



POSSESSIVE
WOLF
DADDY

SKYE WILSON

Possessive Wolf Daddy

A Friends To Lovers Wolf Shifter Romance

Wolves Of Evergreen

Book 2

Skye Wilson

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Chapter 1

Xander

My paws thundered against the earth.

In my ears, there was thunder, too.

The August sun beat down on the blacktop like the scourge of the Devil himself. Up ahead, heat rose from the highway out of Portersmith in a shimmering mirage that skirted the orange traffic cones and police car tires of a roadblock. The hot asphalt burned my calloused paw pads, but I ignored the sensation. My lungs seared with each sharp inhale, shuddered with each exhale. Every breath was an annihilation, but I couldn't stop. Not now.

Miles ago, I'd caught the faintest trail of a scent on the wind—the miasma of burning rubber and gasoline, Melony Houghton's sticky-sweet vanilla perfume, and the baby-powder scent of my sons' heads when I cradled them against my chest and pressed my nose to their crowns.

Two days ago, Melony rode off on a motorcycle with my one-month-old sons in tow. With each second that ticked by, she carried them farther away.

The ache in my heart was only half from exertion. The other half was a bloody cocktail, equal parts loss and rage. My mouth was dry and tasted sour, my eyes stung with the need for sleep, but how could I rest when my boys were out there somewhere, in the hands of a madwoman? Melony had attacked Felicity's best friend and left my brother crawling on his belly across the lawn, dragging a ruined leg behind him, the grass soaked dark with his blood.

The sound of a vehicle coming up the road behind me finally made me pause. I skidded to a stop as a rogue, gray hope took hold of me.

Could that be Melony returning to the scene of her crime? Coming back to try and convince me, yet again, that we were destined to be together? Or maybe just coming to gloat?

I listened to the sound of the engine. The hope died in my chest before it was even fully formed.

Not a bike. A truck.

As it crested a small hill, the truck came into view. From the make and model, I knew it on sight. It was a new Ford F-150, a shiny silver Raptor, fresh out of its dealership plates. Malik, one of the Portersmith sigmas, had bought it just a few weeks ago, probably to impress one of the boys' nannies. My Uncle Clint had hired an entire fleet of them from the Beau Monde Au Pair Agency to help us care for the boys while Felicity recovered from giving birth. At the time, having so many highly trained, vetted professionals around had felt like a blessing. What more could two new parents of twins ask for?

It was damning to think how quickly that blessing had turned into a curse.

If I'd known then what I knew now, I would have traded every minute of sleep their help had bought us. I wouldn't have ever let our babies out of my sight.

Gravel crunched as Malik slowed and pulled over on the shoulder. The driver's side door swung open, and Malik hopped out.

"You are far from home, Xander." Malik tossed his head, throwing his dreads off his shoulder. The silver and gold clasps at the end of each loc clinked together. His dark skin glowed beneath the searing sun.

I could have answered him with two simple words: no shit. But to actually speak with him meant I'd have to shift back to my human form. Right now, I wasn't sure which was worse: being corralled into a heart-to-heart with someone who couldn't possibly fathom my pain, or having to do it naked.

Malik regarded my silence, the deep brown of his gaze gentle but firm. Pitying.

“You need to come back to us, my friend.”

I growled at him, low and threatening. The fur on my shoulders prickled until it stood on end like armored spikes.

Malik had no children. He had no idea the world of hurt I lived in now that mine were gone. Moreover, he was no alpha. He had no business giving orders, especially not to me.

If I wanted to run all the way to Mexico and back, I could. I would if I thought it meant any chance in hell that I could bring my sons back.

“Enough of that.” The cadence of Malik’s Sudanese accent added a no-nonsense air of authority to his words. “Your pack needs you. Your family needs you.” He paused, pursed his lips, and bowed his head. “Your woman needs you.”

I growled again, shorter and sharper this time.

Malik didn’t know what Felicity needed. Neither did I at that point. When I told her that our sons were gone, it had broken her. Broken us, perhaps.

Whatever she needed right now, it sure as fuck wasn’t me.

“She does,” Malik insisted. “Even if she does not say so. This trail is cold. Come back with me. Rest. This is not the way.”

He turned and walked back to his truck. My legs were so weak, I was forced to sit. Only then did I realize how hard I was still panting.

Malik was right. The trail was leading me nowhere. I was spent.

When Malik pulled a robe out of the truck, I shoved myself back to my feet and allowed my body to shift back to my human form. I felt even more pathetic, more useless. Naked on the roadside. Teeth shorter and duller. Claws gone. On two feet, my muscles screamed with exhaustion more than they had when I’d been on four legs.

“Fine. I’ll go back with you,” I agreed bitterly, snatching the robe from him. I shoved my arms into it, then tied it at my waist. “But I can’t rest until I find them, Malik. If they were yours, you’d do the same.”

“They do not need to be mine.” Malik clapped a hand on my shoulder and held my gaze. “You are not the only one left restless. I will not stop searching, either, Xander. Not until your children are found.” He gave my shoulder a quick squeeze. “But you cannot waste your energy chasing the ghosts of taillights.”

I cast a final glance back down the highway before following Malik to his truck.

“You think we *will* find them?” I asked from the passenger seat as Malik made a U-turn.

It was the question on everyone’s minds—mine more than anyone’s.

I didn’t know whether I wanted him to tell me the truth or comfort me with a lie.

“They are your sons, Alexander Miller, alpha of the Evergreen pack.” Malik’s dark eyes were focused dead ahead. “I do not *think* we will find them. I know we will.”

* * *

It took us half an hour to get back to civilization. We drove to Portersmith in mutual silence, cut only by the low hum of music on the radio and the rush of wind coming through my rolled-down window.

At the bottom of the hill, the town, bright and lively, wreathed the bay. The height of the summer vacation season had arrived. Wealthy humans drove the streets in pastel-colored jeeps and Range Rovers with beach chairs strapped to the roofs. Young couples rode around on shiny Vespas, clinging to each other’s waists, caught up in the thrill of summer love. Sailboats floated in the ocean, the sun reflecting off the bright white sails.

It was like nothing had ever happened at all.

For a place that looked like it belonged on a postcard, Portersmith felt like a nightmare that seemingly had no end.

This was Clinton Morrow's territory—the home of my mother's original pack. For decades, it had been the domain of my grandfather. Samuel Morrow: disgraced alpha, serial killer of humans, FBI's most wanted, and now a wolf on the run.

I still couldn't shake the thought that he had something to do with my sons' kidnapping, though there was no proof of that.

Since he'd attacked Felicity and me on the day the boys were born, no one had seen him. No sightings of his crackpot doctor, either, or of Quincy Houghton, Melony's feral father.

They may as well have blinked out of existence entirely.

And now, Melony had joined them and taken my sons with her.

As Malik slowed to take the turn toward Morrow Manor, which sat at the top of the hill and presided over it all, a round-hooded, red convertible with the top down blew past us. Two tan, blonde women in cat-eyed sunglasses and silk scarves rode up front, smiling and laughing. In the back, pudgy twin girls in ladybug print bathing suits turned to wave enthusiastically at us. Their pale pigtailed whipped against their chubby cheeks as the car carried them away.

I raised my hand to wave back but couldn't muster it.

The Amber Alert had gone out the same morning the boys were taken. All the people in Portersmith, humans and shifters alike, knew my sons had been kidnapped. They knew who was responsible. The posters were up all over town with their pictures and names, Rylan and Ryder, their tiny faces scrunched.

It was one of hundreds of pictures we'd taken of the boys. Alongside their photos was one of Melony, probably taken off some social media account. It was burned into my mind now. Her pristine blonde blow-out draped over her raised shoulder, and her eyes rimmed with thick fake lashes. Her smile was

flirty in some kind of disgusting attempt at seduction as she stared at the camera, like she'd done nothing wrong at all.

All of Portersmith's vacationers were probably gossiping about the abduction over mimosas, chatting about it between tennis matches, and speculating while they sunned on their million-dollar yachts.

To them, my missing babies were just a story. A thrilling subplot to their otherwise picturesque vacation by the sea.

Could I blame them, though? How many times had I turned on the news to a story about a missing kid or gotten an Amber Alert on my phone? That kind of thing didn't happen in Evergreen. I couldn't even recall the last time I'd heard of an abduction, let alone if the kid in question had ever been found.

Things like that never felt real until they were personal. Until it was your fucked-up story, your kids who were missing. And once it was personal, it was already too late.

News vans were still crowded at the gates of the manor like flies around dogshit. They'd arrived two days ago, shortly after the police showed up, and hadn't left since. As we pulled up to the gates, reporters hopped from their vehicles and swarmed the truck, shouting questions and shoving their microphones through my open window.

"Mr. Miller! Over here!"

"Any news you can share with us?"

"Where do you think the boys could be now?"

"Are you beginning to lose hope?"

I shoved my hand against a camera lens and forced it away, then hit the button to roll up the window. What did I care if I clipped a few fingers or damaged some equipment in the process? Goddamn vultures, all of them.

A second later, the gates slid open. Clinton's betas emerged from the gatehouse to drive the reporters back so they couldn't follow us up the drive—though not for lack of trying.

I watched the reporters in the rear-view mirror, hating those hungry news crews even more than I despised the oblivious tourists. The former wanted to feed on tragedy. The latter ignored it.

I knew which one was worse.

* * *

Felicity had still been asleep when I headed out that morning—at least, she'd pretended to be. Neither of us had slept properly since the boys were taken. I wasn't sure we ever would until they were safe in our arms again.

I'd left her in bed and slipped out quietly. I'd wanted to hold her, but I knew better than that. Every time I tried to touch her, she only moved farther away.

Malik might have been the one who drove out to find me, but Felicity was the one who brought me back.

Your woman needs you. Even if she does not say so.

I hoped there was some truth in Malik's words.

As I got out of the truck, my only thought was to get dressed in proper clothes and find my mate.

Unfortunately, everyone else found me first.

Dylan sat on the manor's front steps, his jeans ragged, his white T-shirt torn and full of holes. His shaggy, dark blond hair was slicked back with sweat. Dylan raised his head as I approached.

"We need to talk."

I raised an eyebrow as he hopped up and fell into step with me. "You're a long way from Evergreen."

"Four-hour drive," he confirmed.

What the hell was he doing here? He was meant to be back home, managing the pack, and he knew it.

Evergreen needed an alpha—one who could be present and engaged, and one who could be there. Every pack did. My business here in Portersmith had kept me away for far longer than I'd planned. Dad was a shadow of his old self while he waited for Ma to wake from the coma Quincy had put her in. And while Macy—the only actual alpha among my three siblings—would have been the ideal choice for my temporary replacement, she was due to give birth any day now. I'd forbidden her from leaving the safety of her mate Leo's pack in Boston. With babies being abducted, and our sociopathic grandfather still at large, no precaution was too great.

Which left Dylan, a sigma, who was fully capable of leading but very much preferred not to. He'd been picking up the slack for months now, much to his dismay.

“You could've called,” I pointed out.

“I did. You didn't answer.” He side-eyed the terrycloth tie at my waist. “Nice robe.”

I rolled my eyes, scanning the hall up ahead for any signs of Felicity. “Can whatever you need wait?”

“Not really.”

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Okay. Just let me go get—”

A set of doors burst open across the foyer.

“Xander!”

I turned to my aunt and uncle, dressed in their country-club-luncheon finest. They hurried toward us, their eyes haggard.

That couldn't be good.

I clapped Dylan on the shoulder and gave him a firm look. “Wait here. I'll be back down in a second.” I waved at Clint and Aubrey to follow me.

“What do you have for me?” I asked as we took the stairs up to the second floor.

“Three more sympathy arrangements.” Clint nodded to a trio of maids carrying massive, lavish vases of flowers. They moved alongside us like ducks in a row before outpacing us up the stairs.

Each was making a point of not looking at me. They knew exactly how I felt about those fucking flowers. The first one had arrived two days ago, and my stomach had turned at the sight of it. The tenth one, I’d thrown against a wall.

The flowers hadn’t stopped coming, but the maids had done their best to keep them out of my line of sight ever since.

“Is that all the East Coast packs have for us?” I asked. “Their sympathy?”

The police were doing what they could to find Melony and the boys. The FBI were doing their best to track down Samuel. Clinton and Aubrey, like me, still believed that the two cases were connected. It would explain how all our enemies had simply disappeared.

Human authorities and shifter business didn’t often mix. They minded their business, we minded ours. For the average police force, all but the weakest packs were completely impenetrable. The older a pack, the better fortified they were from human influence.

If Samuel was hiding out with one of the other old packs here on the East Coast—and we were certain he was—the FBI would burn through every cent of their annual budget trying to find him. And if he’d taken Melony under his wing, decided to harbor her while she held our sons hostage, the cops would be the last to find them.

Only another shifter would be able to crack that façade. Clinton and Aubrey had spent the last two days on the road trying to do just that.

To little avail, apparently.

“It’s complicated, Xander.” Aubrey’s lips pulled into a tight, thin line. “We did warn you it wouldn’t be easy.”

