



SACHEL PRIDE 3

MIKE'S

Assistant

C.K. NOEL

Mike's Assistant

Satchel Pride 3

C.K. Noel



High Garden Publishing

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To all the Jakes out there, who've felt the urge to flee, to shield their hearts, but ultimately found the strength to trust and embrace what Fate has for them.

Underneath the Sympathy

Jake

“MY CONDOLENCES.”

Every “my condolence” expressed dragged me more into a personal hell. My fingers tensed and my jaw constricted every time I heard it. It was a well-meaning sentence that was gradually pushing me over the edge. My condolences and my sympathies appeared to be the favorite for the people of Buckhannon, West Virginia.

I nodded my head and quietly thanked Mr. Travis. He’d been a close friend of my dad’s and a good neighbor. *At least he showed up*, I thought. I guess I could acknowledge that. It wasn’t his fault I was having such a hard time. It’d been a hell of a past three days, and I just wanted to forget it ever happened. I mean, who wouldn’t want to forget being told their parents died a day before Christmas?

I peered down at my little brothers. Sam, the older of the two, whispered to Abel while they quietly played with Scruffy, the stuffed lion. At just seven and five, they were far too young to be going through this. They couldn’t comprehend

that Mommy and Daddy weren't coming home—Abel especially. He was a momma's boy through and through and kept asking for his mommy. It broke my heart every time I had to explain that she wasn't coming back.

“I'm sorry for your loss.” I looked up at my old elementary school teacher, Mrs. Evers. “Thank you, Mrs. Evers.”

“Your parents,” she sighed, pressing her lips into a slight frown. “They were good people, and it's just awful what happened—especially right at Christmas.”

Tears burned in my eyes, and I choked back a sob. I'd been crying non-stop since the police showed up at our door. “Yeah,” I managed to croak out.

Mrs. Evers gently touched my shoulder. “If you need anything, dear...”

I nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Evers.”

Crap, I thought as the elderly lady walked away. I was only twenty-one years old and didn't want to go through this crap. I cast a glance at Todd, my so-called boyfriend. He wasn't really the supportive type, and neither of us was out, but his absolute apathy toward the situation made me want to break off our relationship. He was absorbed in his phone, oblivious to everything else.

Sighing, I shook my head. I couldn't stay here anymore. I needed to get away from these people, no matter how well-meaning. My life was a wreck. According to my stepmother's

sister, Judith, my parents had left no will and were supposedly in mountains of debt.

Judith was the polar opposite of my stepmom, Ann. Judith was crass, mean, and an all-around unpleasant person. She had never treated me as part of the family; I was merely someone she had to tolerate.

Ann, on the other hand, was warm and welcoming. She'd always supported and accepted me, treating me like her son, and I viewed her as my mom. My real mom died when I was four, and my dad remarried Ann when I was eight. I loved her and my dad very much. I felt the tears burning in my eyes again.

I looked back at Todd. "Can you watch the boys for a second? I need to step away for a minute," I whispered, my voice shaky with emotion.

"Sure, be quick, though," he replied, not even looking up from his phone.

What an asshole, I growled to myself. What did I ever see in him? I leaned down toward the boys. "Sammy, Abel, I'm going to the bathroom. You be good for Todd, okay?"

Sam and Abel looked up at me, their innocent faces full of trust, and nodded. Abel, the younger of the two, clung to my shirt, his eyes reflecting a sudden fear of me leaving. "Jake, you won't go far, right?" he asked, his voice just above a whisper.

“Of course not, buddy,” I reassured, forcing a quick smile despite the raw pain that threatened to pour out as tears. “I’ll be right back.”

Sam, trying to act the part of the older brother, gave Abel a comforting pat on the back. “It’s okay, Abel,” he said, his voice stronger than I expected for his age. “Jake won’t leave us alone.”

I flashed a smile at them, though I knew it didn’t reach my eyes, and slowly extricated myself from Abel’s grip before rising from my chair. The tears were ready to fall again. Sam, like me, had the same brown eyes, brown hair, and facial features as our dad, while Abel, with his hazel-green eyes and light brown hair, looked more like Ann. Looking at them reminded me so much of what we’d just lost. *Fucking black ice.*

My parents were driving home from a Christmas party when their car skidded off the road and collided with a telephone pole. The authorities later determined black ice had been the treacherous culprit.

I shook my head and continued toward the back of the building. If I stayed and thought about the situation any longer, I’d break down. I couldn’t do that around the boys. I had to be strong for them.

Fuck. Just give me one minute of fucking peace—one fucking minute. I picked up the pace as the Talbots headed toward me. They were okay people, but Mrs. Talbot was a narcissist and made every event about herself. If I stuck around, she’d

somehow make my parents' death about her. I turned down the hall and continued my journey.

My escape came to an abrupt halt just as I neared the bathroom. My heart pounded in my chest, and I felt an icy shiver run down my spine as the shrill voice of Judith echoed through the hallway. "We're set to take the boys in the morning, right?" Her words rang in my ears like a chilling death knell, causing a surge of panic and dread that rooted me to the spot.

"Yes, I have the officers all set for tomorrow at eight," a voice I wasn't expecting responded.

To my surprise, it was Ms. Grace on the other end of the conversation. The same social worker who was there on the dreadful night we learned about our parents' deaths. I had thought her to be supportive and encouraging. *Was she really talking about taking the boys?* I thought in disbelief. My stomach churned, bile threatening to rise in my throat. I pressed myself further against the wall, inching closer to catch the rest of their conversation.

"Good. You'll give me custody, and I can finally get that insufferable hanger on out of my family once and for all. I can't imagine why my sister let that fairy into her family, let alone near the boys. Did you see he brought his boyfriend?" Judith's voice dripped with contempt.

My cheeks flamed at her words. I had never disclosed my sexuality to my parents and always thought I had hidden it well.

“You mean his ‘friend’,” Ms. Grace corrected, her voice laced with derision, emphasizing the word ‘friend’ in a way that made my heart sink.

“Friend, my ass. It’s disgusting, really. The boys don’t need to be around someone like that. Jake won’t be able to do anything, will he?”

A scoff sounded. “Not a chance. He’s an unemployed, twenty-one-year-old college student with no job or money. There’s no will or insurance. This is what’s best for the boys.”

“Excellent. The little pansy can have tonight, but tomorrow...”

I couldn’t listen anymore; I felt like I would throw up. Backing away slowly, I turned on my heel, my heart pounding as I made my way back toward the boys. Not only had I lost my parents, but now it seemed I was on the brink of losing my brothers, too.

With a sinking feeling in my chest, I hurried back to the boys, weaving through the crowd of sympathizers, offering their empty words of condolences. I dodged Mr. Travis, who had another comforting platitude ready on his lips, sidestepped Mrs. Evers with her sorrowful gaze, and even avoided the narcissistic Mrs. Talbot. My singular focus was on getting back to my brothers as quickly as possible.

When I finally reached them, Abel looked as though he was on the verge of tears, clinging tightly to Sam, his tiny hands balled up in his brother’s shirt. Sam, meanwhile, was glaring daggers at Todd, a fierce protectiveness etched on his young

face. It was clear that my absence, even for a few minutes, had left them unsettled and worried.

I crouched down to their level, my gaze softening. “Hey, what’s going on?” I asked gently, just as Abel detached himself from Sam and rushed towards me. His tiny arms wound tightly around my legs, his sobs muffled by the fabric of my jeans.

“Sam, what happened?” I turned to the elder of my two brothers. He was inching his way towards me, his gaze never wavering from Todd.

“Todd yelled at Abel,” Sam replied quietly, his voice laced with a trace of anger.

“Whatever, the runt started crying,” Todd dismissed, rising from his chair. “About time you got back. What took you so long? Had to entertain your town folks with their sympathies—it gave me the heebie-jeebies.”

A wave of anger surged within me at Todd’s casual indifference. I struggled to suppress it, reminding myself that my priorities were now the two little figures huddled by my side.

Mustering an insincere smile, I directed my attention toward Todd. “Thanks for watching them. I’ll take it from here; you can head out.”

“Really?” Todd’s eyes lit up at my words. “You’re the best, man. Erin Wix is throwing this massive party. Pete’s been sending me pictures. Looks insane.”

A party? Our parents had just died, and all he could think about was a party. What the fuck had I seen in him? Ignoring the bitter taste in my mouth, I nodded. “Yeah, I’m the best. See you later, Todd.”

“Later, dude. I’ll swing by after the runts are in bed,” Todd replied with a wink, practically sprinting towards the exit.

I watched him go, biting back a curse. Once he was out of sight, I took a deep breath, trying to compose myself. Turning to Sam and Abel, I forced a smile onto my face. “What do you say we head home?”

“Home? You’re leaving already?”

Judith’s shrill voice cut through the air like a discordant melody, making me wince. The sight of her was just as disconcerting: a formidable woman in her late forties. She had her graying black hair drawn back tightly, casting stark emphasis on her harsh features. Her olive skin looked harsher than it should have for her age, probably from years of disapproval etched into her features. Her large, pronounced nose and bushy eyebrows contrasted sharply with her piercing, dark brown eyes. Dressed in a dark-colored, long skirt and dark blouse, she stood rigidly with a bible clasped tightly in her hands. Both Sam and Abel tightened their grips on me instinctively as they, too, absorbed her daunting presence. I knew they feared her as they often ran to their mother and father to escape from her company.

I gave them an encouraging squeeze before mustering a weary smile at their aunt and answering, “Yeah, it’s been a

long day.”

“It certainly has.” Ms. Grace walked up beside Judith, her professional demeanor starkly contrasting Judith’s rigidity. She was a much softer presence, with her light brown hair pulled back into a neat bun and her pastel-colored blouse giving her a somewhat nurturing look. But her carefully practiced smile couldn’t disguise the bureaucratic edge to her voice. “How are they holding up? How are you holding up?”

Her sweet tone caused my stomach to churn, and the bile that had tried to escape earlier made a second attempt. I cleared my throat. “We’re doing okay. It’s going to be bedtime, and I think I should get them home.”

Ms. Grace nodded. “I think that’s a good idea. You try to get some rest, and I’ll be by in the morning to discuss things.”

The dam holding back my chaotic emotions was precariously close to breaking, only held in check by a thin thread of resolve. I forced myself to swallow, attempting to regain control before nodding at her. I was painfully aware of their plans. I had less than twelve hours to figure out what I was going to do.

Judith leaned down to hug the boys, but they tightened their grips and inched behind me, moving out of her reach. Judith’s expression hardened, and she moved closer. I cleared my throat. “They’re tired and cranky. They’ve had a long day, Aunt Judith.”

Judith snapped her gaze toward me at the word aunt. Her eyes narrowed, and at that moment, I felt hatred that I never

felt before. After all these years, her mask finally fell off.

She stood up and pressed her lips together. “Yes, they must be tired. You go rest and take care of them.” With those words, she spun around and left.

Ms. Grace gave a tiny smile and patted my shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Jake.” She peered down at the boys. “Good night, boys.”

Sam and Abel gave a shy wave, but still held me close. How could this woman think it a good idea to separate us?

She looked back at me. “Good night, Jake.”

“Good night, Ms. Grace. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I watched her leave, and my mind raced with desperate plans, half-formed ideas that seemed as shaky as the ground I was standing on. Do I run? Do I fight? How do I fight? My champion, my protector, my father, was gone. I had no one. But I had to think of something. I had to find a way to keep my brothers with me. The question was...how?

I glanced back down to Sam and Abel, who had loosened their hold but not fully let go. “Grab Mr. Scruffy. Let’s head home.”

At the words “Scruffy,” Abel’s eyes widened as if it had just dawned on him he didn’t have his little lion. He released me and ran back toward the seat, scooping the stuffed animal into a hug.

“Come on, guys, let’s go,” I said softly, guiding Sam and Abel towards the exit. As we left the building, Sam kept

stealing glances back at the door.

“Aunt Judith is scary, Jake,” he finally admitted, his voice trembling.

“Yeah, she is,” I agreed, ruffling his hair as we reached our old beat-up sedan.

The car had been a gift from my dad. A smile tugged at my lips, shadowed by the sting of tears, as I remembered the day he had brought it home. It had been a decrepit hulk then; its paint chipped, parts rusted, and a stubborn silence replaced the expected purr of an engine. I remember looking at him as if he had lost his mind. But with a reassuring grin, he had simply declared, ‘We’ll fix it up, son.’ And so, we had. Pouring our sweat into it during the heat of the summer, we brought the old machine back to life.

Since then, the car hadn’t given me a moment’s trouble. It had even become a tradition for us, my father and I, to tinker with it, ensuring its smooth running. The vehicle was more than just transportation; it was a testament to the bond I shared with my father.

I cleared my throat and boosted Abel into his car seat before turning to Sam. The silver moonlight illuminated his young, worried face. I picked him up and placed him next to his brother. “Guys... would you want to live with Aunt Judith?” I asked, buckling Sam in.

At this, Abel whimpered, his tiny hands gripping Scruffy tighter. “No, no, no,” he muttered between sniffles, burying his face in the stuffed animal.

Sam's expression hardened, his childish features taking on an uncanny determination. "No way, Jake. She's like the wicked witch. I don't wanna live with her."

I sighed, closing my eyes as a wave of despair washed over me. But I had to stay strong for them. I opened my eyes and managed a small smile, reaching out to ruffle Sam's hair again while gently patting Abel's leg.

"We won't let that happen, okay?" I reassured them. "I won't let her take you two away from me. But... we might have to leave tonight."

Their eyes widened, but their gazes showed more surprise than fear. They trusted me. It was that trust that solidified my decision. We would run. Tonight. We had to.

They glanced at each other, a silent agreement passing between them. Turning back to me, their expressions were firm. At that moment, I made a silent vow. I was going to keep them safe, and I wouldn't let anyone tear us apart.

We would run.

Roar of Frustration

Mike

THE MORE KATIE SPOKE, the louder the urge to scream grew within me. How could Hayden do this to me? Hell, how could my boss, Edward, do this to me? What had I done to deserve this punishment? Not only was Edward my boss, but he was also the leader and king of our pride - and as a lion shifter, that meant everything to me.

“Mike, are you even listening to me?” Katie’s voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I suppressed a growl. “Yes, Katie, I am. But all I hear is an ever-growing pile of problems. I’m at my limit. Between Martin’s departure and these temps messing up left and right, I need a permanent P.A.—now more than ever!”

Fucking Martin, quitting and leaving me high and dry just when I needed him most. Of course, I couldn’t really blame him. No one could have predicted the king would be shot or Hayden would take an indefinite leave of absence. And yes, Martin’s position was a great opportunity—but his departure stung.

“I’m merely relaying the orders of your boss—no, your king. Remember, I’m just the messenger. Besides, the temps aren’t all bad. You have extra pairs of hands with them—use them.”

This time I did growl. “Not that bad? Not that bad? They can’t even make a damn photocopy without hand holding, and my calls constantly get dropped, or my schedule is double and triple overbooked!”

I was breathing heavily by the end of my rant. This new year? Fucking Disaster. The holidays? A fucking catastrophe. My life? A total fucking mess.

“Don’t you dare growl at me, Michael Doy!” Katie retorted. She might have been the executive secretary for Edward, our king, and a fellow lion shifter. But Katie, ever a proud lioness, didn’t shy away from standing her ground, even when faced with an irate superior. “You need to check yourself, young man, and remember who you’re talking to.”

I released a heavy sigh and hung my head in defeat. How in the world was I going to deal with everything? The other C-Level officers of Satchel Industries were looking to me for guidance, and my king and best friend were counting on me to maintain their family legacy. I laughed sarcastically to myself. Me—Mike Doy—the life of the party, the fun-loving, not a care in the world, nothing can hold me down guy—in charge of a multibillion-dollar corporation.

“Michael,” a softer voice now came from Katie.

I lifted my head and peered up at her. My eyes met her black-rimmed glasses. Katie was a short woman, in her late

fifties, with graying blonde hair she wore in a stylish bun. Despite her librarian-like appearance, Katie commanded respect. She was one of a handful of people I let call me Michael. She had watched me grow up and was like an aunt to me. Her words always carried weight.

“What?” I could hear the despair and whine in my voice.

Katie flashed an encouraging smile. “You’ll get through this, Michael. I know it’s a lot, but I have faith in you. And you know the king has faith in you, too. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have given you the task.”

I heaved a heavy sigh. “All right. I’ll handle the meeting with Danvers and get the Wassermann issue sorted. Any other issue I must handle?”

“That should do it,” Katie replied before turning toward the door. “I’ll send the meeting info to you. You should get with Denise in H.R.; see what’s happening with your P.A.”

I growled, and she chuckled as she walked outside the door. I pushed away from my desk and stood, turning to look out the window. I wanted to be out there, hell, anywhere but here. The only reason I became a lawyer to begin with was Grandpa Freddie.

“Stay close to Hayden, Michael. You watch his back, and I promise, Fate will bless you with your mate.” I internally scoffed at his words that replayed in my mind. How was I going to meet my mate if I was stuck here?

I groaned as the phone rang behind me, a harsh interruption to my bitter introspection. Resisting the urge to smash the damn thing, I turned and glared at the offending object. “Could I not have one moment of peace?” I grumbled.

Mustering the last dregs of my patience, I reached down and snatched up the receiver. “Hello,” I answered, my voice strained with poorly concealed irritation. Silence greeted me.

“Hello,” I tried again, my frustration mounting. “Hello!” I nearly roared into the receiver.

Nothing but mocking silence on the other end. I roared in pure frustration and slammed the phone with more force than necessary. As if on cue, my cell phone blared its annoying tune. I snatched it up, exasperation leaking into my tone. “What?”

“Damn, bro. Is that how you answer your phone now?” Hayden’s carefree voice came from the other end.

“My desk phone rang, and no one was there. It ticked me off,” I replied.

“Oh, that was me. I tried calling, but it disconnected when they transferred me.”

“Damn temps,” I muttered. “What do you need, Hayden?”

“Man, who peed in your Cheerios? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I have incompetent help, and I’m really stressed, seeing how I’m doing your job and your dad’s,” I retorted with all the snark I could muster.

“Ookay. Someone really did pee in your Cheerios. Are things going that bad? Do... do you need me to come back?” he asked.

I sighed and flopped into my chair. “I’m sorry, Hay. I’m.... I don’t know. I...” I was having a hard time putting into words what I was feeling.

“What is it?” Hayden pressed.

“I feel like I’m getting left behind. You have Owen, and I for sure thought I was next. But your dad found Brian, and I’m stuck here. I mean, how am I gonna meet my mate when I’m practically drowning?” I let out a raw laugh, bitterness creeping into my voice.

I squeezed my eyes shut—the past few months of feeling lonely and not having a mate threatened to overwhelm me. If not for Vanessa, Hayden’s sister, and my friends with benefits, I’d have lost it long ago.

“Mike, I’m sorry. You’re not alone, man.” Hayden sighed. His voice filled with concern. “I guess I have been wrapped up in Owen and thrusting things onto you. I can come back. It’s just... Owen isn’t feeling the best. I think he’s caught a cold or something, and Brian’s Nana wants to come by to talk with us.”

“Oh, so the ‘prey princess’ has royal visitors now?” I teased, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

“Mike! Don’t let my dad hear you calling Brian that,” Hayden admonished, but I could hear the laughter in his voice.

“Yeah, yeah, sure thing, your highness. I say it with love.” I shot back, smirking despite my mood.

Brian was a prey shifter, and I must admit, at first, his diva-like behavior had me thinking the ‘prey princess’ moniker was fitting. However, over time, I grew to really like him. He was a good guy and a perfect match for my king.

“Yeah, still, man. My dad will kick your ass, and so will Brian. It’s almost as bad calling him a *bunny*,” Hayden replied, whispering the last word.

“I’ll do my best.” I chuckled. “But getting back to what you asked, you don’t need to return. I got this.” I forced a smile into my voice, hoping Hayden wouldn’t hear the strain in it. “I hope Owen feels better soon. Maybe play naughty nurse with him,” I said, quickly returning to the previous conversation.

Hayden barked a laugh. “That’s the Mike I know and love. It’s definitely an idea.”

“Owen will love it. You should get an outfit.” I was the one to laugh now as the image of a big, hulking Hayden dressed in a skimpy nurse’s uniform popped into my mind.

“He would. My baby loves me.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you? Was there a reason you were calling?” I asked, glad that my best friend had called.

“Naw. I was just checking in while Owen took a nap. I’m glad I did,” he replied.

My reply was cut off by a timid knock on my office door. The timing couldn’t have been worse. I exhaled heavily, the

sound caught somewhere between a sigh and a growl. The interruption was the last thing I needed.

“Hey, Hayden... I’ve got to go,” I said, not trying to hide my annoyance. “Seems like one of the temps needs hand holding. Again.”

“All right, bro. If you need anything, call me,” Hayden said before saying goodbye and hanging up the line.

The timid knock echoed again. I released a deep breath before calling, “Come in.”

The door squeaked open, and a petite figure slipped in. Jessica, one of the temporary assistants, was as unassuming as they came. She barely topped five feet, was stick-thin, and had mousy brown hair that hung in limp waves around her shoulders. Her eyes were a dull shade of brown and were constantly darting around, meeting no one’s gaze for too long. Today, she was wearing a bulky sweater that was at least two sizes too big for her, making her appear even smaller.

She shuffled in, clutching a file to her chest as if it was a lifeline. Her fingers were white knuckled against the manila folder. “Mr. Doy?” Her voice was barely above a whisper. The girl had the disposition of a startled deer, always on the verge of bolting.

“Yes, Jessica?” I tried to keep my tone as patient as I could. But honestly, how many times did I have to repeat myself? The girl needed a shot of confidence, and if I had to give it to her, it wouldn’t be pretty.

She blinked, her eyes darting between me and the folder clutched to her chest. She looked like she was about to say something, but her gaze fell to the floor, and she fell silent once again. This was going to be a long day.

“Jessica?” I asked again.

She swallowed before mumbling, “I... I have the Wassermann file, and Mr. Wassermann... he’s on the phone. But I’m having... problems... transferring the call.”

I released a sigh and held out my hand. “Give me the file. What line is Wassermann on?”

With a shaking hand, Jessica flung out the folder. “I-I don’t remember. He was pretty mad at me and yelled. I... I just put him on hold and came here.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I tapped down the urge to roar and grabbed the file. “I’ll figure it out,” I said, returning to the desk phone while Jessica scurried out of my office.

After several failed attempts, I was finally greeted by a cacophony of delightful curses. My eyes widened; Liam Wassermann had a vast vocabulary, and the things he was saying to do to my... I shook my head.

“Mr. Wassermann, this is Mike Doy. I understand there’s a problem with your contract that you wish to discuss,” I interjected, cutting short his rant.

“Doy? I asked for Edward Satchel. Who the hell are you? If Satchel Industries doesn’t value my business, just spit it out. Get me Edward,” he commanded.

Before replying, I leafed through the file Jessica had left on my desk. “I’m the Chief Legal Officer here, Mr. Wassermann. Contracts fall under my purview. If you’re displeased with your rate, we’re open to discussions. But rest assured, there are other prospective buyers.”

“Now, just a minute—”

“No, you wait. You’ve phoned us three times this morning, even after Katie, Mr. Satchel’s executive assistant, informed you I’d be the one to handle your concerns. In response, you’ve been nothing but abusive towards my secretary, employing language that I wouldn’t expect from a professional. You’ve stated that if we don’t want your business, we should tell you outright. Well, here it is. We don’t tolerate such behavior, Mr. Wassermann. Unless you’re willing to adjust your attitude and exhibit some patience, we have no reason to continue this conversation.” I took a deep breath, gathering my thoughts. “I’ll call you back at the scheduled time, not a second before. And when I do, I expect an apology.”

With a surge of adrenaline, I slammed the phone down. The anger that had been simmering within me throughout the day finally boiled over. I took several cleansing breaths, hoping to calm my racing heart. The call had me so worked up I could feel my veins throbbing.

The soft creak of my office door inching open was the final straw, pushing me past my breaking point once more. In a voice that rattled the glass on my desk, I thundered, “What? If

you've got any sense, you'll give me a damn minute and stay the hell out!"

"Mike?" The gentle timbre of Vanessa's voice made my growl falter. I glanced up from my clenched fists to take in the sight of her standing in the doorway.

Even in my aggravated state, I couldn't ignore the elegant curve of her figure outlined against the soft office light. Standing tall at five-ten, her presence commanded attention without trying. Her long, dark brown hair, always perfectly styled, fell gracefully over her shoulders, framing her soft, oval-shaped face. Her rosy cheeks were touched with a warm glow, and her full lips, adorned with peach lipstick, were slightly parted in concern.

Her blue eyes, usually so captivating, now reflected a mirror of my own frustration. Dressed immaculately as always, Vanessa's designer dress accentuated her grace and sophistication. A hint of expensive jewelry peeked from under her sleeves, catching the light as she held her hands in front of her, a clear sign of her apprehension.

"What's going on? I could hear you screaming all the way to the elevator. The entire floor is petrified."

"Good!" I yelled, my anger still having control. My lion wanted to take command and roar. He was ready for battle. "Maybe if they did their damn jobs—"

"Michael Doy. I'm not one to take your bullshit; I never have been. You better dial that tone back the hell down. We

both know my lion can and will kick your ass,” Vanessa interrupted, her voice steady despite the charged atmosphere.

Appearances could be deceiving, and Vanessa Satchel was the perfect example of that. With her meek and mild-mannered demeanor, one might not guess the ferocity that lurked beneath her surface. She was a lioness through and through. Her power not only rivaled that of her brother, but also that of her father, the king. Had fate decreed her to be the firstborn, there was no doubt she would have been next in line to lead the pride.

I closed my eyes and took more deep breaths. I didn't want to say anything I'd regret, and I was on the cusp of doing just that.

“Okay, here's what we're going to do,” Vanessa said softly. “I'm going to go grab us some coffee and a treat. While I'm doing that, you're going to sit on that couch you have over there and compose yourself. I'll tell everyone to leave you alone for thirty minutes; no calls, no emails, nothing.”

I lifted my head and opened my eyes. “But there's so much work that needs to get done.”

“It can wait, especially if you're having breakdowns like this. Take the thirty minutes, Mike,” she said.

Her words were more of a command. I had no choice but to nod. Vanessa smiled and blew me a kiss before leaving my office. I didn't move from my seat. I looked down at my desk. There was something I needed to do before taking that rest.

I quickly picked up the phone and dialed. “Denise,” I said as soon as the line connected. “I need a competent P.A. hired by the end of the day. I don’t care how you make it happen. It needs to happen today.”

Karma's Promotion

Jake

“SORRY, WE’RE NOT HIRING,” the department store manager’s gruff voice echoed in the modest space. It was a phrase I was growing dishearteningly accustomed to.

I exhaled a sigh, forcing a courteous nod. “Thank you for your time,” I said, not wanting my desperation to seep into my words. “Do you, by any chance, know of anywhere else that might be hiring? I’ve tried everywhere I could think of.”

Florida had been a gamble, one made of hope and a desperate need for change. The boys and I had ventured here on little more than a wing and a prayer. Maybe it was the nostalgia of family vacations and Disney magic that drew me in or the tantalizing promise of swapping snow for the sun. Either way, that dream was slowly turning sour.

Our tight apartment, more of a cramped space than a home, ate into our meager savings. Now, with the bulk of my last two hundred dollars already spent on cleaning supplies, canned foods, and other essentials, my reality was closing in faster than a Florida thunderstorm. In my pocket, the last twenty-

dollar bill felt thinner and more valuable than it had ever been. Two things were becoming painfully clear. First, my step-aunt had shown her true colors—cruel and uncaring. Second, and more terrifying, I might lose the boys if things didn't change soon.

The manager eyed me for a moment before replying, “You could try Java Joe’s—two blocks north of here. That coffee shop’s always looking for new blood. Can’t rely on you young ones to stick around, it seems.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” I said as I practically ran out the door.

The manager’s words rang in my ears as I exited the store, a potential lifeline amid a sea of rejections. Java Joe’s was my next shot at keeping our heads above water. It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

Stepping into the January heat, I marveled at the drastic climate change. Just five days ago, I’d been battling snow up to my knees. Now, I was navigating the sweltering Floridian weather. The irony wasn’t lost on me.

The oversized coffee mug sign of Java Joe’s appeared ahead, a beacon in my desperate job hunt. I needed money - for food, for the boys, for our life here. Our landlady had kindly agreed to look after the boys, but her childcare services had added an extra four hundred to our monthly rent. Florida’s high cost of living was bearing down on us.

Reaching the door of Java Joe’s, I paused and took a deep breath. This was it. As I moved to open the door, a woman

stepped up behind me. Reflexively, I stepped aside, holding the door open for her.

She offered a radiant smile, her gratitude evident. “Thank you so much.”

Returning her smile, I felt a connection—a moment of camaraderie in this unfamiliar place. “You’re welcome.”

With that, I stepped into Java Joe’s, hoping and praying things would be different. The place was bustling. The chatter of people, the hiss of the coffee machine, and the clatter of dishes filled the air while a queue snaked its way up to the counter. My stomach fluttered with a strange mix of hope and dread. For a moment, the urge to turn around and bolt was almost overpowering. Swallowing hard, I steeled my nerves and pushed myself to move forward. This had to work, I thought as I approached the counter.

“What can I get for you?” asked a young girl behind the counter. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen, her youth clear in her cherubic face. But her eyes—those told a different story. They were a weary shade of hazel, veiled with the kind of fatigue that came from too many double shifts and not enough sleep. A layer of perspiration glistened on her forehead, wisps of blonde hair sticking out from under her Java Joe’s cap. The constant hum of activity seemed to weigh heavily on her slender shoulders, but she held herself with a resolute determination that was beyond her years.

I flashed a quick smile. “I was wondering if I could speak to the manager?”

“What do you want, kid?” came a gruff voice from behind the young barista. As I leaned to the side, a woman emerged from behind the espresso machine. A mop of chestnut hair, streaked with strands of silver, was pulled back into a messy bun. Lines of age and stress were etched into her features, but it didn’t diminish her stern beauty. She was in her late thirties or early forties, but the way she carried herself—with the air of someone who was not to be trifled with—made her seem older. Her apron was stained with old coffee spills, evidence of the countless hours she’d likely spent behind this counter.

“I was hoping you’re hiring,” I said, clearing my throat.

Her movements froze, and the cup she was holding clattered onto the counter. The bustling noise in the shop seemed to drop a few decibels. I felt the sudden urge to flee, as if I had just awakened a sleeping bear. The young barista flinched and retreated to the other end of the counter, serving another customer with an anxious glance in my direction.

The woman swiveled around to face me, her brown eyes blazing with a fire that had me taking a step back. The lines on her face deepened, transforming her stern features into a mask of anger.

“Hey! The guy’s just asking for a job. No need to get all dramatic.” The voice came from my right, and I turned to see the woman I had held the door open for, now being served by another young barista.

The manager shot a lethal glare at the woman, but eventually turned her attention back to me. She stalked up to the counter

and punctuated each word with a jab of her finger on the countertop. “This. Is. My. Busy. Time.” She drew in a deep breath, as if gathering her composure. “I don’t know why I need to spell it out for you punk kids. Never ask for a job during busy times, idiots.” She shook her head. “I don’t have a job for you. In fact, get out.”

“Please, I really—” I tried.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it before. Either buy something or get out.” With a dismissive flick of her wrist, the woman turned her back to me again, signaling the end of our conversation.

Feeling a rush of heat to my face, I stepped back from the counter. The sting of the woman’s harsh words settled heavily in my chest, anchoring me to the spot. I could feel my hands shaking at my sides. The humiliation made the bustling café seem strangely quiet, and every noise felt amplified in my ears. An overwhelming urge to run was wrestling with the desperation clinging to my every nerve. As I struggled to regain my composure, snippets of conversation from the next queue over floated to me.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. Our credit card machine is down,” the young barista was explaining to the woman I’d held the door open for. “It’s cash only, for now.”

The woman’s face fell. “I only have my card.”

My gaze shifted towards them, locking with the woman’s for a fleeting moment. At that moment, I was painfully aware of the last twenty-dollar bill in my pocket. It was all we had left,

our final shield against the biting cold of destitution. My fingers instinctively brushed against it, the coarse edges serving as a sharp reminder of our predicament.

In the back of my mind, my dad's voice echoed a lesson from my childhood. "You get what you put out, Jake," he would always say. And although he was no longer with me, his teachings lingered, especially in moments of decision.

With a deep, shaky breath, I pulled the bill from my pocket. The decision was torture, a tug-of-war between the desperation to protect my brothers and the desire to do what felt right. But the thought of the boys seeing me, seeing that I could still choose kindness in the face of despair, tipped the scale. "Here, this should cover it," I offered, holding out the bill. The woman looked at me, surprise flashing in her eyes as the barista watched us both, her expression mirroring the shock.

After all, what you put out into the world has a way of coming back to you. At least, I desperately hoped it did.

"You can't possibly. I—"

"Please," I cut in, silencing the woman's protests. I stepped up to the counter and held out the bill to the barista.

The young girl offered a smile of relief and quickly processed the order. Turning back to the woman, I met her gaze and nodded before starting towards the exit, only to be stopped by a light touch on my arm.

"I can't let you do this without repaying you. Please come with me. I can get cash," the woman insisted.

“It’s really o—”

“No, I insist. My name’s Vanessa. Please, let me repay you,” the woman, Vanessa, said.

“Okay. Thanks. My name’s Jake.” The barista set up two drinks and a small bag on the counter, stopping me from continuing.

