know about it by now.”

“They could be in a hidden forest, like the Centaurs,” Caleb insisted. “No one believed there were there either.”

I shrugged. I didn’t think it was possible for something the size of a T-rex to hide, but possibly one of the smaller varieties. And really, there was no harm in imagining it.

After finishing the section of the booklet I was on, I moved up to where Emory was sitting. Caleb seemed to have the instructions well in hand—better than me, if I were being honest. It was probably better to leave him to it.

“You dinosaured out?” he asked, looking back at me.

“I’m sitting on the floor out.”

“Cause you’re old and don’t do yoga,” Caleb said it as fact, and I didn’t correct him because he wasn’t wrong.

“If you want, we can set up on the real table or I can watch you with Emory from here.”

Caleb looked at us for a long second before telling us he wanted us to watch him from here. Emory and I leaned back and watched Caleb work, offering guidance wherever he needed or asked for it, which wasn’t often. And as he worked, Caleb told us anything and everything he learned about dinosaurs at school, and it was plentiful. I was impressed with

how much the small school was able to accomplish, especially with kids coming and going pretty regularly.

Emory's fingers threaded through my hair as he flipped through the channels, looking for something to watch. After watching one episode of one of Caleb's favorite shows, we all sat down and had our dinner. It was a delicious carbonara.

After living in the military for years, any food was flavorful, and Dean's food never disappointed.

Looking at my nephew now, I was hit with a pang of longing for my brother, whose life had been lost. His memory would live on forever and always through Caleb, but it wasn't fair that he wasn't here to enjoy this time together. Emory must have sensed how I was feeling. He reached over and squeezed my hand.

I smiled at him, appreciating the gesture. He was a good mate. One day I hoped to deserve him.

After dinner, we settled down on the couch and watched a movie. It was a movie about a bear who became a mermaid, and while the premise was great, the execution was a bit dry, even for Caleb. It didn't take long for him to fall asleep, his popcorn bowl still in his hand. I took it from his hand and covered him with a blanket, leaving the movie on. We had promised him he could stay up for the entire movie, and if he woke up to find himself in bed, he might sense that as us going back on our word. He had enough disappointments in his life to let something little like that add to them.

"I spoke with Marcus from Steelwick today," I softly.

“Oh?” Emory turned to face me.

“One of the Valford pack members was on a mission and his hotel room was broken into. His cell phone was stolen, along with his laptop. The laptop was locked down, but the phone was not—which apparently is a breach in protocol.”

I tried to think if anyone from Valford had my number. It didn't take long for me to figure out that they did. Crap.

“So that's how somebody got the numbers to the Asilo pack members?”

I nodded.

“Why did they call you? Or did you call them?”

“They called me. Marcus thought that whatever hacking I did to get into their system might have left them vulnerable. It didn't.” I wouldn't do anything that would, but he wouldn't have known that. He didn't know me from the guy in front of him at the grocery store. He'd have been remiss not to have at least asked.

“They also wanted to talk about how to improve their systems so that somebody else can't get in again.”

“Oh, is that something you can do?” His fingers were threading through my hair again. I wasn't sure which of us enjoyed it more, me or him. It was a toss-up.

I nodded. “It is.” I rarely talked about my skills, not to hide them but because people's faces usually glossed over when I did. As exciting as what I could do was in the movies, it was boring as could be in reality.

“That’s pretty cool.” He leaned his head on my shoulder. “I haven’t been feeling the greatest today,” Emory admitted. “That’s why I was surprised I was so hungry for dinner.

I shifted closer to him. “Oh? I’m sorry. Anything I can do?”

He shook his head. “You know I had a heat... sort of.”

It was a heat, but I understood why he referred to it as sort of. It ended almost as soon as it began, unlike most heats I had heard of which were three-day marathons. I wasn’t complaining. It was exactly the length it needed to be.

“Well, whatever that was when we got together—that heat-like time. It wasn’t that long ago.”

I nodded. “Even if it was, I wouldn’t forget. It was what gave me the ability to sense what I already knew was true. You were mine and I was yours.” I kissed the top of his head.

He looked at me as if waiting for me to speak. “Do you need me to spell it out for you?”

The puzzle pieces clicked together and fell into place. I sucked in a breath. “Do you think you’re pregnant?”

I dared not dream it so. Growing our family was more than I dared hope for.

He nodded. “I could be. I haven’t confirmed anything, but gosh, it’s definitely possible.”

“How do we do that? Do I need to go to the store and get one of those sticks you pee on?” It wasn’t too late. I could probably be there before they closed if I left right away.

“No. I need to go see Mortimer in the morning. Are you upset?”

His question nearly broke me.

“Dear sweet omega mine, there would be nothing that could make me happier than you growing our child.”

He looked up at me, his eyes filled with unshed tears. “I want that too. But also, we need to make sure that Caleb knows that we will always love him and that he is ours too.”

I pulled my omega up and onto my lap, hugging him close to me. “And that right there shows me that you will not only be the most amazing father to ever father, but that you are the exact person Caleb needs in his life.”

He snuggled into me. “I love you, alpha mine.”

“As I love you, omega mine. As I love you.”

Chapter 15

Emory



Waking up in the morning, I wanted to race to Mortimer's. I doubted that he wanted visitors at four in the morning, which was the time I first hopped out of bed. And even if he did, we had Caleb to get to school first. We had opted not to say anything to him until we knew for sure. A baby was a huge change, and having that thrust upon you only to discover it wasn't true wasn't good for anyone. Especially not a child.

Caleb insisted on making breakfast now that he had a newfound love of the culinary arts. He made us each a bowl of cereal. It was adorable the way he measured out the puffs of corn to be the specific amount on the package. It didn't fill us up, the serving size more for a child, but I wasn't going to tell him. If this was what gave him joy and cereal was the level he could achieve, I was here for it.

The two of us walked him to school, where he met up with some friends playing outside. He was thriving, and it was such a relief to see. When he first came, there were more tears than smiles and very little laughter. And now it was more laughter than tears. It warmed my heart.

We gave him half a wave and went on our way. We walked hand in hand to the clinic where Mortimer had his ultrasound machine. I hadn't even talked to Mortimer yet about getting the ultrasound, but I did leave him a message letting him know I was coming about my potential pregnancy.

We had not confirmed a pregnancy, but the likelihood was just too high. And now that I realized it was on the table, I felt sure that was what I was looking at. Between the timing and the symptoms, nothing else made sense. And getting a picture of it sounded like a dream come true. If we had been in Fractured Fang, we could've asked Franklin to do one of his magical ultrasounds, the ones he drew. But also, pregnancies at this stage looked like a tiny blob, so I wasn't sure that would be any better than this.

"You ready?" My mate squeezed my hand.

"So ready." We walked up the short number of steps to the clinic. Inside there was a miniature waiting area, not that many people had to wait to be seen. Shifters were rarely sick, and when they were, it was generally an emergency situation. And pregnancies? This was a pack with few alphas. They weren't as common as in most packs.

The clinic was necessary for the omegas that came to us with wounds, both old and new, or existing pregnancies.

“Come on back!” Mortimer shouted from down the hall as the door closed behind us.

I had been in the clinic before, of course. In fact, I had been there when Shaw’s brother had taken his last breath. But this would be the first time I was going for me specifically. As a shifter, I didn’t get sick very often, and my physical wounds had long since healed by the time I got to Asilo. I was one of the lucky ones that way.

But I knew Mortimer pretty well. Not only did he sometimes attend the leaders’ meetings, but he joined us at mealtimes. He had become an integral part of the pride. We were happy to have him here, even if he didn’t bring his amazing healer skills with him, which he did.

Shaw squeezed my hand and smiled at me reassuringly. “Whatever we find out, we’ll deal with it together.”

He, like me, didn’t want to get his hopes up too high. It was difficult not to. Once I suspected I might be with child, it was all I could think about. And the more I did, the more real it became. So if Mortimer told us there was nothing on the ultrasound, it would be a loss, despite there never having been a baby there in the first place.