“We tried our best. For as much good as it did us,” Clint admitted, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. He was a

short man, but he'd been standing a little taller since Samuel's departure. Beneath my gaze, however, he shrank a full inch. "We can keep at it, though. If you have a moment to talk game plan—"

"Need to get dressed first." It would give me some time to think over a plan that didn't involve breaking down doors and tearing out throats. "If you see Felicity, let her know I'm looking for her."

"Of course. But, Xander—"

"Five minutes, Clint." I took the last few stairs in a single step. "If the East Coast packs are going to fuck us in the ass, I don't wanna hear about it until I've got pants on."

I made it about five paces before the next interruption. This time, it was in the form of a short, dark-skinned Portersmith woman wearing a brightly colored hijab and navy-blue nursing scrubs.

"Mister Miller—"

"It's Xander, Yasmeen. Please." I didn't slow down as I headed for my room. God willing, Felicity was in there waiting for me. The world was too loud right now. Too chaotic. Too full of people needing me for things.

Even if she ignored me from across the room, Felicity was the only person who could quiet it all back down.

"Ah... Xander, then," Yasmeen continued. "It's about your brother. He—"

"Which one?" I interrupted, tugging my robe a little tighter around my waist. Yasmeen was Kingston's recovery nurse, but with Dylan at the manor now, either of them could be giving her grief.

"Excuse me?"

"Which brother?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her eyes widen, likely with horror. "There's more than one?"

“Ah.” So, she hadn’t met Dylan yet. “Kingston, then. Has he killed anyone?”

“No, but—”

“Minding his manners around you?”

“As much as he’s capable,” Yasmeen allowed. “But—”

“Is he a danger to himself or others?”

“Of course not. Well.” A damning pause. “Not exactly. But —”

“Right. Downstairs, you’ll find a scruffy-looking blond guy sulking around.” Yasmeen’s complaints and concerns would keep Dylan busy while I made time to figure out what the hell he wanted from me. “Whatever it is you need to tell me, tell him instead.”

I reached the door to the room, tugged it open, and slammed it behind me.

The silence that greeted me was bittersweet. Inside my head, half a dozen voices were still yammering with complaints. But there was no Felicity here. Just a freshly made bed and the faint scent of her perfume.

My mood blackened while I dressed. Boxers. Jeans. T-shirt. Every move felt mechanical. These days, my body was a poorly kept machine, run ragged and put away wet, left to rust until I got up to run it ragged all over again. When I sat down on the bed to pull on my socks, it took every ounce of strength I possessed to get back to my feet.

If I lay down now, I doubted I’d ever get up again.

When I opened the door once more, I found five bodies waiting for me. Clinton, Aubrey, Dylan, Yasmeen, Malik—

But no Felicity.

Their words erupted at me all at once, a barrage of voices clamoring to be heard. My head panged at every syllable. I held up a hand to try and quiet them, but they ignored it.

“Have any of you seen my mate?” I barked over them all, scowling at the congestion.

Five blank faces stared back at me.

Wherever she was right now, Felicity clearly didn't want to be found.

I growled. "All right. Fine. Let's go to the dining room. You can all air your grievances and give your reports there.

Chapter 2

Felicity

In nursing school, we learned about the golden hour. A pretty name for a precarious thing.

The golden hour referred to the slice of time immediately after someone sustained a traumatic injury. If one could intervene before that time was up, there was a significantly greater likelihood the patient would survive. Rapid intervention was the more official, more accurate term. In some cases, you had several hours before a trauma victim's chances began to falter. In others, only minutes. Seconds.

The important thing was acting. Quickly. Doing the right thing, and doing it fast.

In missing persons cases, they said the first forty-eight hours were the most crucial. Perpetrators were at their most erratic. They were nervous, afraid, or riding a sick adrenaline high, which meant they were most likely to make mistakes. Witnesses still had their clearest memories and could give the most accurate accounts. Discovering the first lead in that critical time window was imperative. After it closed, the chances of solving the case were slashed in half.

Out in the gardens of Morrow Manor, where our golden hour had started, I sat on the ground and stared at the time on my phone, watching the last of our first forty-eight slip away.

I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the earth beneath me, on the heat of the sun on my skin. The sounds of the birds in the trees, the bubbling of the fountain, the scent of roses on the humid wind.

It was what self-help books said to do—the advice of a thousand mindfulness coaches, therapy blog gurus, and glow-up influencers.

Live in the moment. Clear away the cobwebs of your thoughts. Twelve simple steps to getting better. Buy your inner peace, only \$49.99!

It didn't work. The more I focused on my body, the more I felt it.

The knife in my heart. The ache in my sinuses. The stains that had been etched on my cheeks from so many tears. The empty place in my womb where my sons had been safely nestled.

The hedges rose at my back like fortified walls. Even the semblance of protection they provided was a joke. Not so far away, police tape still marked the plot of ground where Samuel Morrow had buried the bodies of his human victims. Before me, more yellow plastic.

CRIME SCENE. DO NOT CROSS.

There was the gap in the paving stones where Melony Houghton had plucked a rock to bash over Gena's head. And there, on the grass, there was a matted, bloody stretch where Kingston had crawled after Melony when she'd mauled his leg.

I turned my gaze back to my hands. They were shaking. My nails were ragged, stinging from the way I'd gnawed them to the quick.

"Mrs. Miller?"

I looked up to find a dark-haired woman in a white button-down and navy slacks approaching from beyond the police tape that crisscrossed the lawn.

I wished I could say she was a sight for sore eyes. At this point, she was anything but.

"Detective Moreno." I'd given up on reminding her that my surname was Jordan, not Miller, and that Xander and I

weren't husband and wife. It hardly seemed important now. "What's the bad news?"

I'd gotten very good at reading faces in the last forty-eight hours. Hers was an open book.

From the moment Xander told me that Melony Houghton had abducted our sons, it had only been bad news. Especially when it came from the Portersmith police force, who had been liaising with the FBI on the boys' case.

"We're pulling the roadblocks tonight," she confessed. "The checkpoints haven't turned up anything. No sightings of that motorcycle, either." She clasped her hands together in front of her and bowed her head like she was giving a eulogy. "I'm sorry. My captain is making me—"

"It's fine," I cut her off. "I understand."

And I did.

I understood that she'd tried. I understood that she'd failed us.

The entire Portersmith Police Department had.

She cleared her throat. "If we thought there was any chance that our current measures would catch Miss Houghton —"

"They were never going to," I scoffed. "By the time you had those roadblocks set up, she was already gone."

Moreno's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again.

"Your husband was prompt about notifying us, Mrs. Miller, and I know every route out of town. I've ridden them all myself, on my own bike, twice, just to make sure. I've timed every path. Believe me when I say that wherever Miss Houghton took your boys, she didn't leave this area on two wheels." She said it with such conviction that I actually believed her.

But Detective Moreno wasn't the only person from the Portersmith PD we'd spoken to. Her captain, Kain Booker, was a big, nasty man with a face like a sour lemon and an attitude to match. He may have been human like Moreno, but

unlike Moreno, he'd been appointed to his position by Samuel Morrow himself.

If I had to guess, old loyalties died hard.

“You think she’s still here in Portersmith, then?”

“I didn’t say that.” Moreno reached across her body and rubbed her arm. “We’ve swept the area thoroughly. Our current suspicion is that she shifted and fled with the boys in her wolf form.”

“You truly believe that a wolf could carry away two one-month-old babies without detection? How do you figure the logistics of that, even? She—what? Swaddled them up with a Boba Wrap and ran off with them riding on her back?”

“That... is one of our current theories, yes,” Moreno admitted. At least she had the decency to look suitably ashamed.

She knew exactly what I thought about her department’s current theories. Half of them had been cooked up by her captain. The ones that weren’t entirely implausible were so offensive, Clinton had banned the captain from the estate.

Frankly, it was for his own safety. Captain Booker was lucky he’d made it off the premises with his face intact.

When we reported the boys as missing, Captain Booker had been the first on the scene. He’d had the audacity to suggest that Xander and I might have kidnapped our own sons, or that we’d simply misplaced them—allowed them to wander off. He’d actually asked if we might have staged Gena and Kingston’s injuries, even as Gena was loaded into an ambulance completely unconscious while the paramedics maneuvered a groaning Kingston onto a stretcher, the bandages around his ravaged leg soaked through with his blood.

Xander had wanted to pulverize the man’s face into a pulp for that. He would have, too, if Malik and Clinton hadn’t held him back. He’d always been quicker with his fists than his words, even when we were teenagers. How many bullies had he sent home crying to their mothers in that same way?

And that was before. Before we'd been threatened, targeted, held hostage, attacked. Before we'd been beaten down over and over again, with only enough time to pick ourselves back up before the next wave of beatings arrived.

Before Melony Houghton had launched herself into our lives and ripped our sons from us.

It had changed him, all of it. When his anger flared that day, I'd felt the power radiate off him, dark and powerful as a crackling storm cloud threatening to rain down wrath and ruin.

And I'd wanted to see it happen. Desperately. So desperately that I knew I should have been afraid of that desire. But in truth, it had scared me far less than it should have.

All of this had changed us both.

Regardless, Xander hadn't trusted the Portersmith PD ever since, and that distrust extended to Detective Moreno, no matter how earnest and eager she seemed.

"Do you have any theories about how Melony gained access to the estate? Any ideas of where she might be now?" More unanswered questions, none of which the police had been any help in answering so far.

"We don't," she admitted. "The guards at the gates have no record of her coming in. They didn't see who knocked them out so she could make her escape."

"What about that reporters, then?" I asked. "Have you figured out how they're getting in?"

The guards had done their best to keep the swarms of news crews on the outside, but someone had broken through. The proof had been plastered all over the front page of the *Boston Enquirer*, plus a four-page spread on the inside: original crime-scene photos of the abduction site; shots of the empty graves in the garden where the bodies of Samuel's victims had been exhumed; pictures of the Morrow Family mausoleum where Samuel's murdered father had been laid to rest. The double abduction of two shifter newborns, the grandsons of a newly discovered shifter serial killer still on the run, all

playing out across Samuel's dumping grounds here at a mysterious, luxurious shifter estate.

It was a story worth trespassing for, I guessed.

There had even been shots of Xander and me standing on the balcony of our room. Those photos had been blurry, but not blurry enough to conceal the way we were both crying.

Moreno frowned. "I'm not here to upset you."

So, that would be a no.

"What are you here for, then? You don't need our permission to take down the roadblocks," I pointed out.

"Ah... well, mostly, I'm here as a courtesy, Mrs. Miller." She pursed her lips and blew a breath out her nose. "I regret to inform you that, because we no longer believe that Miss Houghton, Ryder, and Rylan are still in this county, my captain has ordered me to turn this case entirely over to the CARD. Special Agent Cordova will be your primary contact from here on out." Her eyes met mine. "I am so sorry. Really, I am."

I stared back at her, wishing I could hate her for it. I knew she'd done her best with what she had. I knew it was Captain Booker I really despised. There was every chance that despite Samuel's absence, Booker was still in his pocket. That Booker was intentionally being useless just to hurt us. That he'd let Melony escape.

The CARD... I had a little more hope in them. The FBI's Child Abduction Rapid Deployment team were trained for situations exactly like ours. We'd met with Special Agent Cordova several times but always with Captain Booker breathing down her neck. Cordova was professional and well-spoken. A lot like Moreno, in many ways—but unlike Moreno, she wasn't stuck beneath Booker's thumb.

Maybe it was good news. If the Portersmith PD was dirty, maybe this meant our case would be passed into cleaner, more capable hands.

But the time we'd already lost had been crucial. There was no getting it back.

I turned my gaze back down to my phone. “You know the way out.

Chapter 3

Xander

Everyone gathered around the table while I sat at the head, waiting to hear their grievances and reports. The seat to my right remained empty.

It was where she should have been.

Felicity had yet to turn up. I'd asked the maids, who swore she was around somewhere. At least she hadn't packed her shit and left. But it seemed to me that everyone in this fucking mansion wanted my ear today, save the one person I wanted to talk to.

I missed her. I missed her scent and her smile and the way my chest felt when she was near me. Like my heart was finally beating right.

Felicity was avoiding me. She had been since I broke the news.

"Go on, then," I said with a sigh as I surveyed the faces at the table. "Who's first?"

"The other East Coast packs are stonewalling us," Clint piped up quickly. "No one's seen anything, no one knows anything."

"Some of them may actually be telling the truth," Aubrey added.

"And the liars?"

"It's proving difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff." Clint shook his head solemnly. "We could be looking for a needle in a haystack..."

“Or a needle in a needlestack.” I nodded, accepting it. This was a reality we’d already prepared to face, but the stakes had been far lower back then. “Right. Realistically, how many of these packs might have taken Melony in?”

“A better question would be, how many are loyal to my father?” Clint said. “You know I share your suspicions that he had something to do with this. Melony didn’t make her way onto the estate undetected without help.”

“There are three packs in the area that would help Samuel,” Aubrey supplied. “Old ones, all of them. Waning, like Portersmith was before Clinton took over, but rich in land, connections, and clout.”

“The Du Ponts are my grandmother’s people—Samuel’s mother came from that pack,” said Clint. “He’s been cozy with the Sterlings for decades, and the Laurents hate humans even more than Samuel does...”