Vanessa smiled and grabbed her order before turning back to me. “Come on. It’s not that far. My purse is in my office at Satchel Centre. I have the cash there.”

I nodded and walked beside her. “When you say Satchel Centre, do you mean like Satchel Industries?”

I’d heard that Satchel Industries, the leading innovator in energy solutions, was headquartered right here in Tampa. Their crowning achievement, a groundbreaking self-sustaining battery that never needed recharging, had caught the world’s attention. They were a symbol of progress and prosperity, with everything from ambitious startups to powerful nations seeking their expertise.

Vanessa smiled and nodded. “Yes, that’s the one. If something bears the name Satchel, it’s undoubtedly related to Satchel Industries.”

I couldn’t help but whisper a soft, “Wow. That’s amazing. You work there?”

“Yeah, although not full-time,” she replied as we made our way across the busy street. “I’ve just finished college, and I’m

currently on the hunt for a position more aligned with my degree.”

The three buildings of Satchel Centre loomed in front of us, their mirrored facades glinting in the sun. Each building stretched towards the sky, one slightly taller than the next, in a captivating display of architectural gradation. They formed an awe-inspiring sight, standing in stark contrast amidst the vibrant tropical foliage.

As we approached, I could feel a sense of amazement wash over me. The buildings reflected the surrounding city, a stark reminder of the power and influence contained within these walls. This was the nerve center of Satchel Industries, the birthplace of the world-changing, self-sustaining Satchel Chip.

Crossing into the lobby, the tranquility inside hit me like a wall, a soothing counterpoint to the bustling city outside. The muted hum of the city was faint here, replaced by an air of calmness. It was a testament to the Satchel name — a symbol of relentless innovation and influence dressed in understated opulence.

I stopped walking and was sure I looked like a country bumpkin, having never seen something so incredible. I needed a moment to take it all in. Vanessa came to rest beside me, and I glanced over at her.

“This place. I can’t believe you work here. I’d give anything to work here,” I said honestly, still looking at the magnificent sight. The lobby even had a water feature wall.

“What can you do? I perhaps put in a good word for you,” Vanessa said.

I whirled to face her, my heart pounding like a drum. “Seriously? I can handle any job, anything at all. I just... I just moved here, and I’m desperate. I’d scrub floors if I had to.”

Vanessa grinned. “I think we can find something for you. Come on, let’s make a stop at H.R..”

Vanessa started walking toward the elevator, and I hurried after her. This could be karma already coming back to me. A spark ignited within me, a hopeful glimmer in the dark.

“You really think they might have something?” I asked as we stepped into the elevator.

“I’m sure they have some openings. I’m not sure what they have, but I’ll put in a good word for you. Ryan in H.R. loves me, and Denise, the H.R. vice president, is a good family friend,” Vanessa said as she pressed the button for the fifteenth floor.

I couldn’t believe my luck. A small part of me thought it was my dad and stepmom looking out for me. I was so thankful I gave my last twenty.

“So, you just moved here? Where from?” Vanessa asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Um, I’m from a small town in West Virginia,” I replied. I didn’t know how much I should tell her. Luckily, she didn’t expect more.

“Wow, quite a change in climate. I bet the Florida winter is loads different.”

I laughed and rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah, it was a huge change. A few days ago, I was knee-deep in snow, and now I’m sweating from the blazing sun.”

Vanessa’s laughter filled the elevator, light and carefree. It was contagious—I couldn’t help but mirror her—a smile bloomed across my face. Her beauty was undeniable, a magnetism that was hard to ignore. And while I was gay, I could still appreciate her infectious joy.

The elevator stopped, and the doors slid open with a ding. This floor differed from the lobby below. It was still warm and welcoming, but had much more activity. Two young women typed furiously on the computers stationed at the large horseshoe reception desk.

Vanessa moved past the women, giving them a tiny wave. I gave a nod and quickly followed. As we approached an office door, a familiar flutter of nerves rekindled in my stomach, tying it into anxious knots.

With a soft knock, Vanessa pushed open the door and confidently strolled into the room. “Hey, Ryan,” she greeted, her voice easy and familiar. I trailed behind her, craning my neck to get a glimpse of the younger man sitting behind an oak desk.

“Vanessa, come in. What brings you by?” Ryan replied, looking up with a smile.

Ryan, who couldn't be older than his mid-thirties, was a man whose charisma radiated through the room, reflected in his warm hazel eyes and genuine smile. His brown hair was neatly styled, and his slim-fit shirt showcased his lean physique. A pair of trendy glasses sat comfortably on his nose, giving him a professional yet approachable look. Behind the desk, he seemed to be a man in his element, exuding confidence and a welcoming air that made him instantly likable.

"I wanted to bring my friend Jake by. He just moved to town, and he's looking for work." Vanessa paused and leaned close to Ryan. "I'm sure you can find him something." I heard her whisper. Her words seemed ordinary, but at the same time, it was as if they were a command.

Ryan rose from his chair. "Of course," Ryan said before holding out his hand toward me. "Ryan Hastings, I'm sure we can find something for you to do."

I shook his offered hand. "Jake Bradford. That's great news. I'll do anything. I really need a job."

"I'll let you two talk. I've got to bring this coffee and snack to the grump upstairs before he roars even louder. I'll talk to you later, Jake. Thanks, Ryan," Vanessa said before turning toward the door.

"Thank you so much for everything, Vanessa," I said.

"No problem. I'll be back down with the twenty I owe you," Vanessa replied, her smile lighting up the room.

As I shook my head to decline her repayment, Vanessa stepped towards me, her free arm wrapping around my shoulder in a quick, comforting squeeze. Her scent, a comforting blend of vanilla and something uniquely her, lingered in the air as she pulled away.

“All the same. I’ll see you before you leave,” she said, stepping back, but her smile never faded.

“Go on, Vanessa. I’ll get Jake situated and bring him to you. Please go deal with him. I don’t know how much longer poor Jessica will stay,” Ryan replied, emphasizing the ‘him’ oddly.

Vanessa simply nodded. Whoever they were talking about sounded like a real bear to work for. “I’ll handle it,” she stated confidently before turning towards the door.

“Jake, take a seat,” Ryan motioned to the chairs. “Let’s find you a position.”

A grin spread across my face. After everything, I was finally getting a job, a chance to provide for my brothers. I sent a silent thank you to the universe, a sense of relief washing over me. If this was karma returning on my good deed, it was more than I could have ever asked for.

Unexpected Opportunity

Jake

IT LOOKS LIKE WE have a position open in our mailroom. What do you think? Ever worked in a mailroom?" Ryan asked, looking up from his computer screen.

After Vanessa left, we chit-chatted a bit. He'd asked me where I was from, how old I was, and what kind of education I had. The normal stuff you'd have in an interview. But Ryan made it seem like a conversation, not an interrogation. He was welcoming and always smiling.

I blinked, taken aback by the sudden shift in our conversation. "Uh, no," I confessed. "I mean, I've done odd jobs here and there, but never anything official like that."

Ryan's lips quirked into a slight smile. "Well, it's nothing complicated, but it's necessary. Letters, packages, documents... they all need to be sorted and delivered in a timely manner. It's not glamorous, but it's a start."

It was a start, and it was a start that I needed. I had my brothers depending on me; this was my opening.

“I can do it,” I said clearly, with what I hoped was a determined expression. I wouldn’t fail.

Ryan chuckled, clapping his hands together. “That’s the spirit, Jake. We—”

A rapid knock on the door interrupted him, and we both jerked our gaze to the entrance. A woman of a certain age, with a stern but not unkind face and sharp eyes framed by a cascade of silvering hair, burst in.

“Ry,” she paused at my appearance before continuing. “I didn’t know you were in a meeting.”

Ryan smiled and stood from his desk. “Denise, meet Jake Bradford. Vanessa brought him in for a job.”

I glanced at him, my brow furrowing. There was something in the way he said Vanessa’s name. It was a note of... deference? Admiration? I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Vanessa brought you someone for a job,” Denise said, surprise creeping into her voice.

She focused on me, and a small smile appeared. “I’m Denise Atkinson, the head of human resources.”

I quickly took her offered hand and replied. “Jake Bradford, nice to meet you, Ms. Atkinson.”

“So, what position did Ryan find you?” she asked as she slid into the chair next to mine.

I sat down as Ryan did the same before answering. “The mailroom.”

“The mailroom?” She shook her head with a tsk. “I think we can do better. Especially with a recommendation from Vanessa Satchel.”

“Satchel?” I asked, my eyes widening in surprise.

“Yes, daughter of our CEO and owner, Edward Satchel,” Denise replied with ease. “Now, I have a question for you, Jake. We have a position that just opened. It’s a tough one; the man’s a real lion and loves to roar about everything. But he’s also our CLO and needs an assistant to help him. You think you can handle a grump?”

I was still reeling from the revelation that Vanessa was the daughter of the CEO of the Satchel empire. I wasn’t just applying for a job; I was stepping into a world I didn’t understand. I didn’t know how to respond.

“Uh...”

“It pays significantly more than the mailroom,” Denise continued, “and with Vanessa’s recommendation, I believe you’d be an excellent fit.”

A memory flickered. “I did once want to study law,” I murmured, more to myself than to her, before venturing a question. “Will I need to know legal briefs? I’m not a paralegal.”

Denise shook her head. “Not immediately. His biggest issue right now is juggling his schedule. He’s acting CEO while Mr. Satchel recovers from an incident, and managing both roles is... strenuous.”

“Oh,” I replied, feeling a mixture of disappointment and relief.

“But don’t forget,” Ryan interjected, “we believe in further education here. If you aspire to be a paralegal or even a lawyer, we have programs that can help you achieve that goal.”

I’d forgotten Ryan was in the room, and his words took me by surprise. I managed an embarrassed smile and nodded. Taking a deep breath, I came to a decision. “I can do it.”

Denise’s face lit up in a wide smile, and she rose from her seat. “Fantastic. I’ll take you up to meet Mike while Ryan here gets your offer together.”

Nodding resolutely, I pushed back from the desk and stood, ready to follow Denise into this new chapter of my life. My heartbeat quickened in my chest - a mix of nerves and excitement. I was about to meet the acting CLO and acting CEO of the Satchel empire.

We made our way to the elevator, the monotonous hum of the office fading into silence as the doors closed behind us. Denise pressed the top button, its glow reflected in the polished steel of the elevator’s interior. I caught my reflection and noted how out of place I looked, my casual attire a stark contrast to the upscale surroundings.

Feeling my nerves twang like a guitar string, I rubbed my palms together. Denise, watching me from the corner of her eye, offered a reassuring smile. “Relax, Jake. Mike is a good guy. He’s just a little overwhelmed.”

Her words coaxed a sheepish smile onto my face. “Sorry,” I mumbled, rolling my shoulders to release some of the tension built up there.

“No need to be sorry. Mike can be a little intimidating, but he’s a softy. His roar is bigger than his bite. Truth be told, his previous assistant left for another position unexpectedly, and he’s been stuck with temps that couldn’t handle the job.” She paused and stared down at me before smiling. “I think you’ll do fine.”

I straightened and squared my shoulders. “I won’t let you down. I can handle it.” I had to handle it. My brothers and I depended on me handling it.

Denise smiled as the elevator doors slid open with a ding. I followed Denise out of the elevator and into a tastefully decorated corridor that exuded elegance and power. The doors at the end were as imposing as the rest of the floor - solid mahogany, polished to a high sheen.

It truly was where the boss worked. I took a deep breath as Denise knocked sharply before pushing open the door, revealing a sight that had my jaw dropping and my cheeks flaming in surprise.

“Mike, Vanessa, I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” Denise said, mirth filling her tone.

Vanessa and my soon-to-be boss jumped from the couch, hastily straightening their clothes. The sight of him took my breath away. His chiseled jaw was accentuated by a handsome five o’clock shadow, and his large, muscular frame

commanded attention in the grand room. But it was his piercing brown eyes, locked onto mine, that sent my heart racing. The intensity of his gaze was nearly overwhelming. Suddenly, I wasn't so sure I could handle this.

God help me.

The Scent of Destiny

Mike

I'D TRIED DOING AS Vanessa had instructed and taking a break, but as soon as she walked out the door, Jessica had interrupted with an important call from Mr. Danvers. Danvers was one of our most special clients, and his calls couldn't be ignored. His last deal netted the company over three hundred million. It was too bad he was a wily old curmudgeon who only loved to deal with Edward.

The incessant pounding in my temples grew stronger as I tried to reason with him. "Mr. Danvers, I know you usually deal with Edward, but he's currently not in the office. I'm more than capable of helping you." I must've repeated those words a hundred times already.

His obstinate reply echoed in my ears. "You keep insisting, young man, but Edward and I have a bond. Why can't I speak to him directly?"

Our conversation spiraled into frustrating circles. A growl of irritation rumbled deep in my chest. "Alright, Mr. Danvers," I conceded abruptly. "I'll make sure Edward gets in touch with

you.” I ended the call before he could respond. I was done. I couldn’t do this anymore. I wasn’t the man for this job.

A hesitant knock on the door was the final straw. “Leave me alone!” The roar erupted from my throat, my lion straining against the constraints of my human form.

The room seemed to shrink around me, the air thick with my building anger and frustration. My body was taut, muscles rippling under my skin as if they were trying to break free. And the lion within me? It was pacing, snarling, urging me to let it out and escape this stifling room.

I clasped my hands over my head, my fingers digging into my scalp as I tried to will myself into control. I was the acting CLO of Satchel Enterprises, and I couldn’t afford to lose it, not here.

The scent of fresh coffee permeated the air, drawing my attention to the door. I could also smell something else, something floral, vanilla, maybe? And there was something else, an unfamiliar scent that I couldn’t place.

The door swung open gently, and Vanessa stepped in with a tray of coffee. Her eyes widened as she took in my state. I must have looked like a man on the verge of losing his sanity.

“Mike,” she breathed, “what happened? Jessica sprinted towards the elevator, and you’ve possibly scared off all the temps. Everyone is terrified.”

“Danvers happened,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

She set the tray down on my desk and came around to my side. She was one of a handful who could approach me when I was like this. My lion trusted her.

“You need to take a break, Mike. Just for a while,” she urged softly.

“That’s what everyone keeps saying!” I almost shouted, but then I caught her worried gaze, and my shoulders slumped. She was right.

“You’re right, Vanessa,” I admitted, my voice a mere whisper now. “I just don’t know what to do with myself. I’m not cut out for this. Your father and brother need to come back. I tried sticking it out, but I just can’t without some form of help.”

“Mike, listen to me.” Vanessa helped me stand and led me to the sofa, where I sank into the plush cushions, my arm slung over my eyes in defeat. I wanted to hide from the world.

“Mike,” Vanessa said softly. I shifted to meet her gaze. “You’ve filled in for Hayden and my father before. Hell, you’ve been doing Hayden’s job for over six months. You’re more than capable. So, what’s really upsetting you, Mike?”

I released a long breath and looked away. “Martin le—”

“Mike, you can’t possibly tell me all this is because Martin quit and moved to another job. Something else is going on,” Vanessa interrupted.

“I can do this job, but my heart’s not really in it. Truthfully, I only went into law because of Grandpa Freddie,” I answered.

Vanessa's eyes widened, and she leaned back. "What does my grandpa have to do with it?"

I smiled. "Grandpa Freddie told me to stay by Hayden's side, and Hayden liked law, so I went into it."

"Mike, are you saying you never wanted to be a lawyer? I thought you loved it as much as Hayden," Vanessa said, her tone clearly revealing her surprise.

"No, I wanted to be a rock star." I laughed at her expression.

She slapped my arm. "Be serious."

"I am," I protested. "You know how I feel when I have my guitar in hand, how the music just flows through me."

She frowned, processing this revelation. "I always thought it was just a hobby. You seriously wanted to do that full-time?"

I nodded. "Yeah. The thought of being on stage, sharing my music... It's a dream. But that's all it is now - a dream." I let out a sigh, heavy with years of bottled-up desires. "I agreed to all this, thinking it would lead me to my mate. But as we both know, that hasn't happened."

Vanessa moved closer, resting her head on my shoulder. "Don't lose faith, Mike. We once believed Grandpa's tales about fated mates were pure fiction, and look—my dad and brother both found theirs. You need to trust it will happen when it's meant to." She lifted her head, holding my gaze with an intensity that conveyed her earnestness. "You need to believe fate won't abandon you and learn to relax. Stress won't make it happen any sooner."

As she leaned back into me, I wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close. The sweet vanilla of her scent worked its calming magic on my lion. I took a deeper breath, intrigued by a new, earthy aroma mingling with her familiar scent. My lion stirred, rumbling low in my chest.

I buried my face in the crook of her neck, inhaling the captivating scent that sparked a primal hunger within me. My cock responded instinctively, my lion roaring in my mind for something that felt just out of reach. A burning need welled up within me, a need that was as mystifying as it was undeniable.

Every inhale drew me deeper into the addictive scent that clung to Vanessa, a scent that felt like it was carved into every fiber of my being. It was intoxicating, and I couldn't help the growl that rumbled in my chest, vibrating through the room.

Vanessa tensed beside me, pulling away slightly to look at me, her eyes reflecting a mixture of surprise and... was that curiosity? "Mike?" She asked, her voice barely a whisper.

With an almost feral need, I leaned in, my lips inching closer to hers. I could feel her warm breath on my face, and I saw her eyes widen, but she didn't pull away. My heart pounded in my chest, my lion pacing restlessly as the distance between us continued to shrink. Just as our lips were about to touch —

A sharp rap on the door had us both jolting apart. The door swung open before I could gather my wits, and in strode Denise, our H.R. head, followed by a young man I hadn't met before.

“Mike, Vanessa, I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” Denise said, raising an eyebrow at our hastily disarranged appearances. My attention shifted to the man behind her. He was shorter than my six three frame, standing around five ten. With an average build, neatly clad in fitting jeans and a button-down shirt that hugged his body just right, he stood out. His brown hair and brown eyes gave him a boyish charm, but there was an undeniable attractiveness about him that made my heart flutter. His face was youthful, adorned with an air of wonderment as he scanned the room. His eyes widened, and an adorable blush spread across his cheeks when they met Vanessa’s.

I rose to my feet and straightened my jacket before inhaling. I opened my mouth to speak but stopped, my gaze snapping back to the man. His scent—the scent that had been lingering on Vanessa—came from him. A jolt of recognition swept through me, thundering in my veins. My lion roared louder, his agitation vibrating in my mind, every instinct screaming one thing at me. The man before me, the stranger whose scent had entwined with Vanessa’s, held an inexplicable connection to me. A connection so deep, so intimate, it was as if it had been written in the stars. My world tilted on its axis, the reality of the situation leaving me momentarily breathless.

“Jake, did you get the job?” Vanessa said, breaking me from my chaotic emotions.

The man, the angel, smiled shyly. “Well sort of... thanks to you, Ms. Satchel.”

Vanessa giggled. “They told you my name. I’m glad I can help.”

“You know each other,” I blurted, looking back and forth between them.

“Yes, we met earlier. Jake helped me out, so I helped him get an interview.” Vanessa looked toward Denise. “But I got him an interview with Ryan.”

“Ah, yes. I figured since Mike needed an assistant, and you recommended him, Jake would be perfect. I just brought him up here to meet Mike,” Denise clarified.

What? This man, the one made specifically for me, was going to be my assistant.

Denise raised her brow to me again, and Jake stood nervously, shuffling from foot to foot. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I wanted to grab him and claim him as mine. A soft touch and a throat clearing pulled me from my thoughts once again.

Vanessa hugged my arm. “That’s wonderful. I think Mike’s got his mind on something else.” She winked at Jake and Denise, and the red tint covered Jake’s cheeks once more. I shook my arm. I needed to get distance from Vanessa. I couldn’t let Jake think we were a couple, but Vanessa held tight and moved closer.

My lion roared within me.

Denise chuckled. “Okay, I’m going to get Jake all squared away. I’ll let you two get back to whatever you were doing.”

Denise turned and guided Jake toward the door.

“Wait!”

Denise and Jake swiveled around to meet my gaze. Composing myself, I stepped forward, careful to keep my eagerness in check. I needed to interact with him to confirm the undeniable pull I felt toward this man.

Extending my hand, I softened my voice. “Jake, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Michael Doy.”

He hesitated a moment, his cheeks flaring with an adorable blush, before offering his own hand. “Likewise, Mr. Doy.”

I felt a powerful surge course through me as our hands clasped. “Please, call me Mike,” I corrected gently. My heart drummed a fierce beat in my chest, echoing in my ears like a long-silent melody now resurrected. The spark ignited by our touch was more intense than anything I had ever experienced. His hand slipped away from mine, a reluctant release on my part. His quick withdrawal left a void that I yearned to fill again.

“We’ll let you get back to things,” Denise said once more and quickly ushered Jake from the room.

“Mike, are you okay?” Vanessa said, touching my arm.

“He’s my mate.” Those were the only words I could say.

I had met my mate. Thank Fate!

Uncharted Territory

Mike

“YOUR MATE? ARE YOU serious?” Vanessa said as she excitedly shook my arm.

A surge of electricity rocketed through my veins at her words, making them a stark, undeniable reality. My heart pounded against my rib cage. ‘Your mate’ — the words echoed in my mind, setting off a whirlwind of thoughts. It was as if a dormant part of me had suddenly been jolted awake.

“I...” My voice faltered, the sheer weight of the revelation choking me. The air in the room seemed to thicken, amplifying the deafening silence. I took a deep, shuddering breath, grappling with the overwhelming swell of emotions threatening to consume me.

Staring blankly at the door Jake had just exited through, my mind played back our brief encounter over and over. The electric touch, intoxicating scent, and inexplicable pull I felt towards him made sense now. The reality of having found my mate, something I’d longed for but had feared would never happen, was both exhilarating and terrifying.

Anxiety crept into my heart, coiling like a venomous snake. *What now?* I thought to myself, desperately trying to quell the rising tide of uncertainty. The thought of the challenges that lay ahead—acceptance, relationship, the revelation to Jake himself—sent a cold shudder down my spine.

“Mike,” Vanessa said again, jolting me to the here and now.

Don't borrow trouble, Mike, I said to myself. I had to take things one thing at a time.

“Yes. He's my mate.” I looked at Vanessa's smiling face and wide eyes and couldn't help but smile broadly. “I have a mate,” I said excitedly.

Vanessa laughed and flung her arms around me in a powerful hug. “You have a mate!”

We danced around the office in sheer joy. I pulled from her embrace. “I can't believe it, Nessa. Fate finally gave me a mate.”

“I'm so happy for you, Mike. I'm glad I brought him back with me. Fate really works in mysterious ways.”

“Bring him back? Wait, how do you know him? He hugged—Fuck!” The reality of what Jake had walked in on slammed into me like a freight train.

“What is it? What's wrong?” Vanessa asked urgently.

“Vanessa, he walked in on us. Fuck, he must think we're together or, worse, that I'm straight!”

Venessa raised her hands in a calming motion. “I admit it looks bad, but it’s nothing that can’t be explained. I can talk to him. It will be fine, Mike.”

“But—”

“No buts, Mike. You got this. I’ll help.” She smiled. “Hell, the whole family will help. We’re here for you.”

Vanessa was right. And in reality, if this issue was the biggest thing I had to deal with, I’d be lucky. Both Hayden and Edward went through a lot to win their mates.

“How do you know Jake?” I asked, bringing us back to my previous question before my freak out.

“I met him at the coffee shop.” She settled back onto the couch before continuing. “Jake was looking for a job there. In fact, he’d just gotten a tongue-lashing from the manager.”

“What?” I roared. A protective rage surged through me like an explosion. How dare anyone be mean or yell at my mate?

“Easy,” Vanessa said, holding up her hand. “It worked out for the best. He’s here now. Fate working out, see?”

I inhaled a deep breath and urged my lion to settle. He wanted to hunt anyone who said a bad word about our mate. I exhaled and nodded. “Keep going. How did he wind up here?” I asked.

“I had only taken my card, but their credit machine was down. Jake was nice. Even after getting turned down for a job, he gave me the money for our coffees. So, I asked him to walk back so that I could pay him back, but we ended up talking. He

just moved here from West Virginia and needed a job, so I took him to Ryan.” She scrunched her nose. “I never thought they’d give him your assistant job. Fate really does have a way of working things out.”

I nodded and slid into the seat opposite her, taking in her words. Fate didn’t forget about me and worked overtime to get us to meet. I still couldn’t believe it. I had a mate. A smile played on my lips. I lifted my head, and Vanessa was staring at me.

“I have a mate, Vanessa,” I said softly.

She laughed. “You do, and he’s your new assistant.”

I joined in, laughing. “He is. Wow, I can’t believe it. I need to call Stan to get—”

“Don’t you dare, Michael Allen Doy!”

My eyes widened at the use of my full name. “What? Your dad and brother both used Stan to find out about their mates. They had a whole work up.”

Stan was a private investigator and a member of the Pride. He was also trusted and damn good at his job. He could find out anything about anything.

“Just because they did it doesn’t make it right. How do you think Brian and Owen felt knowing their mates had dossiers on them? Because, trust me, they hated it,” Vanessa said.

“They did? I mean, they never said anything.”

“Maybe not to you, but Owen hated that my brother knew about his childhood before he could tell him himself. He understood it was new for Hayden and that he didn’t know what to do. That’s why he didn’t make a huge fuss—that and because he loved him. And Brian was the same.” She crossed her arms angrily. “They hated it.”

This was news to me. I didn’t think it was so bad, but I didn’t want to hurt Jake. “What should I do?”

Vanessa shook her head and gazed up to heaven. “Men.” She looked back toward me. “You use your words, and I don’t know.... Get to know a person like normal.”

“You don’t have to be sarcastic.”

“Don’t I?”

“Nessa,” I said, exasperated. “Okay, I get your point. I’ll do it your way and use my words.”

Her stern expression melted into a gentle smile. “That’s all I’m asking for, Mike.”

I stared at her, my mind buzzing with a torrent of thoughts. It would not be easy, but it was the right thing to do. The mere thought of Jake—my mate—filled me with a warmth that pushed away the uncertainty. I met Vanessa’s gaze, a determined glint in my eyes.

“I’ll do it the right way,” I vowed. “For Jake... and for us.” I sighed, looking at the empty doorway where Jake had stood. A part of me longed to find him right then, to talk, to learn about

him... But I had to do this at the right pace. I owed it to both of us.

As I said those words, something shifted inside me. A kind of certainty replaced my previous doubts, reinforcing my resolve.

I could do this. I could be a great mate. *Thank you, Fate.*

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Jake

I BOUNDED OUT OF Satchel Industries with a smile. I couldn't believe the offer they'd made me. It was more money and benefits than I could've ever hoped for. This was a turning point for my brothers and me. We've finally had a ray of hope amid the sea of crap we'd dealt with.

Still wearing a grin that could rival the Cheshire Cat's, I headed to my beat-up sedan. It was on its last bit of gas, but hopefully, that wouldn't last long. I had a job! In two weeks, when I get my first check, everything will be fine, I thought to myself.

Reaching my car, I opened the door. Every clunk and rattle from the rusty vehicle was music to my ears, and each jolt was a symphony of success. As I keyed the ignition, a thrill surged through me, warming me from the inside out. This job, this opportunity, it was a lifeline, and I intended to seize it with both hands.

My mind was abuzz with the potential changes this job would bring. I could actually prove I could provide for the

boys. I wouldn't be scared of getting them taken away. Hell, we'd have a better place to live and full bellies.

My phone ringing shook me from my thoughts, and I quickly grabbed it. The name on the screen instantly washed away my good mood. CPS. The letters that had been haunting me since running with the boys.

Grace had tried calling several times and left countless messages. She kept saying she didn't want to get the authorities involved, and that we needed to discuss what was best for the boys. She said that we could work it out, but I didn't trust her, not after what she said at my parents' funeral.

My grip tightened around the steering wheel, knuckles turning white as ice pricked my spine. My gaze lingered on the caller ID before I sent the call to voicemail. A heavy sigh escaped me. They couldn't take my brothers away, not now when things were finally looking up.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I put my car in gear and pulled onto the road. Every mile between Satchel Industries and my apartment seemed to magnify my worries. But it also strengthened my resolve. I had a good job now; I could provide for the boys. That had to count for something.

The clock on the dashboard seemed to tick louder, reminding me of the precious minutes slipping away. I had to pick up the boys and get them home, away from the prying eyes of nosy neighbors who were all too ready to call CPS at the drop of a hat. We needed to celebrate, not hide, but we'd have to tread carefully for a while longer.

As I parked outside our apartment complex, my hand automatically went to the rear-view mirror, adjusting it to catch a glimpse of my reflection. A pair of tired but determined eyes met mine. “You’ve got this, Jake,” I told my reflection. “You can protect them.”

I took another breath and exited the car, heading toward the ground-floor apartment where the boys were. I was thankful that Mrs. Pauly, our landlady, ran the informal daycare in our building. I was equally thankful that she didn’t require me to pay upfront for her services and just added it to the rent.

The door opened before I reached it, and tiny arms quickly wrapped around my legs. I plastered a smile on my face before bending down and giving them a quick hug.

“Hey, how was your day?” I asked.

“It was so much fun. Ms. Pauly is so nice and played with us,” Sam said excitedly.

“They saw you pull up and were eager to reach you.”

I gazed up at Mrs. Pauly. “Thank you for watching them. They weren’t any trouble?”

She shook her head. “Nope. They were good. How was job hunting?”

For a moment, I hesitated, not sure how to break the news. But when I saw the anticipation in her eyes, the supportive tilt of her head, I knew this was a moment to share, not just for me and my brothers, but for everyone who’d been there for us.

“Well,” I started, grinning broadly as I tickled Abel’s tummy. “I found a job, and I start tomorrow.”

The cheers and hugs from my brothers were deafening. I laughed, joining in their elation. We quickly calmed down, and I stood up.

“That’s wonderful news, Jake. Do you know the times? It’s a day shift, right? I can’t watch the boys past six,” Mrs. Pauly said, a nervous twinge lacing her tone.

I nodded. “It’s the day shift, nine to five, Monday through Friday, at Satchel Industries.”

“Satchel Industries? That’s fantastic! Everyone and their mother try to get in there, and they usually have a wait list a mile long. You must’ve had some luck on your side.”

“I did.” I smiled, thinking about all the crazy circumstances that led me to my new position. “It was fate and being in the right place at the right time.”

“I’m happy for you.” She bent down before speaking to the boys. “I’ll see you boys tomorrow. I’m glad you had fun.” She looked back at me. “I have to get dinner started for my husband. Congratulations, Jake.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Pauly. I’ll drop the boys off in the morning.”

Once Mrs. Pauly had closed the door, I shepherded my little brothers towards the staircase. Our worn-out sneakers echoed through the empty hallway as we trudged up to the third floor, the air a potent cocktail of fatigue and exhilaration.

Chattering excitedly, the boys were in their own world by the time we reached our door. As I delved into my pocket for the keys, the metallic jingle was abruptly replaced by a clang as they slipped from my grip.

As I bent down to pick them up, a figure unexpectedly loomed into my vision, causing me to startle back. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you,” a man around my age said, extending my keys toward me.

He was tall and muscular. The broad shoulders and lean physique beneath his simple white tee screamed strength and power. His jet-black hair was slicked back, framing a striking face that was dominated by vibrant, discerning green eyes. Those eyes, set against his pale skin, seemed to bore right into me—his casual attire, coupled with his well-toned body, made for an undeniably handsome sight.

A rush of attraction hit me, but it was a different kind - less intense, less consuming than the magnetic pull I felt towards Mike. And as that thought crossed my mind, a sudden image of my handsome boss sprang up, casting an all-too-familiar flutter in my chest. Shaking my head slightly, I reached out, accepting my keys from the handsome stranger.

Flashing a dimpled smile, he extended a hand, “I’m Dominic. You’re new here, right?”

I nodded and swiftly unlocked the door. My instincts screamed at me to get the boys inside. Dominic seemed friendly, but an underlying hint of danger sparked an unspoken urge to flee.

“I’m Jake. That’s right. We just moved in a few days ago,” I replied, herding the boys through the threshold.

“Nice to meet you, Jake,” Dominic moved a step closer, casually inquiring about the boys, “They’re not your kids, are they?”

“My brothers,” I corrected. “I have to get them dinner ready.” I hoped my words allowed for a quick escape, but Dominic took another step closer.

“That’s good. I’d hate to find out you were tied down,” he said with a wink. “Maybe we can go out and grab a few drinks. I manage a club in town.”

A wave of unease swept over me. “I’m really busy with my brothers and getting settled in. I don’t really have time.”

“Everyone deserves a break,” he countered, closing the distance between us. An unsettling thrill coursed through me. Dominic was handsome, but his assertiveness came off too strong and carried a hint of danger. Like I was the prey, and he was the predator. I needed to escape.

“Uh—” I stammered.

“Jake, Abel needs help,” Sam’s voice echoed into the hall, and Dominic stepped back.

My breathing eased at his retreat, and I sent a silent prayer of thanks to Sam for calling out. “I have to get in. I’ll see you around,” I said nervously before running into the safety of my apartment.

“I’ll see you around,” Dominic called as I shut the door.

I leaned my head against the closed door and took a steadying breath, hoping to ease my racing heart. I needed a moment. Today had been crazy, from all the rejections to getting a job, meeting sexy Mike, and now an intense neighbor—I needed a time out. The thought of Mike gave me pause. I didn't know how I would work with someone clearly out of my league, involved with Vanessa, and sexy as hell.

“Jake!” Sam called again.