“Okay.” I nodded. He was right, but that didn’t make it easier. I wanted more than anything to be pregnant with Shaw’s baby, even if that would throw quite the wrench into my plans for life and my future in general. I wanted children, but this was

all happening quickly, and I hadn't even talked with Shaw about what our future family would look like.

Shaw kissed my temple and walked with me toward the back room where the ultrasound was. Mortimer smiled when he saw us and patted the seat for me to hop up. I complied, and he got right to work.

"Have you scented any changes in your mate?" he asked.

Shaw stiffened. He hadn't told Mortimer about his issues, even though the healer might be the person who could help him. I didn't push. It was up to Shaw to decide that. He wasn't hiding his issue. The other alphas knew. But taking the step to ask the healer was different. It meant getting a glimmer of hope, one that might not result in anything. I got that.

"I have not," was all that Shaw said.

"That's quite alright. Not everyone can scent a pregnancy." Mortimer turned his attention back to me, "Let's take a look, shall we? I could have you pee on one of the sticks, but we're running low on supplies, and we've got the machine right here anyway."

"I appreciate it," I said, happy to be seeing my baby instead of a wet medical test with lines. I lifted up my shirt, and Mortimer put some cold gel on my stomach then began waving the wand around, spreading out the gel.

"Very full bladder," he said.

I chuckled. "Yeah, I didn't take a bathroom break after yoga."

Mortimer hummed and used the wand, pressing lightly on my belly. “Ah-ha! I see.” Mortimer smiled at the screen that only he could see.

“What?” I said. “Mortimer. This isn’t time for fun and games. You can spit it out.”

Apparently potential pregnancies stole patience. Who knew?

“Children are always time for fun and games,” he said. He turned the screen so that it was visible for Shaw and me. “See that there?” He pointed to the screen. “And that there?”

“What am I looking at?” I asked. “I just see little circles, but not really circles... more like blobs.”

“Exactly. Two of them. Twins,” he said. “Not sure why you’re not as sick as many of my other twin carriers are, but go ahead and count yourself lucky.”

If this wasn’t as sick, I had whole new sympathy for the other omegas. The exhaustion alone was awful, but when I added the stomach woes...

“I haven’t been feeling the greatest,” I said, almost on autopilot. My voice sounded far away even to me. There were two?

“Keeping your food down?” he asked as he wiped the gel off my belly.

I nodded. “Just tired mostly. I feel like maybe I have the flu? Are we sure it’s not the flu?”

“That’s pregnancy. I printed a few of the pictures so you have proof.” Mortimer chuckled. “But at least at the end of this you get a secret toy surprise... make that two in your case. Congratulations, dads.”

“Wait. There’s two? So, there’s two babies in there. Like twins. Two?” Shaw said, apparently just catching up.

“Yep. We’ll know more about them later, but I can tell you that they are fraternal, which means that there were two eggs that got fertilized, not just one. Being that you are both panthers, we don’t have to guess the animal, but they could both be boys or girls or one of each. They could have different color hair... you catch my meaning.”

“There’s two.” Shaw stared at the wall. He hadn’t caught any meaning. He was still focused on there being two babies in my middle.

“I think I’ve shocked him.” Mortimer laughed as he handed me some paper towel. “I did the best I could, but there’s probably some left on you.”

“Thanks.” I went about wiping the last of the gel from my skin.

I was in a bit of shock myself. Shaw and I already had a child that we were raising, and now we would have two more. How would Caleb feel about that? It was a lot to take in. We didn’t even know where we would be living or what we would be doing. We didn’t have a pride outside of Asilo. And Shaw made no secret about his lack of love for his birth pride. It was as far off the table as mine was.

“I’m going to let you to talk it out. Take some deep breaths, all right? Everything’s going to be just fine. I have to go meet Jonas, but I’m going to leave some vitamins on the counter for you to start taking.”

I nodded, bobbing my head up and down, words not forming.

“Make sure you are eating well, and if you start not being able to keep food down, let me know. Other than that, how about I see you again in two weeks? For a twin pregnancy we’ll want to keep a closer eye on you for precaution. It is very early, but I have no reason to think anything is wrong.”

I nodded again, barely registering what his words were. There were two babies. That was pretty much all I could hold onto from the conversation. Not one, but two. Twins.

The door clicked close behind Mortimer, and Shaw and I just stared at each other.

“Two,” I said. “Two.”

“Wherever we need to go. Whatever we need to do. I’m here for you, one thousand percent, Emory.” He wrapped his arms around me. “I know we haven’t known each other long, but you are my mate and I love you, and I love our babies and Caleb. We are a family, and I will do whatever I need to do to make it work.”

At least Shaw could make words now.

“I know,” I said. “And if we have to leave Asilo…” The thought hurt my heart too much to voice it out loud. My family

had to come first. It was figuring out what that was that was the hard part.

“How about we talk to Morgan before we make any rash decisions?” Shaw suggested. “We don’t even know all of our options yet.”

He was right, of course.

“I don’t want to put him in an awkward situation.” Morgan would bend over backward to try and help us, while also doing what was best for Asilo. That wasn’t fair to him.

“I understand. I could get a job and start paying—” He squeezed me a bit tighter.

“You said we shouldn’t make any rash decisions, right?” I reminded him.

“Right, and I stand by that, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t start to figure out what our decisions could look like.”

I snuggled into him. “How do you think Caleb will react?” Not that we could change the situation any, but it was good to be prepared.

Shaw pulled back and grinned. “He always wanted to be a brother. My brother used to tell me about it and how he wasn’t ready. And Caleb even mentioned it to me on his calls. I’d almost forgotten about all of that. But in a nutshell, I think he will be happy.”

“I think so, too.” Caleb wasn’t one who wanted or needed all the attention. And he did love being surrounded by others. It would be an adjustment, sure, but ultimately, I was leaning

toward him being excited. “He’s our child just as much as these two are. It’s kind of nice that they get a built-in older brother.”

“It is.” He stepped back and held his hand out for me to help me off the exam table. “I’m so happy, mate. I really am. Even with the hurdles we have in front of us, I’m very excited.”

“Me too,” I said, and I leaned over, kissing my mate deeply. Probably too deeply given we were in an exam room and not our home. When we broke apart, we walked out, and I grabbed the vitamins Mortimer left for us along with the note reminding me to come back in two weeks. “He noticed I was lost in thought on the twin thing.” I held up the note to Shaw, and he chuckled, and we walked out of the building, closing the door behind us.

On the way home we walked in comfortable silence. For the moment, this glorious news was ours alone. We would tell everyone soon enough.

“We’re going to need a bigger house,” I said as we walked up to our place. It was fine for three and possibly four, but five shifters—that was pushing it.

Shaw nodded. “Well, if we’re staying here, we need to get on Gideon’s schedule to get it updated. I bet we can expand out easily enough.”

If we’re staying. If.

Please let us be staying.

Chapter 16

Shaw



“I need a job,” I said to Gideon, Dean, and Cooper. We were outside Gideon’s workshop, organizing a fresh load of lumber. “Got any ideas?”

I was going to be a father to not one, but three cubs, and the money I had been using to keep things going while I figured out things for Caleb was going to run out quicker than I wanted it to. Whether we stayed here or had to move, I needed to provide for my family. And really, especially if we moved because that would mean that Emory was losing his job here, as well, bringing our income down to nothing, with no support system like we had here.

“Like a human job or a job with the pride?” Cooper asked.

“Either one, whatever can provide for me and my family.” I wasn’t picky. I would do what it took to take care of them. And really, no job could be much worse than some of the things I’d been asked to do while in the military.

They all nodded, understanding where I was coming from.

I swallowed thickly. I wasn’t looking for a handout, I was willing to work. A lot was riding on this conversation. And after that, even more so when I actually got a chance to finally speak with Morgan. “I’d like to be able to stay here for Emory to continue his work. He makes a difference, and that’s important to both him and me. But also, I want to live amongst the pride like you all do. This place feels like where I belong. I can’t explain it, it just does.”

They looked at me like I had grown two heads. Was that so far from the realm of possibility that they thought it was baffling that I was even asking? Or was it something else?