“From what we’ve seen so far, not one of them is worth trusting,” said Aubrey. “Whether they’re actively aiding Samuel or not.”

“Your sons are both alphas—a trait that’s in low supply and high demand these days. Moreover, they have a human mother *and* Morrow blood,” said Clint. “No one will say it out loud, of course, but any pack obsessed with shifter superiority will stand by Father’s side in removing the boys from human influence. They’ll only look to placate us, or even hinder—never help.”

“They’re useless, then.” Big surprise. “Keep on them, anyway. If they won’t give us anything, we’ll take it from them. I need your betas knocking on every door.”

“And if those doors don’t open?” Clint asked.

“Start knocking them down instead.”

Malik cleared his throat. “About that.”

I gestured for him to speak.

“We are short-staffed, my friend,” Malik informed me. “We do not have many betas to spare.”

“It’s true.” Clint’s expression was pained. “You know we want to find the boys just as much as you do, but we’re ultimately a peacetime pack. We lost half the muscle we had when Father fled. Most of the other half...”

“This is peak tourism season,” Aubrey explained. “The money Portersmith makes during these months sustains the town for the rest of the year. Without it, there’d be no Portersmith.”

“I don’t trust hiring outside help for this. We can easily outbid any beta who can be bought. Right now, we can spare Malik, the betas he’s retained on his team...and the two of us.” Clint took Aubrey’s hand. “It’s not enough to intimidate every pack that might be harboring Father. It’s barely enough to surveil them all.”

I clenched my jaw, wrestling with that. Clint’s people had jobs. Lives. Felicity and I had those things, too, once.

Why should the shifters of Portersmith carry on like the world was still turning when it had clearly stopped the second our sons were taken from us?

“I understand.” I finally forced the words out, then looked to Dylan. “The Evergreen pack, then. Send the order. What Portersmith can’t cover, our betas will account for.”

Dylan solemnly shook his head. “No, man.”

My heart sank. “What do you mean?”

Dylan cast a furtive glance around the table. “Maybe we should talk about this somewhere more private. It’s why I drove up here.”

“Why bother now?” He’d already blurted out his insubordination. What was another twist of the knife? “Whatever you have to say, might as well say it here.”

“It’s just...” He rubbed the back of his neck, his eyes cast down to the table. “You’ve been gone for a while.”

The accusation seared my chest. But it wasn’t just an accusation, was it?

It was the truth.

“I haven’t had a choice,” I growled. “We came here to secure a future for one of our sons. We stayed to prevent a fucking war—”

“I know that,” Dylan insisted. “The pack, though...”

“Takes orders from their alpha.” I arched a brow as a bitter taste filled my mouth. “Or is that not the case anymore?”

“Look, don’t get all defensive on me.” Dylan held up his hands, palms toward me. “The pack’s behind you—that’s not the problem—but if you want to give them orders like an alpha, you need to *be* their alpha. I’ve been stringing things along as best I can, but I’m just a sigma, Xander. I don’t have... whatever it is that makes it so you can do what you do. We’re falling apart without you.” A rare, pleading look crept into his eyes. For a moment, he looked about six years old again, asking if he could sleep in my room because there were monsters in his. “I can’t do it alone anymore.”

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, then let out a breath.

“No. Of course you can’t.” I covered my face with my hands and tried to rub the tension from my brow, but the muscles there felt calcified, immovable. Hard and heavy as iron. “Thank you. All of you.”

“You don’t need to thank us, Xander,” Clinton said, shaking his head. “I know that none of this is what you want to hear right now.”

Dylan hung his head. “We’ve let you down.”

“No.” I placed my palms on the table and rose. “You’ve been honest with me. That’s all that I can ask.” I looked to Yasmeen. “You had something to say about Kingston?”

If I was meant to spend today dealing with bad news, I might as well get it all out on the table now.

Yasmeen straightened. “I did, yes. Kingston, ah...”

Her voice trailed off as her gaze wandered to the door.

“Kingston, what?” Kingston snipped from the doorway.

He rolled into the room in his wheelchair. His beard was thick and wild, his dark gold brows set into a scowl. He wore the same Red Sox T-shirt he'd been wearing when we watched them win the World Series, its fabric now threadbare and riddled with holes. His lucky shirt, he used to call it.

He looked like a man clinging to whatever luck he could get.

When my eyes trailed down to the blanket across his lap, he was quick to pull it down over his knees, hiding his dressings and the place where his left calf had once been.

“Nice to see you all. The horrified staring? It really does it for me, you know.” He gripped his wheels and pushed himself farther into the room. “So, gang, what are we talking about? Geopolitics? *Love Island*? Weird how I’m not invited to meetings anymore.”

“It was impromptu.” I gestured at the table. “I’m just listening to all the ways I’ve been fucking up lately. Unless you want to add to the pile, you’re not missing much.”

“You should be resting.” Yasmeen’s face went pale as Kingston tilted his chair back, popping an irreverent wheelie. “Mr. Miller, please—”

“Oh, I’m fine. I lost my leg, not my head.” He scoffed as he lowered the chair back into a safer position. “Not that it seems to matter to any of you. Ignore the cripple, right? What could he possibly bring to the table now? You folks have fun without me. I won’t bother you any more than I already have.”

“Stop,” I snapped when he wheeled the chair around and rolled back toward the door.

“Fuckin’ make me,” he called over his shoulder, flipping me the bird on the way out.

My eyes met Yasmeen’s. Exhaustion and worry mingled in her gaze.

“He’s been refusing his pain medication and skipping physical therapy,” she said quickly. “It’s making him... disagreeable.”

Fuck. He was barely forty-eight hours out of the operating room. Shifters healed fast, but not that fast, and wolves still felt pain.

“That’s not what’s making him disagreeable.” I shoved my chair out of the way and headed for the door. “Anything else you need, tell Dylan. Dylan, we’ll finish this conversation later.”

With stiff muscles and aching bones, I jogged for the door.

If Kingston wanted me to fucking make him stop, I was more than happy to oblige.

I caught him halfway down the hall and grabbed the handles of his wheelchair. We were right outside the scorched doors to the manor’s fire-damaged ballroom. Two months ago, Kingston had been by my side, running into that fire without hesitation.

Now, his grip tightened at his wheels as he strained to pull away.

“Let me go,” he growled through his teeth. “You don’t need me for anything, anyway.”

“Wanna fuckin’ bet?” I reached down and pulled the lever to slam on his brakes. “Dodging therapy? Refusing your meds? What I need is for you to recover, you little shit.”

“What’s it matter?” He snarled at me as I walked around his chair to speak with him face to face. “I’m never gonna walk again.”

“Not if you’re avoiding anything that will help you, you won’t,” I pointed out.

“Never gonna run, either,” he said, ignoring me. “Face it, Xan. You need a one-legged brother about as much you need a three-legged wolf.” He sneered as he lowered his gaze to the rug beneath us. “Not even worth making into a wheelchair general, am I?”

“That meeting wasn’t planned. You wanna know what you missed? Literally fuck all. We have nothing. We know nothing. We’re short on resources, shorter on time, the pack

back home is sinking without us, and we're all stuck here sitting on our hands and licking our wounds." Frustration boomed through my voice. I hadn't meant to yell, but when we're angry, we do plenty of things we don't mean. "There. Happy? I just saved you an hour."

He glowered up at me defiantly. "If shit's that bad then let me help. Just because I lost my leg—"

"And I've lost my children." I glowered right back at him. If he wanted to start tallying up losses, I'd meet him point for point. I shook my head. "You're fucking benched, King. You wanna help? Start taking your meds and doing your exercises. Take care of yourself. Then, we'll talk—but not before that."

"Benched. Just like that, huh?"

"Yeah. Just like that."

His lips twisted with disgust. "You still fucking blame me, don't you?"

My jaw dropped. Across my mind, the memory of that day flooded in yet again: Kingston, crawling across the grass on his belly, dragging his ruined leg behind him as Melony drove away.

"I never—" I began, but my words came too late.

"Save it, Xan." Kingston slammed the brake lever back. "You do blame me. I can see it in your fucking eyes. And you should. I should've lost more than my leg that day."

"I'm glad you didn't." Another knife in my heart. Another twist of the blade in my chest.

His eyes were cold and dead when they met mine.

"Then, at least that makes one of us."

He broke the gaze and wheeled around me, then away.

* * *

I roamed the manor like a lost dog. The argument with Kingston clung to my skin, sinking into already taut muscles,

winding my jaw so tight it made my head ache. Everything else piled up behind it, a recipe for disaster. My chest was a dam doomed to break soon.

I needed Felicity. I didn't care if she wanted to shout her fury at me like Kingston had, or just stand quietly by my side.

I was better when she was close to me. With her hand in mine, I could do anything, fix anything, win any war, fight any fight.

Without her, I was lost and angry and too bitter to do anything but look from wall to wall, thinking about how nice it would be to put my fist through it.

The manor had plenty of rooms to hide her. I searched them one by one, finding only empty space behind every door, until there was only one place in the mansion left to turn.

My mother's old bedroom smelled like a florist's shop. Looked like one, too. Roses in every color mingled with daisies and irises, peonies and orchids in a myriad of vases on every available surface.

It was where all the sympathy arrangements had ended up.

In the midst of them all, my mother lay prone in a hospice bed, blonde hair splayed across the pillow beneath her like a halo, eyes closed. If she was a sleeping beauty, it was hard to tell beneath the IV lines and the oxygen mask. Across her neck, bandages covered the scars from where Quincy Houghton had tried to tear out her throat.

The head wound she'd sustained during the same incident had left her comatose. Thanks to Felicity's quick thinking—while in labor, no less—Ma's body had healed. But somewhere within it, Ma's mind was still locked away.

"Xander?" Dad blinked up at me, eyes bleary. He sat hunched in an armchair right next to Ma's bedside. He hadn't left it since I broke the news to him about the boys.

"No updates," I told him before any semblance of false hope could glimmer in his eyes. He'd lost too much already: his wife and mate, his grandsons, so much weight. The swell of wishful thinking followed by the sharp crash of

disappointment was liable to send him into cardiac arrest. “I’m looking for Felicity. Has she been in here?”

“She sat with me for a little while this morning.” Dad gestured to the empty dining chair next to him. “She said you’d left.”

I blinked, dumbfounded. I had left, I supposed. I’d slipped out in the darkness of our bedroom before she woke. There’d been no need to leave a note or a text to tell her where I’d gone. I’d been searching for the boys. Where else would I be? There was nothing else to do.

But the way Dad said it—*left*—made it sound so final. Like I’d abandoned my own mate in grief.

“Well, I’m back now.” My gaze strayed instinctively toward Ma. She’d left us, too. For a while. When she finally decided to return to us, it had been too late. The damage of her meddling had already been done. “Any idea where she might have gone?”

“No. Sorry, kid.” Dad reached for Ma’s hand. His fingers avoided her IV like he’d mapped out their paths around it by memory. “But she was in a pretty black mood.”

“Aren’t we all. What’d she say?”

“Nothing. But I could feel it.” He shook his head and closed his eyes. “Sometimes silence speaks louder than words.”

It was no surprise. Felicity had talked to the police, had issued a plea for our sons’ safe return on the news, had even given carefully prepared statements to the ravenous reporters outside. Where it mattered, she’d held herself together like a true stoic.

But in private, she’d gone dark. She hadn’t said much to me since the kidnapping—I could count the number of words on my fingers. When the police were gone and the cameras were off, I couldn’t even pretend she was taking off her mask. As soon as we were alone, she just put on a new one. No eyes. No lips. No expression at all.

“Ma doing okay?” I asked.

Dad shrugged a shoulder. “Same as ever.”

“And are you—”

“No updates,” Dad said quickly, echoing my own words. “Don’t worry about us right now. Go find your mate, kid. You two need each other. More than ever now.” He bowed his head over Ma’s body and pressed his lips to her wrist. “This world’s too brutal to go it alone.”

It hurt, that distance. My mating bond to Felicity was strong. Wolves mated for life. My love for her would never change.

But... I wasn’t sure the same could be said for her anymore. I’d broken too many promises. I hadn’t kept her safe.

I’d let that bitch steal our sons.

My dad was right.

I headed outside.

Chapter 4

Felicity

Every person is a collection of their losses. You don't realize it until you've lost something yourself, but it's true.

By that logic, for most of my life I'd been made of hair ties and spelling bees, loose teeth, single socks that disappeared in the dryer, the twenty pounds of awkward baby fat I now carried on my sense of self-worth instead of my hips. The father I'd never had. The mother who was present, then not, depending on which rich man she was currently in love with and how much that man liked kids. A childhood wasted trying to parent my mother through her heartbreaks and divorces before she moved on to the next, all while trying to parent myself as well.

After Detective Moreno left, I drifted aimlessly through the gardens. I walked the path that Kingston and Gena must have taken with the boys that morning, before everything went to shit. Had they been flirting when it happened? Imagining how my sons would grow up? Smiling and laughing, making plans in the morning sun—all until Melony arrived to rip it all to shreds?

They'd lost each other for a little while. A failed fling between Xander's oldest brother and my closest female friend. A love affair that had been doomed from the start. Kingston never had his moon dream about Gena, so it hadn't mattered how she felt about him.