I inhaled deeply before turning to the task at hand. I had a busy night of playing Mr. Mom.

Peering back into the main bedroom, relief washed over me as I saw the boys still asleep. This parenting thing was hard, but I finally got the boys fed, bathed, and in bed. I was exhausted. I grabbed the door handle and gently closed the door, careful not to make a sound.

I released a breath and turned back to the living room before sinking into the softness of my couch-slash-bed. I glanced around the tiny space. The walls had chipped paint, and I could take two steps and be in the kitchen. I shook my head. This is what my life had become, I mused. I missed my old room and especially my bed, but if I wanted to be in the boys' life, I'd have to suffer with my bed being the couch.

I released another sigh and laid down, pulling the blanket up to my chin. Closing my eyes, I let the weight of the day ebb

away. This was precisely what I needed—a moment of peace from the whirlwind of responsibilities.

The coolness of the sheets soothed my worries, if only for a little while. The kids, my job, my wicked step-aunt, and CPS lingered on my mind. I shook my head; I needed to let these thoughts go. I took a deep breath, the faint scent of fresh linen calming my senses. Letting the comfort of my makeshift bed cradle me, I allowed my mind to calm and drift.

“That was the last appointment until this afternoon. You have the next few hours free. Here’s your coffee,” I said, placing the cup on the desk.

Mike lifted his gaze from his papers and smiled before rolling back from the desk.

“The entire afternoon free? Whatever will we do?” he rose from his seat and grabbed my shoulders, pulling me into a tight embrace.

His muscular arms encased me, his body heat seeping through our clothing, making my skin tingle. Slowly, he bent down, bridging the distance between us. For what seemed like forever, his lips hung over mine. Then, finally, the moment I’d yearned for came. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine.

The sensation was electrifying, stronger than any physical contact I’d ever experienced. The world faded away, and I lost myself in the softness of his lips, the rough scrape of his stubble. The tantalizing taste of coffee still lingered on his

tongue. I moaned. My body responded to his with a fervor I'd never felt before.

His fingers brushed over my hair, gently tugging to tilt my head for a more intimate encounter. My fingers traced the powerful muscles beneath his white dress shirt on his broad back. All thoughts of the office and the outer world were gone. Mike and I were alone in a sea of want and longing. The spark between us was palpable, like a raging fire threatening to destroy us. And I was more than willing to set fire to myself.

His hand shifted to cup my jaw, and his thumb brushed lightly over my cheek as he leaned back, ending the kiss. His breaths mixed with mine and his brown eyes were intense as they searched my face.

A smile ghosted his lips as he murmured, "That's one way to fill an afternoon."

"Most definitely," I replied, my voice low and husky.

Maintaining eye contact, I guided him backward toward his chair. The office melted away, replaced by this electric bubble that contained just the two of us. My hands slid from his biceps, down his forearms, and onto his hands, pulling him gently until the back of his legs met the chair. He took the hint and slowly sat down, his gaze never leaving mine.

Without missing a beat, I sank to my knees in one smooth movement. Looking up at him, his eyes darkened, a silent understanding passing between us. Filled with a newfound determination, I reached out and unbuckled his pants.

Drawing closer, the warmth of him radiated through the fabric. I could feel his hard arousal urgently straining against its confines, demanding my attention. His moan was a seductive note in the air, compelling me to explore further. I traced the outline of his shaft with my lips, hungering for more. I need more. I didn't want a barrier between us, yearning to feel the velvety texture of his flesh.

Mike's moan deepened. A low rumble of desire as I pulled down the elastic band of his cotton briefs, freeing his large cock. It stood proudly, with a little curve to the right. Every inch was perfection—long, girthy, uncut, and veined. His dick pulsed, and pre-cum beaded at the tip.

I couldn't resist any longer. Leaning forward, I tasted him, the salty-sweet pre-cum tantalizing my taste buds. Mike's deep groan vibrated through the room. I followed the pronounced vein along his shaft, down to his cum filled balls. Their proportions matched his cock, and they hung low. Taking one into my mouth, Mike's response was electric, his body arching in ecstasy.

“Oh, yeah. Just like that, baby. Suck my balls,” Mike's voice, husky and raw, urged me on.

I did as instructed, ensuring my hand worked his pulsing shaft simultaneously. Mike's hips began a rhythmic dance, hinting at a faster pace, but I resisted, savoring each moment. Glancing up, his face reflected pure bliss, eyes half-lidded in ecstasy. I continued my journey upwards, my tongue tracing

its path until I met the tip, pulling back his foreskin to place a delicate kiss on the exposed flesh.

A sharp cry escaped Mike as his grip tightened on me. The time had come. Swiftly, my lips enveloped him, taking him deep. His moan vibrated through me as he pushed further in. Suppressing my reflexes, I gave in to the rhythm he set, his length sliding effortlessly over my tongue.

My own arousal demanded attention, and with my free hand, I unleashed my aching cock. Finding a rhythm with his thrusts, both of us inching closer to the edge. Tingles of my orgasm raced through my body like a tidal wave, and I cried out around his cock as cum sprayed from my pulsing dick.

Mike wasn't far behind, as he pumped in and out. His frantic pace culminated in one final thrust. He stiffened, and volley after volley of cum filled my throat. I did what I could to swallow, but some slipped free from my mouth.

Exhausted but sated, he eased his grip, and I gently cleaned him, savoring the lingering taste. Mike released a sigh and pulled me up from my knees and kissed me.

“That was amazing,” I said breathlessly.

Buzz.... Buzz... Buzz

I jerked my eyes open. My heart raced, and I was panting. I peered down, seeing cum covering my blanket and sheet.

“What the fuck?” I whispered.

Buzz... Buzz... Buzz

I grabbed my phone from the coffee table, and my heart stopped racing, reality hitting me like a freight train.

CPS. FUCK.

Early Bird Tensions

Mike

BUZZ... BUZZ...

I opened my eyes with a groan and slammed the offending alarm off. Sliding out of bed, I stumbled to the bathroom. The dark circles that greeted me in the mirror were a testament to my restless night. I couldn't sleep. The excitement of meeting my mate kept me awake. My mate. Jake. The mere thought of his name caused a grin to split my face.

Today, I'd be able to see Jake and talk to him. I'd be able to get to know him. My lion roared within me, eager to see his mate. The excitement of yesterday filled me once more, and I dare say I felt giddy. Not that I'd ever use that word in public to describe myself.

After a quick shower and brushing my teeth, I found myself in the kitchen, dressed and gripping a travel mug filled with coffee, ready to face the day and see Jake. Would Jake want coffee? Does he like coffee? Maybe he'd be hungry. Do I get him something? These questions raced through my mind,

causing me to pause. There was so much I didn't know about him. *Maybe I should call Stan?* I thought again.

Vanessa had convinced me not to, but I had my doubts. This was my mate. I needed every advantage. I pulled my phone from my pocket and searched the contacts. The screen abruptly changed, and the face of my best friend was proudly displayed.

Pressing the answer button, I put the phone to my ear. "Hey, Hayden, what's up?"

"Don't 'what's up' me, man. What the hell? I have to hear from my sister that you met your mate. You couldn't call me?" Hayden replied.

I chuckled, grabbed my keys, and headed out the door. "I got caught up talking to her, and I knew Owen wasn't feeling well. I didn't want to bother you."

"What bother? The heck with that man. We've been best friends forever, and yet Vanessa had to tell me you found your mate. Did you get Stan to do a check on him? What's his name? Do you like him?"

I could only smile at the rapid change of Hayden's tone from angry to inquisitive. "No, after talking to Nessa, I decided not to involve Stan and get to know Jake the old fashion way," I replied.

Even though I doubted not getting Stan involved, Vanessa's words from yesterday still kept me from getting the background check on Jake.

“What did I tell you about calling my sister Nessa to me? It’s creepy, man,” Hayden whined.

“That’s why I do it.”

I pressed the key fob for my SUV, and the lights of the midnight blue BMW X5 SAV illuminated the parking garage. Opening the door, I slid into the leather seats, feeling the plush comfort mold around me, offering both support and luxury. I cherished this car. It was luxury with a capital L.

“Jerk,” Hayden replied. “So, his name’s Jake? Is that all you know?”

I pressed the ignition, and the vehicle roared to life. After syncing my phone and putting it on speaker, I placed the car in gear and pulled out of the lot before answering. “Yeah, his name is Jake Bradford. And I know he’s mine. He’s gorgeous, Hay. I mean, he’s perfect for me. I know it. My lion went insane after seeing him.”

Hayden laughed. “Yeah, they tend to do that. Are you really not going to do a check on him?”

“I thought about it.” I released a sigh. “I really thought about it. But Vanessa’s words hold weight. She told me how Brian and Owen weren’t thrilled about you and your father using Stan to find out about them.”

“What? Owen’s upset about it?” Hayden interrupted.

“He wasn’t thrilled. I’m sure he told you before. I mean, I get it. Would you want someone to know everything about you before you could tell them?”

“I guess not. I had to know though. He was my mate and well... I’ll have to apologize to Owen.”

“I’m sure he’s already forgiven you, Hayden. How is he, by the way? Any better?”

Hayden released a loud sigh. “Not really. It’s weird. The doctor is saying it’s just a bug, and it has to run its course, but he really can’t keep anything down. He’s been drinking Ensure just to get some nutrients, for fuck’s sake.”

“Damn. If you need me to do anything, let me know,” I replied.

“Thanks, Mike. Back at you. You have a mate now. If you need my help with anything, let me know. I’ll be there like you were there for me.”

“Thanks, bro. I’m pulling into work.” The nervous, giddy energy from earlier raced through me. “Should I have gotten him coffee?” I asked aloud.

Hayden laughed. “Does he drink coffee?”

“I don’t know. I feel like I should bring him something, but I don’t know,” I blurted.

“It’s okay, Mike. Calm down. Go say hi to him first. Find out. Ask him.”

I nodded, even though Hayden couldn’t see me. “I will. You’re right.”

“Always remember that, too. I’m right.”

I laughed this time. “Asshole. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Talk to you later. Call me.”

“I will.” I disconnected the line and took a deep breath.

I parked the BMW in my designated spot and took a moment to gather myself. The anticipation, the excitement, was getting to me. Hayden was right. I needed to just talk to him. With one last deep inhale, I stepped out, my shoes clicking crisply against the concrete of the parking garage.

The morning air was cool over my skin. Winter was always a pleasant change from the sweltering heat that Florida often brings. My lion always loved the cooler weather. He felt more alive and wanted to run through the woods.

Adjusting my tie and straightening my jacket, I approached the building’s entrance. The gleaming glass doors automatically slid open, greeting me with a burst of cold, conditioned air. I smirked. Even with the coolness of the morning, we still had our air conditioning running. By midday, it’d be hot out, and it’d be worth it.

As I stepped inside, I scanned the lobby. I knew I was early, but I hoped I’d see the face, that one face that kept me up last night: Jake. I frowned. It was only Leonard at the security desk and not a trace of anyone else. I lifted my wrist and barked a laugh. *Six forty-three; no wonder the place was a ghost town*, I thought.

Leonard glanced up at me and gave a slight nod. “Morning, Mr. Doy. Early start, huh?”

I nodded as I walked past him. “Morning, Leonard. Didn’t realize I was so early and the first one here.”

“Not the first one, sir,” he replied.

I stopped and turned to face him. “I’m not? Someone got here before me?”

“A new guy got here early and said he was starting today. Supposed to meet with Ryan in H.R. at seven-fifteen.” Leonard pointed over his shoulder across the lobby.

My gaze followed his finger, and I froze while my lion roared with happiness. “Jake,” I whispered, as if I was saying a prayer.

“Sir?” Leonard said, but I shook my head before walking toward Jake. Every step closer caused my heart to beat faster.

Jake’s fingers danced over his phone screen, his brows knitting together as he stared intently at its contents. A subtle crease formed over his lips. The smile from yesterday was gone. I didn’t know what caused his troubled expression, but I wanted, no, *yearned* to soothe it.

As I stepped in front of him, I cleared my throat. Jake’s head popped up, and he stared at me wide-eyed. “I didn’t mean to scare you, Jake,” I said.

Jake jumped to his feet and fumbled with his phone before sliding it into his beige slacks. “Mr. Doy,” he replied. I could hear the nervous tremble in his voice.

“Mike, please. Good morning. Seems we’re both early birds,” I said with a smile.

“Um, Mike. Good morning. I...um, wanted to make sure I was here on time.” A faint blush spread over his cheeks.

My smile widened. “Why don’t we make our way up?”

“Jake,” a voice called as Jake opened his mouth to reply.

I internally growled as I spun around. Ryan from H.R. hurried across the lobby toward us. I’d always liked Ryan and his easy going nature. He was part of the pride, and his lion was more passive than most. If we were wolves, I’m sure he would’ve been an omega. We’d even had a bit of fun a few years before I started my relationship with Vanessa, and I considered him a friend, but right now, he was just a cock blocker, and I wanted him gone.

“Good morning, Mr. Doy,” he said merrily.

“Ryan, morning,” I said, annoyed at his interruption.

Ryan ignored my icy greeting and gave a brief nod before cheerfully speaking to Jake. “Good morning, Jake. Glad to see you. You’re super early.”

“Morning, Ryan. I wanted to make sure I was on time,” Jake replied with more confidence and happiness than I’d seen earlier.

My lion rumbled, jealous of the affection and happiness our mate showed to another. Relax, I urged internally. He doesn’t know what we are to him yet. My lion rumbled in my mind again before huffing and receding to the back.

“Well, you’re not late. That’s a good thing.” Ryan said with a chuckle before continuing. “Why don’t we get you settled, and

I'll introduce you to Katie, who'll get you acclimated to things."

"I was going to take him up," I interrupted.

Ryan peered back at me. "I'm sure you're very busy, Mr. Doy. That's why we hired this guy. I'll get him set up, and you can start your day."

"I don't mind taking him up to Katie," I said firmly. I allowed my authority as a stronger lion to creep into my voice.

Ryan's eyes widened, and he bowed his head slightly. "Of course. I didn't mean any offense. I was going to show him around first."

I felt like an ass seeing Ryan's sparkly attitude fade. He was just trying to be nice. He didn't know what Jake meant to me, and I shouldn't have used my authority to pressure the weak.

"You're right, Ryan. I'm sure you can show him around better than I can. Maybe show him the break room with the best coffee."

Ryan's smile instantly returned. "I can do that." He turned to Jake, who'd been watching our interaction intently. "You do like coffee, right?"

Jake nodded. "Oh, yes, can't start my day without a cup."

"That's great." Ryan turned back to me. "I'll show him around, get him settled, and I'm sure Katie will bring him by afterward."

I smiled and looked toward Jake. "I'll see you later."

The faint blush was back, and he quickly nodded as the pair made their way toward the elevator. I grinned again, thinking of the adorable blush. It gave me hope he wasn't unaffected and even attracted to me.

“Whatcha staring at? You look like the cat that ate the canary. You didn't, did you?”

I spun around and glared. “Talon, what are you doing here so early? What are you doing here, period?”

Talon was my dad's right-hand man. He was an enforcer and guard of the royal family. Recently, he took the position of the king's consort's guard. He was young, strong, and an all around good lion.

“Needed a break. The king and the king's consort were getting visitors again. So why were you watching Ryan and that cutie?” he asked fast. A little too fast. But the word ‘cutie’ is what caught my attention.

I snarled and grabbed his shirt. “Watch how you speak about my mate.”

“Your mate. Shit, man, congrats. I'll be more mindful.”

I released my grip and straightened. I looked back toward the elevator, and Jake had already disappeared. I sighed. “Come on. You can tell me why you don't want to be home while the prey princess has guests.”

Talon growled now. “Don't call him that. Just because he's a prey shifter doesn't mean you can be a dick and disrespect the king's consort.”

“Relax. It’s Brian’s and my thing. I call him a prey princess, and he calls me a furball pussy cat. It equals out.”

“All the same. We shouldn’t judge all prey the same,” Talon said indignantly.

I nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Which prey shifter is your mate? Brian’s brother?”

Talon looked away and didn’t answer. I wondered if I had hit the nail on the head. “Talon?”

He peered back at me. “I don’t know if he’s my mate. Yeah, there’s attraction, but.... I don’t know. How do you know it’s real?”

“What’s your lion say?”

Talon shrugged. “He’s as confused as I am. I left because I didn’t know. I need time to sort things out, and I know if Lucas is there, I won’t be able to. I don’t want to make the same mistakes as Randy and Alejandro.”

I barked a laugh. “No one can make as many mistakes as those two. Don’t worry.”

Randy was human, and Alejandro was a jaguar shifter. They had a sordid affair and were mates. Their story was all things not to do. Don’t freak your mate out. Shifting in front of them without warning was bad. It was a lesson for all shifters.

“That’s true.” Talon laughed. “It’s funny. Now Randy is basically hiding out in a lion pride.”

“I can’t believe he still thinks we’re rabbits.”

“I don’t know if he does. I think he’s figured things out. But he’s still not going to Alejandro. Do you really think they’re mates?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Only they can answer that, just like you can only answer if Lucas is yours. But one thing I know for sure. Your lion will definitely tell you. It will be like your heart just started beating, and you just really started living.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I stared at Talon, and my heart broke for him. I think he wanted Lucas to be his, but he just wasn’t.

“Come on. Let’s go up, and you can hide out,” I said, guiding Talon toward the elevator.

“Sounds good. Thanks, Mike.”

“Anytime, Tal. Anytime.”

First Day Jitters

Jake

“DO YOU THINK YOU can handle the system, kiddo?”

I peered up at Katie. She was a lovely lady but took to calling me kiddo off the bat. I didn't mind; her smile and personality reminded me of my stepmother, Ann. The ache of losing my parents rippled through my chest. But I had to go on.

Katie was a wealth of knowledge. She was the executive secretary to Edward Satchel, the owner, president, and CEO of the company. She was an old hand at this job. I took in everything she told me.

I nodded. “I got it. I can handle it. It's pretty straightforward.”

Katie smiled. “Great. You will learn the ins and outs of what Michael needs. It will take time, but I think you can do it. A lot better than the temps out there.”

“Thanks, Katie. Thank you for the help.”

She grinned. “You're welcome, kiddo.”

“Not a kid,” I grumbled.

Laughing, she ruffled my hair like Ann used to do. “You’re a kiddo to me. It’s midmorning, and there seems to be a break in the schedule.” She pointed at the computer screen before continuing. “It’s a good time to check on Mike and see if he needs anything, coffee especially. He lives on the stuff; all the execs do.”

I nodded and stood from the desk. I turned and looked at the mahogany double doors leading to Mike’s office. My heart fluttered, and my face warmed at the thought of Mike—that damn dream. I had to push it out of my mind, especially now.

I inhaled and steeled my nerves before walking to the office doors and gently rapping. I opened the door as Mike’s big brown eyes stared back at me. He was dreamy. He was even more handsome in real life. The dream version had nothing on him.

He cracked a smile, and my stomach fluttered with excitement. I knew I blushed again. I couldn’t help it.

“Mr. Doy,” I said, walking into the room. It was only then I saw a young man sitting on the couch. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were in a meeting.”

“It’s Mike,” he replied. “You’re not interrupting anything important. This is Talon, a friend. He works security here. We were just catching up. Talon, this is Jake, my new assistant.”

The man, Talon, rose from his seat. He stood a little over six feet, had a muscular build but not bulky, and wore a form-

fitting suit. He had short, well-managed hair, and he looked like security. All he needed was mirrored sunglasses to make his men in black look complete.

“Nice to meet you,” Talon said.

I inhaled nervously and shook the offered hand. “Nice to meet you, too.”

I quickly let go and looked back at Mike. “I was just wondering if I could get you anything. Katie said you live off coffee.”

Mike chuckled, and the sound went straight to my dick. Fuck, what was with this man? I felt my face heat. Double fuck. *Come on, Jake, keep it together.*

“I do live off coffee, but I’m good. We haven’t really had a chance to talk. Why don’t you sit and join Talon and me? We can chat while we have downtime,” Mike said, pointing to the seat opposite him.

Damn it. So much for a quick escape. I was going to have to do this, eventually. Perhaps with Talon here, I wouldn’t embarrass myself. Swallowing, I slid into the offered seat.

“Where are you from, Jake?” Talon asked, returning to his seat on the couch.

I glanced between him and Mike. I didn’t know how much I should tell them. I’d already told Vanessa I was from West Virginia, so I decided to admit to that. “West Virginia.”

“That’s quite a ways from here. How’d you end up in Florida?” Mike asked, leaning forward.

How the hell did I answer that? I couldn't come out and pour my soul out to my boss on the first day, no matter how much I wanted to. I inhaled, and Mike's cologne filled my senses. Another wave of arousal washed through me. Fuck. This needed to stop.

Mike cleared his throat, and I jerked my gaze toward him before settling on "Family."

"Oh, your family moved down here?" Talon asked.

Fuck, another question I didn't want to answer—luckily, I didn't have to.

"Knock, knock."

I jumped to my feet and turned toward the door. Vanessa strolled in carrying a tray of coffee. I hurried to her side and grabbed the tray.

"Thank you, Jake. How's your first day going? This guy's not a grump, is he? If he is, just let me know," Vanessa said, pointing at a smiling Mike.

I glanced between them. Shit, I forgot. He's taken and way out of my league. I turned back to her. An ache radiated in my chest at the thought. I just need to keep things professional. I had to get out of here. I placed the coffee on the desk before inhaling and standing straight.

"It's been going well, and he's been fine. Not a grump at all," I said with a tiny smile. I looked back at Mike. "I'll let you all catch up. You have an appointment in thirty."

I turned on my heel and quickly exited the office before anyone could speak. I hurried past my desk and down the hall to the restroom. I entered the stall and locked it behind me, breathing heavily. Why did I feel this way about him? Why did I have that dream about him? I only met him once, for fuck's sake.

I closed my eyes. Jake, you can do this. This is for your brothers. Buzzing pulled me from my thoughts. I opened my eyes and pulled my phone from my pocket. Fuck! CPS. Why wouldn't she leave me alone? I pressed the button, sending Grace to voicemail.

"I can do this. I need to forget about the dream and forget any attraction for my boss. For Sam and Abel. I can do this," I said firmly.

With my decision made up, I jerked a nod and exited the stall. My eyes widened. *Oh crap on a cracker.*

"So, you had a dream about Mike? Who's Sam and Abel?" Talon asked with a grin.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I replied, going to the sink.

Talon stepped beside me. "Oh really? I think I know what I heard."

My face burned. I peered up into the mirror and could see the red spread across my cheeks. Damn it. I was going to lose this job and my brothers. Tears burned in my eyes as I turned to Talon and took a deep breath.

“Listen, it’s nothing, okay? Please don’t say anything. I know Mike and Vanessa are an item. It’s just a crush. Please, I need this job. I know nothing will happen,” I said. I could hear the emotion in my voice, and I hated it. I hated being vulnerable.

Talon’s brow creased. “Relax, I won’t say anything. I was just teasing. It’s okay. Really, I promise I won’t say anything.”

“Really?” Hope bloomed within me. Could I trust him? I just met him.

He smiled. “Really. I won’t say a word. But—”

“No buts, you already said you wouldn’t,” I interrupted.

Talon’s smile widened. “Okay. No buts. I’ll just say Vanessa and Mike aren’t together.”

They weren’t together. What? I saw them yesterday. Maybe Talon didn’t know. Shit. Did I out their relationship?

I shook my head. I couldn’t dwell on it. “It doesn’t matter. It’s just a crush. Nothing will happen. You promised you wouldn’t say anything. I hope you don’t.” I walked past Talon toward the door.

“Jake,” Talon said softly, and I looked back. “I won’t say anything. You have my word, but never say never.”

“No buts,” I replied.

He grinned, and I left the room. No matter what Talon said, nothing could ever happen. I had to be strong—for Sam and Abel.

Strings and Walls

Mike

THE MELLOW VIBRATIONS OF the guitar strings resonated throughout the spacious office. The workday was done, and I needed a moment to collect my thoughts. It'd been a long day. Hell, it'd been a long week. Ever since that first morning, Jake had been distant. The times I tried to have small talk, he'd brush me off smoothly and rush out of the room. I didn't know what happened, but he kept me at arm's length, and his walls were firmly in place.

My fingers strummed the strings, and a familiar tune I'd been toying with formed. I hummed, then sang softly, "I'm a lion in a man's disguise. Can't you see the truth in my eyes? I'll be the king. You'll be my crown, won't let those steel walls keep us down." I smiled—those words felt so fitting right now.

A light knock caused me to stop playing and look toward the door. Jake, the object of my thoughts, stepped into the room. He flashed a smile and quickly averted his eyes. It was as if he looked at me; I'd see through the walls he expertly put up.

“Sorry to bother you, Mr. Doy,” Jake said.

I hated that he called me Mr. Doy, even though I’d corrected him numerous times. It was as if it was another way for him to create distance.

“It’s Mike. You’ve already been here a few days. It really is okay to call me Mike. And you’re not bothering me at all. The workday is finally done, and it’s Friday,” I replied.

“That’s why I came in. It’s getting late. I, uh, didn’t mean to interrupt. Your playing sounds great.” Jake blushed before continuing. “But I was planning on heading out, and I wondered if there was anything else I could do.”

There was plenty he could do. “Thanks, I just dabble in playing. I always wanted to be a rock star,” I replied, ignoring his question.

Jake released a small giggle, and I couldn’t help but smile. It was a beautiful sound. I placed my guitar to the side and rose from my seat.

“Any plans for the weekend? Have you explored the city yet?” I asked, grabbing my guitar case.

“Um, no, not really. I have....” Jake’s voice trailed off, and I turned to look at him.

“You have....” I prodded.

Jake opened his mouth to reply, but quickly shut it and shook his head. “I don’t have any plans,” he said.

I knew he was holding back, and I hated it. The next thing would be his quick exit. I had to stop him.

“I—”

“I’d be happy to take you out and show you around,” I said, cutting him off.

Jake focused on me, and his eyes widened. “Uh, no, that’s okay. You don’t have to—”

“I want to. You’re new in town. I can show you all the best places if you’re up for it.” I stepped closer to him.

Jake swallowed hard, and I could feel his nervous energy fill the space. “Look, Mr. Doy—Mike,” he corrected, exhaling slowly, “I appreciate the offer, but I don’t think it’s a good idea. We work together and—”

“Jake, it’s just a tour of the city. No strings,” I said, softening my tone. I took another step closer. I wanted to be next to him. I wanted to hold him. My lion roared within me, urging me on. He wanted his mate as much as I did.

Jake stared at me, and his breath quickened. Looking into his eyes, I could see the cracks in the walls, the vulnerability of trust. His eyes said he wanted to trust me, but he was scared. It was that fear that gave me pause. Perhaps I was coming on too strong, but I couldn’t stop myself. I leaned in and pressed my lips gently against Jake’s.

The world seemed to pause for that heartbeat, the weight of everything I’d left unsaid displayed in the kiss. It was magical,

and I never wanted it to end. I was kissing my mate. The one who was made just for me, and I was kissing him.

Jake's breath hitched, and he didn't move, but soon his lips moved and pressed back on mine. It was perfect. Jake pushed back, breaking the spell we were under. His eyes were wide, and panic etched his expression.

"What... what was that?" Jake stammered, his face a deep shade of crimson.

My heart raced. Feeling his panic replace the nervousness made me realize I may have fucked up. "Jake, I'm sorry, I just.... I"

Jake shook his head. "I can't You're with Vanessa. Oh shit, I'm gonna lose my job. I'm going..." Jake shook his head and ran out of the room.

"Jake, wait!" I called out, but Jake was already gone, leaving the room in silence. I stumbled back, and my lion roared within me. What had I done?

I shook my head and ran from the office. My lion wanted to break free, and I couldn't let him do that here. He was angry at me. He wanted to chase after our mate, and I wouldn't let him. I was holding him back.

I didn't bother with the elevator and headed for the stairs. In no time at all, I was in my car and driving. Tears burned in my eyes as I swerved in and out of traffic. Why had I kissed him? I knew he was standoffish. He wasn't ready. I was just impatient.

My phone buzzed, and the screen showed Vanessa's name. I pressed ignore and sent the call to voicemail. I didn't want to talk. I couldn't talk right now. My lion was too angry. I whipped into the entrance of our pride's lands.

The pride lands were a patch of wooded land to the east of the city and extended all the way to the Myakka River. Members diligently monitored the boundaries, ensuring it was a safe place for the pride to run and shift without care. It was what I needed now. It was what my lion craved.

Throwing the car in park and turning off the ignition, I jumped out and sprinted towards the trees. I yelled as my lion took over, and my body shifted into my massive beast, shredding my clothes.

As my human mind fled away, I allowed my beast full control. I roared loudly, warning anyone or anything not to come near. I was in no mood for it. My powerful legs propelled me forward, and the wind blew through my brownish-black mane.

A raw power surged within me as I plowed through the trees. The dirt beneath my paws sprayed behind me. I ran fast and hard. The loss, anger, and sadness of Jake running away filled me, and I had to run to get away from it. Why did our mate have to run? He was ours. My lion thought in simple terms. He didn't understand the human side of things.

A roar sounded behind me, and I skidded to a stop, twirling around. I snarled at the lion confronting me, and he growled back. That alone was enough to set me off. Roaring, I

launched through the air and extended my claws, ready for the impending clash.

The other lion didn't hesitate; he roared back and leaped. We collided mid-air before we fell hard to the ground. I batted at him with a powerful swipe of my claw, but he countered, biting deep into my flank with his razor-sharp teeth. Normally, I wouldn't challenge this lion; after all, he was my father. But now, my emotions were running wild, my lion's primal instincts taking over, demanding a battle.

The surrounding forest became a blur of motion, our snarls and roars echoing as we circled one another. Each of us tried to find an advantage, an opening. I lunged again, aiming for his throat. But my father, being an experienced fighter only second to the king, easily dodged the attack. At the same time, he countered with a swift bite to my leg.

His teeth grazed my skin, and it reminded me that my father, although he loved me, would take no crap. We were both powerhouses, and our massive frames collided with a thud. The fight kicked up clouds of dust and debris. Trees shuddered as we crashed into them, their branches breaking under the force.

With a powerful leap, I jumped again, trying to get the upper hand. I pressed down on him with all my weight. But he anticipated my move and rolled to the side to use his powerful hind legs and push me off balance. Before I could recover, he was on top of me, his massive paws pressed down on my shoulders, and he snarled inches from my face.

His golden eyes stared down at me. I growled but also knew this wasn't a fight to the death. It was my need to let loose, and my father allowing me to.

I tried to shake him off one last time with a final burst of resistance, but his grip was unyielding. I recognized his dominance and exhaled deeply, forcing my lion to submit. I tilted my head to break eye contact, displaying my defeat. A low rumble came from my father's chest, not of anger but of acknowledgment. Slowly, he bent down and nipped my chin before releasing me from his grasp.

Breathing heavily, I lay there, the weight of everything pressing down on me. The fight with my father was a temporary distraction, but it couldn't erase the pain, confusion, and regret that swirled inside. A large tear dropped from my round eyes before I allowed my human to take over and shift back.

“Are you okay, son? You haven't fought me like that since you were a rebellious teen. What's got into you?” My father's voice filled the now silent woods.

I sat up and pulled my knees to my chest. “I didn't think anyone would be here this late. What brings you here?” I asked, deflecting. I wasn't ready to admit I'd fucked up.

My father sat beside me and didn't speak right away. I looked over at him. Walter Doy was one of the strongest men I'd ever met. He was a larger, older version of me. I scanned his profile. Heck, even our body types were the same. I had him beat, just barely, in the cock department.

I laughed to myself. When I was younger, I thought it weird seeing my father naked or being naked in front of him, but as time went on, I realized it was just how shifters were. Nudity was a part of being paranormal.

“I’m still getting used to the mansion. People are constantly there, and I needed a break,” he replied.

My parents recently divorced after years of marriage. They were kind to each other, but just didn’t love each other anymore. My mom even moved away. While my dad moved into the pride house, or as we called it, the Lion’s den.

“Have you heard from Mom?” I asked.

He nodded. “She’s in Colorado. She’s enjoying the snow and met some very interesting people there, by the sounds of it. I hear you met your mate. When were you going to tell me?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Who told you?”

“Are you kidding? It’s all Vanessa could talk about. She got the king’s consort, Brian, Hayden and Owen, thinking of ways to help you. The only reason they haven’t is because the king stopped them.”

I released a heavy sigh. “Dad... I really messed up.”

“What happened, Michael?”

I sighed again. “Jake, my mate’s name is Jake. He’s been really standoffish. Every time I tried talking to him, he keeps it short.”

“What has Stan said? Anything in the background?” My dad asked.

I shook my head. “I didn’t do a background check.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Vanessa. She told me how Owen and Brian hated that Hayden and Uncle Edward did background checks on them. So, I thought I’d do it the old fashion way.” I turned and stared at my dad. “The old fashion way sucks. I’m not getting anywhere with him, Dad. And then tonight, I fucked up.”

My dad placed his hand on my shoulder. “Nothing not fixable. What happened?”

“I kissed him, Dad. He freaked out and started talking about Vanessa and losing his job. He ran out before I could say anything.”

“Vanessa? Why would he mention her?”

I shook my head. “It’s because the first day I met him, Vanessa and I were making out. Denise and Jake interrupted us. I think he believes I’m dating her.”

“Damn. That would explain that and the losing job thing.” He released a large breath. “If you want my advice. Go to him. Clear the air. He may really need the job, and he’s worried about the repercussions. Give him the assurance he needs. It could be why he’s standoffish.”