“Well, duh,” Dean said. “Of course you all would stay here. Where else would you go?”

“Yeah. Do you have any reason to think that you wouldn’t remain here?” Gideon asked, his face showing complete confusion. “Emory is one of our leaders. We don’t just toss them away because they find their mate.”

And while that was true of recent years, according to Emory it hadn’t always been the case. Not the tossing-out part—that would never happen in Asilo—but the leaders of the past would have left to be with their mates. Alphas didn’t stay in Asilo.

“Well, no, it’s just Asilo prides are for omegas, right? Isn’t that the entire point? You all have very specific jobs you do here, which has allowed you to stay. I don’t. I’m just a house guest at this point. And that doesn’t contribute much to the mission, does it?” Because nothing says *please let me stay* by making the argument for me to be booted.

“Yet. You don’t have a specific job yet.” Cooper emphasized *yet*. “And even if you didn’t want to work for the pride, per se, you could do other things. The diner in town is always hiring. It’s owned by a bear shifter. Working there would be nice in keeping relations with local shifters.”

That was a stretch if I ever heard one.

I wasn’t quite sure that line cook or server were jobs that I would find satisfying, but that didn’t matter; if it provided for my family, I could make do. I wasn’t picky.

“This just might be perfect.” The other voice startled me, and I whipped around quickly.

I recognized Steelwick’s Alpha-Elect Armand. Next to him was Morgan. How long had they been standing there and what did they hear?

I stood a little straighter. I knew that Armand was not my biggest fan, after what I had done to find the information to get to my nephew. I didn’t regret it, though. This was where I was meant to be, and it wasn’t my fault their data was so easy to breach. I wouldn’t tell him any of that, though. Apologizing and promising never to do it again were far more likely.

“We just might have a proposition for you, Shaw,” Armand said.

“Are you thinking the same thing that I’m thinking?” Morgan asked, a slight smile on his face.

“I think I am,” Armand said.

“Well, could you all clue the rest of us in because this is getting a little too freaky with you two on the same wavelength,” Cooper said. “After showing up out of nowhere.”

“Pack Alpha magic,” Armand teased, and I missed the joke. But teasing was better than being pissed, so I took it.

Armand took a step closer. “The liaison for this Asilo pack recently took on a different responsibility. Being the liaison for the Centaur herd is taking up a lot more time than we thought it would for Marcus, but it’s a great opportunity for him. And it’s where he belongs. We’re thrilled for him, of course, but that’s left us a little shorthanded.”

I couldn’t imagine taking over as the liaison for a herd that was made up of creatures that weren’t supposed to even be real wasn’t time-consuming. They might be few in numbers, but their existence was huge in impact.

“Plus, we’re just a little shorthanded in general. There are a lot of packs that have needed our assistance lately. Not in a bad way, but there is a lot to do and not enough people to cover the bases.” Armand stopped talking, and I waited for there to be more, but nope. He was done.

“Okay, but what does that have to do with me?” I asked. I was sympathetic to their plight, but also, I had to think of what my family needed right now. And really, what could I do? By all accounts I was a criminal, given how I hacked into their data without a second’s thought and zero regrets.

“You have skills that are necessary for an enforcer pack,” he said, and I froze.

That was the last thing I expected to come out of his mouth. If anything, I had proven to be untrustworthy. And besides, the enforcer pack was... well, it wasn’t anything like Asilo. My mate would never be happy there. At least, I couldn’t picture him being happy there. Enforcer packs helped, absolutely, but not in the ways that were fulfilling to Emory.

I shook my head. He was right, I did have the skills, but... “I don’t think that Emory would want to leave. And I’m not sure I would want to either. I’m sure your pack is nice and all, but... I think I need to pass.”

“You wouldn’t have to leave, though,” Armand said. “Being a part of Steelwick wouldn’t necessarily mean living with us. We might require you to come there for meetings and whatnot, especially training. Given your history and your skill set, you could teach us quite a lot. Come on, let’s go into the house and talk about it. This is more than just a backyard conversation.”

I nodded as I took in all that he’d just said. I owed it to him and my family to hear him out. If there was a way to work out the details to be beneficial for both sides, I was all for it.

“Okay,” I said. “Let me let Emory know and then I’ll meet you. We were supposed to go out for ice cream, and I don’t want him to think I forgot.”

“I was just about to take a break,” Dean said. “Jasper and I can go with him and Caleb. We’ll bring you back some.” He clapped me on the back. “Welcome to the pride.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Cooper said, punching me in the shoulder lightly.

While I appreciated that they thought it was a done deal and were happy for it, I still needed to talk to Emory once I had all of the details. I wasn’t going to make any huge decisions like this without him. We were mates—partners. Doing so would be unfair to him and set us off on a rocky start.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, appreciating the good-natured ribbing I was getting from them. “And thanks.”

“Morgan, was this what you were thinking? I don’t want to overstep,” Armand said.

“This would be perfect. I’m not willing to see Emory go someplace else.” His acceptance embraced me like a hug. “He’s necessary here and loved very much. Not just by the omegas around us, but by the rest of us members as well. He’s family, and we want him to stay.”

I hadn’t realized he felt that way. I was sure Emory didn’t either. He was going to be happy about it. I knew from our conversations that he was worried he’d be overstepping by

asking for us to stay. All indications today were that it was not the case.

“Having alphas on the property is not the taboo thing we once thought it would be,” he continued. “It works well to have them here. For protection, for balance between all of us, and to show them that not all alphas are toxic. And thankfully, none of you are those alphas, the ones that are too good to take care of children.” He smiled bright, and I hated that the bar was so low that taking care of your own kids made you an anomaly. “More times than not we’ve had the alphas protecting the kids while we are all working. As long as that’s a role you’re willing to have.”

“More than,” I said. “I want to be there for Caleb and the new babies as much as I can. And Emory’s work is important to him. I want him to continue that.”

“Well then, welcome to Asilo.” Morgan grinned. “We’re happy to have you.”

I smiled. “I can’t wait to tell Emory, he’s going to be excited.”

Even if I didn’t take the job with Steelwick, we were still welcome and wanted here, and that was huge. He was going to be over the moon. I already was.

“Well, it’ll have to wait till after ice cream and after we have a few conversations,” Armand said. He pulled out a tablet. “I need to go over all of the rules of Steelwick before you even begin starting the official process. Seems that you are a little flexible when needed.” He winked at his jibe over my hacking activities. “Not saying that is always a bad thing, but some of

our rules are more to make our lives easier. And of course, we'll want you to come for a visit before it's *official* official."

"I would be worried if you didn't." Armand didn't seem the type to lead by authority, and Alpha-Elect meant he wasn't a lifer. They wanted him there. That told me more than enough about his character to be comfortable with him.

"You'll need to meet everyone. A lot will weigh on some interviews with my team. I'll be honest, if I had seen any red flags, you wouldn't even gotten beyond the point of me offering."

Morgan nodded as if agreeing with him.

"So it's unlikely anything will come of that time with us to stop the process, but if my team gives me any indication that you wouldn't be good for the job or you make them all uncomfortable, then I can't take you. I need to be upfront with you about that. This is a ninety-nine percent done deal, but there is no guarantee over that one percent."

"I understand, and I appreciate your honesty in this matter," I said, sounding far more formal than I had intended to.

"I thought you might," Armand said. "Being a military man..."

The two of us sat down in Morgan's house and hashed out a lot of details. He told me about his pride and the members in it. Like Asilo, they had changed over recent years and now had cubs running around. I loved the way his face lit up as he

talked about the youth of his pack. He was going to be an amazing boss, and I could see why his pack loved him so.

And the work was just up my alley. It tied in with my military training and was something I was not only good at, but also that I loved. It was the perfect fit. I would need to add an office somewhere, possibly in a little outbuilding of its own or possibly in our house. But that was jumping ahead. First, I needed to tell my mate the amazing news.

Chapter 17

Emory



I was bummed that Shaw couldn't go with us to get ice cream. According to Jasper he was talking with the Alpha-Elect of Steelwick and our Forerunner. I understood why he would need to do that over this. I tried to pump Jasper for more information, but he would only say that everyone was happy enough about how things were going. That was enough to calm my nerves and let me stop pestering him.