The babies had brought them back together again, this time as godparents. Together, they'd smiled at our boys, played peekaboo. Gena had laughed while Kingston pressed the boys'

tiny feet to his ear, pretending to take phone calls. For a perfect month, I'd been so certain that Kingston would wake up one morning and announce that he'd finally had his moon dream. That, like Xander, maybe his had just taken a while to set in.

But it wasn't meant to be.

Thanks to Melony, Kingston had lost a leg. Gena was lucky to have gotten off with only a concussion, but she'd stopped answering my texts once she was discharged from the hospital.

In the end, being my friend had put a target on her back. Maybe I'd lost her for good.

I should have been used to loss by now, but grief wasn't a muscle. You couldn't just flex it, tear its tissues, let it repair itself with rest. Grief was the weight of a cruel world on tender shoulders. Mine were screaming for relief, but there was no way to lessen the load, no quick trick to set it aside. Bear enough of it and, eventually, it would kill you. But there was nowhere else to put it. It had nowhere else to go.

Maybe that was why it hurt so much.

“Cheeks?”

Xander emerged from behind a hedge, looking just as broken and exhausted as I knew I looked—as I was.

“You're back.” Neither of us had been sleeping at night. Not really. For hours these past nights, I'd lain in the darkness of our room and felt him awake and silent next to me. When I finally did drift off last night, I awoke this morning to find the bed empty and Xander gone.

“I—” He licked his lips and nodded. His Adam's apple bobbed. “Yeah. I am.”

I pressed my fingers against my thighs to stop them from trembling. “I wasn't sure if you would be.”

His brow furrowed. “I'll always come back for you.”

The gravel of the garden path crunched beneath his boots. His golden hair was dark at the roots, unwashed, and damp

with sweat. Deep trenches ran between his waves like he'd dragged his fingers through the same channels over and over again. His stubble made his jaw look more rugged than ever. In the greens of his irises, I could see my refracted and warped reflection.

His eyes were the same shape as Rylan's, and Ryder had Xander's nose and lips.

I lowered my gaze. I couldn't stand to look at him when all I could see were the twins.

"Hey. Look at me." Xander caught my cheeks between his palms. We both pretended I didn't flinch at his touch. "What's wrong?"

A harsh, humorless laugh left my throat. "What isn't?"

He bowed his head. "I know, Cheeks. It's killing me, too." Slowly, his eyes wandered back up to mine. "I've missed you."

I blinked. "I haven't gone anywhere," I said dully.

"Whatever you say."

The silence that followed only emphasized his point. Here we were, standing less than a foot apart, connected by Xander's touch. But for all it was worth, we could have been standing in different countries, moving away from each other with the continental drift.

"Cheeks...it's killing me, too." He took my hands, his calluses rough against my palms. "But if we're both dying, surely we don't need to die alone."

My chest tightened as memories of our mating ceremony flooded my mind. I'd been so drunk on the magic of the moonlight, on Xander, on the power of the ancient words we'd spoken to each other, my tongue clumsy and heavy with the language of the wolves.

Fate before love, love before eternity. Our only vows. Even those had been a lie. Love had found us long before fate caught up. And eternity? It sounded more like a threat than a promise now.

From the start, we'd been singled out: hunted, kidnapped, held hostage, burned out, tracked like prey, attacked, nearly killed. Again and again, I'd convinced myself it was worth it. For each other—for our sons—anything was.

Now they were gone, what was left?

Us?

Two broken people, hanging on by the skin of our teeth?

"I don't want to feel like I'm dying anymore, Xander," I said on a shaky breath, clenching my fists. My nails bit into the heels of my hands, hard enough to hurt.

"Neither do I," he agreed. "So, what do you want?"

I stared at him, eyes wide. "I want our sons back." What else was there to want?

"I know, Cheeks. I want that, too."

I sighed, recalling Detective Moreno's announcement. "You just missed Moreno. Portersmith PD are handing the boys' case entirely over to the FBI. They're washing their hands of it. As far as they're concerned, Melony is long gone."

"Good riddance, then," he scoffed. "It's not like they were any help."

I bit my lip. "I'm not sure anyone can help anymore."

"I know how you feel. I just talked to... well, a lot of people. Clint and Aubrey have done everything they can for us. They were kind enough about it, but we've overstayed our welcome. The pack back home is falling apart without us. And Dad, Kingston—they're falling apart here."

"Your mom?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Still out. No better, no worse."

While Xander held my hands, I found myself thinking about loss all over again. It was a grocery list we couldn't seem to stop adding to.

"So... what do we do about it?" My voice was ragged, projecting my helplessness.

“I think...” he whispered, pressing his forehead to mine, and this time, I didn’t flinch. “I think it’s time to go home.”

* * *

We said our goodbyes to Clinton and Aubrey in the same place we’d met them four months ago, at the base of Morrow Manor’s front steps. Aubrey cried a little. Clinton cried a lot.

My own eyes remained dry. I would miss them both, but I couldn’t find any tears to match theirs. All of mine had already been shed.

“We’ll come back when this is over,” I promised Aubrey as we pulled back from an embrace.

With a harsh laugh, she shook head and wiped her eyes. “This place is haunted, hon. Sometimes I think we’d be better burning it all down and starting anew.” She gripped my forearms just beneath my elbows and gave a firm squeeze. “If you never came back, we wouldn’t blame you at all.”

* * *

Before leaving, we cleared our departure from Portersmith with Special Agent Cordova over the phone. She’d had the same idea as Clinton and Aubrey: Melony could be working together with Samuel, which meant one of the other packs in the area might be harboring her. So, Cordova was off doing her best to interrogate the other East Coast packs, to about as much effect.

Thankfully, she didn’t buy Captain Booker’s story that Xander and I might have had something to do with the boys’ abductions—not that the theory ever had any legs to stand on in the first place.

“I can send some agents to escort you home,” Cordova offered, “but with the number of reporters swarming around, it might be better if you keep a low profile.”

We agreed about that. Xander traded his truck for one of Clinton classic cars, a midnight blue Impala. In return, Clinton and Aubrey, disguised like us as they best could be, left in Xander's truck just before we did, drawing the reporters away. As for Xander and me, we donned the closest thing to disguises we could get away with: dark sunglasses, a ball cap for Xander, and a silk scarf to cover my hair.

When we left Portersmith, I didn't even glance in the rear-view mirror to see it one last time.

Aubrey was right. It was haunted, by our time there, by the terrible things we'd been through, and most of all, by Samuel Morrow.

If we never saw it again, I was pretty sure I'd be okay.

The ride back to Evergreen was as silent as it was strange.

The strangeness, at least, I could explain.

We'd spent most of my pregnancy at Portersmith, plus a month of recovery afterward. After so long away, it was uncanny to see the *Welcome to Evergreen* sign. Normally, I didn't even see it.

I'd arrived in Evergreen as a fourteen-year-old, cast off so my mother could cosplay as a young, childless newlywed. Went away for college. Came right back. Evergreen wasn't a place I left often.

Xander turned before we hit town, taking the backstreets instead of staying on the main road.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Save for a few feeble initial attempts at conversation on Xander's part at the start of the drive, it was the first thing either of us had said to each other since leaving Portersmith. Even when we stopped for groceries, we hadn't spoken. I'd placed the things I wanted into the cart, and Xander tossed in his own selections. When the cashier asked us cash or credit, Xander had pulled his wallet and paid without making a sound.

I hoped we were headed to Nana Jordan's—a place that always welcomed me back no matter how long I'd been away—or to the Havishford House, the picturesque colonial of my dreams. I'd purchased the house just in time to abandon it for our own safety, for all the good that had done us.

The universe had delivered its message to me loud and clear, repeatedly. Now that my sons had been taken from me, I was finally ready to accept it.

No matter where we went, we weren't safe, so we might as well go somewhere that felt like home.

Before I could get my hopes up too much, though, Xander dashed them.

“The lodge,” he said, hanging a left. “I don't think I can stomach the way they'll force smiles and give us pity waves when they see us drive by.”

“Oh.” I hadn't considered that. We'd been away just long enough for me to forget that even on the best of days, Xander was small-town famous. Any alpha of any shifter pack always was. Our return to Evergreen should have been a triumph. Instead, we were coming back with our tails between our legs.

“Are you disappointed?”

“No,” I half-lied. “The lodge is fine. What should I expect when we get there?”

“What do you mean?”

“What's waiting for us? Full house? Or an empty one?” The pack liked to band together when tragedy struck.

“Empty,” Xander confirmed. “For tonight. I thought... it might be a good idea. The pack will want to see us. Tomorrow, we'll have to let them. Dylan says things have gone to shit while we've been away.” He shrugged. “If you want, I can still ask them to come over. You know they'd love that. I just thought you might like a little time alone tonight.”

I frowned. Alone from the others or alone from him? I wanted to reach out and take his hand, but something stopped me.

“No,” I said, folding my hands in my lap instead. “An empty house is fine.”

* * *

In so many ways, being alone was a relief.

Dylan and Kingston wouldn't be back for a few days. Tony would stay in Portersmith with Marianne until they could arrange for a transfer to Evergreen General. Right now, it was a waiting game, a matter of hoping Marianne would regain consciousness or, barring that, finding an empty bed.

Left to our own devices for the first time in a month, we unloaded the groceries and filled the fridge, then opened the windows to let in the fresh air. We unpacked our bags. There was no one to hassle us while we did it, no maids to insist on doing what we could easily do for ourselves, no friends or family around to ask us how we were feeling (bad), or if we were okay (of course we weren't).

The silence between Xander and me continued to stretch on, and the force field between our bodies only grew. That night, we went to sleep on separate sides of the bed, parted by a gulf of empty mattress and undisturbed sheets. We woke up in the same positions and immediately checked our phones for updates. There were none. When I forced myself to shower, I took my clothes into the bathroom with me and changed in the lingering humidity of the shower, not caring that it made the fabric of my shirt cling to my skin. Xander did the same. It was easier, I guessed, than the vulnerability of seeing each other naked, or of being naked in front of another person at all. We were both already stripped so raw.

If we're both dying, surely we don't need to die alone.

It was a lovely proposition. One I was still struggling to navigate or make real.

Every word I said to him stuck in my throat before I forced it out. Every time I thought of taking his hand or folding myself into his arms, that strange feeling I'd felt in the car on the ride here stopped me just short of acting on it.

And the longer I went without touching him, the less he touched me back.

* * *

I hissed, then whimpered, bracing myself against the glass of the shower. A few inches away, blistering hot water rained down, filling the space with steam.

At Morrow Manor, after the boys were taken, I'd had a hard time sleeping. Our first night back at the lodge had done little to remedy that. When I finally managed to drift off for a few moments, a sharp pain in my breast launched me right back into consciousness. Now my body had given me a thrilling new reason to evade the rest it so desperately needed.

The breast pump made a soft mechanical noise as it sucked at my nipple, then released. I felt like a dairy cow, and not a particularly good one. The bottle attached to the pump remained empty. No milk came free.

I'd have to turn the water off soon. Steam was supposed to help, but it was making my body too slick for the pump to take hold.

I whimpered again and shoved a knuckle between my teeth, squeezing my eyes shut. Every pull from the pump burned like a cigarette being put out under my skin. Deeper in my breast, a dull and throbbing ache dug trenches in my muscle tissue, tender as a bruise. Sweat poured down my face and trickled between my cleavage. An outright cry left my lips when the pump slipped and, instinctively, I jerked it back into place.

My heart leapt as Xander tore open the door.

“What’s wrong?” His eyes scanned the bathroom frantically before landing on me. He was shirtless, in only his boxers. His hair was messy, his gaze, terrified—like someone might have emerged from the drain to steal me away, too.

“Nothing. Just one of my milk ducts.” I slammed the shower off and pulled the pump away from my skin. They'd

both been useless, anyhow. “It’s clogged, I think. Not a big deal.”

My shoulders hunched as I emerged from behind the glass and reached for a towel. The steam would give me a little privacy but not for long.

“Sounded like a big deal. Here. Hold still.” Xander stepped between me and towel rack, reaching for me. “I’ll take care of it.”

“No.” I took a quick step back and steadied myself against the wall. The tiles were slick beneath my bare feet. “It’s okay. I’ve got it. Normally, the boys...” I trailed off. We didn’t need another reminder of their absence, even if feeding them was the prescribed solution for this. “It just needs a little massaging, that’s all. I’m sorry I woke you. I’ll be quieter. You can go back to sleep.”

“Let me do this for you, Cheeks. I’m not—”

“I said I’ve got it!” I snapped.

I took another step back. This time, my feet lost their purchase. They slipped out from beneath me, and the floor rushed up as the ceiling whooshed away.

Xander’s strong, firm arms wrapped around me just in time. He caught me beneath the armpits and dragged me to his chest. In my panic, that only made me struggle even more.

I didn’t want to be held. I didn’t want to be sweaty and wet, or wielding a breast pump at three in the morning, or dealing with my misbehaving tits.

I wanted to stop hurting.

I wanted our sons back.

Xander held me tightly until I stopped fighting him long enough to get my feet beneath me again. Only then did his arms relax, but he didn’t let me go.