“I know you’re right, but what if he still wants nothing to do with me?” The weight of uncertainty made my voice tremble.

My dad smiled. “He will, son. He will. He’s your fated one, and lord knows fate likes us to work hard for our mates. You can do this.”

I didn’t reply. I gazed out at the setting sun. “I can do this,” I whispered.

My dad wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Yes, you can, Michael. Yes, you can. I’ll help you any way I can.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Fate, Grandpa Freddie, or anyone out there, you can help me too, please.

Unexpected Waves

Jake

“JAKE... JAKE?”

The call of my name pulled me out of my thoughts. I looked down to see Abel gazing up at me. “Yeah, Abel?”

My mind had been scattered since last night. I couldn't believe the kiss with Mike, but my night's excitement didn't end there. I had an intimidating encounter with Mrs. Pauly's husband, and let's just say, I could never be late picking up the boys again. The man was scary, and the boys were clearly shaken by the time I got there. To top it off, Mrs. Pauly warned me that another delay would have her calling the authorities. That statement alone put the fear of God in me.

Then, let's not forget Dominic. He once again hit on me outside my door. The boys, still traumatized by their encounter with Mrs. Pauly's spouse, clung to me, halting Dominic in his tracks. I felt a mixture of gratitude and guilt for their unintended intervention.

I had enough going on and couldn't deal with Dominic. Like, what was I going to do about Mike and Vanessa? Would I lose my job? *Maybe I should look for another job?* I would hate to do that, as I enjoyed working at Satchel Industries, and the salary and benefits were hard to beat.

“Jake, are you listening?” Abel's tiny voice interrupted my whirlwind of thoughts.

I blinked, bringing myself back to the present. “I'm sorry, buddy. What did you say?”

“Can we have pancakes and juice?” Sam chimed in before Abel could repeat himself.

“Of course,” I replied with a smile.

I had woken up early and decided, as it was Saturday, to take the boys out to eat. Ryan had mentioned a nice restaurant by the beach that was affordable. The Pavilion. The Pavilion was an interesting building with a great view of the bay and beach. The decor was nautical-themed. It had fishnets hanging from the ceiling, deep blue curtains, and bright linen tablecloths. It had a cozy atmosphere as soon as we entered. We were instantly greeted, and the hostess had no problem bringing us to a nice round booth in the corner.

“Yay!” Abel and Sam squealed with happiness.

I was glad to see them smiling, but at the same time, I missed our parents. I wanted them here with us, and I wanted to forget everything that had ever happened. *Then I wouldn't have met Mike.*, I shook off that thought as soon as it entered.

No matter how many times I dreamed of the man or how amazing the kiss felt, I couldn't let it proceed.

"Jake," Sam said urgently, and I blinked again.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. Are you ready to order?" An older waitress with a rough voice, likely from years of smoking, stood by our table. Her hair, a mix of black and silvery gray, was neatly tied back, reminiscent of a skunk's tail. Her demeanor, however, was warm, and her eyes twinkled with amusement.

I was so lost in my thoughts, I didn't even notice her walk up. "I apologize. Yes...um, these two are hoping for some pancakes. Do you have a children's order?"

Sam's face puckered in indignation. "We're not kids. We want big pancakes," he said, and Abel jerked a nod in agreement.

I forgot my parents had said he was going through the grown-up phase and hated to be referred to as a kid. But before I could correct myself, the waitress leaned in, a sly grin on her face.

"Well," she began with a playful wink toward me. "We have Mickey Mouse pancakes. Do you think anyone here would like those?"

Sam's ire instantly changed, and both boys called out. "Me!"

"I want Mickey pancakes. Jake, can we have some?"

I chuckled and opened my mouth to reply, but instantly stopped at the voice behind me.

“Jake?”

My heart raced, and I didn't want to turn around. How could I see him now? After last night, after the kiss? I wasn't ready, but I knew I had to. I slowly turned. Mike's smiling face greeted me, and a shiver raced through me.

“I thought that was you. How are you?” He asked. I could hear a quiver in his voice I'd never heard before. Was he nervous?

“I...um, I'm fine,” I stuttered.

“Michael, you know him?”

I glanced at the waitress. I'd forgotten she was taking our order. Her expression had hardened, and she stared at Mike.

Mike lowered his gaze momentarily. “Yes, ma'am. He's my new assistant, and...” His eyes locked onto mine. “And friend.”

The way he said the word 'friend' caused me to shiver more. It was as if it had a deeper meaning to the word.

“I see,” the waitress said, her expression softening. “Is Hayden and my boys coming, or you by yourself?”

Mike flashed a smile. “It's just me today, Linda. I came for some coffee. Your 'boys' are home. Owen's under the weather still.”

Linda clicked her tongue in sympathy. "I'll have to call them later. Maybe send them some soup." Her gaze slid back to me. "Okay then, Mike, why don't you join your assistant? It saves me a table. You don't mind, do you, honey?"

Oh shit. I felt like a deer caught in the headlights. She wanted me to eat with him? Damn it. How could I refuse? I hesitated, words stuck in my throat, and finally gave a slight nod. "I...I don't mind. If it's okay with Mike."

Before Mike could respond, Linda jumped in, her voice dripping with mirth. "Of course, Michael doesn't mind. Sit down, dear. I'll fetch your coffee and give you a minute to decide on food. I'll get the orders when I return." Her eyes flicked to the boys, who were openly gawking at Mike. "Orange juice for the young gentlemen?"

Both Sam and Abel nodded in unison.

"Great," she said. "I'll be back with your coffee. Coffee for you, sweetie?"

Feeling increasingly flustered, especially as Mike took the seat beside me, I managed a nod. "Coffee, please."

Linda quickly turned and hurried away. I glanced at Mike, nervously shifting in my seat, and looked back at the boys. They both stared at Mike. Sam squinted his eyes as if to really examine him, while Abel simply pursed his lips. I wanted to laugh at their antics.

Abel was the first to break the silence. "Who's this?" He asked plainly.

“This is my boss, Mike,” I explained, giving Mike a brief glance. “Mike, these are my brothers, Sam and Abel,” I replied, pointing to each of my brothers in turn.

Mike offered a warm smile. “It’s nice to meet you both. Are you having a fun Saturday with your brother? I bet your parents are enjoying some quiet time at home.”

The atmosphere around our table suddenly changed. I could feel the tension at the weight of Mike’s innocent words. Sam and Abel’s eyes widened, and a shadow passed over their faces. Mike had unintentionally mentioned the one verboten word, ‘parents.’

Reacting swiftly, I slid over to the boys’ side of the booth, wrapping Abel into a comforting embrace. “Hey, it’s okay. We’re together now,” I whispered, feeling him clutch at my shirt. I knew he was ready to burst and had to distract him.

“Sam,” I urged gently, “hand Scruffy to Abel.” I hoped that the familiarity of his stuffed lion would bring him some solace. “Abel, Scruffy’s here. Remember our promise? When he’s around, there’s no reason to be sad, okay?”

Abel sniffled but nodded and quickly grabbed hold of Scruffy. I peered up at Mike, who wore a surprised and concerned expression.

I wasn’t ready to explain. Not yet. And luckily, I didn’t have to, as Linda returned with our drinks, shifting the focus of the moment.

Once Linda had taken our orders, the table's atmosphere transformed. The weight of earlier emotions lifted, replaced by light-hearted banter and laughter. Mike, ever the charmer, even ordered a plate of Mickey Mouse pancakes for himself. His playful pout when Linda teased him about the choice had both Sam and Abel in fits of laughter. Watching Mike effortlessly bond with the boys warmed my heart. Yet, every time I felt drawn into the moment, a nagging thought would pull me back—Vanessa. Mike was with Vanessa. The kiss we shared, no matter how intoxicating, was a mistake.

“I had planned on calling you today,” Mike said, catching me mid-bite.

“You were? Is everything okay?” My fork clinked against the plate as I set it down, anxiety clear in my voice. Was he about to fire me? Why did he want to call?

Mike nodded. “I wanted to clear the air. After our encounter, you left in such a hurry, and while I admit I acted impulsively, there are things you need to know.”

I cleared my throat and sat straight. “What things?”

The boys were engrossed in their coloring, allowing us the privacy of our conversation.

Mike nodded again. “First, while I may have been impulsive kissing you, I don't regret it. I like you, Jake. I like you a lot. And I think you may like me, too.”

“But Vanessa,” I interjected.

Mike held up a hand, silencing me. “That’s the second thing. Vanessa and I were never truly together. Yes, we had a casual thing, but nothing more. We were both looking for something, someone more.” He paused and stared, locking his eyes with mine. “I was looking for you.”

I took a deep breath, processing his words. They felt genuine. Deep down, I knew they were.

“I’m relieved you weren’t unfaithful. But I... Mike, you’re my boss. I need this job.” I leaned forward and whispered. “I’m all my brothers have. Our parents... they died three weeks ago, on Christmas Eve. As much as I might want something more with you, I have to think about them.”

“How’s everything?” Linda breezed in, shattering the tension.

I leaned back and pushed my plate away. “It was great. Thank you.”

Mike stared at me for another moment before turning to Linda. “It was fantastic, as always. Thank you.”

“Wonderful. Now, since you’re the boss, the bill naturally finds its way to you,” Linda said with a giggle, before placing the paper in front of Mike.

“I—”

“That’s perfect,” Mike said, interrupting my objection.

He quickly pulled on his wallet and handed her his card. Linda once more hurried away. Mike glanced back at me.

“Jake, I—”

“Jake, can we go swimming?” Sam asked, stopping Mike’s words.

I peered down at my little brother and furrowed my brow. “Swimming?”

Sam nodded and pointed out the window. “Yeah, on the beach like him.”

I turned and looked where he pointed. There was a surfer in the water, enjoying the waves. I looked back at Sam, and Abel had stopped his coloring. He was now focused on my answer. “That man is wearing a special suit. That water is really cold. I know the sun’s shining, and there’s no snow here, but it’s still winter.”

The looks of disappointment were instant, and I hated telling them no, but I couldn’t in good conscience let them go in that water.

“I have a heated pool at my place. You guys can swim there.”

I jerked my attention to Mike. “We could—”

“Absolutely you could. The boys can have fun, and we can continue our conversation,” Mike said.

“Please, Jake,” Abel and Sam cried.

“Please, Jake,” Mike said, joining in and giving a tiny pout. It was the same pout he gave Linda when he asked for the pancakes.

I glared at him. “You don’t play fair,” I whispered.

“All’s fair in love and war,” Mike quipped.

I released a sigh. “I guess I’m outvoted, and we’re going swimming.”

The boys cheered in excitement, and Mike grinned victoriously. I couldn’t help but find him even more endearing. Shit. What the hell was I going to do? How could he want me? I couldn’t fall in love, could I?

Mom, Dad, please help me.

Pool Party

Mike

MY GAZE KEPT DARTING to the rearview mirror. I released a breath I didn't know I was holding. Three emotions waged war within me: relief every time I spotted Jake's beat-up sedan; fear that he might change his mind and decide not to follow; and excitement, a palpable thrill at the thought of having him in my home.

I glanced back at the mirror and released another sigh. Still there. Thank fate. Now I just needed to figure out how to get him to fall for me. He was ready to blow me off at the restaurant before the boys... the boys. They were the key.

As soon as Jake told me they were his priority and he had to take care of them, I knew they came as a package deal. Surprisingly, I was okay with that. Even my lion was okay with it. We liked cubs. Often at pride gatherings, I'd roughhouse and play with them. Heck, let's face it, I was a big kid myself. Not to mention cubs were a lot better company than some adults.

Nervousness hit me as I turned off the main road into my neighborhood. It was a pleasant area, very mid to upper-class, with wide spaces between homes and manicured lawns. It also had plenty of kids and families in the area.

I smiled, picturing the boys playing in the yard, with Jake and me watching from the porch. It was all very suburban—very white picket fence. God, I was a sap, but I wanted it. I wanted this family. I hoped Jake wanted it, too.

I took the last curve, and my home came into view, standing tall and proud among its neighbors. It was a two-story, Mediterranean-style home with stucco white-washed walls and a bright red-tiled roof. Palm trees filled the landscape.

The driveway, made of cobblestone, wound its way up towards a spacious double garage. On either side of the driveway, vast stretches of manicured lawn rolled out, making it look even grander compared to the neighboring homes. There were patches of flowerbeds near the house, and the entrance looked like the entrance to a tropical getaway.

Parking my car, I turned the ignition off and quickly hopped out. Jake had just pulled in behind me. He sat for a moment, still and silent, his eyes wide as they took in the house's grandeur. He blinked a few times, as if adjusting to the unexpected sight before him. Did he like it? Did he think it was too much?

The house was a big place. It sported four bedrooms, a theater room, an office, and a gigantic, open kitchen slash family room. For a single man, it might have seemed

excessively large. Hayden had thought I was crazy buying the place, but now, looking at Jake and the boys, it was perfect.

I hurried to the driver's side door as Jake slowly got out. "Your house is amazing," he said in a tone of awe.

"I'm glad you like it. I'll give you and the boys the dime tour," I said as Jake opened the back door and unlatched Abel and Sam from their car seats.

The boys hopped out and gazed at the house, mirroring Jake's earlier awe with wide eyes and open mouths. I grinned at their expressions.

"You ready to see the inside and the pool?" I asked excitedly.

They cheered and ran forward. I grabbed Jake's hand, giving him a tiny tug. He stumbled a little and looked down at our clasped hands. He smiled and rolled his eyes.

"You really don't play fair." I heard him mumble.

I chuckled and pulled him quickly behind the boys. At the front door, I swung it open with a flourish. "Welcome."

"Whoa," Sam exclaimed, stepping in.

"This place is big," Abel declared simultaneously.

I glanced at Jake, who was scanning the room, seemingly absorbing every detail. Turning my gaze back to the room, I attempted to envision the space through his eyes. The main living room had overstuffed, comfy, black leather couches that begged one to sink into them. To the side, the dining area showcased a grand wooden table set for eight, catching the

light from the modern black steel chandelier overhead. But the *pièce de résistance* was the sprawling open kitchen, complete with white marble countertops and gleaming stainless-steel appliances. A perfect space for family gatherings.

Catching a certain gleam in Jake's eyes, I grinned. "Do you like it?"

Jake gave a smile. "It's gorgeous."

"I'm glad you approve. Come on. I'm sure the boys want to see the pool and the backyard." I grabbed Jake's hand again and guided him through the living space and out the sliding glass doors to the backyard. Sam and Abel quickly followed, running past us as soon as they saw the pool.

"This is awesome!" Sam exclaimed.

"Incredible. It's like a tropical oasis," Jake whispered.

I grinned, a surge of pride flowing through me. The backyard was my pride and joy and one of the main reasons I bought the home. The expansive pool was undoubtedly the centerpiece. It's crystal-clear water reflecting the beautiful blue skies. It had a dramatic rock formation at one end, from which a waterfall churned the water gracefully.

The gentle sound of water splashing added to the allure. Luxurious loungers beckoned from the pool's edge, hinting at lazy afternoons, while towering palm trees provided both shade and a sense of seclusion. In contrast, beds of colorful flowers and plants filled the area with pops of color. It was my personal getaway.

“Jake, Jake, can we swim?”

“Can we?” Abel and Sam’s eager voices overlapped as they dashed back, tugging at Jake’s shirt.

“That’s why we’re here,” Jake chuckled, crouching to their level.

“Do you have suits?” I asked, remembering we’d come straight from the restaurant.

Jake met my gaze, a twinkle in his eye. “I was going to let them swim in their shorts. As for me...” He waved his hand over his jeans. “I was just going to watch.”

“I’ve got a pair of trunks you can wear,” I countered, wanting him to join his brothers for fun. Not to mention, I’d love to see a wet Jake.

A smirk curved Jake’s lips as he straightened. “Your shorts will slide right off me.”

“Tempting as that visual is, I have a smaller pair you can slip into,” I shot back, my grin unabashed.

His eyebrows shot up; curiosity evident. “You do?”

“Hayden’s ma—boyfriend, Owen, is about your size. He has a pair here,” I clarified, narrowly sidestepping the term ‘mate’.

Before Jake could muster a response, Sam and Abel’s impatient whines cut in.

“Jake!”

“I’ll go grab them. Help the boys out, and I’ll be back in a jiffy,” I assured him, heading back into the house.

Dashing to the guest room that Hayden and Owen often occupied, I yanked open the dresser. After a brief search, I triumphantly pulled out a pair of swim shorts. My heart raced at the thought of Jake's presence. It was more than just him being here; it was the chance to truly get to know him.

I quickly folded the shorts, tucked them under my arm, and then hurried to my room. I threw the shorts on my bed and whipped off my shirt before sliding down my jeans and underwear in one go. Naked, I turned to my dresser and pulled my bathing suit on. Not bothering with another shirt, I grabbed the spare trunks and headed back to the sliding doors.

I laughed, spotting the boys already splashing wildly and attempting to drag Jake in along with them. Jake laughed and fended off their little hands, jumping out of the range of the splashes.

I slid open the door and stepped out to the cacophony of laughs. I strolled over to them and smiled. "They couldn't wait, huh?"

Jake lifted his head and looked back at me. His eyes locked on my bare chest, and red spread over his cheeks. I internally fist-pumped, knowing I had that effect on him.

He cleared his throat. "Y-yeah. They loved going to the Y back home."

Handing him the shorts, our fingers brushed briefly, sending an unexpected jolt through me.

“Here you go. They should fit just right,” I said, trying to sound casual despite the flutter in my chest.

“Thanks, where’s—”

“Anyone home?”

I spun around in surprise. “Vanessa? What are you doing here?”

“I came to check... Jake. You’re here.” Vanessa ran up to Jake and grabbed his arms. “Did Mike get things sorted with you? I came over to make a game plan. You need to know there’s nothing is going on between Mike and me.”

Jake’s face reddened at her words, and he looked down shyly. “He told me,” he whispered.

“Vanessa,” I said, disentangling Jake from her grasp. “Everything’s fine. You didn’t need to come here.”

“I needed to help you clear up this misunderstanding,” she replied.

“Jake. Jake, watch me!” Sam yelled, causing all of us to turn and watch as he ran and did a cannonball into the pool.

I grinned at his exuberance, and Abel cheered by the steps.

“That was amazing!” Jake called as Sam surfaced.

“Are you coming swimming, Jake?” Abel asked.

“In a few minutes, buddy.” Jake turned back to me. “Where’s —”

“Who are these cuties?” Venessa asked, cutting Jake off.

“My brothers, Sam and Abel. Sam is the older one that did the cannonball, and Abel is the younger by the steps,” Jake replied, then focused on me. “Where’s the restroom? I better go change before they throw me in like this.”

Vanessa’s eyes brightened the way they always did when she was going to stir the pot. She placed her hand on my shoulder. “Mike can show you. I’ll watch the boys.” She released my shoulder, not waiting for a reply. “I love pool parties,” she giggled.

“I don’t know about this,” Jake said, but Vanessa waved him off. She had already kicked off her shoes, rolled up her pants, and sat on the edge of the pool, chatting with Sam and Abel.

“I—”

“That’s Vanessa for you. She loves playing with kiddos and playing matchmaker,” I said quietly.

“Matchmaker?”

“She knows I like you,” I said confidently.

Jake shook his head. “You really don’t play fair. Now you have allies helping you out.”

“Everyone needs a good wingman,” I quipped, and Jake laughed. “Come on, let’s get you changed.”

I placed my hand on the small of Jake’s back and guided him through the sliding doors again. Jake studied the room once more as we walked down the small hall.

“You really have a beautiful home,” he said.

“Thank you. I fell in love with it and had to buy it. Hayden and my parents tried to get me to buy a condo downtown, but I always wanted a home,” I replied, opening the door to my bedroom.

Jake paused at the threshold, his eyes taking in the room. A sophisticated palette of black and white graced the walls and furnishings, offering a sense of timeless elegance. The California king bed was draped in luxurious monochrome linens, and opposite, an electric fireplace stood proudly.

The dancing flames cast a warm amber glow across the room. Ambient lighting from modern fixtures set a tranquil mood, and a few carefully chosen art pieces added character, breaking the monochrome with subtle splashes of color. Even the scent in the room—a mix of sandalwood and fresh linen—added to the allure.

“Amazing,” Jake whispered.

I stepped up behind Jake and pressed into his back before whispering in his ear. “I’m glad you like it. I could’ve shown you to the restroom aside the pool, but I wanted you to see my room.”

Jake shivered beneath my touch, and I couldn’t hold back anymore. I spun him around and smashed my lips to his. Jake moaned and pressed hard against me. Soon our tongues dueled, and we both savored each other’s flavors. His taste was intoxicating—sweet with a hint of spice. The primal part of me, the lion within, roared with desire. We both needed more.

I groaned low before breaking the kiss before moving us past the threshold and slamming the door behind me with my foot. I grabbed him again, kissing him fiercely. My body thrummed with need, and my cock strained for release.

Jake, for his part, picked up right where we left off, giving as much as he got. This was the best experience of my life. I couldn't wait anymore. Breaking the kiss once more, I dropped to my knees and quickly unbuttoned his jeans, releasing his slender dick. He wasn't massive, but he wasn't small. Perfectly proportioned, framed by a neatly trimmed patch of dark hair.

I peered up at him as he looked down with wide eyes, surprise and shock clear in his expression. I grinned and, in one motion, took him deep into my mouth until I had him fully enveloped. Jake cried out, and his knees shook. Holding him steady, I bobbed up and down, reveling in the feel of his velvet skin sliding over my tongue.

I moaned, the primal need to taste him fully spurring me on. Faster and faster, up and down. Jake's cries grew louder with a steady refrain of, 'oh god'. Finally, he groaned loud and grasped my hair, jamming his cock down my throat, causing me to gag. His shaft pulsed, and his cum filled my mouth. I swallowed, greedily drinking him down like it was the last drop of water on the planet.

He relaxed his grip, and I licked him clean before jumping to my feet and pushing him to the floor. I freed my cock and stroked rapidly. It wouldn't take long. One, two strokes, and I

cried out as volley after volley of cum sprayed, covering Jake's face. He opened his mouth desperately, trying to catch the shooting seed. He didn't have to; I stroked my cock a few more times, tapping my tip on his tongue and dripping the rest into his mouth.

Jake eagerly licked me, and I shuddered at the sensation. This was the most incredible encounter of my life. I pulled Jake up and kissed him. I moaned as our flavors mixed into something unique. I pulled back and stared into his eyes. He closed his eyes and smiled as I pulled him into my embrace.

"That was amazing," I whispered, fully sated.

Jake released a breathless laugh. "You definitely don't play fair. That was the best I've ever had. I don't think I can let you go."

"Don't," I replied instantly, holding him tighter. "Don't let me go. Never."

Please, Fate, never let him leave.

Secrets Revealed

Jake

THE FAMILIAR HUM OF the engine was the only sound as I drove into work that Monday. My knuckles whitened on the steering wheel, betraying my nervous energy. The cityscape zoomed by, but my thoughts were miles away, still lingering on the weekend spent with Mike.

Dropping the boys off at Mrs. Pauly's had become routine. But today, their goodbyes were peppered with excited chatter about their time with Mike. They were utterly smitten, and honestly, so was I.

Saturday had been... magical. I could still feel the tingling sensation on my lips, the warmth of Mike's touch, the gentle whispers between passionate moments. But it wasn't just the intimacy that made it special—it was everything after. The raw connection. The laughter. The genuine joy.

Sunday only heightened those feelings. Mike had invited us back to the pool. At first, I was apprehensive. Would it be awkward after our... momentous evening? But the minute we arrived, any doubts vanished. Mike was a natural with the

boys. It wasn't long before a full-blown splash fight erupted. I watched, heart swelling with affection, as the boys teamed up against Mike, laughter ringing out. Mike took it all in stride, feigning defeat, only to return with a wave of splashes. It was a pure, unfiltered joy—something I hadn't seen from the boys in a long time.

As I pulled into the parking lot of my office, I shook my head, attempting to shift from weekend bliss to weekday focus. But as I gathered my things and slid out of the car, the echoes of our laughter and the shimmer of sunlight on the pool's surface continued to dance in my mind. I was in deep, and there was no denying it.

I pushed the car door shut, the familiar click grounding me momentarily. With every step towards the office building, I could feel the weekend's memories blur, replaced by the looming tasks of the day. That is, until Ryan's voice brought it all rushing back.

“Looks like someone caught the sun this weekend!” Ryan remarked cheerily as he joined me in the elevator. His smile was infectious, the kind that made even Mondays bearable.

Glancing at my reflection in the polished metal doors, I noticed the telltale redness on my cheeks. Thank goodness for sunburns. “Yeah, spent some time outdoors,” I responded, sounding nonchalant.

Ryan raised an eyebrow, his grin widening. “Quite a change from West Virginia, huh? Did you take the boys?”

When I first started, and Ryan showed me around, I confided in him about my brothers and parents. Since then, he always asked about them. “It’s a big change. Right now, it’s probably covered with inches of snow up north while I spent the weekend in the pool with the boys... and someone else.”

The elevator bell dinged, signaling our floor. As we stepped out, Ryan gave a playful nudge. “Well, whoever the someone else is, they’ve got you glowing. And I don’t mean just the sunburn.”

I could feel the heat rushing to my face, grateful that the existing sunburn masked my blush. “It was a good weekend,” was all I said. But inside, my heart was racing, a mix of giddiness and nerves, all stemming from two sun-soaked days that had felt like a dream.

“Did I hear Ryan say someone had you glowing?”

I spun around at the sound of Mike’s baritone voice. I blushed harder. “It was a good weekend,” I repeated.

Mike grinned and stepped closer. “Was it? Did it have to do with a special someone?”

I glanced around nervously before stepping closer to him. “Maybe.”

“I had a great weekend, too. And I can tell you it was all about someone special,” Mike replied, his voice going husky.

I stepped to move closer, but stopped when seeing Katie walking down the hall. I stepped back and straightened. Mike frowned, but I still said. “Good morning, Katie.”

“Good morning, Jake. Got some sun, huh?” She said with a smile.

“Yeah. It was a fun weekend.” I looked back at Mike, whose expression had softened. “I’m glad you enjoyed your weekend, Mr. Doy. I’ll check your calendar immediately.”

I quickly turned and hurried to my desk. I got to work immediately, turning on my computer and sorting the files for the day. I was engrossed in sorting through the pile of reports on my desk when a movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention.

Glancing up, I found Mike strolling past my desk and into his office. Our eyes met, and he shot me a mischievous wink, the corners of his lips curling up into a smirk. My heart skipped a beat, but before I could react, he continued on, leaving me flustered yet smiling.

The rest of the day was a blur of appointments and meetings. Every executive in the building seemed to have a question or issue that needed resolving. There wasn’t a moment to catch a breath between coordinating conference calls, rearranging schedules, and prepping briefings. Every interaction with Mike was strictly professional, a quick nod here, a brief acknowledgment there, but nothing beyond business.

The once buzzing office had quieted by late afternoon as people trickled out. I glanced at the clock, realizing how late it had gotten. Ever the early riser, Katie was wrapping up her day, her desk neatly organized as always.

“Have a good evening, Jake,” she called out, throwing her purse over her shoulder. “Don’t stay too late!”

I offered her a genuine smile. “You have a good night, too, Katie. See you tomorrow.”

With the office now nearly empty, I gathered my thoughts, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves. It was time to face Mike, not as his assistant, but as someone who’d shared an unforgettable weekend with him. Slowly, I rose from my chair and headed into his office, knocking lightly before entering.

Mike lifted his head from his computer, with his phone to his ear, and flashed a smile.

“Yes, Mr. Wassermann, I’m glad we could get some of your issues resolved,” he said, waving me in. I grinned and continued in, closing the door behind me. “Yes, Mr. Wassermann.” Mike rolled his eyes and made a yapping hand gesture, causing me to giggle.

Over the weekend, I noted how Mike loved to have fun and was a jokester. It was endearing, and I was falling for him. Oh shit, I was falling for him. The realization hit me like a freight train. I just met him, and here I was, falling in love with him.

We barely knew each other, yet the feelings were so potent. They were impossible to ignore. How could a connection this deep form in such a short time? And was it mutual? Mike’s actions hinted so, but was he serious, or was I just a fling? He said he was looking for something more when he explained about Vanessa. Was I that something more?

“I believe we can get that settled tomorrow. We can pick it up then... No, most of our staff have left for the day. We can't do it tonight... I'll ensure we get you on the books for first thing in the morning.”

I nodded, pulling out my phone and noting the appointment. “Got it,” I mouthed, and Mike smiled in acknowledgment.

“Okay...yes... you, too. Good night. Talk to you tomorrow.” With those words, Mike quickly hung up the phone. “Dear god, that man can talk your ear off. Is everyone gone for the day?”

“Pretty much. Katie just left a few moments ago, and the rest left a few minutes before her. It's just us on this floor,” I replied.

Mike grinned and jumped from his seat. His eyes had a predatory gleam, and my heart fluttered; I hoped what he was about to do was what I thought.

In just a couple of strides, he was right in front of me, pulling me into a powerful embrace. I felt the warmth of his lips on mine, a soft touch that quickly escalated into something deeper, more passionate. Mike didn't disappoint; my hopes were becoming a reality as he pressed deep into the kiss. I moaned, loving his taste.

“Soulmate,” he murmured against my lips, pulling back slightly only to dive in again, even more fervently.

My heart raced, a blend of confusion and pleasure swirling inside me. “Made for me,” he continued between kisses, each

word punctuated with a hungry urgency I had never felt from him—or anyone—before. “My mate.”

That word. Mate. It felt right, and I didn’t know why. It was as if I knew I was a part of him on a deeper level. All his words were true. I was nearly lost in the sensation when something shifted. Mike’s kisses grew almost desperate.

I pulled back to catch my breath and stared into his eyes. What I saw made little sense. His eyes eclipsed the confusion and rightness of Mike’s words. They weren’t the familiar warm brown I’d grown fond of, but were glowing a bright, wild gold.

What the hell? “Mike,” I whispered. “Are you okay?”

“Everything’s fine, my mate, don’t be afraid,” he replied, his voice sounding not his own but rough and wild. Even though he said not to be afraid, my heart raced. I didn’t know what was going on.

Mike squeezed his eyes close and shook his head. With a sound somewhere between a growl and a roar, Mike’s body began to change. Mike’s muscles expanded, clothes ripped apart, and in mere seconds, where the man I’d spent an unforgettable weekend with once stood, a massive African lion with a lush black-brown mane took his place.

Panic surged through me. I dropped my phone, the sound echoing loudly in the tense silence. That creature was undoubtedly majestic, gorgeous even, but also undeniably dangerous. Its large teeth gleamed menacingly, and those golden eyes were fixed intently on me.

Mike—or what used to be Mike—shook his massive head, his thick mane flowing in a wild cascade of lustrous black and brown hair. He let loose another roar, the sound echoing throughout the room, sending vibrations through my very core. I trembled, understanding now what truly made the lion the king of the beasts.

The lion's muscles flexed beneath a tawny fur, shimmering from the room's ambient light. Its eyes, once familiar, now bore into me with a golden intensity that was both captivating and terrifying. Its tail flicked, thumping rhythmically against the floor. Each of the lion's paws was larger than my hand. I knew all it had to do was slash at me, and I'd be done for under those massive claws.

The lion took a step forward, and I instinctively stepped back. My eyes darted around the room, frantically searching for an escape. But the lion, in its immense size and newfound dominance, blocked the main exit. As it took another deliberate step, the gravity of my situation became all too clear.

Driven by pure adrenaline and survival instinct, I turned and bolted for the nearest escape—the executive bathroom. Slamming the door behind me and locking it as quickly as my trembling hands would allow, I pressed myself against the sturdy barrier, my heart pounding loudly.

A heavy thump against the door jolted me from my thoughts. The lion was outside, threatening to shatter the thin barrier

between us. My breath caught in my throat, and for a moment, the room seemed to close in on me.

Tears streamed down my face as the crushing weight of reality bore down. I was trapped, and the fear that this could be my end overpowered me. I was helpless to do anything.

With my back against the door, I tried to grasp the reality of the situation. Mike—or the man I thought I knew as Mike—was now a colossal lion, a force of nature, just beyond this fragile barrier. The weight of fear pressed down on me, but amidst that fear, a burning need to understand gnawed at my mind.

Locked Doors and Broken Hearts

Mike

THE CHILL OF THE air conditioning against my exposed skin replaced the thick fur of my lion. With every labored breath, the realization of my transformation and what had just happened smacked me in the face.

I sat up, feeling the coldness of the room. The remnants of my shredded clothes were scattered around the office, and I trembled, knowing what I'd done.

The naked truth of my existence was out. Jake now knew I wasn't human. I ran a shaky hand through my now human hair, trying to calm the frantic beating of my heart.

“What have I done?” The words were a whisper, a plea, and a lament. They escaped my lips, bearing the weight of all the secrets I'd kept hidden.

The pained cries echoing from the other side of the bathroom door pierced through my chest sharper than any claw or knife ever could. Jake, the one with whom I was meant to be, was now trapped in fear—of me.

I pushed myself up, and my mind raced. How had I let this happen? The bond, connection, and feelings had all been so powerful, so overwhelmingly intense. I'd lost myself in it, allowing the lion within to break free, and in the process, I'd shattered the fragile trust that had been building between Jake and myself.

Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them back. I had to make things right, to explain, to apologize... to hope that Jake might somehow, someday, understand.

Drawing a deep breath, I slowly approached the bathroom door. "Jake?" My voice was choked with emotion. "It's me, Mike. Please, let me explain." I prayed he would listen.