Caleb had been looking forward to ice cream all day. Sure, part of it was going on an outing with both Shaw and me, but part of it was that they were having his favorite flavor as their special—Cookie Monster Growls. I wasn't even sure what was in it, but when he first came, Jasper had brought him some when he took some of the other omegas and kids out, and

Caleb never forgot that. I think in a way it was the first time he felt part of the pride as a whole.

I wasn't about to not make good on my promise to Caleb that we would get some once he finished his book report. We didn't do school like humans did, per se, but it was important for them to learn some basic things. It was especially when it came to things that would help them to fit in with the human world should they ever need to, and book reports were a great tool for that. Reading about children in the human world and then discussing it had the kids figuring out parts of their culture without having to be lectured the way I was as a kid. I hated it so and was glad he got to skip that, at least until he was older.

Reading was an incredibly important part of their education for this and many other reasons. Luckily for us, Caleb had a strong love for reading, especially being read to, not that I would ever complain about that. The books might get a little repetitive, but I loved those cuddly moments when he curled up next to me while I read him a book.

"What are you grinning about?" I said to Jasper when we got out of the vehicle at the ice cream shop.

He put his arm around me and hugged me close. "Nothing. I'm just glad it's all working out."

I didn't know what he meant by that. There were still so many things to work out, but I appreciated his enthusiasm.

"Yeah," I said. "Me too."

“I’m glad we’re getting ice cream,” Caleb said. “Cookie Monster Growls, here I come! Can I get whipped cream too?”

“Sure!” I ruffled Caleb’s hair. “And a cherry too if you want.”

“Or gummy bears? This kid in the book I did my report on ate gummy bears on his ice cream. So it’s kind of like I’m doing schoolwork.”

Jasper burst out in laughter as I worked hard to contain my own. I had to hand it to Caleb, he could loophole it like a boss.

“Yeah, seeing it’s school related, we can do that if they have any.” I had no idea what their topping list was, but I was happy to buy him whatever he wanted. Just for this trip, it wasn’t an everyday occurrence.

“Thanks. I wish Uncle Shaw were here. How come he couldn’t come?” He looked up at me with a bit of hurt in his eyes. I’d thought we’d done a good job making this seem like the fun way to get ice cream, leaving a bit early and bringing Jasper with us, but I saw then that I’d missed the boat by a mile.

“He really wanted to.” I knelt down to be at eye level and booped his nose. “He loves us and ice cream. This is the perfect outing for him. Maybe we can all go next week. Something came up and he had to talk with some people.”

I stood up straight and noticed that he was looking expectantly at me as if I was needed to explain more. I wasn’t even sure how much I could say and gave Jasper a look I hoped showed that I needed saving.

“Caleb, the Steelwick pack Alpha was here, and he had to speak with your Uncle Shaw about a few things. We’ll bring him back something tasty, though,” Jasper said.

When I’d first heard that Shaw had to speak with Armand it had taken me aback. I wasn’t going to question it, especially not knowing that Shaw did some pretty intense things on the computer. For all I knew it had nothing to do with our pride at all. He might have simply wanted my mate to show him how to do something fancy on the computer.

I knew Shaw had done some poking around with the computer when he was looking for Caleb, not all of which had been... legal, for lack of a better term. I didn’t know a whole lot about it, but I knew it was important for Steelwick that both our and their information remained safe. Shaw poking around was a threat to that, even if it was for good reason. I crossed my fingers that the conversation was a positive one and not that my mate was getting into trouble. I doubted that Jasper would be so jolly if that were the case and held onto that.

“I think I want a big banana split,” I said, shockingly hungry. But then again, I was growing not one but two babies. They would need energy, and ice cream was basically milk and bananas were fruit. It was practically a health food.

“I want a Trash Can Sundae,” Jasper said.

I chuckled. I had no idea what it was, but the name coming from the lips of an adult amused me.

“And you know what I want.” Caleb rubbed his belly. “It’s going to be amazing.”

“Not as amazing as my vanilla cone,” Dean said with sincerity. To each their own, but that sounded boring. But then again, their little one was here, and he was probably doing it so he could share. Dean was as amazing a father as he was a chef, and his food was legendary in shifter realms.

“You are wrong. Cookie Monster Grownl is going to be the best.” Caleb was firm in his belief.

I, on the other hand, wasn’t so sure about his prediction. The ice cream in question was bright blue and nothing about frozen gummy bears sounded good. If anything, they sounded like a trip to the dentist.

As a surprise to no one, a trash can sundae was exactly like it sounded. There was a cup shaped like a garbage can filled with ice cream. On it they loaded every topping imaginable. Sprinkles, cookie dough pieces, Oreos, crumbled-up cookies, all sorts of things. Jasper looked at it as a masterpiece. I wasn’t so sure, but it looked far better than the blue sundae we got Caleb, so there was that. I still hadn’t decided what to get Shaw, but we had time before I needed to. I had an entire banana split to devour first, and I planned to eat every last morsel.

We grabbed our ice cream from the counter and ate at the picnic table outside. It was comfortable and quiet. They had really done a nice job setting this place up. I could see why it was so popular on a hot summer’s night. Today was cooler, the only reason we were able to get our ice cream so quickly.

But even in the peaceful quiet, my beast was on edge. There was something eerie in the air, and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. My cat let out a rumble of concern. I looked around, trying to figure out what it was that was making my cat growl. I couldn't see or scent a single thing that might upset him.

"Everything all right?" Jasper asked, his voice low and filled with concern.

"Yeah," I said and shook a bit to try and get rid of the weird feeling coming over me. It was probably just one of the thousand things that came with pregnancy that no one ever talked about. "Everything's fine. I'm just... you know." I looked down to my still-flat belly and hoped he caught my hint.

His little one wasn't quite old enough for their own ice cream, but they were able to taste some bites from the cone Dean had gotten. I had called it. He was ordering for his child, and it was stinking adorable.

Despite not wanting to raise the alarm, my senses were on alert. I felt as if we were being watched, but I couldn't see how or where from. And then there was the bigger question: Why? We were just people out for after-school ice cream. There was nothing special about us. Or was there?

"Should we swing into the store so you guys can take a container of ice cream back for Shaw? I fear bringing something back from here will result in a puddle of goop,"

Dean asked. “I haven’t yet perfected homemade ice cream, but I’m close.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.” I ate another spoonful of my sundae. “I wonder if you could make banana ice cream, but not the kind with fake banana flavor, but made with real bananas. I think I would eat that all day.”

Dean chuckled. “I can try.”

We threw away all our stuff once we were finished. Surprisingly, even I managed to finish mine and the thing was the size of a dinner plate. Once we were back in the car, I felt slightly better, my nerves less on high alert. They were still elevated, but nowhere near as much.

“I’ll run in and grab some real quick,” I said once we were at the grocery store. I was already opening the door. The little one was already asleep, and it was best to hurry up so we could get home and they could get a proper nap outside of their car seat.

“I wanna come with you!” Caleb said.

I wanted to protest, to tell him to stay, but there really was no reason he couldn’t come with me. It was a quick trip, and the odds of him waking up our resident napper were far too great if I left him in the car.

“All right, let’s go,” I said. “But you need to stay with me.”

“Yes, Emory.”

I wasn’t looking, but it wouldn’t have surprised me if he was rolling his eyes. Sometime in the past few weeks I had

transitioned from “Emmie” to “Emory,” and I wasn’t sure if I loved it.

We headed straight to the freezer section and grabbed a few pints of ice cream. We weren’t sure which one Shaw would like best, and to get all felt like the safest option. I amused myself as I thought about how he wanted me to keep the kitchen far more stocked than it was when he first came and how when I was finally doing so it was all frozen yums.

As we headed around to get to the register, there was a huge crash in the aisle we were passing, and an older woman screamed. I looked to the noise and an entire display rack of canned chili had fallen over and she was trapped beneath it.

“Here, follow me.” I handed Caleb the ice cream and the two of us ran down the aisle to help the woman.