I had no choice but to feel his body against mine, sturdy and strong like a well-built home.

Slowly, the tension released from my own body.

God, I was tired.

“Here,” he said gently, taking the pump from me.

He placed it on the floor, then dropped to one knee. I allowed him to sit me down on his thigh. He moved my body like a doll’s, positioning me the way he wanted. With a stern hand on my back, he pressed me forward, doubling me over. My nakedness was forgotten as he took my breast in his large, callused hand.

He massaged it firmly, starting at the root and working his fingers down toward the nipple. The sensation was as hypnotizing as it was painful. I gasped and whined my way through it until, finally, the duct cleared with a thin spurt of milk across the wet tile.

“Do you hate me, Cheeks?” he whispered as I sniffed, wiping away what could have been sweat, could have been tears.

“Of course I don’t hate you.” I covered my sore breast with a hand. I loathed to admit it, but it did feel better. “Why would you ask me that?”

“Maybe because you flinch every time I try to touch you. When I walk into a room, you glance at me, then look away. Even now, you nearly hurt yourself trying to get away from me.” He rested his head against my shoulder, and I willed myself not to move. I didn’t want to prove his point. “Maybe you hate me because this is my all fault.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is,” he insisted. But with a sigh, he seemed to drop the argument. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” I said, realizing he meant my breast, not something else. “It felt... almost good, actually. It’s the first time anything’s felt good since...”

My heart twinged just for admitting it. Nothing felt good anymore. How ridiculous was it that something as unsexy as Xander unclogging my blocked milk duct was the first almost-positive sensation I’d experienced since the twins were kidnapped?

“Then, I’m glad it was from me,” he said softly. The silence spread its choking tendrils between us for a long moment before he spoke again, driving them away. “I can’t believe it’s only been three days.”

“Neither can I,” I admitted. “I keep thinking I’m going to hear them crying from the next room, then I remember...” that they were gone, that they might never come back. We might never find them. I might never hear my babies cry again.

“I know. I feel it too.” Xander helped me to my feet, then rose. He wrapped his arms around my soaked body, holding me close.

Despite the urge to fight against him, to push him away, I let him.

The truth was, I needed to be held.

Maybe Xander needed something to hold, too.

He pulled back to stare down at me. There was something new and fierce in the greens of his eyes. “I’ve given up on the cops helping us, Cheeks. I’m done waiting for a call that’ll never come. I’ve made you a lot of promises. I’ve broken most of them. So this is the last one I make you until I can prove to you that I’m capable of keeping them.”

He moved in, as if for a kiss. I must have flinched again without even meaning to, because he changed trajectory at the last minute, brushing his lips against my cheek instead.

“I’m going to fix this, I swear it,” he rasped, moving his lips to my ear. My body shivered at the quiet power in his voice. “I’m going to find them. I’m going to bring them back to you.”

Chapter 5

Xander

In my dreams, we were a family again. Happy. Safe. Whole.

When I slept, I could even hear the boys crying.

I never thought the sound of crying babies would bring me so much joy.

I woke with a start to a dark room and the cold reality: there were no cribs next to the bed, no fussing infants to lift and cradle in my arms.

Next to me, Felicity lay beneath the sheets, her back to me. Even in the pitch dark, I could make out the cascade of her auburn hair flowing across the pillow like an ocean of silk. But when I reached for her, she only mumbled something incoherent and shifted away.

I didn't think she was awake.

Stupid, I thought to myself as I dragged myself from the bed and to the shower. Holding her the night before was the most right I'd felt all week, and all too quickly, it had evaporated.

No matter how much she claimed she didn't blame me, I didn't buy it. Not in the least.

When I'd tried to kiss her, she'd turned away.

And even in her sleep, my mate couldn't stand my touch.

* * *

“We’re at a loss.”

Special Agent Regina Cordova sat at the lodge’s large dining room table, her hand curled around a cup of coffee, and a deep trench between her brows. She’d arrived with the sunrise, coming in straight off a night shift staking out the Du Pont pack’s estate in Vermont. Her silver hair was tied back in a severe bun, and the stains on her white shirt told me this was far from the first cup of coffee she’d had in the last few hours.

“But you’re the FBI,” Felicity pointed out. “You’ve caught thousands of criminals. That’s your job.”

“And yet, D.B. Cooper still got away. And the Lindbergh baby...” Her voice trailed off. Not exactly a story I appreciated being reminded of at that moment. “All I’m saying is that we need to be realistic. These cases are delicate, complex things even in the best of cases, and that’s before you add shifters into the mix.” She gave me a wary look, like I was personally responsible for complicating things more. “I want to be transparent with you both. The tip line we set up has been ringing off the hook—”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Felicity interjected.

“—but not with anything valuable,” Cordova finished. “Hundreds of people are spotting hundreds of blonde women with babies every day. We’ve got police across the country responding to each report, and we still haven’t found her. Frankly, we’re running out of leads. Stakeouts, wiretapping, search warrants—sometimes they work.” She shook her head, looking more exhausted by the minute. “Sometimes they don’t.”

“Have you reached out to Doris Houghton yet?” I asked. “She’s Melony’s grandmother. Doesn’t live far from here.”

“I have,” Cordova confirmed. “Waste of time. I sent two of my guys over to her place on the day of the abduction. Melony wasn’t there. Doris didn’t know where she was. Said she hadn’t seen her in months. Another dead end.”

“You think she’s telling the truth?” Felicity asked.

“I think so, yeah. Though, it’s hard to say for sure.” Cordova shrugged. “You’re welcome to try yourself. I know you shifters are happier to cooperate with each other than the authorities. Maybe you’ll succeed where we’ve failed.” She lifted her coffee mug to her lips and drank deeply. It was empty when she put it down. “Thanks for the coffee. If I learn anything more, I’ll be in touch.”

Felicity and I walked her out and stood on the front porch as we watched her walk away.

“Do you think she’s right?” Felicity asked.

I pulled my phone from my pocket. “Only one way to find out.”

I made the call. Seven rings, then voicemail. I made the call again.

I made that same call sixteen times before I gave up. Doris Houghton knew my number. She must’ve known I’d be calling, but she wasn’t answering, and somehow I doubted she’d just fallen and couldn’t get up.

“Dylan and Kingston are getting back today,” I announced, pulling up Connell Huxley’s contact instead. “When they get here, I want the pack elders here, too.”

Felicity visibly perked up. “You have a plan?”

I dialed Connell’s number. “I just might.”

* * *

The drill whirred in my hand, shooting satisfying vibrations through my work glove up my arm as I set the last screw in place. The sweat forming at the back of my neck from the kiss of the morning sunlight cooled my skin as a breeze swept in. Beneath my boots, the plywood ramp was sturdy and strong.

Sturdy and strong was something we sorely needed right now.

Rylan and Ryder’s absence still hung the heaviest over my heart. But when it rained, my God, how it fucking poured.

Kingston would be back today. So would Dylan. I was worried about them both.

The amputation had decimated Kingston. So had his guilt over the boys. *I should've lost more than my leg that day.* Those words still haunted me. If he was ever going to walk again, he needed to start taking his meds and going to PT. And before that, he would have to learn to accept help. To forgive himself. To accept that this wasn't his fault.

After so many months of managing the pack without me, Dylan probably needed a vacation more than anything, but I couldn't give him one now. He never should have been put in the position of leading the pack on his own, and I'd need him more than ever as soon as he was home. Keeping the reporters away meant keeping a low profile, which meant Felicity and I couldn't chance going into town. I needed a lieutenant. A second-in-command. Whether he'd take the job or not? All I could do was hope.

Out in Boston, Macy and Leo were hunkered down with my newborn niece. Harper had been born earlier that morning, weighing eight pounds and six ounces, with a full head of blonde hair and a tooth already coming in. It had been a long labor, and a hard one, Macy had admitted in an exhausted voice over the phone. She would need time to recover, and even though she'd assured me that Leo's pack was taking good care of her, it killed me that we couldn't be there with them.

Finally, I thought of Ma and Dad. Ma was still in a coma back in Portersmith. Until she came to, Dad would remain a husk of his former self. And even if she came to, she'd still be cut off from their mating bond. Still cursed. Could the pack ever accept her again after all she'd done? Could Felicity?

Could I?

I wanted to line my troubles up along the porch steps like army men, then knock them over one by one.

Instead, I built a ramp.

"You think it'll hold?" Felicity asked from where she was leaning against the frame of the front door. She was still in her

nightgown. Her hair was bound back in a wilting ponytail, tangled around its tie and half loose in front. The heat and humidity had turned her auburn waves into thin, damp curls around her face. The bags under her eyes were as deep as the ones beneath my own.

Somehow, the hollowed cheeks and bloodshot eyes only enhanced her features. That she could still be so beautiful when she was in so much pain—it hurt my heart.

“It ain’t pretty, but it’ll hold,” I confirmed, putting the drill down and standing back to admire my work. It was a long ramp for a short set of steps, but without it, Kingston wouldn’t be able to get inside on his own. “Kind of fucked up, now that I think about it.”

“What is?”

“How many places aren’t, ya know, wheelchair accessible.” If Kingston took his meds and dedicated himself to recovery, he’d be on crutches soon enough, then a prosthetic, if he could find the patience to learn how to use one. But the lodge hadn’t been built with accessibility in mind. Not a lot of places had.

“Kingston will appreciate it.”

“He won’t.” At least, not in any way he’d admit. “But with a couple of trips to the hardware store and a little more time, I can build this in properly.” I nodded, already imagining how I could make the ramp look intentional, recraft it with nicer wood and stain it to match the steps. “We’ll need it for the strollers.”

“The strollers. Right.” She didn’t sound convinced. “Are you sure about this?”

“If it can hold my weight, it’ll hold anything else we throw at it. And if Kingston tries to tear it apart because he’d rather crawl up the stairs than accept mobility assistance... Well, it’d keep him busy for a while.”

“Xander...” Felicity shook her head. “I mean about Carter’s Creek. Your plan.”

“Oh.”

Of course, that was what she meant. I'd been up half the night, staring at the ceiling, charting and recharting that course, questioning whether it was the right one.

Today, we'd put it into action either way. No more chasing cold trails. No more relying on the police. If we couldn't find a way to track the boys down, we'd have to make one. And we would.

"Yeah," I answered. "Yeah, I am."

"You think it's gonna work?"

"It has to, Cheeks." I wanted to go to her, take her in my arms, kiss her hard and deep like a promise only our lips could seal.

But I knew better than that. A kiss wouldn't be enough. Only results could fix this now.

* * *

We made up the den for Kingston. Unfortunately, I couldn't build an elevator in one morning, and all the rooms at the lodge were upstairs. While Felicity fluffed pillows, and I smoothed a fresh sheet over the unfolded mattress of the pull-out couch, the pack elders arrived.

We greeted them on the porch, accepting their hugs and pitying looks. It was just as uncomfortable as I'd expected, even though I knew they were coming from a heartfelt place.

"We're so sorry," Sylvia Abner cooed, smoothing a hand down Felicity's shoulder blades. Felicity stiffened at the touch like she wanted to bolt but held her ground. She had just as hard of a time at accepting sympathy as I did, I'd realized. Perhaps it was even harder for her. I'd known these people for as long as I could remember. Felicity was still new to having so many people around her who cared.

"We're more than sorry." Ambrose Reed shook my hand with a death grip and a fierce scowl. "We're pissed as all hell."

“What’re we doing about it?” Connell asked, hands in his pockets. He nodded but didn’t swoop in to touch us. It was a kindness I didn’t know how to thank him for.

“Well, for starters—” I began, but my words were cut off by the sound of a vehicle approaching. I turned my head to find Dylan’s truck speeding down the drive. “Shit. Gimme a second.”

I jogged down the porch steps as Dylan pulled up. The wheels flung gravel until the truck lurched to an abrupt stop. Through the front windshield, I could see that he and Kingston were arguing. I could hear it, too. The closer I got, the louder their shouts became.

“You wanna do it yourself, huh?” Dylan shouted at Kingston as he threw the driver’s side door open. He hopped down, brow knitted, lips snarling. “Don’t need my help? Okay, buddy! Go ahead! Go for it! See if I care.”

“What’s going on?” I asked as Dylan trudged toward me.

“He’s a fucking menace, Xan. I’m done with him.”

“You can’t be done with him,” I pointed out, watching the passenger side door as Kingston pushed it open. “He’s your brother.”

“He was your brother first.” Dylan shot a parting glare at the truck, then deflated as he turned away. “I’m trying. Honest. I’ve been with him all day, haven’t I? I got him here. Even that was a big ask.” He shook his head. “I wanna help him. I do. Problem is, he’s a jackass, and a fucker, and he doesn’t want help.”

I clapped my hand on his shoulder in understanding. “Go on in. I’ll handle it.”

Dylan patted my chest in return and shook his head. “Good luck. I mean that.”

He headed up the steps as I braced myself to hear Kingston’s side of things.

“Need a hand?” I offered.

“No, I need a fucking leg. You’ve still got both of yours, cupcake, so try and keep up.” Kingston stared down at the truck’s running board. He looked like he was doing advanced calculus in his head. “Just leave me be. It’s like I told Dylan... I can do this myself.”