"Leave me alone! Go away," came Jake's fragile cry.

It broke my heart. I placed my hand on the wooden door and bowed my head as tears streaked down my cheeks.

Heaving a deep breath, I turned toward my desk and picked up my phone. I needed help. If Jake wouldn't listen to me, hopefully, he'd listen to someone else. I quickly dialed the number.

"Hi, Mike! Got you on speaker. I'm with Hayden," Vanessa's cheery voice answered.

"Hey, Bro. Vanessa's catching us up on you and your mate. Heard you guys had a great weekend," Hayden said.

The weekend. It felt like millennia ago. If only I could go back in time to the weekend.

“What plans do you have tonight? Are you going to see my little men? I love Abel and Sam. They’re great,” Vanessa said.

“I need... help.” The words barely passed my lips. My tears were coming hard now.

“Mike,” Hayden and Vanessa said simultaneously. “What’s wrong?”

I sucked in a sob. “Need.... Help. Messed up.”

“Okay, buddy. Where are you? We’ll come to you,” Hayden urgently asked, panic filling his voice.

I sniffed again. “I’m... at the office.”

“We’re on the way. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

I didn’t reply. I could barely speak. I knew what I had done. I scanned the office, and the shreds of my clothes scattered on the floor. He’s never going to want anything to do with me. Oh god. Another sob escaped as I dropped the phone.

The weight of everything caused me to crumble to the ground. My sobs resonated off the office walls. I’d lost everything. A world without Jake in my life would mean nothing.

The office door burst open suddenly, causing me to flinch. Talon was there, eyes wide with alarm as he entered the scene. His tailored suit and pristine appearance contrasted with the surrounding chaos. He rushed to my side.

“Mike,” Talon kneeled, placing a hand on my shoulder. “What happened?” His voice was steady, trying to be the

anchor I desperately needed.

“Fucked up,” I said between sobs. “I did the same thing I joked about Alejandro and Randy doing. I couldn’t control my lion. Jake...he saw everything.” I peered up at his eyes, which shone with understanding. “What are you doing here?”

“Hayden and Vanessa called me. They’re on their way, but I was nearby and came up to check on you. Where’s Jake now? Did he run out of here?” he asked.

I shook my head and pointed toward the bathroom door. “He ran and won’t...”

Talon’s eyes widened. “He’s still here?”

I nodded as my office door burst open once more. It wasn’t just Vanessa and Hayden, but Hayden’s mate Owen, my father, my king, Edward, and his mate, Brian. They all stumbled at the entrance, taking in the storm around us before their gazes landed on me. Seeing my naked body seemed to confirm their thoughts. Vanessa’s following words certainly did.

“Oh shit, you shifted.”

Hayden ran toward me and crouched on my side opposite Talon. “Bro, are you okay? What happened other than...” his voice trailed off, and he waved his hand around the office.

“The pussycat obviously lost it and scared his mate,” Brian said, his usual snark flowing in his tone.

“Bunny.”

“Brian,” Owen and Edward said in unison.

Brian raised his pierced brow. “What? It’s our thing. I give Mike shit, and he gives it right back, calling me a prey princess. It’s how we show love.”

I knew Brian meant well, and usually, he’d be correct, but at this moment, I didn’t care. I glanced back toward the bathroom before looking up at Brian. “I’m not up for it, Brian.”

Brian’s eyes widened, and he crouched in front of me. “Come on, Mike. It’ll work out. You gotta trust Fate. We’ll go find your mate and talk to him. You’ll see.”

“Ah, guys. You won’t have to look too far,” Talon said, causing everyone to stare at him. He pointed toward the bathroom. “Jake’s locked up in the bathroom.”

“Crap, he’s still here. Oh my god,” Vanessa twirled on her heel and started for the door.

“Vanessa, wait,” Owen ordered.

She looked back. “What? I’m going to get him out here.”

Owen ignored her and looked at Talon. “Talon, go find some clothes for Mike.” Talon nodded and hurried out of the office before Owen gazed back down. “Hayden, why don’t you, your dad, and Walter take Mike and head out into the hallway? Brian, Vanessa and I will talk with Jake.”

His words were like a spike in my chest, and they caused me to cringe. I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to talk to my mate and beg for his forgiveness.

Owen crouched to my level. “I know deep down you don’t want to go anywhere, but right now, Jake’s scared of you.”

I cringed again, but Owen carried on. “Mike, if I hadn’t known Brian for nearly ten years when I saw Hayden’s shift, I’d probably be just like Jake—scared. Humans don’t really believe in the paranormal. Heck, even the ones that do believe have some doubts, especially if they’ve never seen it before.”

“Why does Brian get to stay?” Talon asked, handing me a pair of sweats.

“Because he’s a fluffy bunny. Pretty hard to fear that,” Owen said matter of fact.

“Hey! I’m a rabbit. A big, giant Flemish rabbit,” Brian protested.

Owen spun and faced him while Hayden helped me to my feet. I quickly slid on the pair of sweats and T-shirt when Owen said, “You’re a fuzzy bunny, B, and that’s what we need right now to calm Jake down. So, own it.”

Brian scrunched his nose. “Fine, Red, just this once, though.”

Owen looked back at me; it was the first time I noticed he didn’t really look like himself. Yes, he had his crazy puffy bright red hair, but on top of that, he had dark circles under his eyes, pale, almost clammy-looking skin, and an expression that screamed tired and sick.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Owen smiled at me. “I’ll be fine. This bug has got me down. Two weeks. I’m hoping I shake it soon.”

“Are you sure you’re up for it, baby?” Hayden moved to his side and gave Owen a brief hug.

“I’ll be fine, love.” Owen kissed Hayden’s lips softly, and I felt a longing ache spread over my chest. I wanted that with Jake. I glanced back toward the bathroom.

“Come on, son. Let’s step outside and let them talk with your mate,” my dad said, nudging my shoulders toward the exit. I didn’t move right away. It was like I was cemented to the spot. I bowed my head and spotted Jake’s phone. I quickly swooped it up. It was my talisman. It would ensure I’d see him again.

My father nudged my arm again, and I didn’t protest, allowing him to take me out. I looked back in time for Hayden to shut my office door. The sound of the click was like the sound of the final nail in the coffin.

My dad squeezed my shoulder. “It will be all right, son. They’ll talk to him.”

“If anyone can talk some sense into Jake, my Owen can,” Hayden said.

“And my Brian will definitely lighten the mood. Trust Fate, Michael,” Edward joined in.

I nodded and closed my eyes. Gripping Jake’s phone tight, I silently prayed to the heavens and anyone who would listen.

Please, Fate. Let things work out.

Caged Fear

Jake

I HAD BARRICADED MYSELF in the bathroom, a cage of cold tiles and echoing noises. My heart thudded in a way that felt too loud, and my breath came in ragged, uneven bursts. Each beat served as a vivid reminder of the craziness that had played out in front of me.

Murmurs filtered in through the door, hazy and indistinct. The rational part of my mind whispered they were real, but fear gripped me so tightly that I wasn't sure if they were genuine or conjured by my imagination. Was the lion still out there? Or worse, were there others?

I pulled my knees closer to my chest, and my thoughts circled back to Mike—or was it the lion? I didn't know. And now, I was caged, with no way out.

A knock reverberated through the room, causing me to jump. “Jake? It's Vanessa.”

Vanessa? What was she doing here? Did she know about Mike? Was she out there with the lion? My heart stopped at

that thought. I went to open the door but froze. What if she was one, too?

“Jake,” her soft voice sounded again.

I couldn't take the risk. I undid the lock and flung the door open. About to grab her and pull her in, I froze again. Two men I'd never met before were with her. They were unassuming and my size. One had wild, bright red hair, while the other had short-styled platinum blond hair.

I didn't have time to think. I grabbed Vanessa's arm, pulling her into the bathroom. “Get in here. There's a vicious lion out here.”

I yanked her arm, but she didn't budge. “Jake,” she said softly. “Mike's not going to hurt you.”

“What do you mean?” I released her and jerked back. “How do you know?”

“Easy, Jake. You don't know me, but I know what you're going through. My name's Owen,” the redhead said.

Owen. Mike had mentioned an Owen. He's the boyfriend of his best friend, Hayden. How could he know what I was going through?

“How would you know? I just saw...” I shook my head. “We need to get out of here. There's....” I couldn't say the words. My heart was pounding in my chest.

“I know what you saw, Jake. I'm human like you. The first time I saw Hayden shift, I passed out. Had I not known Brian

here for years, I probably would've run like you," Owen said, pointing to the blond.

"Human? You say that like there should be anything but. He changed into a lion. A monster," I replied.

"We're not monsters," Vanessa protested. "We're called shifters."

My eyes widened, and I took a step back. "You—you're a lion, too?"

"Yes, she's a lion, but she won't hurt you, just like Mike won't hurt you," Owen said.

"Yeah, they're just big kitties," Brian chimed in.

I jerked my focus to Brian. "Are you one, too?"

"Pft...as if," Brian scoffed.

"Brian's a bunny," Owen said at the same time.

"Rabbit," Brian retorted.

"There's different... You're really?" I stared at Brian. I couldn't even put together a coherent sentence.

Owen chuckled. "Yes, he really is a rabbit, a big, fully bunny rabbit."

"Owen, I'm a giant Flemish rabbit, and I'm just as badass as any lion."

"Sure, B. Sure," Owen said gently. He reached out and gently touched my hand. "To answer your question, yes, there are many kinds of paranormals." My eyes widened at his words, but he continued on. "I know this is wild, but trust me,

they won't hurt you. Yes, there are some bad eggs out there, but there are plenty of human bad eggs, too."

"Mike will never hurt you. None of us will," Vanessa said gently.

I looked back at her, "Mike was... he was saying crazy stuff, calling me his mate, and he just changed."

Vanessa nodded in understanding, but it was Owen that spoke up. "Mates are very special to shifters. It's something Mike can explain to you, but the main thing is, he will never hurt you."

"How can you be sure? Why can't you tell me?"

His lips turned up, and softness shone in his tired-looking eyes. "Jake, ask yourself, deep down, if you believe Mike will hurt you or not, truly?"

That gave me pause. Deep down, even when I was crying in the bathroom, I knew the truth. I knew he wouldn't hurt me. But the enormity of seeing a real live lion with massive teeth and claws, and not to mention seeing a man, a man who I... I'm falling for, turning into said lion was almost too much.

"I—"

I stopped speaking as the office door swung open. Mike stepped in. Instinctively, I retreated a step, causing him to halt mid-stride. For a brief moment, his eyes darted away, a shadow of vulnerability passing over his face. As he met my gaze again, there was a rawness in his eyes, now reddened and

swollen. The streaks on his cheeks were unmistakable signs of tears.

“Mike, what are you...” Vanessa began, but he held up his hand.

“I know. I’ll leave. It’s just your phone hasn’t stopped ringing.” He held out my phone, and as if on cue, it started buzzing wildly.

Oh shit, the boys. In all this craziness, I’d forgotten about my brothers. Forgetting about my fear, I surged forward and snatched the phone from Mike’s hand, quickly answering it.

“Hello,” I said hurriedly.

“Jake,” Sam’s small voice echoed through the line.

“Sam, I’m so sorry.”

“Are you coming to get us?” I heard sniffing and muffled shouts in the background.

“Yes, I’m on my way now. I promise.”

“Hurry, Jake. Abel and I are hiding in the closet. Mr. Pauly came home mad, and he and Mrs. Pauly were fighting. He hit her,” he said with a tremble.

“I’m on my way now. I promise. You stay hiding. I’ll be right there.” I pulled the phone from my ear and locked eyes with Mike. “I’m leaving. If you want to hurt me, hurt me, but my brothers are in trouble.” And with those words, I strode past him and out the office door.

There were several large men outside the office, including Talon. I didn't know who the others were, and frankly, I didn't care. I continued my trek, stopping at the elevator, hoping it was still on this floor. If not, I'd run down the stairs.

Thankfully, luck was on my side. Immediately after pressing the call button, the door slid open. I rushed inside and quickly pressed the button floor. The door began to slide close, but before they did, Mike and Vanessa jumped in the car.

“What—”

“We're coming with you. I know you're scared, but I care for you and the boys. I want, no, I *need* to make sure you and they are okay,” Mike said, almost like a plea.

“Yeah, I fell in love with those little buggers. We need to make sure they're okay,” Vanessa said as the elevator began its descent.

I continued to stare at Mike. I knew he wasn't lying; deep down, I knew. I'd trust him.... For now. Decision made I jerked a nod. “Okay.”

I stood nervously, watching the illuminated floor numbers change as we passed each level. Thankfully, most of the building was empty, and we wouldn't be stopping constantly. Finally, after what seemed like hours, the carriage came to a stop, and the doors slid open with a ding.

“We'll take my car. It'll be faster,” Mike said.

I didn't protest and simply nodded, sprinting to Mike's sleek, black BMW.

As soon as we were all in, Mike wasted no time, starting the engine with a soft roar and speeding out of the parking garage, the tires screeching slightly against the polished concrete floor.

“Where are we headed?” Mike’s voice cut through the tension, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly.

“The Willmont Apartments,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady.

Both Mike’s and Vanessa’s expressions shifted instantly. There was clear concern in Vanessa’s eyes as she voiced her apprehension. “Jake, that’s not the safest area. Why would you...?”

Cutting her off, I said, “It was all I could afford when we moved down here. Mrs. Pauly agreed to watch the boys, and it seemed like a win-win at the time.” I paused, swallowing hard. “Until it wasn’t.”

Mike cast a quick glance at me, his eyes warm yet filled with concern. “Jake, you’ve been doing your best for your brothers. We all make decisions based on what we think is right at the time.”

Vanessa, sensing my distress, added gently, “You’ve always had their best interests at heart. We’re going to make sure they’re okay.”

Feeling slightly comforted, I nodded, though the weight of worry still pressed down on me. “I should’ve known better.”

“They’re going to be okay,” Mike said again as he sped up.

The car raced through the city streets, the glow of traffic lights flashing past us in a blur. Mike didn't hesitate as he ran a red light, eliciting angry honks from other drivers. But he was singularly focused, weaving through traffic with a determination I hadn't seen before.

The Willmont Apartment complex soon loomed ahead, a series of old brick buildings that had seen better days. Mike pulled in, tires skidding slightly as he parked abruptly in front of the entrance.

"Let's go," he said tersely, and together, we dashed towards the building.

My heart raced as I approached the door, the angry shouts from inside confirming my worst fears. Without hesitation, I pounded on the door, desperate for it to open. When it did, the overwhelming stench of alcohol greeted me, emanating from Mr. Pauly's disheveled appearance.

His eyes, bloodshot and wild, locked onto mine. "Who the hell do you think you are, pounding on my door like that?" he spat.

Before I could react, Mr. Pauly was inches from my face. He lifted his fist, and I braced for whatever was coming. But the blow never came. In a blur, Mike intervened, pinning him against the door with a vice-like grip.

"Don't even think about it," Mike growled.

Mrs. Pauly's distressed cries pierced through the room. "Get away from him!" She flung herself at Mike, tears staining her

cheeks. “Let my husband go!” She turned her gaze on me. “I warned you not to be late! I should’ve never let a little faggot like you stay here!”

“Enough!” Mike’s voice, thick with authority, silenced the room. His single word was like the roar of the lion I’d heard early. It held strength and authority and brokered no argument. He was in command. The room was charged with a force that surged from Mike, leaving everyone frozen in its wake. It was raw power demanding immediate respect.

Mike’s gaze never left Mr. Pauly. “Vanessa, Jake, go get the boys.”

Pushing past the paralyzed Mr. Pauly, Vanessa and I hurried further inside and down the hall. “Sam! Abel!” My voice echoed with a mix of fear and relief. The creaking of a door followed, and two little faces emerged from the shadows. Relief washed over me as they ran into my arms.

“Are you guys okay?” My voice trembled as I clutched them close.

Sam’s nod was almost imperceptible, but Abel, holding up his trusty stuffed lion, assured me, “Scruffy kept us safe.”

A laugh escaped me, despite the tension. “Of course he did,” I whispered, cherishing their warmth.

Vanessa’s voice snapped me back to reality. “We need to move.” Swiftly, she lifted Sam, and I cradled Abel tightly.

Returning to the main room, Mike still held his ground, his unwavering gaze and grip keeping Mr. Pauly in check. Mrs.

Pauly opened her mouth to speak, but one stern look from Mike had her snapping it shut, leaving her mute.

I was thankful for his intervention. I didn't know if I could take another onslaught of her hate, especially in front of the boys.

"Go pack a few things for you and the boys," Mike directed.

I simply nodded, even though I wanted to protest. We had nowhere else to go. This was our place. But now wasn't the time to argue. The boys' safety came first, and being here wasn't helping. Tightly holding Abel, we exited the apartment and ascended the stairs to our room.

Opening our door, I placed Abel down. "Sam, take Abel into the room and get your backpack. Fill it with some things."

Vanessa placed Sam on the ground. My stoic little brother nodded before grabbing Abel's hand and guiding him to the back room.

"I don't know where we're going," I whispered. I was exhausted. This night had been a whirlwind of emotions, and I was spent. From seeing the man I was falling for transform into a lion to the boys and Mr. Pauly... "I failed them. I'm not cut out—"

"You didn't fail them." Mike's deep voice sounded behind me.

"I'll go help the boys," Vanessa said as I turned to face Mike.

His expression shone with tenderness, and his eyes warmth. I wanted to rush into his arms, but at the same time, he wasn't human.

“You didn't fail them,” Mike repeated.

A tiny laugh escaped, and I shook my head, smiling a smile I really didn't feel. “I don't know about that. I feel like I did. But that doesn't matter right now. What happened with Mrs. Pauly?”

Mike took a step forward and gently touched my cheek. “She doesn't matter. You didn't fail them. I caused you to be late. It wasn't your fault—none of it was.”

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to push into his touch. Opening my eyes, I nodded. “Thank you for saying that.”

“I mean it. You are a great older brother.”

I nodded again and took a step back. “What happened with Mrs. Pauly and Mr. Pauly? That man...”

Mike sighed. “Yeah, he ended up passing out. Mrs. Pauly wants you out of the apartment, though.”

I turned around and began to gather my things. “I figured as much. I don't know where we're going to go or who's going to watch the boys while I work.”

“Don't worry about it. You have help. Let me help you.”

I peered back at Mike. I wanted to believe him and trust him. I didn't really have a choice. I nodded. “Thank you.”

I turned back to my task at hand, and my thoughts turned to my parents. *Mom, Dad, I know I've been asking a lot of you, but keep watching over us.*

Thresholds and Trust

Mike

THE SOFT HUM OF the car's engine filled the silence as the city's lights blurred past. Each glance I stole at Jake showed me the weariness etched into his features, yet there was a subtle strength in his posture. I gripped the steering wheel tighter, regret gnawing at me. I had inadvertently placed him and his brothers in this chaos.

“Where are we headed?” Jake asked, breaking the silence.

I peered over at him. There was weariness but also trust. It was that trust that eased the ache in my chest. I knew I'd effed up. Perhaps Fate was giving me a chance.

“I would take you home with me,” Jake stiffened in the seat next to me, and I knew I'd made the right choice and continued on. “But I don't know how comfortable you'd be. Hayden and Owen are staying with Hayden's father. They've offered their apartment.”

“I don't want to put them out,” Jake said quickly.

I shook my head. “You’re not. They don’t plan to go back there. They’re only here for the holidays before going back to the east coast to their beach house.”

Jake stared at me. Uncertainty shone in his eyes, and I could tell he wanted to protest more, but was internally battling what was best for the boys and the inconvenience.

I opened my mouth to reassure him, but Vanessa beat me. “Don’t worry, Jake. My brother and Owen really don’t want to stay in the apartment. Trust me, Jake, they’ve practically abandoned that place. They really don’t mind.”

Jake looked back at her. “Hayden’s your brother?”

She nodded quickly. “Yep, my big brother. Since meeting Owen, he’s sort of become retired. That’s when Mike got roped into being the CLO of Satchel Industries.” She laughed, her chuckle light and melodic. Almost instinctively, Abel and Sam giggled along, their eyes shining with mischief, even if they didn’t fully understand the joke. “Hayden’s become sappy and in love.”

Jake released a sigh and turned back to stare out the windshield. “Okay. I just don’t want to be a bother.”

I reached over and grabbed his hand. He looked down at the touch but didn’t pull away. I took that as a win and mentally fist-pumped the air. “You’re not.”

It didn’t take long before we were turning into the Satchel Tower. Hayden owned the entire building, not just the

penthouse above. It was one of the most expensive, trendy, and luxurious buildings in the city.

Jake tensed and stared up at the immense structure. Nervousness radiated off him in waves, and I squeezed his hand, hoping to reassure him.

He glanced over at me. “Hayden’s place is here?”

“Yes, you and the boys will be safe and sound here. The building offers top-notch security, and you’ll meet a wonderful doorman named Henry,” I replied, easing the car into the reserved parking spot near the entrance.

After turning off the ignition, I turned to Jake. “Let’s head inside and get you all settled.”

Jake nodded as we all climbed out of the SUV. Sam and Abel’s eyes darted around the parking garage, curiosity painting their youthful features. I had to suppress a chuckle, already imagining their reactions. Hayden’s penthouse spanned two stories, boasting a sprawling pool and garden. And the cherry on top? Hayden, ever the gamer, had dedicated an entire room to theater and gaming. I could hardly wait to see the awe and excitement in the boys’ eyes.

The main entrance door swung open, and Henry, dressed in his usual charcoal gray uniform, stepped out. Henry was a kind, middle-aged man that took his job with utmost seriousness. Years of knowing him hadn’t changed his prim, proper, and professional demeanor one bit.

“Good evening, Mr. Doy, Ms. Satchel,” Henry greeted with his customary formal tone.

“Hi, Henry,” Vanessa chimed in, her voice bubbling with cheerful exuberance.

“Evening, Henry. Hayden mentioned he’d call you,” I said, stepping forward.

With a nod, Henry responded, “He did. He made it clear that a gentleman and his younger brothers would be staying in his apartment and that I should extend the same courtesy to them as I would to him.” Taking a step closer to Jake, he inquired, “I gather you’re the gentleman he mentioned?”

Jake’s eyes widened. He resembled a deer caught in the headlights. Rushing to his side, I jumped in, “Yes, this is Jake Bradford, and these are his brothers, Sam and Abel.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. Please come in.” Henry opened the door and waved his hand in a grand gesture.

Jake glanced at me before walking into the main lobby. The lobby of the building was elegant with sleek decor. It had a main U-shaped reception, polished floors, and cream walls.

After everyone was in the building, Henry hurried in front of us and circled behind the counter. “Mr. Bradford.”

“You can call me Jake,” Jake replied.

I stifled a laugh, but Vanessa wasn’t as successful. “Jake, Henry will never call you by your first name. Heck, my brother threatened his job, but he wouldn’t budge. The only one he let slip was Owen, because let’s face it, Owen is a tiny,

firecracker redhead, and you don't want to get on his bad side.”

“Ms. Satchel,” Henry began with a practiced glare. “It was one instance that I referred to Mr. Pryde by his given name, and I can assure you it had nothing to do with fear.”

Vanessa pressed her lips tight. “Mmm hmm.”

Henry rolled his eyes and looked back at Jake. “Mr. Bradford, may I have your phone number?”

“My phone number?” questioned Jake.

“Yes, sir. I'll be able to send you a secure link. It will download your key and give you access to the elevator and residence. Of course, you'll need to set up a pin for it to be usable. Additionally, I have a physical key if needed.”

Jake's eyes widened. “Oh. Um, okay. My number's 555-857-0987.”

Within moments, Jake's phone dinged. “Please, go ahead and click the link. You'll be able to register. Do you mind, for security's sake, if I take photos of the boys and add them to our system?”

“Um... what?”

“I assure you. Our system is closed, and only our security team will have access. It's simply a security precaution.”

Jake looked at me, and I gave him a smile. “It may be good to do, but it's completely up to you. Also, if Henry's not here, other staff will know you and the boys.”

Jake nodded. “Okay. I guess that’s fine.”

“Excellent,” Henry said, coming around the counter and crouching to Sam and Abel’s level. The boys instinctively stepped closer to Vanessa, and Abel tightened his hold on his stuffed animal.

“Hello, young sirs. My name is Henry, and I’m glad to meet you.” Henry pointed to Sam, “Samuel,” then pointed to Abel. “And Abel, correct?”

Sam’s eyes widened, and he studied Henry momentarily before nodding. “I’m Sam. He’s Abel. Why do you talk funny?”

“Sam,” Jake scolded, but Henry laughed.

“I do speak funny, don’t I? It’s part of my job. Do you young gentlemen mind if I take your photo?”

Abel looked at Sam, and Sam looked at Abel before staring back at Henry. I could only imagine what they made of Henry. By their expressions, they thought he was nuts. Sam caught my eye while Jake was staring at his phone. I give him an encouraging nod. Finally, after what seemed like minutes but, in reality, was seconds, the boys agreed.

Henry quickly took the photos before returning to his computer. After a few more moments, Jake and the boys were cleared to head to Hayden’s apartment.

“Have a great rest of your evening,” Henry said after ushering us into the elevator.

“Thank you,” Jake said with a smile.

The door closed, and I turned to Jake. “Hold your phone to the panel.”

Jake did as instructed and instantly the panel lights came to life. “You’ll want to press the PH, and then you’ll need to confirm it on your phone with your pin,” I explained.

Jake nodded, pressed the button, and quickly confirmed it on his phone. The elevator immediately took off. Jake looked back at me and whispered, “PH? Does that stand for what I think it stands for?”

“Probably,” I whispered back.

“I don’t know if we can stay—”

“It’s fine, Jake. Trust me,” I interjected before he could finish his sentence.

His nervousness was palpable, and I wanted nothing more than to ease his concerns. The elevator dinged, signaling our arrival, and the doors slid open. I gently urged Jake onto the small landing. A lone, dark wood door stood ahead, with walls on either side painted a deep gray. “Just like before, hold your phone to the lock and authorize the access,” I instructed.

Jake complied, and upon entering his code, the locks clicked open. Taking a deep, audible breath, he hesitated for a moment at the threshold, which lasted only a moment longer before he took the plunge and stepped inside.

I watched the play of emotions on his face, reliving my own awe when I first witnessed the grandeur of this place. The grand crystal chandelier, casting an opulent glow on the

polished marble below, always took the breath away. I glanced at Jake, catching the upward tilt of his head as he took it in.

To the right, the modern kitchen with its sleek lines beckoned, but I knew what had captured Jake's full attention. Those floor-to-ceiling windows. The vast expanse of the Gulf, a shimmering sheet of blue greens, and the distant form of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. It was a view that never ceased to astonish, no matter how many times you looked.

Jake seemed rooted to the spot; his gaze unwavering. "It's... it's unbelievable," he finally muttered.

I took a moment to appreciate the plush white sectional that dominated the living room. "Wait till you sink into that couch," I remarked, pointing towards it. "And just so you know, there's another equally cozy living area upstairs. Perfect for lazy evenings."

Jake turned to me, eyes wide. "This is... I mean, how is this place even real?"

I grinned, clapping him lightly on the shoulder. "Welcome to Hayden's world."

The boys ran in from behind us. "Boys! Don't run in here." Jake turned to face me. "How can we stay here? The boys will —"

"Jake, it's okay. If the place can survive Hayden, it can survive those two," Vanessa said.

"A Christmas tree!" Abel exclaimed.

I turned around, and indeed, the Christmas tree and decorations still were up. It seemed Hayden and Owen were slacking.

Abel's eyes shimmered with the vibrant colors of the Christmas tree, but it was Sam who voiced the thought bubbling up in both their minds. "Did Santa come here?" he asked, looking around as if expecting to find gifts left behind.

Jake's face paled slightly, and there was a weight to his silence, one I understood all too well. The loss they had faced, especially on a day meant for joy and family, would have made celebrating difficult.

"No," Abel murmured, a note of disappointment in his voice. He clutched Scruffy tighter. "Santa didn't come to our place this year either."

The air grew heavier. Jake looked down, guilt and sadness clouding his eyes. It broke my heart to think of what these boys had been through, especially recently.

Rushing to fill the void, I crouched down to their level. "You know, I heard there was a massive snowstorm at the North Pole this year. Santa's sleigh got stuck in a giant snowdrift, and Rudolph's nose went on the blink because of the cold. Can you imagine? A traffic jam at the North Pole!" I exaggerated, pulling a face for added effect.

The boys exchanged glances, clearly considering the story.

"So, Santa might just be delayed. He's probably double-timing it right now to make up for lost days!" I added with a

wink.

“Speaking of delays,” Vanessa chimed in. “Let’s not delay any further! There’s a lot of cool things to check out, and we have to choose some rooms.”

The boys, their curiosity piqued, eagerly nodded and followed Vanessa, their earlier disappointment momentarily forgotten.

I looked up at Jake. He’d moved to the glass door and stared out at the evening sky. I rose to my feet and walked behind him.

Jake peered back at me before looking back outside. “Thank you, Mike. It...”

“You don’t have to thank me,” I said softly.

Jake turned around. “I think we need to talk. A lot happened, and I’m not...”

I reached out and grabbed Jake’s hand. He was right. I’d messed up, and I knew everything wasn’t perfect. If I was to have a shot at keeping my mate, we needed to talk.

It was time.

“Yes, we do.”

Fairy Tales, Fate, and Promise

Jake

“YES, WE DO.”

Mike’s deep voice reverberated against the glass and in my heart. I loved the sound of his voice. It had captured me the moment I’d heard it. I stared out the window at the picturesque evening one more time before turning around. This was a conversation that needed to happen. I needed answers if I was going to trust Mike.

I glanced toward the sound of laughter that echoed down the hall. Whatever Vanessa was showing the boys, it sounded like they were having fun. “I love hearing them laugh. I didn’t know what I was going to do when my parents... when they died.”

“I’m so sorry,” Mike whispered.

I looked back at him. Creases marred his beautiful face, and I could see the fear shining in his eyes. Was he really scared that I’d leave him? I was confused. I squeezed his hand, which

was intertwined with mine, before releasing it and sitting on the couch.

Mike was right. I sank into the soft cushions. It was as if I was sitting on clouds. I scanned the beautiful room as Mike took the seat next to me. It was all too much. I didn't know why or how I could stay here. It was so out of my league.

“Mike—”

“I know what you're thinking. I can see it written on your face, but you can stay here. You have help now. You're not alone,” Mike said, reading my mind. It was surprising how well he could read me.

“I don't understand why you're helping me. I don't...” How did I say I feared what he was?

“I'm helping you because I need to,” Mike began. “I messed up tonight and petrified you. It wasn't my intention. I need to make it right.” He looked away for a moment and inhaled before continuing. “It's more than that, though. It's who you are to me.”

I swallowed, terrified to ask, but I asked all the same. “What am I to you?”

“You're my mate,” Mike said instantly.

“What does that mean?” I asked nervously.

“I'm a shifter, as you found out.” Mike's eyes locked with mine, and I could see the seriousness shining in them. “I will never, ever hurt you. Neither will my lion. The truth is, he was just excited to see you, and I lost control.”

“Excited to see me? You talk like he’s different from you.”

Mike smiled. “He is, and he isn’t. I mean, we’re two spirits sharing the same body. He has his thoughts, but they’re pretty basic. Eat, sleep. You get the picture. But he knows his mate, just like me.”

“How is it possible? I mean, I know it’s possible. I saw you transform,” I said.

“Shifters have been around for a long time. Some say longer than humans. There are many different kinds, lions, tigers, bears—”

“Oh, my!” I quipped. Mike smiled big. “I couldn’t help myself. Continue.”

“Well, there are tons of paranormals out there. Not only shifters. Vampires, witches, fairies. Some say there are dragons, but no one has seen a dragon in forever.”

“Really? Dragons? Vampires? They’re real.” My jaw dropped. This was insane.

“Yes, they are,” Mike confirmed.

I shook my head, trying to wrap my head around what he said. Mike didn’t continue. He sat patiently. He gave me the time I needed to think because... wow. Wow was the only word I could think of.

I looked back on Mike and focused on the big questions, the ones that started with the word ‘Mate.’ I had a feeling I understood, but I needed clarity. “What’s a mate? How do you know I’m yours?”

He released a breath before speaking. “For the longest time, we thought mates were fairy tales told by our elders. We didn’t believe they existed, but.” Mike smiled and looked away for a moment before looking back at me. “Hayden’s grandpa, Grandpa Freddie, always told us they were real and Hayden and I would be blessed with mates.”

“And you believe I’m your mate?” I asked.

Mike nodded vigorously. “I know you’re my mate. Deep down, I know. When I first met you, it was like my heart beat for the very first time. I knew.”

I wanted to believe him, and I think some of me did, but still. “You said you thought it was a fairytale, though.”

“Yeah. You see. Shifters and paranormals used to live a very long time. Some still do, mainly shifters, live less than other paranormals, but more than humans. We live to about a hundred and fifty. But back in the day, we used to live for centuries. And because of our long life, Fate gave us mates. It was the one person to complete us and make us whole.” Mike took a breath.

“But we stopped meeting our mates. No one knows why. Maybe some in the older generation does, but it was like the tap was shut off. But Grandpa Freddie believed Hayden would change things, and we’d be blessed. Then he met Owen, and well, the tap is back on.” Mike grabbed my hand. “And I met you.”