I knelt down and started to remove the cans. She was crying, and I understood why. They were heavy, and I couldn’t understand why they’d have a free-standing shelf of them like that.

“I’ve got you,” I assured her through her tears.

It only took a couple of minutes until the cans were picked up and a staff member finally showed up to help.

“Let’s help you up.” I held a hand for her, and she grabbed it.

“Thank you,” she said between sobs. “I have no idea why that man pushed that down on me. He kept saying something about mine.”

My stomach dropped, and I turned to grab Caleb to get us the fuck out of there, but when I did, he wasn't there, and the three ice creams laid on the ground where he once stood.

Fuck.

Chapter 18

Shaw



The phones all rang at the same time, and I instantly knew something had gone terribly wrong. My beast was already clawing to get out when I answered Jasper's call.

"Are you with the others still?" he asked, his voice shaking.

All of the other phones stopped ringing the second I answered mine.

"Yes." It was all I could get out. I was military trained, and every last bit of that training fell out the window. My gut clenched, and it was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. Something was wrong. With my mate, with Caleb, or with both.

"Put me on speaker."

I fumbled with the phone, managing to do so. I needed to get a grip. Whatever this was, I needed to be strong. My family—my new pride was counting on me. I was getting looped in for a reason.

“We need security on high alert at the pride, now. And we need as many people as we can spare at Linden Grocers. I’ll inform you along the way, but you need to move now.”

He didn’t say this was about my mate and nephew, but he didn’t need to. I felt it deep inside my bones. Something was terribly wrong.

“Who’s coming with me?” I asked, already halfway to the door.

“Who says you are going?” Morgan asked.

“Me. Now who is coming with me?” I kept walking, not even pretending to care who was or wasn’t technically in charge here. If this meant they would no longer want me in the pack or as part of Steelwick’s team, they could fuck the right off.

“I am.” Armand was already at my side. “I’m driving.”

I didn’t argue with him. It was probably safer that he do so. And besides, he had a motorcycle, and they were both fast and agile.

“Agreed.” I let him run ahead of me, and I got on the back of his bike and off we went.

The store was close by, and as we pulled in, I could see Dean in the car with his little one and Jasper hugging Emory. Caleb was nowhere in sight.

“He was here,” Emory sobbed, and I raced to him. “He has Caleb. At least I think it’s his dad. I don’t know.” His voice was shaking, and I was doing the best I could to decipher his words. “He pushed a display down, and I missed that part. I thought it just crashed and there was a lady and... Find him. I tried but I couldn’t pick up on a scent at all.”

Which meant that I didn’t have a single hope of finding him on my own.

“Keep him safe,” I barked to Jasper who promised to take him home and keep him safe.

Armand and I went into the store, and on the way in I said what I should’ve said before. “I can’t scent properly,” I said. “I can only pick up certain things—none of which are helpful. Long story short, it was a chemical injury from my time in the military. My nose will be of no use.”

Armand grunted. “I’ll see if I can convince them to let me see the camera footage. There probably isn’t a scent if your mate couldn’t pick up on it.”

I hadn’t thought of that.

“See if you can figure out what happened while I work my magic, and don’t leave without letting me know,” he ordered.

I promised I wouldn’t, and as he ran over to where the office and customer service were, I looked for a display that might’ve been knocked over and found it easily. It was still on the ground, a staff member picking up the cans.

Unsure what else to do, I walked over, trying to act as if I were just a customer. Armand could take care of the “official-looking” bits. I needed to blend.

“Please tell me these aren’t all dented.” I bent down to grab one. “My boyfriend told me to grab four for something he’s making for a potluck, and he’s sure dented equals unsafe.”

The employee looked up at me. “Most are, but I can help you find some. An asshole got pissed at an old lady and pushed this over on her. What the fuck is wrong with people these days?”

“He pushed it onto an old lady? Is she okay?” I, of course, cared that she was fine, but my goal was to worm out any information that I could from him.

“She’s fine. He thought she had his kid or something. The entire thing was messed up. Some nice omega helped her.” He handed me a can. “This one seems fine.”

“Thanks.” I accepted it, not wanting to blow my story just yet, and stood up when the scent of death slammed into me. It was faint, but there.

I closed my eyes and scented it deeply. There was something familiar about it. Like it belonged to a place and not a person, or a mouse who maybe got stuck between the shelves. I scented deeply again and a hand on my shoulder startled me.

“I got what we need. How about you?” It was Armand.

“Yeah, I think I do,” I said and followed him outside to the motorcycle where we could talk without humans all up in our

business and making things far more complicated than they needed to be.

“It was Caleb’s bio father. Technically, we have no say in the custody bit of this, since that hasn’t been decided by the council yet. Caleb is his son, and I don’t think there have been any orders in place taking that right from him.”

“Fuck that. He kidnapped him, and we’re getting him back.” I didn’t give one last fuck what legal paperwork might or might not say. His father was a piece of shit and a murderer. He stole my brother from me, and I was going to end him.

“You didn’t let me finish. We can deal with him in relation to what he did to your brother, but we need to be careful and word it that way when we find him, which we will.” Armand said it like a vow.

“I scented death in there. Not like grocery store meat decaying or even a dead infestation, but death death. It scented like chicken processing. Are there any plants here or possibly a large farm that might be doing that? I would look for anything that might meet that criterion.” I’d never been grateful for my fucked-up nose before, but isolating that single scent might just be exactly what we needed.

“Let me make a call.”

Less than a minute later we were on our way to a chicken farm that had recently been shuttered when their land was foreclosed on. It made sense as a hideout and was close. Was it the best clue following there was? Maybe not, but it was what we had.

Armand pulled off onto a dirt road right before the farm and parked the bike. “We need to go by foot if we have any hope of catching them off guard. The others are aware of our location and are sending back-up. We only had a few guys close by, but unless this bastard managed to get a crew, he’s probably working alone. A few is all we’ll need.”

“Do you know anything about this asshole that you haven’t shared?” He had told me quite a bit, and I had done the same in return.

“No. And Shaw, I never said this, but if he leaves here without a heartbeat, I have your back. It wasn’t to be avoided and you had no choice.” He squeezed my shoulder. “Let’s go get Caleb.”

We split up, Armand going around the back and me coming up from the side. I wasn’t sure what the bastard’s plans were, but I doubted they were to hurt Caleb. That wouldn’t stop him in the future, of course. He was an abusive piece of shit, but it bought us time to get Caleb out of there and home where he belonged.

The place hadn’t been closed long; the stench of feces and death still clung to the air, but it wasn’t fresh. If I were to guess it had been a few months, which meant the house would be missing both electricity and water. This wasn’t a permanent place for him to be. It was a stopover, and we had to take care of things before he moved along.

I reached the window of the home easily. There were enough places to hide as I made my way to him. My hope was that he

was too busy getting Caleb settled in and too cocky to think anyone could track him that he wasn't even paying attention. Whatever he did to hide his true scent had worked, neither Armand nor Caleb picking up on it. My guess was it was tied to dark healing, perhaps something from the recipes the hyena cackle had been working with before they'd been shut down by Steelwick. Nothing ever good came out of dark healing. Nothing.

I peeked in the window and saw Caleb sitting at the kitchen table, sobbing quietly, his sperm donor tying him to a chair. We needed a distraction to get him out of there. I went behind the chicken coop, the place Armand and I said we would go if we needed to chat. It wasn't ideal, but given we had two-point-three seconds to make a plan, it worked.

"He's in the kitchen. I need to get the asshole out of the house long enough to have Caleb rescued. I also wouldn't mind the guy dead, but not when Caleb could see. He might be an evil piece of shit, but the kid already watched one parent die. I can't let him go through that again." He might hate the guy to his core, but even then, it wouldn't make the experience any less traumatic.

"Guess we could blow up his car." Armand sounded far too excited about the possibility. "I'll do that, and when he comes out, you take care of him, and I'll get Caleb out of there."

I nodded and started to take off my clothes. I needed my panther for this.