“King—” I shook my head, reaching for him. Dylan’s truck was huge. There was no way Kingston was getting out of it without help.

“Fuck off,” he snapped, shoving my hands away. He shifted in his seat and let out a breath. “Just need to... Sonofabitch... Fucking...”

In an act of great bravery—or great idiocy—he launched himself out of the truck. His foot hit the running board okay, but as he tried to hop down, he lost his balance.

“Fuck!”

I barely caught him in time before he hit the ground.

“Jesus, man,” I swore. “You keep this shit up, you’re gonna kill yourself.”

“I’m fine!” He wrestled against my hold on him, trying to shove me away. He almost succeeded, too, until he almost toppled over the second he was free. “Let go of me, asshole! I’m fucking fine.”

“You’re not fine,” I growled as he went right back to struggling all over again. “Go on. Swear at me all you like. Take it out on me. You go right ahead. But this is a family. You’re part of it. That means you get help when you need it whether you like or not.”

Kingston drew back. For a second, I thought he was going to head butt me. I was relieved when he didn’t.

“I’m not gonna thank you,” he grumbled, looking away.

“Didn’t ask you to.” I helped him prop himself up on the door while I reached into the truck’s bed to grab his wheelchair. I unfolded it for him and helped him into it. It earned me more swearing, but Kingston’s words hurt me a lot less than face-planting on the driveway would have hurt him.

* * *

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Dylan breathed.

I’d gathered everyone around the dinner table to hear my new plan. After I laid it out, a stunned silence fell over the room. It would have left me sweating if Felicity hadn’t reached for my hand.

That Dylan was the first to speak—and that his response was so incredulous—wasn’t a good sign.

“I’m not kidding,” I assured him. “The time for jokes is long past.”

“But... There are kids in Carter’s Creek, Xander,” Sylvia pointed out.

“Our sons are kids,” I said. “And they’re in a hell of a lot more danger right now than any children there.”

We had no way of knowing where our sons were, or what plans Melony had for them. If she’d taken them to her father, I knew Quincy would like nothing more than to feel their blood on his hands. If it was Samuel she’d delivered them to, it was harder to say. My sons were his legacy. His kin. That had to count for something. But there were too many variables to count, too much madness in the mix.

Right now, Rylan and Ryder could be alive somewhere, safe and sound. Or...

They might already be dead.

“I know, hon. Believe me, I know.” Sylvia drew her arms around herself as she shivered. “I know we’re desperate, but ___”

“Desperate times, desperate measures.” Ambrose nodded in approval, which, generally speaking, was also a bad sign. But I needed all the support I could get. “You’ll get no argument on this from me. Carter’s Creek has been pushing it with us for too damn long. They wanted war, now they’ve got one.”

“Quincy Houghton wanted a war. As did Melony,” Connell said. His wary gaze met mine. “Doris Houghton hasn’t done anything to us, and she’s the closest thing to a pack alpha they’ve got now. If we’re calling this war, fine. But blockading her town? You ask me, that sounds a little like a war crime.”

“So’s stealing someone’s newborns, don’t you think?” I countered. “You’re right, Connell. Doris hasn’t done anything to us.”

“She sent flowers,” Felicity corrected bitterly.

“That’s true. Flowers.” My jaw clenched as I remembered the cloying scent of all those meaningless vases and bouquets gathered in Ma’s room back at Morrow Manor. “When she should have been waiting here for us when we arrived, ready to hand over any information she could on her son and granddaughter. She promised me she’d keep a handle on the two of them. Instead, she’s let them run rampant and given us nothing to go on.”

“And you don’t see any other way?” Connell asked. “Diplomacy—”

“Has gotten us nowhere,” I reminded him. “Don’t you think I started with that? I called her sixteen goddamn times this morning. No answer. Which means she knows I want to talk to her. If I go knocking at her door, I suspect she’ll pretend she’s not home.”

“If she’s going to cold-shoulder us, then we’ll give her the same treatment.” Felicity’s grip tightened around my fingers. “If she wants the roads open again, she can have them. As soon as she tells us everything she knows about Melony and where she might be now.”

“I...I understand, but I don’t like it. Think of the children, Xander,” Sylvia pleaded.

“I am. I’m thinking of my children.” I looked to Kingston, who’d been silent so far. He sat in his wheelchair, arms crossed over his chest as he stared at the wall. “King?”

He pursed his lips, then nodded.

“Melony Houghton is part of Doris’s pack. Without any other alphas in that town... she’s Doris’s heir,” Kingston said, still not meeting my gaze. “She attacked a human. She destroyed my leg. She’s been aiding and abetting a known enemy of Evergreen, and she kidnapped two innocent babies.” A low growl left his throat. “No. We can’t let that fly. If Doris Houghton is playing alpha, she’s responsible for the actions of her pack members. There won’t be any trouble as long as she cooperates. It’s better than she deserves.”

I looked around the table, clocking the expressions on every face. Kingston’s, determined. Dylan’s, uneasy. Ambrose looked bloodthirsty and vindicated. Sylvia, heartbroken.

Felicity’s face had gone stoic again. She looked like a battle-hardened general, ready to give whatever order was necessary.

Connell merely raised his hands in surrender. “All right. Do it, then. But if this gets out of hand...”

“It won’t,” I assured him. Everything I knew about Doris Houghton told me that we’d be hearing from her soon. I turned to Dylan. “Can you rally up our betas? I don’t think this’ll take long, but we’ll need a team on every road in and out of Carter’s Creek until Doris does her part to make this right.”

“They’d be better off hearing it from you,” Dylan said. “Like I told you, they’re tired of taking my orders. What you’re asking for here is going to lead to some push-back if it comes from anyone’s mouth but yours.”

“All right.” I squeezed Felicity’s hand once last time, then let her fingers slip away as I rose. “Then, we’ll go together. Let’s get this over with.”

Chapter 6

Felicity

The pack elders left shortly after Xander and Dylan. Before Sylvia headed out, she took my hands in hers and said a prayer for the boys. Ambrose hit me with a flurry of violent promises about what he'd do when those fuckers who took our babies were finally found.

Both were sweet, in their own way, but their offerings felt empty.

Xander had the right of it. Promises and prayers were just Band-Aids. Words weren't going to bring Rylan and Ryder back to us.

We needed something better. Something else.

The closest thing to comfort I got from the pack elders came from Connell. He lingered for a few minutes after Sylvia and Ambrose left, then wrapped me in a quick, tight hug. He smelled like a grandpa—in the good kind of way. Clean and woody and warm, just a little bit like motor oil. He broke the hug as quickly as he'd started it and didn't say anything to spoil the moment. Then he was gone as well, leaving me with a grumpy Kingston, who immediately shut himself in the den, and an otherwise empty lodge.

The couches were comfy here. The décor elegantly rustic. This place was a far cry from the oppressive luxury of Morrow Manor. A good thing, as far as I was concerned. I never wanted to be waited on by a maid or called “Mistress” ever again.

But it also wasn't home. Not for me. Not even for Xander, who'd grown up in his parents' house out on the edge of town. It was too big to be a home. Too many empty bedrooms. Too many chairs at the dining room table. A kitchen outfitted for feeding a small army when all I wanted to do was fry up two eggs, make two cups of coffee, toast two slices of bread, and make two bottles—breakfast for our little family of four.

I sat down on a couch, then got right back up. The swing on the front porch was equally awkward beneath me when I tried it out.

I felt displaced, adrift all over again. A sailor's wife on the widow's watch, wondering when her husband would return from the war.

* * *

"I'm glad you two are back in town, you know," Nana said, bustling across the kitchen once the kettle began to whistle. "I might've missed you a little."

I forced a smile that felt incredible fragile. "We missed you, too. I'm sorry I didn't call when we got back."

"You needed a little time to yourselves. It's okay." She lifted the kettle and tilted it over our mugs. Steam rose as the tea bags floated up, then sank into the hot water.

"Still."

I'd asked her to come over while I waited for Xander to return from Carter's Creek. The comfort of being alone wasn't much of a comfort without him here, as it turned out. And as far as company went, Kingston didn't qualify.

Nana spooned sugar into our mugs, then slid one toward me. "When you get to be my age, waiting's not so hard. Time moves faster, and you've got plenty of practice. You think you'll be up for visitors again soon?"

"I thought that's what we were doing now," I admitted.

“Oh, hon. I’m not visitors. I’m family. You’ve gotta suffer me whether you want to or not.” She said it teasingly but with pride. As if anyone had to suffer Nana. Even on the darkest days, she was a comforting brightness. “But Connell told me how nice it was to see you again, even given the circumstances. And I know Nadia would like to come visit... when you’re ready, of course.”

Nadia was a former maid at Morrow Manor. I could still remember the look of terror on the maid’s face when she came to my room in the manor all those months ago, delivering the bad news: Xander’s grandfather was summoning me. It’d been the look of someone who knew exactly what happened when that disgusting old man summoned a human woman to his quarters. If not even the mate of his own grandson was exempt from his filthy desires, a human maid without a car or other job prospects certainly hadn’t been.

It was one of the few things we’d done at Morrow Manor that I could truly take pride in. With Nana and Gena’s help, we’d gotten Nadia out. Samuel would never touch her again. He had no idea where she was.

“How is she?” I asked.

“Oh, you’d barely recognize her. She’s talking more, spending less time in bed, eating better.” Nana reached out and curled her fingers around my palm. “Which reminds me, you barely touched your lunch..” She clucked her tongue at me. “You’re losing weight.”

“It’s nothing.” After all the shit I’d gotten as a chubby teenager, it was crazy to even think that I was being chided for losing weight. “Just baby weight.”

Nana’s grip on my hand tightened. “It’s not.”

I looked away, knowing she was right. She’d brought over her famous honey-barbecue ribs for lunch, the kind she slathered with her secret recipe sauce and baked wrapped in foil until the last fifteen minutes of broiling to keep them juicy while the heat caramelized the outer layer. Alongside the ribs was a potato salad loaded with fresh herbs from her garden and crispy bacon; creamy mac and cheese with shell noodles

and so much extra gouda that every scoop came with a massive cheese pull; a salad of fresh cucumbers and the first cherry tomatoes of the season, dressed with oil and lemon juice and Dijon mustard.

It was a feast that normally would have left me salivating, but what little I'd eaten of it, I'd had to choke down to be polite. Food didn't taste any better than coffee to me anymore. My appetite was nonexistent. Even seated, the elastic on my leggings gaped loose at my waist.

"At least Mom will be happy," I joked, though it wasn't really that funny. At any sign of weight loss on my part, my mother was generally thrilled. Anything to get her daughter a little closer to a size four, whether it came from healthy eating or despair.

"Ah, your mother." Nana winced. "About her."

"Oh no." There was a reason I hadn't spoken to Mom since well before Easter. Actually, there were about twelve.

More drama from her was the last thing we needed now.

"It's nothing bad," Nana assured me in the most soothing tone she could muster. "She saw the interview on the news, is all."

"And she's pissed I didn't tell her that I was pregnant?" She had to be. It wasn't her style to take that gracefully. I could already imagine her reaction, the way her Botoxed brow line must have struggled to scowl. Who cared that my sons had been kidnapped? How dare I keep her out of the loop?

"Actually, no." Nana must have seen my jaw drop. "I know. Surprised me, too. She knows there's, ah... bad blood between the two of you, and she called me to ask if she'd be welcome in Evergreen again. I think she wants to patch things up."

"Did she apologize to you?" That was part of the reason I wasn't on speaking terms with my mother anymore. Last time I saw her, she'd been so rude to Nana that Xander had kicked her and her snooty boyfriend out of Nana's house.

“Don’t you worry about me.” That was a no. “It’s you she’s thinking of right now.”

“If she wanted to apologize to me, she should’ve called me herself.” Even that was typical Mom, though. Testing the waters. Seeing what she might be able to get away with before she even considered doing the right thing.

“I think she wants to,” Nana said. “She’s just concerned she’ll overwhelm you.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Mom’s concerns were about vastly more important things. Like Birkin bags, lip filler, faking her age, and most of all, herself. Everyone and everything else tended to take the backseat.

“Stop making this about you!” she’d told me once as I desperately tried to scrub a bright red bloodstain out of her brand-new couch. “It’s my turn to be upset right now!” And never mind that I’d just started my first period. There’d only been so much room for emotions in her house, and she always claimed the lion’s share.

“Call her back or don’t, baby doll,” Nana said with a shrug. “But she sounded sincere. By my measure, that’s progress. You’ve gotta take whatever good the world gives you right now.” She leveled a meaningful gaze at me. “Even if it doesn’t come wrapped in the package you wanna see.”

* * *

After Nana left, I paced and fiddled with my phone, waiting to hear from Xander. I knew he expected to be back before nightfall, but there was no news yet. I didn’t want to bother him with requests for updates. Instead, I opened my contact list and scrolled through the names.

At my mother’s, I paused.

Nana said Mom wanted to talk to me. I still wasn’t sure if the feeling was mutual. She’d spent my childhood alternating between obsessing over my appearance and body, like I was a

doll with some factory defects that left me looking less ideal than the picture on my box, and ignoring me completely.