Every word Mike spoke resonated in the deepest parts of me, stirring emotions I hadn’t fully come to grips with. The

universe had supposedly singled me out for this man? The idea was alluring, but it also felt like I was walking a tightrope. Sure, there was a pull between us I couldn't deny. Yet, the rational part of me shouted it had only been a week. One week. How could everything hinge on such a brief span of time?

“I want to believe you, Mike. Every fiber of my being is drawn to you. Hell, I've even had dreams of us.”

“Dreams?”

I ignored Mike's interruption. “That doesn't matter. It's only been a week, Mike. We've known each other for just a week. That's it. How can we be certain?” My voice wavered, torn between the whirlwind of emotions and the logic trying to anchor me.

Mike's gaze searched mine, raw emotions playing out in his eyes. “Just a chance. Let's take our time and get to know each other without the weight of labels or destinies. Just a chance.”

I took a moment, staring into those big brown eyes. My heart battled with my head, but ultimately, the hope I saw in him tipped the scales. “Alright, Mike. We'll give this... whatever this is... a try.”

Before I could process my decision fully, Mike's face broke into the biggest grin, and in seconds, his lips met mine. Relief, joy, and promise all melded into that kiss, giving me a tantalizing glimpse of what could be.

The moment, filled with promise, was interrupted by a gentle voice from the entrance of the family room. “Sorry to intrude, but the boys are getting pretty hungry. Sounds like a mini stampede out there.”

Mike sighed, pulling away slightly but keeping a hand on my knee. “I’ll get something started in the kitchen—”

Vanessa interrupted, waving a dismissive hand. “How about you two go out? I can handle feeding the boys for tonight. A little pizza and movie night never hurt anyone.”

Before I could voice my hesitation, two excited blurs burst into the room. Sam, his eyes shining with anticipation, exclaimed, “Yeah! Pizza! And guess what? This place has a moving theater!”

Mike chuckled and whispered, “Hayden has a theater room.”

Following his brother’s exuberance, Abel added, “Yeah! Nessa said we gonna watch Lion King. Can we, Jake?”

“The Lion King, huh? I wonder who chose that movie,” I said, staring at Vanessa.

“Hey. It’s a good movie. Nala’s the best,” she replied earnestly, causing me to grin.

“Please, Jake. Please,” Sam and Abel begged.

I looked from one eager face to the next, then to Vanessa’s amused expression, and finally to Mike’s hopeful eyes. It was hard to argue against such enthusiasm.

I still hesitated and protested, though. The instinct to protect the boys always at the forefront, “Vanessa, I can’t just leave them. They need—”

She stepped forward, placing a hand on her hip in mock authority. “Jake, when was the last time you went out alone for dinner without constantly looking over your shoulder for those two?”

The weight of the question made my heart sink. “Before my parents...” I admitted, my voice soft.

With a reassuring touch on my arm, Vanessa pressed on. “Then it’s settled. Let yourself have this. Trust me; the boys will be just fine. A change in routine can be a good thing.”

Feeling a bit overwhelmed, but in a good way, I nodded. “Alright, just this once.”

Mike’s face was a mix of gratitude and excitement. “Thank you,” he whispered to Vanessa, who just winked and started herding the boys back out of the room, their voices bubbling with excitement for their upcoming movie night.

A Melody of the Heart

Jake

THE MOMENT MIKE AND I stepped into The Pavilion, I was in awe. The place looked totally different from the other morning. Gone were the bright lights and early morning chatter. The lights were softened by strings of twinkle lights woven in the nets above. But the inside held nothing on the outside. It was alive with music, tiki torches, and tons of customers enjoying their meals.

Mike nudged me with a light elbow. “Linda does a great dinner, and she always has a great band playing.”

I nodded. “It’s amazing. It’s completely transformed.”

“Come on, let’s get a place outside,” Mike said, placing his hand on the small of my back and guiding me through the building.

The smell of the food caused my stomach to growl. I had to stop drooling as we passed some delicious-looking dishes. It all looked so amazing. I wanted to try everything.

“This place feels like two different worlds,” I said as we settled at a table to the side of the stage.

A band softly played music, and I grinned, knowing the song. Instead of sitting opposite me, Mike took the seat beside me and grabbed my hand. I noticed Mike liked to hold my hand. It was nice. My old boyfriends never liked public displays, but then, neither did I. I wasn't out and proud back in West Virginia.

“Everything okay?” Mike asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

I nodded and squeezed his hand. It turned out I liked hand holding, especially holding Mike's hand. “Everything's perfect.”

A waiter, clad in a casual white shirt and navy-blue shorts, approached our table. His blond hair, tussled by the ocean breeze, partially obscured one eye, giving him a playful appearance. A silver tray was balanced effortlessly in one hand.

“Good evening, gentlemen. It's great to see you again, Mike.” His voice held a hint of cheerfulness.

Mike chuckled, nodding in acknowledgment. “Evening, Tim. This is Jake.”

I offered a shy smile, and Tim's eyes lit up in recognition. “Ah, the newcomer. Linda mentioned you. Mike's *assistant*. Welcome back to The Pavilion,” he said, emphasizing the

word assistant. “Can I get you two started with something to drink?”

“I’ll take a cold beer. Whatever you’ve got on draft is fine,” Mike replied, still holding onto my hand.

Tim glanced at me expectantly, and after a brief pause, I said, “I’ll try the house red wine, please.”

He scribbled down our orders on his pad, then flashed a friendly grin. “Great choices. The house wine pairs wonderfully with most of our evening dishes. Be back in a sec with your drinks.”

As Tim retreated, I looked back at Mike. “You’re really a regular here. You know everyone. Why did he say ‘assistant’ like that?”

Mike grinned and leaned close. “Linda and most of the staff here are skunk shifters. Linda knows you’re my mate.”

“Skunk shifters, really?” I asked, my eyes wide.

“Yes, skunks. Welcome back.” A rough voice said.

I turned to see Linda step up to our table. But this wasn’t the Linda I had met. It seemed The Pavilion wasn’t the only thing to change. Gone was Linda’s uniform and pulled-back hair. Her eyes, however, held a mischievous glint, and she now wore a beautiful flower print dress with black and silver hair cascading over her shoulders.

“Linda!” Mike greeted warmly. “I see your ears were burning.”

“Naturally.” She smirked, taking the empty seat next to ours. “Tim might be a good waiter, but he’s terrible at keeping secrets. Besides, I can sense when another is in my territory. You know how our kind is.”

I swallowed hard. “I didn’t... I mean, skunk shifters?”

Linda chuckled, “It’s not as glamorous as wolves or tigers or even lions, but we have our charms.”

Mike squeezed my hand reassuringly. “Linda is the leader, the alpha of the skunk surfeit. Everyone knows not to mess with her. Even the king of my pride, Edward, stays friendly with her. She’s no nonsense, but fair.”

Linda barked a laugh. “You better believe it. I protect what’s mine. Even though Edward is on my shit list, he and his son stole two of my best people.”

Mike was the one to laugh now. “I think Fate had a hand in that, too. You can’t pin the blame solely on them.” Mike looked at me. “Owen and Brian used to work here and were honorary members of the surfeit.”

“They’re still members and a part of my family. If anything happens to Red or Cottontail, look out,” Linda clarified.

I grinned at the nicknames she had for Owen and Brian; they suited them. Owen with his red hair and Brian being a rabbit. A rabbit. All of this was so incredible. And unbelievable.

Linda focused on me. “So, Mike told you about us. How are you holding up?”

I stared back at her, a whirlwind of emotions churning within me. “Honestly, it’s a lot to process. I never could’ve imagined, and now...skunks.” I shook my head in disbelief.

Linda tilted her head, her expression softening. “Take your time, Jake. It might be overwhelming now, but you’ll find that our *community* is tight-knit and supportive. And quite unlike any other.”

“Thank you, Linda,” I murmured, feeling a bit more at ease. The night had taken an unexpected turn, and I realized there was much more to the people around me. Did I really know them?

Linda turned to Mike before looking back at me. “Do you mind if I steal Mike for just a few moments? I want to get his input on a legal business matter.”

I shook my head. “I don’t mind.”

Mike squeezed my hand before letting go. “I’ll be right back.”

The music’s gentle rhythm filled the air, a soothing contrast to the earlier revelations. I took a moment to scan the bustling boardwalk patio. A couple was dancing in one corner, a group of friends laughing at a shared joke, and a family with kids clapping to the beat of the music. The Pavilion had its own magic at night, a haven of gentle lights and joy.

A soft glow illuminated our table as Tim returned, placing our drinks with practiced ease. The golden liquid in Mike’s

beer reflected the twinkle lights, and my wine sparkled with a deep ruby hue.

“I’ll return for your dinner orders when Mike gets back,” Tim assured, his smile warm and inviting. And with a swift pivot, he blended back into the restaurant’s activity.

I sipped my wine, letting the music wash over me, its mellow tones inviting me to sway in place. Just as I began to get lost in the melody, a shadow fell across the table. My gaze was pulled up to see Dominic sliding smoothly into Mike’s seat. His chiseled jaw, high cheekbones, and piercing green eyes could make anyone’s heart race. But those very eyes had an edge that always put me on guard.

“Jake,” he purred, a smirk playing on his lips. “It’s been a while. About time you’re out without the boys. You should have called me.”

“Dominic,” I replied cautiously, trying to keep the wariness from my voice. “What brings you here? I thought you ran a club.”

“Oh, I run The Dungeon, but I come by from time to time. The Pavilion has its charms.” His eyes traveled over me as if taking in every detail. “But tonight, it seems especially... enchanting.”

While flattery rarely bothered me, coming from Dominic, it always felt like a well-laid trap. “Thanks. I’m just here enjoying the night with my boyfriend.”

Dominic's expression hardened. "Boyfriend? Since when do you have a boyfriend?"

I straightened up, a sudden boldness surging within. "It's recent. But why is that any of your concern, Dominic?"

He leaned in closer, so close I could smell the musky scent of his cologne, a mix that was as enticing as it was disconcerting. "You always were one to play hard to get, Jake. I remember how you used to blush when our eyes met across the hallway. You can't deny there was something between us."

I took a deep breath, steadying myself. "We had nothing between us. And for the record, I didn't blush because I was flustered in a good way. You always have this... intensity. It's not something I was, or am, looking for." I finally told him what I thought. I couldn't believe I did it.

Dominic's eyes seemed to darken a shade. "Intensity can be a good thing, Jake. It makes life... thrilling." His fingers danced lightly over the back of my hand that was resting on the table, a touch that was meant to be seductive but only increased my discomfort.

I snatched my hand back. "Look, Dominic, it was nice running into you, but I'd appreciate it if you'd leave. My boyfriend will be back."

Dominic scoffed. "Boyfriend. Is this boyfriend even real? You used to use your brothers to get away from me. Perhaps you're using an imaginary boyfriend."

"His boyfriend isn't imaginary."

Relief surged through me as I looked over at Mike. Mike's expression had a hard edge. He looked ready to throttle Dominic.

"That's my seat," Mike said through clenched teeth.

Dominic's gaze shifted from me to Mike, and for a split second, a flash of uncertainty crossed his striking features. But he recovered quickly, leaning back in his chair with an air of arrogance.

"Well, if it isn't the mystery boyfriend," Dominic mused, dragging out the word as if testing its validity. "Tell you what. Why don't we share him?"

Mike snarled and snatched Dominic from the seat, holding him close to his face. "I. Don't. Share." Mike growled every word. "You have two seconds to leave before I make you."

Dominic didn't appear phased. He simply grasped Mike's hands, undoing his grasp. "So protective. It was just a suggestion." He glanced back at me. "It was good catching up. You should definitely stop by my club." He winked before walking away.

Mike's eyes followed him until Dominic was out of sight. He then sat beside me, immediately taking my hand, his fingers intertwining with mine. The warmth of his touch was a stark contrast to the icy chill Dominic's presence had left behind.

"Are you okay?" Mike's voice held a genuine concern that made my heart flutter.

“I am now,” I replied, squeezing his hand for reassurance. “I’ve always found Dominic unnerving. I never knew how to handle him. Thank you for stepping in.”

Mike leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. “Always,” he whispered. “I’ve got your back, no matter what.”

I believed him. I knew he’d be there for me. My heart pounded happily. We settled in our seats just as Tim returned. We quickly scanned the menu and ordered our dinners. I hummed the song that the band now played.

“Tell the world that we finally got it all right. I choose you,” Mike sang, and I stared at him in surprise.

“You know this song?”

Mike nodded. “It’s a great song, one of my favorites.”

“Mine too. I love Sara Bareilles,” I replied.

“She’s good. What other music do you like?” Mike asked.

I shrugged. “I like a little of everything. You said you wanted to be a singer the other day. Why didn’t you?” I looked away and felt my face heat before saying. “You have a beautiful voice.”

“Thanks. It was because of Grandpa Freddie.” Mike leaned back and took a sip of his beer. “He always told me to stay close to Hayden, and I’d find my mate. Hayden wanted to be a lawyer, so I went into law.”

“That’s why?” I asked, incredulous at the thought that was why Mike chose the law.

Mike smiled and leaned close. “Yep. And I’m glad I did. I met you.”

I felt my face warm again. “Smooth talker.”

Mike laughed, and we continued our chat. As the night went on, we talked about everything from my growing up and how I wanted to go to school, to Mike telling me he still writes music and loves to surf. It was perfect. The more we talked, the more I felt a connection with him.

“How’s everything?” Tim asked, as I finished my last bite.

“Wonderful,” Mike replied.

“Delicious, thank you,” I said.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. Can I interest you in the apple cobbler for dessert? It’s fantastic.” Tim emphasized the word good.

It sounded good, so I glanced at Mike. He laughed and nodded. “You twisted our arms. We’ll take it.”

Tim nodded and quickly hurried away. In less than a minute, he placed the dessert in front of us. As Tim set the dessert on our table, Mike shifted in his seat, casting a glance toward the stage where the band had just finished a number and was taking a short break.

“Hey, Jake,” Mike began, a mysterious glint in his eyes. “I need to step away for a moment. I’ve got a little surprise for you. Wait here, okay?”

Before I could even question him, Mike was up and heading toward the stage. I watched in surprise, trying to figure out what he was doing. The stage lights dimmed slightly as Mike stepped up, taking a guitar handed to him by one of the band members.

He strummed a few chords, and the crowd quieted down, their attention captured. His voice echoed out, gentle and firm.

“In the hustle of the day, beneath the city lights, your big brown eyes...”

I felt my heart skip a beat. Was he singing about me?

“A lion’s heart, hidden in a man’s attire, for you, my love, it roars like wildfire.”

His gaze found mine across the distance, and I felt a connection so palpable it nearly took my breath away. My heart pounded, ready to burst. I couldn’t believe it.

“You stand strong for your brothers so small. In your courage, I truly fall.”

The crowd was mesmerized, but it felt like Mike was singing just for me. Every line echoed our shared moments, our growing bond.

“In the roar of the city or the silent night, I’ll always hold you oh so tight.”

The song ended, and the applause erupted. I was overwhelmed by the realization of Mike’s feelings for me, conveyed through the heartfelt lyrics. He stepped off the stage

and returned to our table; the room was buzzing with whispers and applause.

The air between us was thick with emotion. Mike had just laid bare his feelings for me, and I knew then that I wasn't alone in my growing affection, but I wasn't sure if I was ready to voice my own feelings.

All I could think was, did I dare admit it?

Lazy Day Surprise

Mike

JAKE SQUINTED HIS EYES at me, a mixture of surprise and curiosity. “What do you mean, we don’t have to go to work today?”

The memory of last night made my heart race. Singing that song to Jake was nerve-wracking, but the vulnerability was worth it. I could tell it affected him deeply. His kiss, gentle yet full of emotion, was the perfect way to end our evening. I wanted nothing more than to stay with him, to bask in the glow of our newfound connection. But the night had been intense for him. Discovering the world of paranormals, the situation with his brothers, their move—it was a lot. So, I stepped back, promising to see him in the morning.

“Mike,” Jake’s voice jolted me back to the present.

“I mean just that. We’ve been given the day off,” I said plainly.

“But you’re my boss. I don’t get it. How were we given the day off?” Jake asked, confusion lacing his words.

I smiled. “I have someone over me, you know. I was just acting as CEO and CLO.”

“But Mr. Satchel was out of the office.”

“He was, but he’s back. He wanted to make sure we had some time...” He paused and locked his gaze with mine. “You had some time. He knows it was a lot to take in yesterday. He saw the state we were both in.”

Jake’s eyes went wide. “He saw? Wait, was he one of the men that was outside your office? I recognized Talon, but not the other three.”

I nodded. “Yes. Hayden, Hayden’s dad, Edward, and my father were there last night.”

“Oh my god, he probably thinks...” Jake’s words cut off as he buried his face in his hands.

I gently touched his arms. “He thinks nothing bad. None of them do. It’s surprising to find out about shifters. Not to mention, Owen ripped into all of them, saying this isn’t usual for humans and they need to give it a break. And Edward loves his son and son-in-law, so he’s back at work and gave us the day off.”

Jake peered up at me through his fingers. “He really doesn’t think badly of me?”

“Not at all.” I smiled.

From upstairs, a burst of laughter echoed. “Sounds like the boys are having fun,” I remarked with a grin.

Jake laughed. “They found Hayden’s video games last night after the movie. Vanessa was fast asleep while they were playing and having fun. They gave me a brief fight about going to sleep, but with the promise of playing some this morning, they went to bed.”

I stepped closer to Jake as I heard another giggle. “So, how about a lazy day of fun, filled with video games and swimming in the pool?”

Jake looked up at me. “Sounds fun.”

“Great,” I said, happiness flowing through me. I grabbed his hand. “I brought my suit. Let’s go change.” I winked, remembering the last time we changed, which was amazing.

Jake giggled as I pulled him down the hallway into the bedroom. Closing the door with my foot, I spun Jake around and smashed my lips to his. He melted into my embrace, his lips pressing into mine with a moan.

My hands roamed over his body. I wanted more. I wanted skin. I slid my hand under his shirt, but Jake stepped back, breaking the kiss. I looked at him in confusion. Had I messed up again?

“I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

Jake shook his head. “No. It’s that. It’s...” His voice trailed off.

“What?” I’d do anything for him. Whatever the issue was, I’d make it right.

“I... I was wondering...” Jake rubbed the back of his neck, and a light blush spread over his cheeks.

“Wondering?” I questioned.

“I... Yesterday, I didn’t know what was happening and was scared, but I was wondering if I could see your lion again.”

My lion roared with excitement. He was on board with this. “Absolutely. Are you sure?”

“I’m... I think...” Jake released a breath and nodded. “I’m sure. You’ll change back if I get scared again, right?”

“Yes, if you get scared, I’ll change back. Just say the word,” I answered instantly.

I stepped back and began taking off my shirt.

“W-what are you doing?” Jake asked.

I stopped and looked back at him. “Last time I shifted, I tore my clothes. I’d prefer not to do that. I like this shirt and jeans.”

“Oh... right. Okay.” Another pink hue spread over Jake’s cheeks again.

“Just sit back and enjoy the show,” I said with a wink.

Knowing Jake was watching, I deliberately took my time stripping. I smirked at hearing his breath quicken and hitch. Soon, with my jeans slipped off, I stood there completely bare. I rose, proud of my muscular physique.

My cock hardened as I locked my gaze on Jake. I could see the lust and heat shining in them. “You keep looking at me like that, and I won’t be shifting.”

Jake licked his bottom lip. “Then you better transform now, because I don’t know if you’ll be shifting either.”

Closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, I pictured my lion form. In moments, fur sprouted across my skin, my limbs extending and reshaping, until my transformation was complete. I shook my mane and couldn’t stop the brief roar.

“Mike?” Jake’s timid voice broke through my animal mind.

I bowed and crouched low, attempting to be the least intimidating. Jake lifted his hand and slowly reached out, but stopped.

“You’re so beautiful. Is it okay if I touch you?”

I shuffled forward, pressing my head into his hand. Jake instantly buried his fingers into my mane. His touch sent waves of comfort through me, eliciting involuntary purrs and chuffs.

Jake chuckled. “You like that, don’t you?” He said, scratching my fur.

I pushed my head into his body and rubbed my face against him like a kitten. I wanted to leave my scent all over him.

“Scruffy?”

“Wow.”

So lost in the feel of my mate’s hands, I didn’t notice the door had opened. Jake’s face flushed a deep red as he hastily composed himself. My gaze shifted, landing on Sam and Abel. Their eyes, wide as silver dollars, looked at me in amazement.

“Sam. Abel. What are you doing here?” Jake hurriedly asked.

They ignored him, especially Abel, who stepped toward me. “It’s Scruffy,” he repeated.

Abel, without a hint of fear, took another step and tentatively reached out to stroke the thick fur of my mane. The touch was light, filled with a child’s wonder. Soon, Sam, not to be outdone by his younger brother, approached and started petting me as well. Their little hands were gentle and curious.

Jake, finally regaining his composure, crouched down next to the boys, one hand resting on my back. “Boys, I know he looks like Scruffy, but this is actually Mike.”

Both boys looked at him. Their brows furrowed in confusion. “But he’s Scruffy,” Sam insisted, pointing to the resemblance between me and their cherished stuffed toy.

Jake sighed, trying to find the right words. “I know it’s confusing. Mike has a special ability where he can change into a lion. But he’s not the stuffed toy Scruffy. He’s a real lion and our friend.”

I needed to revert to my human form to explain the situation to the boys better. I moved behind the bed, out of their direct line of sight, and willed my body to change back. The familiar sensation of my bones reshaping and fur receding took over. Once in my human form, I hastily grabbed my clothes and dressed.

Emerging from the other side of the bed, I kneeled down to the boys' level. "Hey," I began gently, looking into their astonished eyes, "It's still me, Mike."

The boys exchanged glances, seemingly processing the situation. "So, you're a real-life Scruffy?" Abel finally asked, his voice filled with awe.

Jake smiled, wrapping an arm around Abel. "Something like that. But we have to keep this a secret, okay? It's very important that you don't tell anyone about this."

Sam nodded gravely, seeming to understand the gravity of the request. "We promise, right, Abel?"

Abel nodded enthusiastically, his eyes still on me. "Promise! Can we play with real-life Scruffy later?"

Jake chuckled, "Maybe later. But remember, he's still Mike."

I grinned, ruffling the boys' hair. "You can definitely play with Scruffy. What do we say we go swimming in the pool?"

The boys' eyes lit up like Roman candles, and they quickly nodded. "Scruffy swims?" Abel asked.

I laughed. "Yeah, Scruffy swims. Why don't you both go get changed into your suits."

Before leaving, they looked at Jake, who gave them a nod. They quickly turned and ran out. Jake peered down at me.

"Is it okay they know?" He asked, biting his lip.

I rose to my feet. "It's fine. They would've found out, eventually. I wouldn't keep it a secret from them. They are

important to my lion, just like you are.” I smiled. “Besides, it went better than I expected.”

Jake laughed. “Yeah, they didn’t freak out like their big brother. Oh, to have the mind of a child.”

“You handled it fine. Kids often can adjust to the supernatural more easily than adults. If I didn’t know about shifters, I think I’d have acted like you,” I said.

“Thanks for saying that,” Jake replied. “We better get ready to swim, Scruffy.”

Laughing, I hugged Jake. “I’ll let you change first. You already got a free show.”

Jake joined in and laughed. “How about we change together?”

I nodded in agreement. Today was going to turn out to be a great day.

Swimming with Lions

Jake

WATCHING MIKE, A BLEND of awe and amusement washed over me. Sam playfully tugged on his tail while Abel, in his typical fearless fashion, rode triumphantly atop Mike's broad back. Their infectious laughter echoed around Hayden's pool, harmonizing with the rhythmic splash of water. At that moment, the massive, majestic lion before me was more lamb than predator, and the surreal, heartwarming scene tugged at my heartstrings.

“God, it's been years since I've seen Mike this way.”

Startled, I looked up to find Vanessa approaching. “What brings you here?”

She flashed a familiar smile, settling onto the lounge beside me. “Dad mentioned you and Mike were taking a break today. Thought I'd offer to babysit the boys again.”

Raising an eyebrow, I retorted, “By babysitting, you mean have them babysit you, right? Last night, you crashed while they binged on video games.”

Rolling her eyes, she replied, “That’s different. I had a long day.”

Chuckling, I nodded towards the pool, where another burst of laughter erupted. “No worries. Seems they’ve found entertainment with our life-sized Scruffy.”

“That’s adorable. Bet Abel loves him,” she remarked, her eyes following the boys.

I was about to reply but paused. The light atmosphere shifted, and the laughter and splashing abruptly ceased. Following the boys’ gaze, I saw them looking at Vanessa, fear clear in their wide eyes. Sam quickly moved, shielding Mike with his body. “You won’t tell!” he shouted defiantly with arms spread wide. Abel quickly echoed his brother’s sentiment. “Leave Scruffy alone, Nessa.”

Realizing their fear, I tried to reassure them. “It’s okay. Vanessa knows about Mike. She won’t harm him.”

Both boys hesitated, their eyes darting between Vanessa and me. “You promise?” Sam’s voice quivered.

But before I could reply, Vanessa interrupted, “Not just Mike.” With that, she sprinted towards the pool. Mid-leap, her clothes seemed to dissolve as she transformed seamlessly into a lioness, her transition even more fluid than Mike’s.

The boys’ reactions were instantaneous. Their earlier fear was replaced by pure awe. “Look, it’s Nala from The Lion King!” Sam cheered, diving into the water towards her.

While Sam and Abel excitedly swam around Vanessa, captivated by her lioness form, I watched with a smile, relieved by their quick acceptance. But out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Mike's large frame climbing out of the pool. He moved with the quiet grace that only a predator could possess. Even in his lion form, every step, every motion, was a testament to his controlled power.

I sensed his approach, and just as I was about to greet him, he gave a mighty shake, sending droplets of water flying in every direction. I was instantly drenched, water dripping down my face and clothes.

Mike seemed to find it extremely amusing, letting out a deep, throaty chuff that I recognized as his version of a chuckle. "Really, Mike?" I exclaimed, brushing water out of my eyes.

His eyes twinkled with mischief as he sat down, appearing all too pleased with himself. For a moment, he looked like an overgrown cat that had just knocked a vase off a shelf—utterly unapologetic.

Chuckling, I said, "You realize I'll get you back for that, right?"

Mike responded with another chuff, nudging me gently with his nose, his whiskers tickling my skin.

Another laugh from the pool sounded. Vanessa played chase with the boys, darting in and out of the water. Her lioness form was a perfect contrast of ferocity and tenderness. Their shrieks of laughter filled the air, punctuated by her playful growls.

As I continued to watch them, Mike laid his massive head on my lap, his warm breath sending gentle puffs against my wet shirt. And in that serene moment, amidst the playfulness and familial bond forming, I realized that maybe, just maybe, we were all finding our own places home.

My phone on the table buzzed, and I picked it up. The display caused me to fall back into reality. Did I tell Mike? Do I ignore it? Fuck, why couldn't CPS leave us alone?

Mike peered up at me. His golden orbs searched my face. I smiled down at him and placed my phone on the table. I'd tell him later. Right now, I wanted to savor this a little longer. Just a little longer.

Setting Boundaries

Mike

THE MORNING SUN PAINTED the horizon in a blush of oranges and purples as I drove down the familiar road to pick up Jake for work. My heart drummed a unique beat, one mixed with anticipation and a hint of anxiety. Our relationship had evolved, taking on layers and dimensions that neither of us had quite expected. And while that thrilled me in ways words couldn't express, I also recognized the hesitation in Jake's eyes.

I gripped the steering wheel a little tighter, my fingers tingling. I hoped he knew that no matter where our feelings took us, our bond, our friendship, would remain unshaken.

Yesterday was supposed to be a day of relaxation—a day for the boys, for us, for the semblance of a family. And it was magical, almost unreal. The laughter, the splashing, and that damn cheeky move when I drenched him... The memory brought a smirk to my face. But under it all, something gnawed at Jake, a shadow that flickered behind his eyes, a

tension in his shoulders. Whatever it was, he chose not to share it, and that concerned me.

As I pulled up in front of his place, I took a deep breath, readying myself for the day and the challenges it might bring. But more than anything, I wanted to be there for Jake, to be a pillar he could lean on, especially now, when our paths were intertwining so intricately.

My phone vibrated with a text, snapping me out of my reverie. Glancing at it, I noticed it was from Jake.

Jake: Henry called and said you pulled in. We'll be out in a sec. Just getting the boys ready.

I smiled, tapping out a quick reply. Jake was surprised when I told him Satchel Industries had a daycare in the building for all the kids of company employees. It was a free benefit for all staff.

Soon enough, the front doors swung open, and Jake, along with the two bundles of energy that were Sam and Abel, emerged. I unlocked the doors as the boys ran to my car and opened the back door.

“Hi, Scruffy!” Abel shouted, climbing into his assigned seat.

Sam followed suit. “Hi, Mike!”

“Good morning, guys,” I replied.

Jake stuck his head in and quickly buckled Sam before moving to Abel's side and securing him in place. Who'd ever thought I'd have car seats in my car? I shook my head,

disbelieving that this was my new reality. Even more disbelieving, I loved it.

The passenger door opening pulled me from my thoughts, and Jake slid into the seat. I quickly leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the lips. His eyes widened, but I grinned. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Jake whispered.

“Oooo kissing!” the boys squealed.

“Ha ha, very funny, boys. You don’t mind if Mike kisses me, do you?” Jake asked.

His little brothers tilted their heads as if thinking hard about the question. “It’s okay, Jake. I kiss Scruffy all the time.” Abel held up his stuffed lion.

I burst out laughing as I put the car in gear and started on our way. Jake joined, laughing at his brother’s reply.

“Okay. So long as you’re fine with it,” Jake said.

“We like Mike. It’s okay, Jake,” Sam said, not to be outdone by his younger brother.

Jake caught my eye, and I grinned. Leaning close, I whispered. “Guess this means I can kiss you anytime I want.”

Jake laughed and shook his head before looking out the window.

We continued our drive, the car filled with the soft hum of the engine and the boys’ sporadic bursts of conversation. The towering silhouette of Satchel Industries came into view as a

symbol of modern architecture and innovation. Jake's eyes briefly darted toward the skyscraper, but he seemed lost in thought.

Pulling into the parking structure, we found my spot right up front, near the elevators—being the CLO had its perks. Gathering the boys and our things, we made our way to the building's main lobby. I could feel Jake's curiosity growing with each step.

“Here we are,” I announced, opening a door labeled ‘Satchel Industries Day Care.’

The room beyond was expansive and vibrant. Colorful murals adorned the walls, depicting fantastical scenes of outer space, underwater worlds, and magical forests. There were distinct sections—an arts and crafts corner, a reading nook filled with shelves of children's books, a miniature jungle gym, and even a tech station with kid-friendly apps and games. Children's laughter echoed throughout the room, and the staff moved with practiced ease, attending to the little ones.

Jake stopped in his tracks, taking it all in. His eyes widened as he observed the organized chaos, the joy evident in every corner. “This... this is for the employees' kids?” he stammered.

I nodded, smiling at his reaction. “Every bit of it. Completely free to all employees of Satchel Industries.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “I've never seen anything like this. My parents always said daycare cost an arm and a

leg, and I'm pretty sure it wasn't even half as impressive as this." Jake looked at me, his eyes searching for any hint of insincerity. "And it's really free?"

"Absolutely," I confirmed. "The company believes in supporting its employees, not just in their professional roles, but in their roles as parents, too. Ensuring the kids are safe and stimulated allows the parents to work without worries."

Jake seemed to struggle for words. He took a deep breath, whispering, "I can't believe this is available to me... to us."

Before he could say more, Sam and Abel had already begun to explore, eagerly joining a group of children building a tall tower with blocks. A caregiver approached us with a friendly smile, introducing herself and assuring Jake that the boys were in expert hands.

We stood there a moment longer, watching as Sam and Abel integrated themselves into the fold. I wrapped an arm around Jake's waist, pulling him close. "They'll be okay here," I murmured.

Jake nodded slowly, still taking it all in. "Thank you, Mike," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

I guided him gently towards the exit. It was time we began our day. We made our way back to the elevator. As the doors closed, I reached over to hug Jake and give him a kiss, but he jumped away. I stared at him in surprise.

"What—"

“We’re working now. We can’t be doing this here,” Jake said firmly.

“So, nothing?” I asked, not sure if I could resist a stolen kiss here or there.

Jake jerked his head in defiance. “Nothing. Between the hours of nine and five, we’re on the clock. We have to stay professional.

I grimaced. I didn’t like the idea, but reluctantly, I understood. We were at work and needed to stay professional. “Okay, you’re right. No hanky panky while at work.

Jake laughed. “Hanky panky? Who says that?”

“Hey! It’s a perfectly acceptable term,” I retorted.

“If you’re like, fifty,” Jake giggled, but suddenly stopped. “You said shifters live a little longer than humans. You’re not fifty, are you?”

I shook my head and pushed his arm playfully. “No, I’m not fifty. I’m twenty-eight. How old are you?”

“Twenty-one,” Jake replied as the elevator stopped and the doors slid open.

Jake moved to the exit, but I stopped him. I lifted my wrist and showed him my watch. “It’s eight fifty-eight—not nine yet. We have two minutes.” With those words, I quickly pulled Jake in for a kiss. This time, he didn’t pull away, and I fully savored his unique flavor.

He leaned back, breaking the kiss, locking his eyes with mine. “Will that hold you over?”

“It will have to,” I whispered.

Jake smiled before turning and heading toward his desk. I stood staring, watching him walk, suddenly mesmerized by his movements.

“You just going to stand there? Or are you going to get work?”