It was less than two minutes later and Armand had the car up in flames with a noise that was probably heard all the way to Asilo. The noise was the only flaw in the plan. The last thing we wanted was human police intervening. It was too late, and I would worry about that if and when the time came.

Just as I suspected he would, the fucker ran out to see what the noise was. For a kidnapper, he hadn't been smart, allowing a simple distraction to get the better of him. I was glad for it.

"What the fuck?" He ran to the car, and I stepped out from behind the garage.

"That's my question." I stared him dead in the eye.

"How did you... it's impossible... I wiped my scent free." He looked back to the house as if deciding whether to fight or to go and grab the boy.

"Your scent, yes, but not that of this place. I'm here for my nephew. We can do this the easy way or the..."

He shifted into his hyena form before I even finished the sentence. I shifted and landed on my paws just as he reached me. There was so much I wanted to know, from how he managed to do what he did with the phones, why he killed my brother, and why he came back for Caleb. All of them would remain a mystery because once I took my fur it had been decided. He would die.

He snapped at me as he lunged, but as strong and determined as hyenas were, they were nowhere near as agile as a panther. I rolled onto the ground, and as he landed and tumbled, I

pounced, my jaws closing around his neck and ripping through the flesh long before he could think of a counter move. I showed him no mercy for he deserved none.

His death was quick and painless. Not what I would have chosen for him, but it was what it was. My brother's death was avenged, and Caleb was safe. At least I hoped he was.

I took a few steps back and shifted. "Burn, you piece of garbage." I scooped up his corpse and tossed it onto the burning car. Steelwick would still need to come and clean up the mess. There was enough blood here to alert the humans, but his body would be gone. If only it could take all of the horrible memories he gave my mate and Caleb with him.

Halfway to the house, Armand came out with Caleb who started to run to me, until Armand stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"It's safe," I called to Armand, and he let Caleb go. I'd never seen the little guy run so fast.

"He told me you let him keep me, and when I called him a liar, he tied me up." Caleb looked up at me, my body covered in his father's blood. "Are you hurt or is it his?"

I refused to lie to him. "His. I had no choice."

"He isn't with Daddy. The goddess wouldn't allow that," Caleb whispered. His lip trembled with each word.

"You're right. She wouldn't. Let me grab my clothes and we can go home." Humans would notice a naked guy on a

motorcycle, or anywhere else for that matter. They were weird about nudity.

“Papa must be so scared.”

“Papa?”

“Yeah. I thought that name worked. Do you think he will like it?”

“I know he will. He loves you just like a father.” I held my hand out for Caleb’s, and he took it. “My clothes are by the chicken coop then we are outta here.”

“When I called him a liar, he asked me if I was dumb,” Caleb said as I pulled my shirt over my head. I hated not being able to see his facial expression as he spoke. I didn’t want to miss any of this. “He said that you and Papa were going to get rid of me and that you only kept me to hurt him.”

“I’m glad you called him a liar. He was. We are keeping you because we love you and you are our family.”

“I know, Duncle.”

“Duncle?”

“I don’t love it, but it’s dad and uncle combined.” He shrugged. “I’ll think of something better.”

“I think it’s perfect.” I held my hand out for his. “Ready to go home and see Papa?”

“I’m ready, Duncle. So very ready.”

Chapter 19

Emory



“He’s asleep?” Shaw asked.

I nodded. I didn’t pull Caleb’s door closed, though. Instead, the two of us leaned in the doorway, just watching him as he slept, our hands linked together. We couldn’t bear to be apart from one another for too long.

It had been terrifying to have him there one second and gone the next. Guilt had rushed into me so quickly that I was barely able to speak, much less be of any help. And because it was a shifter kidnapping, I had to manage to keep the entire thing from the humans as I was in that state.

Thankfully, they took the fallen display and the hurt human as the excuse for everything that had happened. And even when Armand managed to see the security footage, he did it under

the guise of safety inspection due to the accident. There I was in the parking lot having a full on meltdown, and Armand was clever enough to make that happen. There was a reason he was in Steelwick and I was in Asilo. We had very different abilities. That was for sure.

After a few moments of us standing there, Shaw and I made our way down the hallway to the living room and settled on the couch. Shaw pulled me into his arms and held me close.

“Jasper and Kian will come over tomorrow and we can talk about a counseling plan for Caleb,” I said. “His father was an evil piece of shit, but he was still his father. I’m glad he didn’t have to watch him die. That messes with you, even if they are evil fuckers who deserve it.” And his father one hundred percent fell into that category.

“I think he will be all right. He seemed to understand the situation much better than most adults would’ve. It will still be hard because your father is your father, but he’s tough. Right?” My mate didn’t sound as sure as his words would indicate.

I nodded. “It was traumatic, for sure, but he wasn’t without us for long at all, and he didn’t see the death. I’ve seen worse and so has he. The day he came here, it was...” I couldn’t finish and I didn’t need to. Shaw knew the story.

“I hate that this happened to him and that I wasn’t able to stop it,” I said. That guilt would sit with me for as long as I lived. It was safe to say that I too was going to need some counseling and treatment to get over the day’s events. But we were both in the right place for the healing to begin.

“There was nothing you could do, and as far as places for it to happen, that was a good one. It had security footage and a lot of witnesses. We were able to find him.”

I opened my mouth to continue, but Shaw stopped me. “Don’t say it would be better if it didn’t happen, because of course it would, but you didn’t see his sperm donor. There was no stopping him. And the more unhinged he got, the greater the possibility that he would hurt a human or one of our pride as he tried to get Caleb. The way it happened was the best possible outcome.”

“Caleb was lucky you and Armand were there. Thank you. I’m so happy he has you in his life.”

Shaw hugged me tighter. “And he has you,” Shaw said. “Did you know he calls you Papa in his head? He tested it with me tonight. It was so fucking adorable. And I think he might’ve said it to his father too.”

“Papa?”

I nodded.

“Is that okay? I’m not his dad. Would your brother approve?” I would never want to do anything to disrespect the man that brought Caleb into this world and protected him, the one I promised I would take care of his son, the one who loved him so much that he held on until he was the one place that could keep Caleb safe.

“My brother would love it and crack up at my new name.” He pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

“And that name is?” I asked.

“Duncle. Like daddy and uncle mushed together. It’s sweet, but also... objectively funny.”

“Correct on both accounts.” I rubbed my cheek against his body, wanting my mate to scent like me. “Sorry I forgot your ice cream at the store,” I teased, wanting to move on to something less serious.

We still had to do a bunch of paperwork for Steelwick and needed to talk to the Asilo leaders. I was ready for a break until that happened. Not that there would ever really be a break from it. I had a feeling it wouldn’t be far from our thoughts for a long time, if not forever.

He let out a wry laugh at my ice cream joke. “I’ll never forgive myself for missing that trip to the ice cream place, if I’m being honest. I’m not sure that my panther is going to let the two of you out of my sight for a long time, mate. I’m sorry. So incredibly sorry that I stayed behind.”

“I thought this was inevitable. You can’t tell me not to blame myself then turn around and point that same blame in your direction. That’s not how this works.” I cupped his cheek, and he leaned into it.

“I know, but—”

I cut him off. “No buts. How could you have known what was going to happen? You couldn’t have.”

“I know,” he conceded.

“What were you and Armand talking about, anyway? Were you still in trouble for the hacking?” I wanted to change the subject, give us some semblance of normalcy after the day we had. Plus, I was nosy.

“No, it was about the hacking, sort of, but not in a bad way.

He had all of my attention.

“Actually, he barely even mentioned that except when he was making a bad attempt at teasing.” He shook his head in amusement. I had to be sure to ask him about that later. “I can’t believe I haven’t gotten a chance to tell you. Armand wants me to be a part of Steelwick.”

My jaw dropped so fast, I was surprised it didn’t fall off. I climbed off his lap so I could sit facing him as we finished this discussion. Of all the things I had suspected might come from his mouth, leaving Asilo to join Steelwick wasn’t one of them. And honestly, I wasn’t sure how I felt about it.