If I'd been kidnapped, how long would it have taken my own mother to realize I was even gone?

I scrolled back up to Gena's contact and opened our messages. I'd sent her several since she'd been discharged from the hospital, but they were all unread.

I missed her and her easy smile. The way we could joke around about the silliest things, our faces aching with laughter. I even missed the shifts we'd worked together at Evergreen Hills, where we were overworked and understaffed.

More than that, though, I felt guilty. When I asked her to be the twins' godmother, she'd been so excited. She'd taken off work to drive up to Portersmith with Kingston to spend time with them. With us. She had no stakes in the world of shifter feuds and politics that I'd entered when I fell in love with Xander. She hadn't done anything to Melony Houghton, anything to deserve being attacked.

She'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Caught up in the wrong storyline. Friends with the wrong people—me.

She'd come between Melony and my sons and had paid the price.

Hey, I texted her, adding to the pile of other messages. How are you feeling? Xander and I are back in Evergreen.

She was lucky she'd only come away from the attack with a concussion, that she'd been able to get discharged quickly and head back home with just a bad headache and a scar. Kingston hadn't shared that luck. She probably hated me for dragging her into this, for putting her in harm's way. I didn't expect a response.

My heart leaped when I got one, anyway.

Welcome home <3 Wanna come over?

I almost smiled.

Of course I did.

* * *

It'd been a long time since I'd driven the Flamingo. Actually, a long time since I'd driven at all. My ugly, old, two-tone pink Kia still smelled faintly like the last pine tree-shaped air freshener I'd hung over the rear-view mirror six months ago—bright yellow Vanillaroma. My work Crocs still sat in the passenger seat next to the lanyard that bore my name tag, like artifacts from another life.

I parked outside Gena's house and headed inside.

"I'm so sorry I didn't answer your texts," she gushed as she hugged me in the entryway. "I've been recovering up at my dad's place. The cell service there is dogshit."

"You don't need to apologize." I glanced at her suitcase next to the door as she pulled away. "Did you just get home?"

"Just this morning, yeah. You?"

"We've been at the lodge for a few days," I said, following her into the living room. Her apartment was comfortably messy. A bra hung over the arm of the couch. Pedro Pascal fought mushroom zombies on the TV. "How're you feeling?"

"Concussed, I guess. The doctors say I'll be fine, though. It gets better every day. You?" She yanked the bra off the couch and tossed it across the room as we sat down. "Wait, no. Don't answer that. You've probably got people asking you that all time."

"Yeah." I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. It made the thin folds of extra skin over my stomach roll awkwardly, a reminder of how quickly I'd lost the baby weight. "I just wish I had a different answer."

"You will. Someday soon." She put a tentative hand on my shoulder and turned toward me. "Felicity... I'm so fucking sorry."

"Don't say that." I shook my head quickly. "It's not your fault."

“It is, though.” She raised her hands to her temples. “I keep playing it back in my mind. If I had just been paying better attention, I think I might have been able to hear her coming, or if we hadn’t taken the boys out to the garden—”

“None of that would have mattered. Melony was already on the estate.” We still had no idea how she’d managed that. “She knew what she wanted. She would have taken them no matter where they were. And if Kingston didn’t hear Melony coming, there’s no way you could have. You’re a human, Gena. You’re lucky she didn’t maim you. Or kill you. I’m just glad you’re okay.” I took a deep breath. “I’m so sorry—”

“Hey, no. If I’m not allowed to apologize to you, you can’t apologize to me.” Her cheeks went a little pink—a feeling I knew all too well. “Just... Come on. Please. Is there anything I can do?”

“Well, you could tell me what you remember,” I suggested. “I mean, if you do remember any of it.”

We’d asked the same of Kingston, but he only remembered seeing Gena go down and the fight that followed. Melony had been prepared to shift and had done so quickly.

“She was out of her clothes and into her wolf form while I was still trying to figure out what was going on.” That’s what Kingston had told Xander in a rasp, right out of surgery.

If Gena’s side of the story provided anything new that Kingston’s had missed, it could be the break we needed.

“You’ve already heard most of it in the report, I imagine. That FBI lady took my statement once I was conscious enough to give one.”

“Of course,” I said. “But is there anything you might have remembered since? Anything they might have missed?”

“There is one thing.” She grimaced. “It’s kind of ridiculous. Like, I feel like I might have misheard. Or made it up.”

“Tell me anyway?” I pleaded. “Anything is better than nothing right now.”

“Right before it all happened... I think Melony called the boys her babies.” Her grimace shifted to a look of outright disgust. “I think that’s what she said, anyway. Give me my baby back. After that, though—I’ve got nothing. That’s probably when she hit me with the rock.”

My heart dropped. “She thinks my sons are... hers?”

“It’s gross, I know. Delulu queen.” Gena rolled her eyes, then rubbed the back of her head. “Like I said, I might not have heard her right. I’m not sure it will make a difference either way. But if that is what she said, and if she thinks they’re hers, maybe it means she’s taking care of them, right?”

“I guess.” A bitter taste filled my mouth. Beneath it, anger seared across my chest, making even my bones feel constricted around my heart and lungs. “But they’re not hers. She didn’t carry them. She didn’t give birth to them...”

Tears brimmed in my eyes as a rogue wave of emotion struck. And here I’d thought I was done crying, only for the ability to return to me with a vengeance now, of all times.

Give me my baby back.

My fingers curled into tight, angry fists.,

“God, Gena, I spent most of my first trimester barely able to keep a single bite of food down! I spent my first moments of labor with my fingers in Xander’s mom’s throat after Melony’s father tried to rip it out! And after all that, she just waltzed into my life and took my children away because she felt like it? Because she wanted them? Because she could?”

“I know, babe. I know.” A whimper left Gena’s throat. When she wrapped her arms around me, I realized she was crying, too. “I hate her for everything she’s done to you. This, though? She’s not going to get away with it. I can feel it. Can’t you?”

I didn’t answer, my throat too clogged with tears. They burned in my eyes and fell down my cheeks in fat dollops.

This couldn’t be the thing that broke me. I tried desperately to calm myself, but every time I tried to stop

sobbing, my brain supplied me with fresh material that only made everything worse.

Melony rocking my babies to sleep at night. Melony changing their diapers, watching them roll over for the first time, hearing the first sounds of their baby babble, their first words. Melony, deranged and delusional, trying to breastfeed them. That one made me want to puke. A baby's first real smile happened around the one-month mark, I recalled. When they were taken, Rylan and Ryder hadn't smiled for us yet. When they did smile for the first time, would they be staring up at Melony's face instead of mine? How many other milestones of theirs would we miss because some lunatic I barely knew had taken one look at my family and decided that I not only didn't deserve it, but in fact, she was going to take it for herself?

I cried in Gena's arms, hyperventilating and sick with my own grief, for what felt like an hour. An eternity. I wasn't sure I would ever stop.

But the thing about tears, I'd come to realize over the last several days, was that eventually, no matter how bad they got, they always gave out in the end.

"Oh, God," I breathed in horror when I finally sobered up. "I'm getting snot all over you."

"Hon, we're nurses." Gena pulled back and wiped my tears away with her thumbs. "We've both been covered in a lot worse."

A ragged, unexpected laugh leaped from my throat. She was right, of course. A little snot wasn't enough to faze either of us. It was a gross joke, but exactly the one I'd needed.

"Thank you," I whispered. Every breath I drew, I tried to focus on making it deep and slow. "I cried so much that first day, I haven't been able to since. I... I think I needed that."

"Maybe we both did," she said. Her own eyes were red and puffy, too. "I still can't imagine a worse thing happening to a better person, you know. Just remember you're not alone."

We spent the next several minutes composing ourselves, the same way millions of other women did every day. Gena produced a box of tissues. We dried our eyes. She got me a glass of water. I sipped at it, thinking about how, on a different timeline, in a different life, we could have just as easily been two women in a funeral home bathroom at the wake of a friend, or two teenage girls fixing our makeup after being stood up for the junior prom. We would have recovered from our tears in more or less the same way.

Blot the mascara. Blow the nose. Choke down the grief so you could return to the world with a brave face. Maybe that was the hallmark of womanhood: holding it together until you couldn't help but break down, then putting all your pieces back into place like it had never happened at all.

"How's Kingston doing?" Gena asked as I got ready to head out. My brave face was on again. So was hers.

I'd been waiting for her to ask.

"He's struggling," I admitted, even though that seemed like an understatement at this point.

"I bet he is," Gena said softly. "I heard about his leg."

"When you're feeling better, you should come see him for yourself," I suggested. "It might cheer him up."

"Or the opposite." Gena laughed thinly. "We hate each other, remember?"

I arched an eyebrow, not quite buying that. "Are you so sure about that?"

Gena and Kingston had history. Not quite as much as Xander and I did, but enough. She'd never admit it—brave faces, after all—but I was pretty sure he'd broken her heart.

Maybe she'd broken his as well.

"Maybe I will come by and see him, yeah," she murmured, blushing again. "Is he blaming himself, too?"

"I think everyone is blaming themselves at this point."

"How's Xander?" Gena asked at the door.

“Angry.” I frowned, suddenly envious of that. I wished I could just be angry, too. Then my sinuses wouldn’t ache so much. But every time my rage flared up, it shifted to sadness too quickly, then went impotent and pathetic and limp. Xander wanted to fight the entire world to get our sons back. I just wanted to blink and find them in my arms again. I didn’t care how. “I think I’ve been pushing him away.”

“You do that, yeah. You’re kind of like a cat in that way,” Gena mused.

“A cat?” The connection fell short for me. I wasn’t feeling particular feline right now. Or frisky, for that matter.

“Yeah. You don’t want anyone to know you’re hurting, so you pretend you’re not because it makes you feel safe.” She smiled, a little smug, while I gaped at her. “Just an observation. But everyone needs a little scratch behind the ears sometimes. If you’re pushing him away, it’s never too late to pull him back.”

Chapter 7

Xander

A blockade.

It was an act of war, even if not a single drop of blood was shed. There were no guns in the cars or trucks that we gathered to park across the roads that led in and out of Carter's Creek. We set no fires. We didn't even shift. But by noon that day, it was no longer possible for anyone in Carter's Creek to leave, and anyone left outside of town would have to stay outside.

It gave me no pleasure, but we turned away the first few vehicles that approached us without incident. The first had been a Crown Vic with an elderly couple who claimed to be coming back from an appointment at Evergreen General. The second, a harried mother on her way out of town to buy groceries, the backseats of her minivan filled with screaming kids.

They all recognized me. When I explained why they weren't allowed to leave or drive home, they accepted it begrudgingly but without argument.

A blockade wasn't an act of war because it inconvenienced people. It was an act of war because of the threat behind it: give up and accept that this is your new reality until we get what we want, or try your luck and see how violently it'll be enforced.

I didn't expect it would come to that. Carter's Creek was a tiny pack. Most of its members were in their fifties or older. The few young people were betas, married couples with kids. Neither were the type likely to try and start shit. The closest to

an actual fight we got came from three working-class betas in a beat-up Toyota. They were headed home from the mechanic's shop in Evergreen where they worked, they said. They weren't happy to learn that we had no intention of letting them do so.

"Call your alpha," I told them after they'd leveled their finest arguments and favorite curse words.

The largest of the betas barked a laugh. "What alpha? We don't have one of those anymore."

"You've got Doris Houghton," I informed him. "Ring her up. If she cooperates, you can be home before dark."

They stood there in silence, sizing up Dylan and me. There were three of them, two of us, but apparently, they didn't like their odds. They probably liked the idea of bringing down the full force of Evergreen's wrath if they decided to duke things out even less.

Grumbling, the betas got back into their car and pulled over to the side of the road. It was one of five now, all waiting to enter Carter's Creek.

I doubted theirs would be the first call Doris had received today, but that was the point. I wanted her buried in complaints. I wanted her phone to be ringing off the hook.

If she wanted to run from the problems her son and granddaughter had caused, we couldn't leave her with anywhere to run to. I didn't care if every member of her pack was left stuck here on the side of the road, or back in Carter's Creek banging down her door.

One way or another, we were going to talk, whether she wanted to or not.

Near sunset, a car approached us from inside Carter's Creek. I recognized it. It had been parked outside a Carter's Creek diner the first time I came here to speak with their pack elders about Quincy's threats.

Doris Houghton. We'd finally drawn her out.

I hopped down from my tailgate and walked out into the middle of the road, holding a hand up to signal for her to stop. Behind me, Dylan stood at the ready.

For what, we'd have to wait and see.

She flew out of the driver's seat without turning off the engine. Her face was twisted with rage. "Xander Miller, what in the name of Hell—"

"Evening, Doris," I cut her off. "Just thought we should have a little chat."

She glowered at me. She was dressed in jeans and a button-down with the sleeves rolled up like a ranch hand's, but on her feet, she wore house slippers, not boots.

It seemed we'd pulled her from a cozy evening at home.

"Fine, then," she said through her teeth, marching toward me. "Let's talk. If you thought your sons were here, you'd be breaking down doors already. And since my whole pack swore you a blood oath, I know you aren't here because think we had anything to do with their kidnapping."