I turned to see Katie smirking at me. “I’m going. Is the big boss in?”

“Yes, he started early. I sent some information to Jake to set up some appointments for you. The both of you have a busy day ahead.”

I glared at the CEO’s secretary. “Gee, thanks.”

“Cost of taking a day off,” she said with a chuckle before walking away.

I shook my head and headed to my office, giving Jake a wink as I passed by.

Katie hadn’t exaggerated; my schedule was packed with back-to-back meetings, leaving me with barely a moment to catch my breath. The rare breaks came when Jake stepped into my office, either to update me or deliver files. Each visit, brief as they were, allowed me the guilty pleasure of stealing more than just a few stolen glances.

By mid-afternoon, I finally had my first break. Too bad Katie had waylaid Jake, and I was left to my own devices. My phone buzzed, and I glanced at the screen. What I read caused my heart to race and my brow to furrow.

555-323-9888: You better stay away from Jake, if you know what's good for you.

Swiping the screen, I quickly dialed a number.

“Hello?”

“Hey Hayden, it's Mike. I need to run something by you.”

“Sure, go ahead,” my best friend replied.

“I just received this weird text telling me to stay away from Jake, and yesterday, he received a call, didn't answer it, but he looked upset. I don't want to break his trust, but...”

“But you're wondering if you should look into it.”

“Yeah.”

“If it were just the phone call, I'd talk to Jake. I think you should talk to him, anyway. But with the text, definitely look into it. Remember what happened with Owen?”

I released a breath. “You're right. Can you ask Talon and Stan to investigate it? I'll talk to Jake about it, too.”

“No problem, I sure can. I'll get them right on it.”

“Other than my drama, what's going on?” I asked my best friend.

“Oh, I’m just living the dream, spending time with mate, and watching some Chinese drama,” Hayden replied.

I chuckled. Owen had gotten Hayden hooked on Chinese dramas. They even subscribed to a popular streaming platform that played the latest and greatest. “Sounds like fun. You know some of us have to work. When are you going to come back? Are you? How’s Owen doing?” I asked, remembering he didn’t look like himself yesterday.

Hayden sighed. “Not good. He’s sleeping right now. I don’t know what’s wrong with him. The doctors don’t know either. It’s like he can’t hold anything down and is just sick. I’m really worried, Mike.”

I heard the anxiousness in Hayden’s voice and wished I could help. “He’ll be okay, Hay. We’ll look into other doctors and try to figure things out. He’ll be okay.”

“Thanks, Mike. We have another appointment tomorrow. How are things going with Jake? Vanessa said you, Jake, and the boys had a great day, Scruffy.”

I laughed at Hayden’s use of the name the boys used for me. “It’s going great. I... I love him, Hayden.”

I finally admitted aloud what I’d been feeling for days. Granted, I just told my best friend and not Jake, but I said it straight, not veiled with a song. I knew I liked Jake, but I fell for him, and I fell hard.

“It’s an amazing feeling, huh?” Hayden replied.

“It is. I can’t believe it. I love the boys, too. I want to make them happy, just like Jake. They’re my family. They’ve been through so much. I want to do something special for them. They mentioned Santa not visiting this year. Do you got any ideas on how I can make it up to them?”

“Man, I can’t imagine losing your parents on Christmas Eve. The poor kids. Poor Jake. Hey, I got it. Why don’t you take them to the most magical place on earth? We can set it all up. I can get Vanessa to help.”

“That’s a great idea, Hay! I’m going to search now. I think they’ll love it.”

“I’ll reach out to Vanessa and get your transportation. You’ll have to fly. The kids will love a helicopter ride,” Hayden chuckled. “I still remember Owen’s first helicopter ride.”

“It was fun, huh?”

“He loved it.”

A light knock sounded on my door. “Jake’s coming. I’ll talk to you later. Help me organize it,” I said quickly as Jake walked in.

“No problem. I get everything set. Jake and the boys will love it. I’ll handle that and deal with the other thing. Leave it all to me,” Hayden reassured.

“Thanks. Give my best to Owen.”

I disconnected the line and focused on Jake. “Katie finally let you free?”

“Yes,” Jake laughed before setting a brown bag on my desk. “I got us a late lunch.”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Impressive initiative, Mr. Bradford.”

Jake winked. “It’s not every day you get to have lunch with Satchel Industries’ star executive, is it? Thought I’d make it special.” He began unpacking the bag, revealing an array of sushi rolls, miso soup, and a couple of neatly packed bento boxes.

A pleasant aroma filled the office. “Japanese? My favorite. How did you know?”

Jake shrugged with a sly grin. “A little birdy named Katie might’ve mentioned it.”

I laughed. “Of course she did. That woman knows too much.”

Jake had a twinkle in his eye before saying, “Let’s eat, and by the time we’re done, it will be five o’clock.”

I smirked, but my smile dropped, remembering the talk I had to have. “Hey, Jake. Can we talk?”

His hand stilled, and he focused on me. “Words like ‘can we talk’ are never good. What’s up? Are you having doubts?”

“No, nothing like that,” I reassured. Reaching over, I grabbed his hand and pulled him to the couch. Once we settled, I continued. “I wanted to ask about yesterday.”

Jake tilted his head. “Yesterday?”

“You received a call. You didn’t answer it, but I could tell it upset you. Will you tell me what it was about?”

Jake didn’t reply right away and released a loud breath. “It was a call from CPS.”

“CPS?” I was confused. Why would they call Jake? Was something wrong with the boys?

“After my parents died, I thought I’d get custody since we didn’t really have family, except a mean step-aunt who hated me. At my parents’ funeral, I overheard that aunt and the CPS lady, Ms. Grace, talking about how they were going to take the boys from me, and I’d never be able to see them.” Jake locked his pleading eyes with me. “I ended up running. She’s been trying to call me since. Saying that she didn’t want to escalate the matter but would if I didn’t respond. It’s been going on for three weeks. I’m scared it will happen, and someone will take them from me.

“Like hell! They’re ours! No one’s taking our boys!” My lion wanted to hunt any that would even try to take them. “We’ll get this sorted. I’ll be damned if anyone tries to take them from us. I promise. We’ll fix this.”

Jake launched at me and wrapped his arms around me before crying in my chest. I held him close. “It will be all right. Everything will be fine,” I whispered.

He leaned back. “Thank you... For everything.”

“You’re welcome for everything.” I gave him another hug.

He gave me a shaky smile. “It’s not five yet.”

I chuckled at his attempt to lighten the mood and played along. Wiggling my eyebrows, I said, “We can skip lunch and clock out early.”

“Not a chance; this food smells delicious,” Jake said, getting up and setting a plate.

“Okay, dinner first, then hanky panky.”

He giggled, and I enjoyed the sound. I always wanted to hear it. God, I loved him. I just hoped he felt the same.

Disney Magic

Jake

I COULDN'T STOP SMILING. Telling Mike about the issue with CPS lifted a gigantic weight off my shoulders. When he said everything would be all right and that we'd work it out, I believed him. In the depths of my being, I believed him.

“Jake, that place was so much fun. We get to come back to it, right?” Sam asked.

“I wanna go back, too. Danny is awesome!” Abel joined in.

Since picking up the boys from daycare, they hadn't stopped talking about the friends they had and the games they played. Abel was especially infatuated with his new friend, Danny. Apparently, as soon as they met, the pair became thick as thieves.

I peered down at them as we rode the elevator to the apartment. “Yes, you both can go back and see Danny again.” I looked up at Mike. He'd been distracted with his phone since picking up the boys. I wondered if he was already working on the situation.

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. “We’re home. Let’s get inside, and we—”

“Wait,” Mike interrupted, stepping in front of the door.

I scrunched my brow. “What’s going on?”

Mike smiled but didn’t answer; instead, he crouched low to look the boys in the eyes. The boys, for their part, wore the same quizzical expression I was sure I wore.

“So, I got a special call today,” Mike began, and my heart stopped. Was he going to tell him about CPS? Were the boys going away? Instinctively, I made to move in front of my brothers, but stopped as Mike continued. “It was from the North Pole.”

The North Pole? What the hell? I was even more confused.

“The North Pole?” Sam asked.

Mike nodded. “Yep, it was a call from Santa.”

“Santa!” Abel exclaimed. “You know Santa?”

“Yep. He’s a friend of mine. He told me the snowstorm had finally cleared up and Rudolph’s nose was working again. He had a special surprise for you two...” Mike glanced up at me and gave me a wink. “And your big brother.”

“Really? What did he get us?” Sam asked excitedly.

Yeah, what did he get us? I wondered.

Mike grinned. “Let’s open the door and find out.”

Mike rose to his feet and bid me to unlock the door. I nodded and held out my phone until hearing the locks disengage. With

a flourish, Mike swung open the door, and the boys ran inside.

As the door swung wide, streamers popped, and confetti cascaded from above, showering the entryway in a glittering rain of colors. The apartment had transformed. Everywhere I looked, there were decorations of beloved Disney characters: Mickey and Minnie-shaped balloons floating by the ceiling, a tablecloth showcasing the iconic Disney castle, and even little figurines of characters like Elsa and Woody strategically placed around the living room.

“Surprise!” Vanessa yelled, her voice echoing the joy evident in the decor.

She wore mouse ears and held two pairs out to Sam and Abel. They timidly grabbed them, with Abel especially appearing confused.

In the background, neatly packed suitcases stood in a row, their presence hinting at the impending adventure. Their tags bore the unmistakable Disney logo.

Mike laid his hands on their shoulders. “Do you know what those mean?”

Abel and Sam shook their heads. I could see the glint of disappointment in Abel’s eyes, but I knew the significance of those hats—at least, I thought I did. And in a moment, I also knew the bubbling excitement from earlier would overflow.

“It means Santa got you a special trip to Disney.”

“Disney!” The sound was deafening. I’d never heard them scream so loud in my life, and I’d heard them scream.

“Yep, Disney. And guess what? Santa sent a special sleigh, and we’re leaving tonight,” Vanessa said, adding to their excitement.

The boys danced around Vanessa, screaming and laughing. They were so excited. My heart burst with joy at seeing them so happy. My smile dropped, thinking of my parents, how they would’ve loved to see them like this.

“You okay?” Mike whispered. I didn’t notice him come over.

I nodded. “Just thinking my mom and dad would’ve loved this.”

Mike wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me to his side. “They’re watching.”

“You think?”

“I know. They’re always watching you and the boys.”

I laid my head on my chest. “Thank you, Mike. Thank you for everything.”

“You’re welcome.”

We stayed there watching the dancing boys. Vanessa was no better. She was like a kid herself. Who knew the refined lady I met at the coffee shop would be so uninhibited?

“We better get ready. Our ride should be here any minute,” Mike said.

I peered up at him. “We’re really leaving tonight? What about work?”

“Well, your boss, the hard ass, good-looking but still a hard ass, gave you the week off,” Mike said with a wink.

“Mike,” I began, my voice taking a serious tone. “I don’t know about the hardness of your ass, though you are good-looking. But we can’t just shirk our responsibilities.”

Mike grinned mischievously. “You can see how hard... my ass is any time.”

“Mike,” I said, giving him a playful shove.

“Okay, okay. Seriously. When our boss found out about Santa’s plan and how his daughter was involved, he agreed we needed to take this much-needed time. Edward’s the one that insisted on us having off,” Mike explained.

“That’s right,” Vanessa chimed in. “Daddy loves me. And I love Disney. So, of course, you needed off. Not to mention, I get to have fun with my new nephews. So, let’s all have fun.”

I knew when I was beaten. I looked at Mike. “You really don’t play fair. You pulled out the big guns on this one.”

Mike laughed and pulled me into a hug. “I keep telling you all’s fair in love and war.”

I chuckled at his words, loving the light banter we shared. Over the past couple of days, I’d fallen hard. I just needed to tell him.

Mike released his hold and pulled out his phone before announcing. “Okay, Santa’s sleigh is here. Let’s get going. Time for some fun.”

The boys screamed again, and Mike went for the bags. I hurried to help, and soon we were out the door. In the elevator, Mike stopped me from pushing the ground floor button. Instead, he pushed the button for the roof.

“Why are we going to the roof?” I asked.

Mike grinned. “I told you. Santa sent a special sleigh.”

I opened my mouth to reply but just shook my head. It’s better I don’t ask questions and enjoy the ride, I thought.

It didn’t take long before the elevator doors opened with a ding. My mouth dropped at the sight that greeted us. I turned my head slowly to face Mike. “You didn’t.”

“I did.” He smiled and grabbed my hand. “Come on.”

On the roof stood a large black helicopter. Its blades were stopped, and the side door was open.

Sam and Abel stood in stunned silence for a moment, their eyes wide as saucers, taking in the sight of the helicopter. Then, in pure childlike wonder, Sam whispered, “It’s like a flying car!”

Abel, bouncing on his heels, chirped, “Are we really gonna fly in that?”

Mike chuckled, swinging a bag over his shoulder. “You bet. This is our special sleigh, direct from Santa.” He winked at me, his grin infectious.

Vanessa, still giddy herself, handed me a pair of headphones. “You’ll need these. It can get pretty loud up there.”

As we approached the helicopter, the pilot stepped out, extending his hand to Mike. “Everything’s ready for takeoff, Mr. Doy.”

Mike nodded, “Thanks, Aden. These are the special guests I told you about.”

Aden nodded with a smile, looking at the boys. “Hey, guys! This is a special ride straight from the North Pole. Ready for an adventure?”

Both boys eagerly nodded without reservations. They showed no fear about taking this special sleigh. In fact, their excitement could be felt in the air.

Helping the boys into their seats, I ensured their seat belts were securely fastened before taking the seat next to them. Mike settled on my other side, and Vanessa sat across from us, her eyes shining with excitement, capturing the moment on her phone.

As the blades started to whirl above us, the sound became nearly deafening, even with the headphones on. But the vibrating sensation was almost exhilarating. I could see Sam and Abel gripping their seats, eyes darting around, taking in every detail.

Mike leaned over, speaking into my ear through the headphones, “First time in a helicopter?”

I nodded, gripping the edge of my seat as the helicopter began its ascent. “First time flying,” I clarified.

The ground seemed to fall away beneath us, the city lights blending into a beautiful tapestry of twinkling stars and skyscrapers.

Sam's voice piped up, filled with awe. "Look, Jake! We're flying! We're really flying!"

Abel, peering out the window, added, "Everything looks so tiny! Like toy houses!"

The sensation of flying, the city sprawling below, and the stars above made the experience surreal. But the joy on the boys' faces and the warmth of Mike's hand finding mine made everything feel right.

Mike squeezed my hand gently. "Best trip to Disney, right?"

I smiled, squeezing back. "And we haven't even arrived yet."

The helicopter zoomed through the air, and the earth below blew past in a blur. It was amazing to think I'd ever experience something like this. Mike kept opening my eyes and blowing my mind.

I glanced over at him and studied his expression. A tiny smile played on his lips as he watched the boys excitedly point out different things. He cares about them. The realization took hold. It wasn't just me he cared about, but he honestly cared about my brothers and their happiness, too.

Leaning over, I kissed his cheek. He jerked his gaze back to me, his eyes wide. "What was that for?"

"You deserve a kiss for being Santa's helper." I grinned.

Mike laughed and gave me a peck on my lips. “Wait, the surprises don’t end here. Santa’s been very busy.”

I smiled and looked back out the window. I couldn’t wait for the next surprise. I glanced back at Mike, and he winked. A plan formed in my mind. I now grinned. Whatever the surprise was, I knew I’d love it as much as I loved Mike—and I was going to show him.

Whispers and Roars

Mike

THE RUSH OF THE wind under the helicopter blades still echoed in my ears as we touched down. The sheer joy on Jake and the boys' faces was a testament to the 'sleigh ride' success. Every wide-eyed glance they cast around, every infectious peal of laughter—they filled me with a warmth that reached deeper than I'd ever expected.

The mild disappointment when we landed was palpable, but it melted away instantly when the looming silhouette of the Animal Kingdom Lodge came into view. Its magnificence wasn't just in the intricate architecture or the grandeur of its design, but in the promise of adventure it held. The distant sounds of wildlife, the ambient lighting peeking through the trees, and the excited chatter of families all around painted a perfect picture of the magic Disney always promised.

I glanced at Jake as I entered the lobby to check us in. His head was tilted in conversation with Vanessa. I wondered what they were talking about. Since getting off the helicopter, Jake

had been whispering to her and Vanessa to him. I'll find out later, I thought, shaking my head.

“Good evening, and welcome to the Animal Kingdom Lodge,” the smartly dressed man behind the counter said.

“Hello,” I said, stepping up. “I have reservations under Doy.”

The man quickly typed before speaking. “Yes, Mr. Doy, welcome again. My name is Eric. We have you in our three bedroom Grand Villa. It boasts the Savannah view. Do you have any luggage? I can have it sent to the room.”

I pointed to Jake, Vanessa, and the boys. “Yes, it's with them.”

Eric nodded and waved to one of his associates. “Okay. Let me just finish getting your keys ready.”

It didn't take but a moment, and after signing a few papers, we were checked in and ready to go. I walked over to Jake and Vanessa, and the pair instantly stopped talking as I approached. Yeah, they were up to something.

“Okay, we're all set. Did you all want to get settled or grab some dinner?” I asked.

Vanessa grinned. “Actually,” she grabbed one key from my hands. “The boys and I are going to grab dinner and explore. You and Jake have the night free. Enjoy.” And with that, she rushed toward the boys and corralled them out the door before Jake, or I, could form a word.

I looked back at Jake, and a faint blush tinted his cheeks. So, this was what he was planning. “I guess it’s just us for the night. What do you say we relax and maybe order some room service?”

“That sounds great.”

I placed my hand on the small of Jake’s back and guided him down the halls, only stopping to look at the variety of animals along the way. The place was beautiful, with splashes of yellow and orange and African art adorning the walls.

Entering the suite was another level of class and wonder. It had a large family area with soft-looking couches, a full kitchen to one side, and a balcony on the other. Jake stepped to the sliding glass doors, and I was awed by the picturesque view of the fields and animals.

“You’re not going to want to shift and chase the antelope, are you?” Jake leaned in and whispered.

I burst into loud, unadulterated laughter. “As amusing and fun as that sounds, I think I can control myself and my lion,” I said, even though my lion really liked the idea and was pacing in my mind.

I reached out and pulled Jake into my embrace. “I love you,” I said before I could stop myself. I hadn’t intended to tell him like this. The words had just slipped out.

Jake leaned back, and he stared up at me with an expression that I was sure mirrored mine. His mouth hung open, and his eyes were wide. “Y-you love me?”

I sobered quickly and nodded, touching his cheek with my hand. “Yes, Jake. We said we’d take things slow, but I’ve fallen for you hard. I love you.”

I held my breath as I waited for Jake to speak. Did I mess up? Fuck, I rushed again. The weight of my confession hung in the air between us.

Jake’s lips twitched upwards, his words a balm to my anxieties. “Good. Because I love you, Michael Doy.”

Without thinking, I leaned down, wrapped my arms around Jake’s waist, and lifted him off his feet. His laugh, surprised and musical, filled the room as I rushed us toward the bedroom.

“Mike!” he gasped, clutching my shoulders, but his eyes sparkled excitedly.

I sped through the door and laid him on the big king-sized bed. He stared up at me with a grin on his face. I could see the love shining in his eyes. Leaning down, I kissed his lips.

Jake moaned, pressing deeper into the kiss, fueling my hunger further. Inside, my lion roared, urging me on. My hands roamed over Jake’s skin, relishing the feel, while he buried his fingers in my hair, pulling me closer.

Pulling back slightly, breathless, I tugged on his shirt. “Off,” was the only word I could say.

His eyebrows furrowed in playful confusion. “What?”

I rose, whipping off my shirt before saying, “Clothes off. Now. Before I rip them off.” I could barely string together a

sentence as my lion pushed me to claim our mate. He wanted to own him and become one with him. Thankfully, we were of the same mind. I desired all of Jake.

Jake's eyes widened before quickly throwing off his shirt and unbuckling his jeans. His hands stilled, and his gaze locked on mine as I slid down my pants. My cock was painfully hard, bouncing in the air and leaking.

I stroked my shaft a few times as I watched Jake continue to slide his jeans down. His dick was equally hard. I wanted to taste him, but it seemed Jake was thinking the same. He twirled around and took my shaft down his throat. I cried out in ecstasy, my cock sliding deeper into his mouth.

“Fuck, Jake.... Yes,” I panted as he slowly bobbed up and down.

Adding his hand to the action, I couldn't help but thrust my hips in rhythm to his motion. My orgasm ricocheted through me, but I didn't want to come like this. I wanted, no, I *needed* to be inside him.

Suddenly, I pushed Jake, and he fell onto his back, surprise clear in his eyes. But now it was my turn. Leaning in, I licked the length of his erection, the velvety texture under my tongue driving me wild. I savored the hint of his taste, taking him into my mouth, desperate to coax out more of that intoxicating flavor.

“Oh God, Mike,” Jake cried out. Encouraged, I intensified my movements, mirroring the rhythm he'd set earlier. He tried

to move, to thrust up, but I pinned his hips down, reveling in the power I had over him at this moment.

I licked his sensitive head. “You ready for more, baby?”

His eyes, heavy with lust, met mine as he nodded, the anticipation palpable between us. Grinning, I resumed my path downwards, exploring further. Lifting his legs, I spread his cheeks and revealed his rosette. I couldn’t help but take a taste. I moaned, eating his ass; he tasted divine.

My tongue slid over his tight ring, probing and breaching his hole. Jake arched at every lick, and I grinned. I knew what could make him cry out even more. Adding my finger to the mix was just the ticket. Jake cried out in pleasure as slipped in my digit.

I added another and another, and soon I had three fingers inside him, stretching him, preparing him. I couldn’t wait anymore, and I pulled away.

“No!” Jake yelled. “What are you doing?”

“Lube, baby. We need lube.” Like a flash I hurried to the bathroom, desperate. There was no time to go to the suitcases. Thankfully, the hotel had lotion readily available. I quickly grabbed the tiny bottle before hurrying back.

I froze at the sight before me. Jake was moaning in pleasure, stroking his cock and fucking his own fingers. It was pure, unadulterated sex. My dick pulsed, and I shook my head out of my daze before slathering my shaft in the cream.

Climbing on the bed, I stilled Jake's hands. "This is mine." I purred, lining my cock with his hole. I pushed forward.

Our screams filled the air as I was enveloped in the heat of his soft hole. I leaned down and kissed Jake, still pushing in until my balls touched his ass. I stilled and stared at Jake.

"Move," he whispered, and I couldn't help but comply.

I slid out, then in, slowly forming a steady rhythm. My body hummed with pleasure and my climax rose within. Suddenly, my lion roared, and I screamed aloud. My lion had come to the forefront.

Growling, I grabbed Jake's legs and pounded into him, thrusting in and out with abandon. Jake cried out, and I felt him tense under me.

"Yes! God, yes! I'm going to come," he screamed.

I roared again. My teeth transformed, and my vision changed. My lion had truly taken over. Never in my life had I experienced something like this. I thrust deep. "Mine!" I yelled, lunging forward and biting Jake's neck.

Jake cried out before I felt the sting of his blunt teeth on my neck. A flash of light filled the room, and my mind was filled with images of Jake. I saw his life pass before me, and I saw him meeting me. Our lives melded before my eyes and our hearts beat in sync. There were no walls, nothing was hidden. We saw each other bare, and we felt our love.

I sucked his neck, and he cried out again before warmth filled the space between us, and I knew Jake had climaxed.

His orgasm spurred me on, and I couldn't hold back. My cock swelled even more. Thrusting one last time, I roared, filling Jake with my cum.

I trembled as I lifted my head and locked eyes with Jake. "I love you," I whispered.

He grinned a sated grin. "I love you, my mate."

His words were true. He was my mate, and now we were bonded, nothing could break us apart.

Thank Fate.

Demon in the Details

Jake

THE SOFT MORNING RAYS filled the room as I blinked my eyes open. Had it all been a dream? I inhaled, taking in the large figure lying beside me. Touching my neck, flashes of last night filled my mind. It was no dream. It was incredible. The bond, our connection, was all real. There was really no room to doubt. I'd seen everything. I'd felt everything.

Reaching over, I traced my finger over Mike's square jaw. I loved him so much. It was sometimes hard to believe how much I loved him in such a short period. I chuckled, realizing again that I felt it and knew our love was real. It was an odd assurance I didn't have yesterday.

Mike's eyes fluttered open, and a grin crossed his lips. "Morning."

"Morning," I said, leaning over to kiss him but pausing.

"Why are you stopping?"

"Morning breath," I replied. "I'll go brush my teeth."

Mike laughed. "I'll risk it." He grabbed my wrist and pulled me to him, kissing me. I moaned and synced my mouth to match his.

A knock on the door caused me to jump back, pulling the sheet on my neck. "Yes," I called tentatively.

"I'm not coming in," Vanessa's voice filtered through the door. "But I thought you should know the boys are already up and bouncing off the walls, eager to see the magic of the kingdom."

I laughed at her play on words.

"We'll be out in a second," Mike called.

Mike kissed me again before rising from the bed. I didn't move as I studied his naked body. I was a lucky man, I thought.

"You know, if you hurry, we can squeeze in a quick shower," Mike said with a wink.

I grinned, jumping from the bed. I grabbed his hand, pulling him to the bathroom and turning on the shower.

Mike's laughter quickly turned into a moan of pleasure as I dropped to my knees and took his semi-hard cock in my mouth. The shower sprayed over our bodies as I bobbed up and down, loving the feel of Mike's hardening cock.

My own cock was hard, and I stroked it in the rhythm of Mike's moans of pleasure. My climax was quickly approaching. This was going to be quick. I groaned in ecstasy

as Mike dug his fingers through my hair and fucked my mouth.

“Yeah, fuck. Just like that. I’m going to come,” Mike panted, and I moaned in reply, increasing the suction around his shaft.

Mike thrust one last time and stilled, filling my mouth with his cum. Swallowing his seed, I stroked myself frantically, allowing my body to release and come.

My body relaxed as the last of my cum dripped from my cock. I peered up at my Mike, water running down my face. Mike panted and grinned. “That was definitely a fantastic way to start the day.” He bent down and kissed my lips. I loved the flavor of his kiss mixed with the flavor of his seed. It was incredible.

“Are you guys almost done? I don’t know if I can hold off the minions much longer!”

I giggled after Vanessa’s call. Mike joined in laughing but said, “We better get clean and out there. I don’t know how much she’ll be able to handle the boys.”

I nodded as Mike picked me up to my feet. “Showering with you is my new favorite thing.”

Mike laughed again. “Mine too, love. Mine too.”

As we walked through the entrance of the park, the jubilant sounds of excited visitors surrounded us. Giant cartoon

characters greeted the kids, and the aroma of popcorn wafted through the air.

Vanessa shot me a mock glare, her lips twitching upwards. “You guys sure took your sweet time this morning.”

I laughed, feigning innocence. “We had to make sure we looked presentable for the happiest place on earth.”

She snorted. “Right. Presentable.”

Sam tugged at my sleeve, eyes wide with anticipation. “Jake, can we go to the castle first?”

Abel, not wanting to be left out, chimed in, “And then Space Mountain!”

Mike wrapped an arm around my waist. “Looks like we have a full day ahead of us.”

I grinned, squeezing his hand. “Let the magic begin.”

As the day progressed, we tried every ride and attraction the park offered. From the thrilling drop of the Tower of Terror to the whimsical voyage of It’s a Small World, our laughter and wonderment echoed through every corner. Vanessa was our unofficial tour guide, leading the way and ensuring we used our Fast Passes efficiently.

Sam, with his infectious excitement, pulled me on a carousel ride. The sun glinted off the brightly colored horses as we spun round and round. Abel, showing his daredevil side, repeatedly dragged Mike to Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, the two of them emerging each time with wind-tousled hair and huge grins.

As dusk approached, we watched the evening parade, enchanted by the floats glowing with thousands of twinkling lights and the elaborately dressed characters dancing along the route. The culmination of our day was the spectacular fireworks show over Sleeping Beauty Castle, with vibrant explosions painting the night sky, reflecting in the children's wide-eyed faces.

As the last of the fireworks exploded, we made our exit. The boys didn't want to leave, and Abel was getting the tired whine. They had a fun, action-packed day. I grinned. They'll sleep well tonight, I thought.

"What has you grinning?" Mike asked as we took our seats on the hotel tram.

I leaned over and whispered. "The boys are going to sleep well tonight."

"I like the sound of that," Mike chuckled.

"Hey, enough of that. We've got to deal with these two first," Vanessa interrupted.

I looked up. Abel had fallen asleep on her shoulder, and Sam was close to falling asleep as well.

"We'll get them to bed. Thanks for all your help, Vanessa," I said.

"You're welcome." She gave me a smile. "You guys are so cute together. I'm so happy for you. Now if I could just find my mate."

“You will,” Mike said confidently, reaching out to squeeze Vanessa’s free hand. “And when you do, we’ll be right there, cheering you on.”

Vanessa blushed. “Thanks, big guy. That means a lot.”

The tram journey back to the hotel was short, but it was enough for the day’s exhaustion to pull at me. Mike and I shared a silent communication, our bond stronger than ever, and it reassured me.

Vanessa helped get the boys into their room, tucking them in. Their innocent faces were angelic in sleep, a stark contrast to the whirlwinds of energy they’d been throughout the day.

Once we were sure they were settled, Vanessa excused herself to her room while Mike and I headed to ours, but were stopped by a knock on the door.

I gazed up at Mike. “Expecting anyone?”

Mike shook his head before heading to the door. “No.” He opened the door, and my eyes widened.

“Talon?”

“Mike, Jake. Sorry to interrupt,” Talon said as Mike let him into the room.

“What are you doing here, Talon?” Mike asked.

“His Majesty ordered me here,” he replied, his voice taking on a sober tone.

“Why? What happened?” Mike demanded.

“It’s about the text message.”

“What text message?” I asked. I hadn’t heard about any text.

Mike turned to me and sighed. “The other day, I received a message. It warned me to stay away from you.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me? Who was it from?” I rushed to his side. Why would anyone warn Mike away from me?

“I’d planned on telling you, but we were discussing the CPS situation at the time. I don’t know who sent it, but I asked Hayden to investigate it before planning this trip. I really wasn’t keeping it from you,” he quickly explained.

I nodded before focusing on Talon. “And you found out who sent the text?”

Talon jerked a nod. “Yes.” He locked eyes with Mike. “It’s not good.”

“Tell us.” Mike grabbed my hand.

“It was sent by an *other*, named Dominic Billings. I don’t—”

“Dominic,” I exclaimed, and Mike growled.

“You know him?” Talon asked.

“We know him,” Mike replied through clenched teeth. “He used to be Jake’s neighbor, and we had a run-in with him at The Pavilion. I didn’t feel his strength as an *other*, though.”

“What’s an *other*?” I asked.

“‘*Other*’ is a term we use for supernatural beings that don’t fit the standard classifications of shifters, vampires, or witches. It’s a catch-all term. Demons, for instance, fall under this

category. There are many kinds of ‘*others*’, each with their own strengths and vulnerabilities,” Talon explained.

“And Dominic is what?” Talon didn’t answer. “Talon?” I prodded.

Talon’s chest heaved before a loud breath escaped in a rush. “He’s a demon.”

“A demon!” I yelled.

“Easy, Jake. Most demons keep to themselves. We call them others because the word demon has a negative connotation,” Mike said.

“But he’s a demon.” I couldn’t believe that Mike or anyone else was okay with demons or that they even existed.

“Yes. He’s a demon, but we can defend against him, and they can still be hurt. It’s not a hopeless battle,” Mike tried to soothe.

“Mike’s right. It’s why the king asked me to come right away. We’ll make sure you’re both safe.”

My mind raced. This was insane. Did I take the boys and run? The boys! I needed to keep them safe.

Mike squeezed my hand. “We’ll keep them safe,” he said, as if reading my thoughts.

I peered up at him. “But what if...”

“We’ll keep them safe. We’re a ‘we’ now. We stand together, and we fight for our family.”

“Mike’s right. Mates are worth fighting for. And you all are no different. You and the boys are one of us now, a part of the pride, and the pride protects our own. Nothing will happen to them or you.”

Mike brushed his hand over my cheek. “Talon’s also right. Nothing will happen to you and the boys.”

I released a breath and pressed against his hand, nodding. I was tired of running. From the very beginning, that was my MO. I ran. I ran when the CPS was going to take the boys, and I ran when I found out Mike was a shifter. It was time I stopped running.

“I trust you.”

Mike released an audible sigh. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“You don’t have to thank me. I love you, Mike. I trust you.”

“I love you, too. Always. I’ll never let you down.”

Promises Kept

Mike

“IT’S GOOD TO BE back,” I sighed, sinking into the comfort of Hayden’s couch. I inhaled the sweet soothing vanilla that was uniquely Jake. I needed a few minutes after the chaotic whirlwind of our trip.

The faint thuds of the boys’ excitement echoed from the theater room. Their energy was indefatigable. Jake, curled into my side, gave a half-laugh, half-groan. “Tell me about it. I’m on the brink of exhaustion. We definitely need a vacation from our vacation.”

A chuckle escaped me, the resonance of our shared weariness. “Yeah, thank god for Vanessa and Talon, especially Talon with his impromptu piggyback service.”

Jake’s eyes, always so expressive, twinkled. “He’s like a big kid.” He nudged me playfully. “But so are you, Mr. I-Can-Also-Give-Piggyback-Rides.”