Leaving Asilo wasn’t in my plans, this was a place where I made a difference. But Steelwick was a pack who did just as much good as we did, only in a different way. If Shaw wanted to go there and help them with their good work, what kind of a mate would I be if I attempted to stop them? One not worth having, that was what kind. “We’ll go with you, of course.”

“No, mate.” He rubbed his thumb along my cheekbone.

“We’re not leaving Asilo. This place needs you.”

“And Steelwick needs you.” I would never undervalue the contributions my mate could and would make to any pack he

worked for or with.

And the more I thought about it, the more perfectly he fit with Steelwick. His abilities with a computer would make a huge difference in what they could accomplish as a group. Shifters were starting to adopt more and more technology as a whole, and if enforcer packs didn't keep up, they were going to see their ability to do their job declining.

"I can work with Steelwick and still live here," he said, and I found my body instantly relaxing. He wasn't talking about moving at all. He had been offered the best of both worlds; doing work he loved and that could make a difference while staying in his home with the family he loved. Armand sure knew how to make a job offer... and how to save small hyena pups.

"I'd take over Marcus's position, but also do some research work and facilitate the training of Steelwick members on new technology. I'd have to visit there some, of course, but we would still live and raise our family here."

"What about Morgan? Did he and all the other alphas—" It was one thing for us to want to live here, but we still had to make arrangements to do so. Especially if my mate was going to be working for the enforcer pack. They didn't exactly blend, which meant more eyes would inadvertently be on Asilo.

"They're all on board, and I half suspect Morgan might've been in on the whole job-offer thing. But yes, they support us all the way. When I talked to some of the guys this morning,

they looked at me as if I had a thousand heads. They had assumed me staying here was a given.”

“We can stay? Really? Even with you not working for the pride?” I needed to be sure I understood correctly before I gave into the joy filling me.

“Really. We can stay even with me being an enforcer. I will first and foremost be Asilo, I think. I need to clarify the technicalities of it all. But yeah, we are staying.” Shaw leaned forward and kissed my lips. “For as long as you want. Forever if you want, we’re here.”

I couldn’t help myself; the events of the day wore on me and the tears began to fall. I smashed my face against Shaw’s chest and sobbed. “This is so amazing,” I said. “I can’t believe I lost him, though. I didn’t protect him.”

Shaw held me, rocking gently. “You were doing what any decent person would, helping someone in need. It wasn’t your fault that Caleb was snatched while you were doing so. If you think about it, you being distracted protected our babies. It meant the hyena piece of shit hadn’t been able to hurt you. And he would have. The only person who was safe, even if only for a short time, was Caleb, and we got him back within two hours. We. Got. Him. Back.”

“You got him back. You kept him safe.” I rubbed my cheek against his.

“Neither of us are going to blame ourselves anymore. Got it? It isn’t good for either of us, and neither of us earned the

blame.” He took both my cheeks in his hands. “Okay? Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

It helped a little, but I knew that there would be moments where I’d forget, and I was sure that Morgan and them would have their own set of counseling for me to do, and I would go because it was important and valid and needed. Shaw probably would too, knowing him. We both wanted what was best for our family and protecting our own mental health was part of that.

“He’s had so much hurt in his short life,” I said.

“He’s had a lot of love too,” Shaw said. “My brother loved him more than words. We love him. He’ll have siblings who will love him too.”

“True.”

“Plus, everyone here in Asilo. He is so surrounded by love.” He pressed his forehead to mine. “We’re going to get through this as a family and as a pride.”

I pulled back enough to wipe my eyes. “You’re right. We’ll get through this.”

He kissed me again. His lips moving softly over mine, then his forehead rested against mine and we held each other. I didn’t want to let him go. I wanted to stay here in his arms forever.

“Bet you’re glad you have a broken alpha,” he said a few minutes later, referring to how he was the only one would could scent our son’s kidnapper thanks to what we suspected

was a dark healing potion. As far as I knew Steelwick hadn't found it yet, but they were searching the farm, and if it was there, they would.

"You're not broken, you have a superpower." I rubbed noses with him.

"The superpower of only smelling gross things?"

"Would you rather be putting on a tight suit and rappelling down the sides of buildings to save the day?"

"I suppose not. And speaking of knot, are you ready to go to bed, omega mine?"

I was off the bed and jogging there before he finished his sentence.

"I'll take that as a yes." He laughed and caught up with me, just as we reached our bed.

Epilogue

Shaw



The screen door slammed closed as Emory waddled his way across the back deck and down the stairs. Pol was close on his heels, hovering but trying not to be obvious about it. I had to hold back my grin.

We had a set of patio chairs and a table not too far out on the lawn where Emory could sit. The kids and omegas all played in the yard. It wasn't a fancy party, but we had a few lawn games out and an exceptionally large bouncy house that looked to be some sort of obstacle course. It had been an impulse buy courtesy of Gideon. The kids were taking turns having their fun. Some of the grown-ups were too.

We were celebrating Caleb's birthday and everyone in the pride wanted to make it the best one ever. He had been through so much this past year and was doing wonderfully navigating

it all. Heck, he was doing much better than I could've in his shoes, that was for sure.

“You know it wasn't too many years ago we didn't have any kids here,” Thomas said. “Now the place is crawling with them.” His grin told me he was happy about that, but there was a slight hint of wistfulness in his voice.

He and Pol remained the only two omegas who were unmated and permanent members of Asilo. I wasn't sure what their plans were, and if they would continue on here. A few times Thomas had made comments about potentially leaving. No one in the pride wanted that, but they wouldn't stand in the way, either. They loved Thomas and wanted him to be happy.

I settled next to my omega. He let out a long sigh and rubbed his large belly. It was sexy as fuck. I knew there were times where he didn't believe me when I said that. I took them as a sign I needed to show him just how sexy I thought he was. As his pregnancy progressed, that meant blow jobs aplenty—you know, to prove that I could see his cock just fine, even if he couldn't. It was a sacrifice I was willing to make. And by sacrifice, I meant I was the luckiest alpha on this entire planet.

“It's close to time,” he whispered.

“Now?!” I nearly jumped to my feet, my whole body going on alert. I knew our babies would be here any time now, but *now now*? That was soon. Like whoa soon.

“Not now, but later.” He grabbed my arm. “I promise to tell you when it's go time.”

“You do look about ready to pop,” Thomas said as he sat down. He handed Emory a bottle of water and got a hiss in return. Thomas was very smart in most ways, but he still had to learn that you didn’t make size comments to preggos. They do not take it well.

I had to choke back a laugh. “You know you should never comment on an omega’s state this late in their pregnancy.” I rolled my eyes at him. “You’re lucky he didn’t bite you.” He wouldn’t do that, of course. Rather, he probably wouldn’t do that.

“Just calling it like I see it,” he said, still not learning his lesson. “And if everything I’m learning about omega birth is correct, you are ready to pop.”

Thomas had been studying not only human medicine, but also shifter healing. He was halfway through an apprenticeship with Mortimer. He was probably going to be good at it from a practical perspective, but he needed to work on his bedside manner, that was for sure.

Emory leaned back in the chair, his eyes drifting closed. He was exhausted. Not as bad as during the first wee bit of his pregnancy, but close.

Eventually, we were left alone while everyone played.

“You can join the fun, you know,” he said, not opening his eyes. “I just need to rest a bit.

“I thought you might be doing this to hide in plain sight from everyone.” I kissed his cheek.

“Shhh, don’t give away all my secrets.”

“You sure you don’t want to come and watch the kids on the inflatables?” I offered, already knowing the answer. He was so ready to be done being pregnant and just getting up to waddle over to the blow-up toy would take a huge amount of energy.

“Nope. But you should go.”

“I’m fine exactly where I am.” I squeezed his hand. “With you.”

“Thomas isn’t wrong,” he said. “I know I’m a little bit away as from my due date, but my panther has been quiet.”

Our beasts tended to get quiet when they were carrying the heavy lifting, and in the case of pregnancy, that meant keeping the pain in check. It was great from a pain-management perspective, according to Mortimer, but from a “making sure you are where you want to be to have your baby” perspective it sucked.