Our banter was cut short by Vanessa’s voice. “Guys, I’m going to head home. I can barely keep my eyes open.”

Jake was quick to untangle from me and pull Vanessa into a warm embrace. “Thank you for every—”

A jarring chime broke through the moment, stopping him from speaking. He quickly stepped back and snatched his phone from the table. “It’s the alert I put for the lobby.”

“Hello?”

“Mr. Bradford.” Even without my shifter abilities, the tense undertone in Henry’s voice was unmistakable. But with them, every nuance was amplified.

“Yes,” Jake’s voice wavered.

“Sir. I-I have a police officer and two ladies from child protective services here.”

The color drained from Jake’s face. His phone slipped from his grasp, and a tremor overtook him. My instincts screamed. Protect. Comfort. Act. I lunged, catching the phone and drawing Jake close, trying to anchor him amidst the rising storm.

“Henry, it’s Mike. Do they have a warrant?”

“No, but they are stating they have a clear and imminent need to see the welfare of the boys as Mr. Bradford fled with them,” Henry explained.

I growled, but I guess this problem came sooner than I expected. “Show them up, Henry.”

Jake jerked his gaze to me, a look of surprise and fear filling his expression. “It will be okay,” I mouthed. “Trust me.”

Jake closed his eyes and nodded.

“Are you certain, sir?” Henry asked.

“Positive. It’s time this issue is resolved,” I said.

“Understood. We’ll be up in a moment.”

I hung up the phone. “Why are you letting them up? They’re going to take the boys.”

“No, Jake, they’re not. I promise. Remember how I told you I had people working on the situation?”

“Yes, but—”

“I promise everything is going to be fine. I had planned to call and set up a meeting, anyway. I was going to tell you tonight. But there’s more going on, and the boys aren’t going anywhere. Please, trust me,” I pleaded.

Jake released a deep breath. “Okay. Please make sure I don’t lose my brothers.”

“They are our family. Nothing is going to happen to them.”

“Damn straight, and if you need me, Jake, I’m not above shifting and eating some people,” Vanessa said seriously.

Jake couldn’t contain his chuckle. I lifted Jake from the ground and turned to Vanessa. “We’ll eat them, but I don’t think it will come to that,” I said, causing Jake to full on guffaw.

I gave Jake a hug as a knock sounded on the door. “Everything’s going to be all right. Vanessa, go get Talon. Tell him I need the file Stan sent.”

“On it.” Vanessa hurried out of the room and upstairs.

I straightened and marched to the door. I took a deep breath and opened it. An officer was the first to greet me. He had a sober expression on his face. “Mr. Bradford?” He asked.

“That’s not the faggot that stole my nephews,” an older woman with a shrill voice exclaimed.

The officer and another lady turned and faced her. “Mrs. Troller, I’ve warned you about using that type of language. I won’t tolerate it,” the officer said firmly before looking back at me. “We’re here to see Mr. Jake Bradford and Sam and Abel Bradford. I’m Officer Chambers, and this is Mrs. Baker and Ms. Grace from Child Protective Services, as well as the boys’ aunt, Mrs. Troller.”

“I’m Michael Doy, Mr. Bradford’s legal counsel, and since when is it acceptable to bring a family member on a wellness check?”

“Michael Doy, as in....”

“Yes, as in the chief legal counsel of Satchel Industries,” I clarified.

The officer’s, as well as Mrs. Baker’s, eyes widened, but Ms. Grace was the one to speak. “Jake Bradford kidnapped those children. We’re here to ensure they are reunited with their loving aunt.”

“Loving aunt. The woman who just called me a slur, but then again, you agree with her, don’t you, Ms. Grace?” Jake

stepped to my side. I could feel his anger radiating from his body.

“Jake, it’s all right,” I said, placing my hand on his arm.

“There he is! Arrest him.” Jake’s aunt exclaimed.

“I warned you, Jake. I didn’t want it to get this far,” Ms. Grace chimed in.

“Really, you... You didn’t want it to get this far. The one who colluded with an aunt to take the boys from their rightful guardian.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, you don’t. I can think of fifty thousand reasons you would,” I replied.

Ms. Grace’s eyes widened, and I felt Jake’s stare. I shook my head. “We’ll get to that in a moment. For now, let’s talk about the accusation of kidnapping. Officer Chambers, tell me, can you kidnap your own children?”

“No, but they’re not his children. He’s not their guardian,” he replied.

“But he is.”

“No, he’s not. I’m their guardian,” Jake’s aunt yelled.

“No, you’re just the woman who wanted their inheritance and thought you could use your good friend Ms. Grace to help you.”

“My sister had nothing. Her useless husband was a bum and didn’t have a penny. They had nothing but debt.”

“Don’t talk about my father like that,” Jake snarled.

“Why don’t we all take a step back? The important thing is the welfare of the boys. Will you allow us to check on them?” Mrs. Baker asked.

I leveled my stare at them. “After we resolve the current issue.”

At that moment, the distinct sound of footsteps approached. I recognized them instantly as Talon’s. He strode into the room, holding a thick file in his hand, his expression a mix of seriousness and slight amusement.

“Here’s the file you asked for, Mike,” Talon said, handing it to me. He then glanced at the small crowd, eyes narrowing momentarily at Ms. Grace and Mrs. Troller. “Seems I missed the start of the party.”

I opened the file and quickly flipped through the pages. “Thank you, Talon. And yes, you did, but your timing is impeccable. Officer Chambers, Ms. Grace, and Mrs. Baker, please have a look at these documents.”

Mrs. Baker was the one that took the file while I explained the contents. “You’ll find the will of Jake and the boys’ parents.” I shifted my gaze to Jake’s aunt. “You know, the one that apparently never existed, the same one that names Jake as the guardian of Sam and Abel, and all their assets to be placed in a trust and distributed evenly among the boys.”

“What...?” Jake stammered, his gaze darting between the document and me. “I’m their guardian? But... I never knew.

They never told me about any will.”

I nodded sympathetically, squeezing Jake’s arm reassuringly. “They likely wanted to spare you the worries and responsibilities until it was necessary, given how young you were. The fact that they trusted you above anyone else with their most precious treasures speaks volumes, Jake.”

Jake’s aunt’s face flushed red. If this was a cartoon, I was sure steam would shoot from her ears.

I smirked before turning back to the file and pulling out a page. “This document is just as fascinating. It’s a life insurance policy to the tune of five hundred thousand dollars, with, surprise, the boys as the beneficiaries.”

Officer Chambers snatched the paper. A firm line set in his jaw, and he glared at Ms. Grace and Jake’s aunt while he handed it over to Mrs. Baker. Mrs. Baker read over the document before glaring at Ms. Grace. “Ms. Grace, are you saying you knew nothing about this? What kind of office are you running in West Virginia?”

“Oh, she knew. My P.I. is very good at his job. You’ll find in that file the text exchanges between Ms. Grace and Mrs. Troller. The one I particularly think you’d be interested in is the one where Mrs. Troller offers Ms. Grace fifty thousand dollars to lose the will and get her custody of the boys.”

After locking eyes with Mrs. Baker, who gave a subtle nod, Officer Chambers took a deep breath, regaining his authoritative composure.

“Mrs. Baker, please see to the welfare of the boys. With everything going on, their well-being remains our top priority.” Officer Chambers said with a hint of tiredness in his eyes.

Mrs. Baker nodded, her professional demeanor unchanged. “Of course, Officer Chambers.”

Turning to Jake, I gently nudged him. “Jake, why don’t you accompany Mrs. Baker and introduce her to your brothers? It might be comforting for them to have you there.”

He swallowed hard, nodding. “Yeah, you’re right, Mike. Mrs. Baker?”

The two of them ascended the stairs, with Jake guiding her. “They’re upstairs, second room to the right. Vanessa might be with them.”

As they disappeared from sight, Officer Chambers focused his attention on Ms. Grace and Mrs. Troller. His voice was steely as he said, “Given the information presented and the severe nature of the allegations, both of you will need to come downtown for further questioning.”

“This is outrageous!” Mrs. Troller spat, her shrill voice echoing in the room.

Ms. Grace, attempting to maintain her dignity, retorted, “This is clearly a misunderstanding, Officer.”

Officer Chambers held up a hand, silencing them. “You’ll have the opportunity to explain at the station. Backup is on its way to ensure this process goes smoothly.”

“Officer Chambers, I’m going to head upstairs. Do you need anything more from me?” I asked, wanting to join my family.

He shook his head. “No. I think we’re good. I’m just waiting for my partner.”

I looked at Talon. “Talon. Stay here with Officer Chambers, in case he needs anything else. I’ll be upstairs.”

As I said those words, the elevator slid open, and two officers joined Officer Chambers. Ms. Grace and Jake’s aunt were screaming as they guided them back to the elevator. I shook my head. Not my problem anymore, I thought.

I raced upstairs, an overwhelming need to be with my family propelling me forward. As I neared the theater rooms, the joyful laughter of Sam and Abel reached my ears. They were immersed in recounting tales of their magical Disney adventure, a gift from Santa.

As if sensing my presence, Jake turned, his eyes catching mine. There was so much gratitude and love in that one look. He stood up and came to me, his steps quick and sure. As he reached me, he wrapped his arms around my neck, pulling me into a tight embrace.

Drawing back just enough to see my face, he whispered, “I love you, Mike. Thank you. Thank you.”

The shimmer of tears in his eyes made my heart clench. “I love you, too,” I replied, brushing away a tear that had escaped.

Before either of us could say another word, I leaned down, capturing his lips with mine. It was a kiss filled with promise and the best kiss yet. I knew, without a doubt, that I had my mate by my side, the boys laughing in the next room, and together, we were Unbreakable. Nothing and no one could tear us apart.

Preg-not What I Expected

Jake

THE SOFT BEEPING OF the video blended seamlessly with the boys' laughter. Their joy made my heart sore. I could finally relax. The boys were with me and not going with evil Aunt Judith. It was amazing how the choking fear that loomed over me for weeks, the fear of losing them, instantly vanished. The boys seemed lighter and freer, even though I suspected they had no idea what had happened today. They just knew they met another new person, Mrs. Baker.

Mrs. Baker's visit was nothing short of a revelation. It wasn't just the assurance of the boys' placement that eased my heart; it was the recognition of my parents' faith in me. Their will and the guardianship papers were testaments of their trust. The words from those documents echoed in my mind. Obvious declarations of love and hope for the boys' future. It felt like a message from the past telling me I was on the right path.

As I continued to watch Sam and Abel, I could sense Mike's presence even before he entered the room. It was like a magnet pulling me toward him. I didn't need to see him to know he

was there, watching over us, sharing in the moment's warmth. His energy was a calm reassurance to the chaos that had ensued.

“Look at you two, defeating that final boss,” Mike said, playfully nudging Sam's shoulder.

Sam puffed up his chest in mock pride. “Well, we've been practicing. Right, Abel?”

Abel nodded, his eyes never leaving the screen. “Yup! We're the best team.”

Mike's laughter rang out, filling the room with even more warmth. He came over and settled in the seat next to me, intertwining his fingers with mine. Looking down at our hands, I smiled. I loved him holding my hand.

“Did Vanessa leave?” I asked, peering up at him.

Mike nodded. “She did. Talon is still lingering around, though. I think we're going to be stuck with him for a bit.”

I bit my lip nervously. We got rid of one dark cloud, and yet another one still loomed. “Do you really think Dominic will try anything?”

Mike didn't reply right away. He tilted his head and pressed his lips together. I could tell he was considering the different outcomes. Finally, he gazed down at me. “Truth be told. I don't know. I'm not sure why Dominic would hyper-focus on you. Don't get me wrong, I understand the pull toward you, but you're my mate. Dominic, on the other hand...”

I nodded. “I was thinking about that, too. Like why would he warn you off? Is it really just to get into my pants?”

Mike growled playfully, pulling me to his side. “No one’s getting into your pants but me.”

“Just you,” I giggled, loving the feel of Mike’s arms wrapped around me.

“Good. That’s right,” he said with finality, causing me to laugh more.

After settling down, I released a breath and broached a topic that was weighing on my mind. “Mike,” I said, my tone sobering. He locked his eyes with mine, and I continued. “Um... when—” damn, I was having difficulty saying the words. I didn’t know how to ask him.

“What is it, baby? Whatever you want to say, you can tell me,” he reassured.

I exhaled loudly. “Can we move in with you?”

Mike’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I mean, well, you brought the boys and me here because I was scared. But we’re bonded, and Vanessa said that’s basically like marriage in the shifter world. And I’m sure the boys and I can’t stay in Hayden’s place forever. And you—”

My rambling was cut off by a forceful kiss. It took me by surprise, but I melted into Mike’s taste and kissed him back.

Mike eased the kiss, pulled back, and stared at me. “You and the boys can live with me forever. We can head home right

now.”

I grinned, leaning forward. I gave him a softer kiss. It was a kiss of promise. I was thrilled. He hadn't rejected me. We had a home.

A throat clearing caused me to pull back and break the kiss. Mike and I simultaneously looked toward the room entrance.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Talon said with a slight tinge of red on his cheeks.

“What's going on, Talon?” Mike asked.

Talon cleared his throat again. “I got a call from the king. He requested that you, Jake, and the boys come to the lion's den. He said it's important.”

Mike rose to his feet. “Did something happen?”

“Lion's den?” I asked at the same time.

“It's what we call the king's house. It's basically a mansion. A lot of single members of the pride live there, and it's where we have most of our gatherings,” Mike explained.

“Oh,” I said, not knowing how to respond. Every time I thought I had a handle on things, a fresh surprise would appear. I shook my head and focused on Talon.

“Did something happen?” I asked, repeating the question Mike had asked.

“I don't know. But His Majesty said it was very important,” Talon replied.

Mike looked at the boys, who had stopped playing their game and were listening and watching the exchange. I think the word Lion's Den caught their attention. Mike turned his gaze on me and lifted his brow. I internally laughed at his silent question. Like I was going to say no to the king of the pride, and more, say no to the CEO of the place I worked.

“Guess we're going to the Lion's den.”

I fidgeted in the seat as we were driven through one of the poshest areas I've ever seen. The houses were large, estate-style homes with gates protecting their manicured lawns. I never thought I'd ever see homes like this in person, let alone be about to step foot in one.

Mike reached over and gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “It's going to be okay.”

I flashed a weak smile. I wasn't sure how this was all going to work out, especially when Mike turned into a long, paved driveway and passed a wrought-iron gate. My jaw dropped at the sprawling mansion in front of me.

The building extended over three normal-sized lots and rose three stories high. It had a stone façade, gold-accented trim, and several large bay windows. A large, manicured lawn decorated with marble statuary and a majestic fountain in the center fronted the mansion.

“T-that's the lion's den?” I couldn't stop my stutter.

“Whoa,” Sam said from the back seat.

“That place is big,” Abel chimed in.

Mike smiled. “It is big. I used to play hide and seek with my best friend Hayden here. The game used to go on for hours.”

“Can we play?” Sam and Abel asked excitedly.

“Way to give them ideas,” I whispered.

Mike laughed loudly, as did Talon. I shook my head and looked back at the boys. “We’ll have to see. Right now, we’re here for something important. You two need to be on your best behavior.”

“But Jake,” Sam whined while Abel crossed his arms and pouted.

“I said we’ll see. Promise me you’ll be good,” I said as we pulled in front of the grand entrance.

“Fine.”

“Okay.”

I leveled one final stare at the boys, hoping to convey I meant business, before nodding and sliding out of the car. I turned around and looked up in amazement. Mike came around, placing his hand on my back, and gave me a gentle nudge.

“Let’s go see what’s going on.”

I nodded again, and we walked toward the large wooden doors. I stumbled on my feet as the doors seemed to open on their own. An older gentleman, around sixty or seventy,

stepped out. His short gray hair was slicked back, and his thin mustache was well-groomed. He was dressed formally in a black suit, a white button-down shirt, and gleaming black shoes.

“Good afternoon, Master Doy,” the man said with a tilt of his head.

“Hi, Carl. How are you? This is my mate, Jake, and his brothers, Sam and Abel.” Mike looked at me. “This is Carl. He’s been the butler for the home for as long as I can remember. He’s also a prominent member of the pride.”

Carl grinned. “Princess Vanessa told us you met your mate. Congratulations.” He looked at me and gave me a bow. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I replied, mirroring his bow.

“We’re here to see his Majesty,” Mike said formally.

“Yes, of course. Please come in,” Carl said, holding his hand toward the doors.

Mike gave me another gentle nudge, and I let loose an audible gasp. The interior of the home was just as amazing as the exterior. This place was a palace. There were two grand staircases, one on each side of the foyer. Marble floors and a giant chandelier sparkled against the golden trim inlays of the walls.

“Hello, Mike,” a young man said. He had a muscular build, short blond hair, and striking blue eyes. He glanced at Talon.

“Talon,” he said softly.

Talon visibly stiffened, and his eyes bore into the man. “Lucas,” he whispered. “What are you doing here?”

“Lucas is Brian’s brother,” Mike said quietly before saying aloud. “Hey, Lucas. Are you visiting the prey princess?”

Talon growled, and Lucas glared at Mike. “Ooh, you gonna be in trouble when I tell the king you called his mate that.”

Mike laughed. “The king will be fine. It’s our thing. He calls me a pussycat, and I call him a prey princess.”

“You shouldn’t call anyone that,” Talon said through clenched teeth. I’d never seen him so agitated and wondered why.

“Relax, Talon. It’s just a joke.”

I interjected, sensing an underlying tension. “Wait, is ‘prey princess’ derogatory?”

Lucas sighed. “In our world, predators sometimes label prey shifters as divas, and ‘prey princess’ can be a snide remark. Mike and my brother, however, have a history of teasing each other.”

Lucas stepped forward and extended his hand. “We haven’t been introduced. I’m Lucas. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too. I’m Jake,” I said, shaking his hand.

Lucas smiled and glanced at Talon. “It’s always a blessing to meet your mate.”

Talon looked away, and I wondered what the hell that was about. “These are my brothers, Sam and Abel,” I said, wanting

to break the sudden tension.

“Nice to meet you both,” Lucas said with a grin. The boys, for their part, nodded, but continued to look around the vast building. They’re probably trying to find places to hide, I thought.

“To answer your question,” Lucas said. “I brought my Nana to visit. It’s actually why you’re here. She needs to speak to the mated couples. They’re in the king’s study. The king asked for me and Talon to watch the boys while you speak with them.”

I tensed. I didn’t want to leave the boys. Mike gave me a gentle squeeze. “The boys will be okay. Talon and Lucas will keep them safe. I promise.”

I didn’t like it, but I trusted Mike thus far, and he’s never broken a promise. I nodded. “Okay.”

Lucas crouched down to be at eye level with the boys. “Sam. Abel. I have some nieces and nephews about your age. They’re playing out back. How about I take you to meet them?”

They nodded eagerly. “Can we, Jake?” Sam asked.

“Yes, but no hide and seek. I don’t want to lose you in this big place so soon,” I replied.

“Aw, fine.”

“We’ll watch them,” Talon assured as he and Lucas guided them down a hallway.

Mike grabbed my hand. “They’ll be fine. Let’s go find out what’s going on.”

“Okay.” I squeezed Mike’s hand for needed support. It was time I met the king.

We walked past the staircases and down a wide hallway with large portraits hanging on the walls. I wondered who they were. We came to a walnut-colored door, and Mike knocked.

“Come in,” a deep voice replied.

Stepping into the room was like stepping into a TV set. It was like a study you’d see in the movies, complete with bookcases, leather furniture, and a big world globe.

I scanned the room and recognized Brian and Owen immediately. Brian sat between an older woman with gray hair pulled back into a bun and big glasses, and a large man with a muscular build, salt and pepper hair, and dressed to the nines.

The man had an air of power around him, a regal air. I realized he was one of the men from the night of my freakout. This must be the king, Edward. Owen, on the other hand, was curled next to a younger version of the king. He had to be Hayden. Owen looked pale, and his red hair was unkempt. I wondered what was wrong.

My suspicions were confirmed when Mike stepped forward and bowed to the older gentlemen. “Your Majesty,” he said formally before bowing to Hayden. “Your Highness.”

Hayden, Brian, and Owen chuckled. “Bro, relax. You don’t need to be so formal.”

“Yeah, come on, pussycat. Relax.” Brian said.

“Hayden and Brian are right,” the king said, rising from his seat and stepping before me. “It’s very nice to meet you, Jake. I’m Edward.”

“Nice to meet you, um, your Majesty,” I replied awkwardly.

“Call me Edward. Especially when it’s just family.”

I nodded. “Edward.”

“I’m Nana. You can call me Nana,” the older woman chimed in from the couch.

I grinned at her words and bowed my head in acknowledgment. “Nice to meet you, Nana.”

Edward turned to Mike. “Congratulations to both of you. I want you to know, I’ll be sending Talon, Walter, and some enforcers to deal with the Dominic situation. You can rest assured he won’t be bothering either of you.”

Mike bowed his head. “Thank you, sire.”

I felt a weight lift off me, much like it did earlier with the CPS situation. We didn’t have to worry.

“It’s the least I can do. Please have a seat,” Edward said, indicating a loveseat. Mike grasped my hand, and we quickly did as Edward instructed.

Once we settled, Mike looked at Owen. “How are you feeling? Have the doctors figured out what’s wrong?”

Hayden was the one to reply. “No. They don’t know what’s going on. Every doctor we’ve seen says there’s nothing wrong

when, obviously, there is something wrong.”

I heard the worry in Hayden’s voice as he pulled Owen close. I wished there was something I could do to help.

“I know what’s wrong with him. It’s why I called you together,” Nana said sagely.

Everyone’s gaze focused on Nana.

“Nana, you know what’s wrong?” Brian asked.

She nodded her head. “I have to admit, I would have told you sooner, but I thought it was just a cold. When I talked to Brian this morning, I realized it wasn’t. It’s why I’m here now.”

“Your pairing is the first true-mated pair in a long time. And knowledge about the pairings has been lost. But it’s important that you know.” She took a deep breath and locked gazes with each of us before saying, “I wasn’t born a shifter.”

“What? Nana, how’s that possible? I’ve seen you shift. You turn into a rabbit just like the entire family.”

“I was born human. It was only after I bonded with your grandfather that I inherited some of his abilities.”

“That’s impossible,” Edward exclaimed. “You can’t become a shifter or be made one. The only paranormal that can make others are vampires.”

“It’s not impossible, and vampires are not the only ones. It doesn’t always happen to my extreme with the ability to transform. It’s usually just gaining advanced hearing or

becoming stronger. I was one of the lucky ones that was able to shift,” Nana explained.

“So, that’s what’s wrong with me? Am I changing? I’m going to shift into a lion?” Owen asked, his eyes wide.

It was Owen’s expression that caused me to gasp. Did this mean I was going to be able to shift, too?

“It’s part of it,” Nana said.

“There’s more?” I couldn’t help but blurt out.

Mike squeezed my hand. “It’s going to be okay, Jake. It will be.”

Nana nodded. “There’s more.” She focused back on Owen. “Owen, you’re sick because you’re pregnant.”

“What!” Hayden and Mike jumped to their feet.

I was stunned. Was I.... I couldn’t even think of the words, let alone say them.

“Nana, you can’t be serious. Owen’s a man. A biological man,” Brian said. “There’s no way that’s possible.”

“Yes, he is. But it’s part of Fate’s plan. You see, in the past, there were many different pairings, men with men, men and women, women and women; Fate made a way for them to continue the line. It’s part of the reason we stopped seeing fated mates,” she explained.

“What do you mean?” Mike asked, his voice was rough.

“It had to do with two leaders of different packs. They were men and fated. But their packs hated one another. The men

were also prideful, and neither wanted to bear a child. So, they denied their bond, and they ended up killing each other. Fate got mad at them for dismissing her gift. That's when things changed."

"How do we even have a baby? Is it exclusive to the human mates, or will Brian also be able to?" I asked.

Brian jerked his gaze to me before looking at his Nana with wild, wide eyes. "Yeah, Nana. Am I going to be able to give birth and how.... where does it come out?"

I gulped. My mind raced at the possible ways the baby could come out.

"It's not only humans affected. Yes, Brian, you can get pregnant. As far as how they're delivered...." She shook her head. "I don't know. I planned to reach out to some friends to learn more, but I'm unsure if they know."

Mike sighed and flopped onto the seat beside me before looking at me. "I-I didn't know. I-Please don't leave me."

His words broke my heart. I wouldn't, no, I couldn't leave him. It'd be like leaving my own heart. Yes, it was a shock, but I'd get through it. Leaning forward, I said. "I'm not going anywhere. We're in this together. I love you, Mike."

"I love you, too," Mike said.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed his lips. Kissing him, I knew everything would be okay. We'd make it through anything—even pregnancy.

The Melody of Eternity

Mike

THE NOTES FLOWED SEAMLESSLY from my fingers, each pluck and strum a reflection of the emotions churning deep within me. The soft hum of my voice resonated with the gentle rhythm of the guitar, creating a melancholic ambiance in the dimly lit bedroom. Music filled me. It was an escape from this crazy day. Day? I thought. A crazy week, more like.

I'd thought for sure that Jake would run when Nana revealed her little secrets, but he proudly sat by me. *Jake*. I smiled at his name. Every thought, *everything* centered on my mate. I loved him so much, and it was incredible to feel the love reflected back.

“New song?”

As if conjuring the man himself, I lifted my head and smiled. “Not really,” I said, placing my guitar aside. “Get the boys to bed?”

Jake laughed. “Yes. They had so much fun with Lucas’s nephews and nieces. They played hide and seek.”

I grinned. “It’s fun playing hide and seek at the den. We should try it. I can shift and find you.”

“Who knows, I may be the one shifting and finding you,” Jake replied, sighing heavily as he sat on the bed.

“How are you feeling about that?” I asked, butterflies filling my stomach. I knew he said he wouldn’t leave me, but I was still worried he’d hate what was happening to him.

Jake chuckled. “Surprisingly okay.” He looked at me with a mischievous glint in his eye. “I mean, I could think of worse things, you know, like getting pregnant. Oh, wait, that can happen.”

I laughed at his sarcasm. “Jake, I—”

“No, Mike, I’m just teasing. Even if we get pregnant, I’ll be okay with it. You know why?” he asked.

“Why?”

“Because I have you. I love you.”

My heart swelled at his words. “I love you, too.”

Jake sighed again and laid back on the bed. “It was a busy day today. It’s going to be nice just being your assistant tomorrow.”

I leaned over him and stared into his eyes. “You’re never just my assistant, Jake. You’re my world, my heart, my love.” I bent forward and kissed his lips.

He moaned and pressed into my kiss, wrapping his arms around my neck, but I pulled back. He looked at me with a

confused expression. “Why’d you stop?”

I sat up, and he followed. “Because I—”

“Hey, if you’re about to suggest we use condoms because I can get pregnant now, I’m going to beat you. I love the feel of you,” he interrupted indignantly.

I laughed. “No, I would never dream of that. It’s just I thought of some new lyrics.”

Jake narrowed his eyes. “And you want to write them down? Now?”

“Actually. I want you to hear them,” I said, grabbing my guitar.

Jake smiled and shifted to face me fully. “Okay, but afterward, we’re getting back to busy.”

“Absolutely.”

My fingers strummed the cords, and I began the song. “In the hustle of the day, beneath the city lights, your big brown eyes are my guiding star, my beacon of the night....”

Jake scrunched his brow as I continued to sing. “I thought you said new lyrics. This is our song. The one you sang for me,” he said at a break.

“It is, but I added to it.” I smiled and completed a new bridge. My heart raced as I began the new lines. I prayed Jake liked them, even loved them.

*Now I stand, guitar in hand, asking you to
understand, My love is true, and I hope you see
I'm asking you to marry me. Your love's the
melody to my song. With you and your brothers is
where I belong.*

*With this ring, under the star's light, I promise to
hold you and your brothers every night, I'll be
patient, I'll be kind, in your love, my home I find.
You're my mate, my destiny. Say you'll be with me
for eternity.*

I stopped playing and placed my guitar down before turning to my nightstand. Pulling out the black velvet box, I turned back to Jake, who had tears in his eyes.

“Will you marry me, Jake?” I asked, showing the platinum ring.

He didn't reply, and my heart stopped. He leaned forward and kissed my lips. “Yes,” he whispered before deepening the kiss.

I pulled back. “Yes, you said yes.” I kissed him again, smiling and laughing.

“Yes. Yes. I said yes,” Jake laughed in between pecks.

This was the happiest day of my life. My world was complete. Fate had given me my mate, and I couldn't be happier.

The Dungeon

Dominic

“SIR.”

The sultry whimper of the chained man captured my sole attention. I didn't want to look away now, of all times. The submissive man bound to the St. Andrew's cross was marked so well. The red welts painting his back contrasted his milky flesh beautifully. And what's more, his moans of ecstasy as the whip stung his flesh had me hard as a rock.

“What?” I snapped, not appreciating the interruption, especially at the height of this particular scene.

Jorin, ever the unflappable minion throughout our centuries-long association, now looked distinctly uncomfortable. His eyes darted around the dim room, from the gleaming leather and metal equipment to the shadows where others watched and participated in their own dark fantasies.

“Jorin?” My voice dropped to a lethal whisper, sharp enough to cut through the moans and cries permeating the air. “You've

served me for ages. It's unlike you to disturb me during my... recreation."

The petite blonde that was servicing my cock stopped at my tone. His slight blue eyes peered up at me in fear.

"Did I tell you to stop?" I snapped, smacking his bare ass. The sound reverberated through the room, matching the current crack of the whip. The pretty twink instantly slipped my hard cock back into his mouth.

I looked back at Jorin, and his pale eyes met mine. A spark of genuine worry flickered within them. "I know, Master Dominic, but there are four large lion shifters here, demanding an audience with you."

I chuckled. It appeared that my text had caused a stir. In truth, I did it just because I was bored. I loved the fact that Jake was so innocent, and as a sex demon, I yearned for that innocence so I could corrupt it. Seeing Jake flustered, I had to mess with him and the overprotective lion.

"Sir," Jorin's words trembled.

"Show them in," I said with a flick of my hand.

Jorin nodded and quickly left the room. I leaned back and moaned as the little blond took me down to the root. Not many could take my thick, large cock all the way. Thank fuck, he doesn't have a gag reflex, I thought.

"Master Dominic, the lions of the Satchel Pride!" Jorin's voice cut through my pleasure.

I cracked my eyes and took in the hulking men. My eyes landed on one in particular. I couldn't stop my grin.

Things just got interesting.

Mike's Song

King To Your Crown

By: Mike Doy

*In the hustle of the day, beneath the city lights,
your big brown eyes, they're my guiding star, my
beacon of the night. A lion's heart, hidden in a
man's attire. For you, my love, it roars like
wildfire. Walls of steel may keep us apart, but my
love, it's strong. It won't fall apart.*

*I'm a lion in a man's disguise. Can't you see the
truth in my eyes? I'll be the king. You'll be my
crown, won't let those steel walls keep us down. In
the wild or in the city's heart, my love for you
won't ever part.*

*Your laughter, it's music to my ears. Your dazzling
smile, it chases away all my fears, You stand
strong for your brothers so small. In your*

courage, I truly fall. Working side by side, yet so far apart, I know I'm the one who can touch your heart.

I'm a lion, wild and free. Can't you see what's meant to be? I'll be the king. You'll be my crown, won't let those steel walls keep us down. In the roar of the city or the silent night, I'll always hold you oh so tight.

Now I stand, guitar in hand, asking you to understand, My love is true, and I hope you see I'm asking you to marry me. Your love's the melody to my song. With you and your brothers is where I belong.

With this ring, under the star's light, I promise to hold you and your brothers every night, I'll be patient, I'll be kind, in your love, my home I find. You're my mate, my destiny. Say you'll be with me for eternity.

About The Author

C.K.Noel

C.K. Noel may seem just your average guy, but his boundless imagination gives birth to tales of paranormal MM romance, where fated mates, true love, and happily-ever-afters rule supreme. Yet, for C.K., every silver lining has its cloud - his characters must face their fair share of challenges before savoring the sweet taste of happiness. Because what's a good story without a sprinkle of drama to keep things interesting?

C.K. takes the mundane aspects of life and spins them into extraordinary narratives, revealing the magic in the everyday. His stories, including the popular High Garden Dragons, Belle Fort Wolves, and the latest series, Satchel Pride, explore themes of dragons, shifters, Fae, and MPREG. His tales offer something for every taste. You can find more info about his work at his website: www.cknoel.com or his Linktree [here](#).

Life away from the computer is just as vibrant for C.K. He calls a quaint Florida town home, a stone's throw from the place he grew up. When not weaving enchanting tales or delving into captivating reads, you can find him by the pool,

not the beach (because, let's face it, sharks are scarier than any paranormal creature he writes about).

He shares his life with a large, lively family, a prissy Chihuahua with a royal demeanor, and two cats who switch from cuddling to clawing in the blink of an eye. In C.K.'s world, the ordinary meets the extraordinary - both on and off the pages.



Books By C.K. Noel

Satchel Pride

1. Hayden's Pryde
2. Edward's Bunny

The High Garden Dragon Series

1. The Dragon King's Heart
2. Devin's Dragon Duke
3. The Dragon Guardian's Angel
4. The Dragon Assassin's Mates
5. The Dragon's Straight Mate
6. The Doctor's Wounded Dragon
7. The Mage's Dragon Enforcer
8. The Dragon Lord's Love

The Belle Fort Wolves

1. Tommy's Wolf
2. Robert's Alpha
3. Jasper's Sunshine
4. Caleb's Redemption