Thankfully, Emory’s entire birth plan was to have me by his side and preferably in the birthing room. We could accomplish that. My hope was that everyone who was needed would be present, but aside from that, I was leaving all of the decisions and planning up to my mate. He was the one growing the babies, after all.

I nodded. “I can sense that.”

Now that we were mated, it seemed as if I was more in tune with his cat. I still couldn’t scent him or most things, but I did

pick up on other cues. And when I needed my scent the most it was there for me. I could hardly complain.

“I think he’s holding back the pain.” Our animals would hold back an omega’s contractions, then when they were too tired to go on, the labor pains would hit with intensity. It wasn’t long after that the baby would be born.

“I’m ready,” I said. Not that I was the one that needed to be. He was the one who had to push out not one, but two entire shifter beings from his body. And boy, did my mate call me on it. Good for him. I liked feisty Emory.

“You’re ready? I’m ready. I just don’t want to ruin the birthday party.”

I chuckled. “I don’t think anyone would even notice. The kids are having fun, and the adults are keeping them occupied. And what has Caleb been wanting? His siblings. You’re about to give him the best birthday present ever.”

“Calen wants to be there when the babies are born,” he reminded me.

“He can be.” It was going to be a tight squeeze in the birthing room, between myself, Emory, Mortimer, Thomas, and Caleb, but it would work. We’d make it work. Plus, how much room did the kid really need and how much would he want to see?

It was important for him to be there for his siblings’ birth, and if it was important to him, it was to me as well. He was excited and had embraced his role as older brother. He had been immensely helpful while planning the nursery.

Emory and I had already discussed how we were going to handle things when the babies arrived. It would be easy for Caleb to try and insert himself in a sort of parental role. I'd seen it a lot in my old pride, and it wasn't healthy. There had to be a balance, one that had him just being their brother, even if that looked a bit different when they were babies. We weren't sure how we were going to make that happen, but we were.

Emory winced and bent over at the waist, distracting me from my thoughts and bringing me straight to the present.

"Why don't we go ahead and make our way toward the clinic?" he said. "I don't think it's going to be much longer."

"Shit, okay," I said, standing up. I helped him to his feet. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I just did." He knew that wasn't what I meant, but I ignored it.

I scanned the crowd for Mortimer, but he was already making his way toward the clinic. He must've been watching us like a hawk.

"Quietly," Emory said. "I don't want to draw attention to us. The room is going to be crowded enough as it is."

We got about five steps before quiet was not an option. He led out a yowl of pain, and I picked him up into my arms and raced across the lawn. I had him into the birthing room quickly.

Caleb followed soon after, and I was relieved because leaving Emory's side wasn't an option, but neither was leaving Caleb out of this. "Is it time, Papa? Are the babies coming?"

Emory smiled. His eyes flooded with tears as he held back the labor pains. "Yeah, buddy. We're going to meet them really soon. Are you ready?"

Caleb nodded. "I'll hold your hand the whole time."

"I know you will."

Mortimer walked in, wiping his hands off with a towel. "I thought this might happen today," he said. "It was the cake that brought it on, wasn't it?"

"I didn't even get any cake," Emory said. "That doesn't seem fair, does it?"

"We'll make sure to save you some," I promised.

It was all a blur after that, and before long, I was holding our first screaming child in my arms.

"He's beautiful," I said. "So beautiful."

"Hold him," Emory screamed. "I need to push."

Unlike our first baby, this one didn't come out on the first push. Or the second. By the third, I could see Mortimer's face taking on a fake smile. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

"Grab the ultrasound," he said to Thomas. "And I need you two to step outside with your baby to make room for the machine. I have a feeling your second child turned themselves

around. It's an easy thing to work around for me, but I need the visual first. Scram."

That didn't sound good. Not good at all. But I trusted Mortimer, and if he said it was easy to work around, I had no reason not to believe him.

The two of us went into the next room. I hated being away from my mate, but if this was what he and our baby needed, I was going to do it without fuss.

"I think we should name the baby Marshall." Caleb's announcement surprised me, but also, it made sense. "But I didn't want to say it to Papa in case you think it might hurt his feelings."

"Your papa is going to love it," I assured him.

Mortimer called us back in before we could discuss it any more.

"The little stinker was breech. Long story short, I have him where he needs to be now, and the next contraction is coming. Go hold your papa's hand. He's going to need you." I loved the way he included Caleb in this process.

The contraction did come quickly, and this time it ended with a crying baby girl.

"She's perfect," Mortimer assured us as he handed her to Thomas to clean up and weigh before giving her to Emory to hold.

Emory pushed himself up to get a better look, then winced.

“Hold still now. I still have some work to do down here,” Mortimer said. “Thomas, let him see the baby already.”

I wasn't sure what work he had to do down there, and I honestly wasn't sure I wanted to. My mate had been so brave and strong.

“You did amazing, love.”

“You really did, Papa. You had two babies in your belly and now they are here! I wasn't so sure I believed that was how it worked.”

It took all I could to control my giggle.

I stepped over to where Caleb was standing at Emory's shoulder. True to his word, Caleb had held Emory's hand throughout the whole birth except for the short time Mortimer kicked us both out.

Thomas placed our daughter on Emory's chest, and she began rooting for her first meal.

I held out the baby to Emory. “He probably feels the same.”

Emory brought him to the other side of his chest, and he latched right on. It was a good thing Mortimer had given Emory lessons on how to tandem feed the babies, because looking at him, I couldn't figure out how he was managing it. But then again, my mate could turn himself into a pretzel with ease.

Caleb looked down at his younger brother in wonder. “Marshall is so cute. But I don't know what his sister's name is.”

Emory mouthed, “Marshall?” and I nodded.

“Marshall is a great name.” Emory looked down at our son.

“His sister needs an equally great one.”

“What about Skye?” Caleb offered.

“Skye. I like that.” Emory smiled down at our two beautiful babies.

“Are they always going to be that color?” Caleb asked.

I laughed and ruffled Caleb’s hair.

“Gross,” he said. “You have baby goo all over you.”

It was true, I did.

“Sorry, but the babies will get cleaned off better in a bit, after they have some skin-to-skin time with Emory and get a bit to eat,” Mortimer explained. “It’s healthier for them.”

“I’ve read about that,” Caleb said, and he whipped off his shirt. “It was in that book you gave Papa. It said it was good for all people in the babies’ lives.”

I hadn’t known he read the book, but it made sense. He was super excited about the babies coming and he loved to read.

Caleb climbed into bed with Emory. At first, I was about to protest, but the four of them settled in together, but then Mortimer said that it was fine and that all of us could fit if we wanted to.

“Skin to skin is important and helps keep the babies calm and know who their family is,” Caleb said. “I want the babies to

know that I'm family, right? Even though technically we're only cousins."

"You're family, Caleb," Emory said. "Your brother and sister already know that. You talked to them a lot when I was pregnant. That is the first form of bonding."

"I read that too," Caleb said. "Did you mean that about them being my brother and sister?"

"Of course I did. Your daddy will always be your daddy, but we are your papa and duncle, and by default, that make them your siblings." I never wanted him to feel even the tiniest of specks less-than in this family. "You're our family and we love you."

"Family. I love that. Thank you for keeping your promise to Daddy." He was looking at Emory. "And thank you for coming to find me. I love you both."

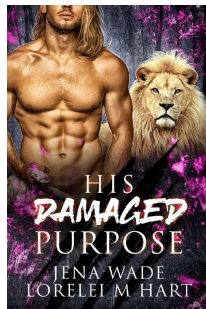
"We love you, Caleb," I said. "You made us a family."

"And you gave me mine. Twice. Best birthday present ever." He looked down at his siblings. "Next year I'm going to be able to eat three cakes."

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About Jena Wade



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I live in Michigan with my husband, two dogs, and three children. By day I work as a software developer and at night I write. I was born and raised on a farm and I spend most of my free time outdoors, playing in the garden or tending to my landscaping.

I like my books sweet, sexy and full of romance. I love to hear from my readers and would be more than happy to answer any questions you may have about my work! Feel free to email me at thejenawade@gmail.com.

In the meantime, [visit me on Amazon](#).