"Your granddaughter swore me a blood oath, too," I pointed out.

"And her blood is likely cursed from it now. She'll pay for her sins on her own time. Don't make my pack pay for them." The rage in her expression shifted. Now, she looked like a stern mother giving a misbehaving boy a talking-to. "I was very sorry to hear about your sons, Xander, but we didn't have anything to do with this. With any of it."

"I'm not sure I believe you."

"Xander—"

"No." I held up a hand. "I don't need you to make your case to me. I know you didn't cook up this scheme to take my sons."

"I'm glad we're in agreement." She nodded to Dylan, who stood in front of the trucks blocking the road. "Now, call off your dogs before I call the cops."

“The cops aren’t going to do shit about this, and you know it. They don’t like getting mixed up in shifter business,” I reminded her. “The way I figure it, you and your people probably have a week here before food starts to run out. Me and my people are more than happy to wait things out if you are. Or, you can give me some answers, and we can wrap this up nice and quick. Up to you.”

She stared me down. Behind her eyes, I could see the calculations rolling in. Was I bluffing? Would I really watch her pack starve just to get my way?

“Very well,” she said. “What do you want to know?”

“You promised to keep a leash on your granddaughter. Instead, you let her run wild. You said you’d take care of your son, too. Instead, he’s who-the-fuck-knows where now, half-feral and planning God knows what. What I want to know, Doris, is why?”

She breathed an exasperated sigh. “You don’t think I tried?”

“Not hard enough. Now, my boys are gone, my mother is in a coma, and your family is responsible.” I almost pitied her. Managing Quincy or Melony independently couldn’t have been an easy task. Managing them both? Impossible. But we all had our crosses to bear. If hers was too heavy, she should have asked for help before it was too late.

“I’ve failed in controlling Quincy and Melony, I can admit that, but they aren’t here. Neither are your sons.” She gestured behind her, toward town. “I already told the FBI as much. Search every house if you want. You have my full permission. No one will try to stop you. I’m not a monster, Xander. If those babies were in Carter’s Creek, I’d have already sent them home to you.”

“I know. What I don’t understand is why you’ve been dodging my calls. Or why it took six hours for you to finally show your face here today.”

“It’s complicated, isn’t it?” She stared at the ground between our feet. “You want information from me. I’ve

gathered that much. But I'm a parent, too, Xander. How could I face you, knowing that my granddaughter kidnapped your sons, and I had nothing to tell you but how sorry I was?"

The look on her face was a broken as shattered glass. It made my heart pang, but there were far deeper wounds in my chest than any pity I felt for Doris Houghton.

"I think you have more to tell me than that."

"Such as?" She looked up at me expectantly. "I didn't know Melony was going to do this. The last I heard from her was months ago. She was struggling. Unstable. I was doing my best to mitigate that, but then your brother and his betas came and took her away. She's been off my radar ever since, and that's the truth."

I searched her eyes and found no deception. If she was lying, she was the best in the game.

"I believe you," I relented. "So, we'll start with what you do know. Melony was unstable. How so?"

"She..." Doris glanced to her pack members. They were gathered up behind the trucks, leaning forward, ears perked. She drew a little closer and lowered her voice. "About four months ago, Melony discovered that she can't have children. She didn't take it well."

"I can imagine." I really could, and I didn't like it one bit. Melony, who was obsessed with me and convinced I was her mate, discovering that she was unable to conceive, shortly after Felicity realized she was pregnant. Already, this story spelled out disaster.

"I arranged for her to see a therapist," Doris continued. "She was even talking about taking a trip down to Texas to clear her head. I thought it was a sign she was making progress. The farther away from you she was, the better."

"Can't disagree with that." Shame it hadn't worked out that way.

"Only, she never went to see the therapist. After your brother apprehended her, I called and checked. Never made it to a single appointment. She was just using them as cover to

help her father evade everyone. Including me.” Doris reached across her body, rubbing her forearm. She shifted from one foot to the other with discomfort. “I wish she would have talked to her doctor instead. She needed it. Badly.”

“Because she was depressed?” My eyes narrowed. Depression was a bitch, but that wasn’t an excuse for stealing my sons.

“It was so far beyond depression, Xander,” Doris said. “She was delusional. Manic. There were days she was convinced she really was pregnant. I was trying to keep Felicity’s pregnancy a secret from her as a result, but I imagine that went right out the window once she and her father linked up again.”

I gritted my teeth. Kingston and Malik had brought Melony to Morrow Manor, where Quincy and Ma had nearly killed Felicity and half the Portersmith pack in order to break Melony free.

If they’d just let her be, let her keep putting trackers on cars and having her delusions where Doris could at least try to manage her, maybe my sons would be at home right now, safe in their mother’s arms.

“You think she kidnapped my sons out of spite?” I guessed.

“No,” she said quickly. “I mean, maybe. I can’t say for certain. Melony is... She’s very unwell. But she very much wants to be a mother, Xander. Almost as much as she wants to be your mate. There’s a chance...” Doris shrugged as her voice trailed off. “Whatever she plans to do with your boys, I don’t think she wants to hurt them.”

I nodded, mulling that over. It was the best-case scenario, all things considered, but I had to keep in mind that Melony and her baby fever weren’t the only influences at play.

“You said she was talking about going to Texas?”

“Her mother had a ranch there. She left it to Melony in her will. It’s been vacant for a long time, but...” Doris tilted her

head to the side. Her eyes flashed when it clicked. “You think Melony might have taken the babies there?”

“It’s the only lead we have.”

“Then, I’ll give you the address.” She reached into her back pocket, pulling out a notepad and a pen. “There’s something else I can offer you, too.”

“I’m listening.”

“This is the number for a man named Dennis Kerry,” she said as she wrote. “He’s a wolf shifter—a sigma. Once, he was finest tracker and bounty hunter on the East Coast. When Quincy’s father...” Her expression twisted for a moment, then relaxed. “When he went feral, this was who I called.”

“A shifter bounty hunter?” I’d never heard of such a thing, but then again, I’d never needed one before.

“Sometimes it takes a shifter to find one,” Doris explained. She tore off a sheet from her notepad and handed it to me. “He’s ex-military. Efficient. Professional. I know you must already have the entire country out looking for your boys, but if you’re looking for someone more... specialized...”

I glanced down at the piece of paper. It bore an address, a number, and Dennis Kerry’s name. “I’ll give him a call. Thank you, Doris.”

“If you really want to thank me, you’ll lift this blockade.”

“I will,” I promised, tucking the paper into my pocket. “Once I can verify that this information checks out, of course.”

“Oh, it’ll check out,” she assured me. “Let me know when your men are gone. Carter’s Creek never wanted any part of this. Neither did I. Quincy, Melony... I know you’re just doing what you feel you must, but I won’t see my people punished for their actions.”

“I’ll give you call when we clear out.” I met her eyes, meaningfully. “Maybe you answer this time.”

“Yeah.” She scoffed. “I’ll be sure do that.”

“Doris?” I called out to her as she turned to leave. She stopped in her tracks. “Just one more thing.”

A sigh. “What now?”

“Do you know how to break a blood curse?”

Her brow furrowed. “Oh. That’s...that’s very kind of you, but you don’t need to bother with that on Melony’s behalf. She did what she did. She needs to live with the consequences of it—whatever those may be.”

I blinked, processing her words for a moment before it clicked.

“I’m not asking for Melony.”

“Ah.” Her face fell. She motioned for me to follow her back to her car. “My mistake. Regardless, I’m not sure it’s possible. If I knew how, I would’ve tried it already.” She slipped behind the wheel and shrugged. “I suspect there’s a reason my husband, my son, and my granddaughter have all gone mad.”

She reached for her seatbelt. I closed the door for her, then went back to stand next to Dylan as we watched her drive away.

“Learn anything useful?” he asked.

“Could be.” I cocked my head toward the vehicles backed up behind us. “Let them back into town if they want to go. They’ve waited here for long enough.”

“And the blockade?”

“It stays.” I headed for the driver’s side of my truck. “Until we know for sure what Doris’s saying is true, no one else comes in. No one goes out.”

* * *

I left Dylan to man the blockade. Before I headed out, Luke and Mandy Spencer arrived to relieve me. Between the three of them, they’d maintain the blockade, bottlenecking the main

road into Carter's Creek; others would take the side roads. No one in, no one out. Not until we knew that what Doris had told me held true.

After Dylan's plea to be relieved of leadership duties, I was surprised he'd been willing to stay.

"I don't mind being your hand out in the field, Xan," he informed me when I asked if he'd be okay. "Don't even mind being your mouthpiece if that's what you need. It's calling the shots that bothers me. I'm always second-guessing whether I'm making the right choice."

"So am I, dumbass," I pointed out. "Being an alpha doesn't grant you magical decision-making powers."

"Maybe not," he agreed with a quirk of his lips. "But better you than me."

The sun dipped below the horizon on my ride home. I didn't even remember to turn the radio on as I drove. My thoughts were already flurrying loud enough in my mind.

Melony's part in this clusterfuck made more sense now that Doris had filled in a few blanks. She wanted a child. Couldn't have one. So, she'd gone to great lengths to take mine. She was hardly innocent. Far from it. Plenty of women learned that they couldn't have children every day, and they didn't go kidnapping people's newborns. But at least it explained what we couldn't excuse.

Where Samuel and Quincy slotted into it was hard to say. The only reason they had to ally with each other was a mutual hatred of me.

Maybe that was all it took. Luckily, I was normally better at making friends than enemies.

Unfortunately, these weren't normal times.

Back at the lodge, the door to the den was closed. When I knocked on it, Kingston's voice responded with a firm, "Fuck you, go away."

He was still sulking, then. No better, no worse.

"We're not accusing you of anything."

In the upstairs hallway, my ears perked up to the sound of Felicity's voice. I followed it back to our room.

Cracking the door open, I found her in a nightgown, her hair wet and wrapped in a towel. Her cellphone was wedged between her shoulder and the shell of her ear. In her hands, she held a legal pad and an ink pen, taking notes.

"No, no. Please, it's nothing like that. We're just trying to find answers. That's all." She glanced at me and held up a finger when I walked in and sat down on the bed. "Please. If it was your kids, wouldn't you do the same?"

A pause as she waited for the response. I unlaced my boots to the sound of her pen scratching against paper.

"Thank you," she said after a few moments, still writing. "Yes, that would be wonderful. I'm sure it will be a great help." Another pause. "Yes, that's the right address. Thank you again—okay—thank you. Have a good day."

Her shoulders slumped with relief as she ended the call.

"Who was that?" I asked. Sounded important, whoever it had been.

"Beau Monde. That nanny agency that Clinton hired." She walked to the desk, sighing as she placed her phone and writing materials on top of it. "We never figured out how Melony got onto the estate. The cops swear they already talked to them, but I figured..."

"Couldn't hurt," I agreed. If Cordova had made the call, I trusted she'd gotten everything she could out of them. But if Captain Booker had done it...

There was a good chance Felicity had just found a stone left unturned.

It was one of many loose ends we'd been left holding onto. Melony had gone unnoticed at Morrow Manor long enough to figure out where the boys were and when it would be easiest to take them. The guards at the gates swore they hadn't admitted anyone who fit her description, especially not on motorcycle.

And the only outsiders they'd let in that day were the nannies from that so-called, highly vetted, prestigious agency. Felicity was right. It was the most obvious source, the glaring gap in our frontlines that Melony had managed to wriggle in through. She'd only had to use violence on her way out.

But how did a supposedly deranged, delusional woman manage to sneak into such a high-end operation? Either Doris had been lying about Melony's mental state, or that agency wasn't as above-board as we'd been led to believe.

"They're giving you info, then?" I asked.

"They're being friendly. Probably worried that if they don't keep us placated, we might sue." She flipped her head upside down and shook her hair from the towel. "Maybe we should. They're emailing me a list of the employees who were scheduled that morning. It's something, at least."

I frowned. "Clint has that, doesn't he? I remember when he turned it over to the cops."

"He has the list of names that showed up. They signed in at the gates. If there are any discrepancies between the agency's schedule and the sign-in sheet... I don't know. I guess it still wouldn't explain anything." She moved to the window and pulled back the curtains, staring out into the dark of the night like she was waiting for something to emerge from it. "I just wanted to try and feel useful for a change. It's probably nothing."

"No, Cheeks, that's sharp of you. Any information we can get is worth having right now." I placed my boots aside and rose. I moved behind her, my hands sliding down her waist, my cheek brushing against her temple. "You are so—"

She stiffened at my touch, and my voice fell off. It was only then that I remembered that this kind of intimacy between us—touching, caressing, moving naturally—was one of the things we'd lost.

For two people who'd known each other for more than half our lives, we were so much like strangers now. The gulf of our

grief had pulled us apart, two bodies trapped in different riptides.

Only, here I was, holding her.

“So what?” she breathed.

She didn’t pull away.

“So brilliant,” I breathed back.

My mouth went dry as I searched for something else to say—some other compliment that would make this moment last a little longer before it slipped through my fingers and slithered away.

There were a million things I loved about her. I could have rattled them off like I was making a grocery list for the perfect woman. But just then, none of them felt right.

In that moment, her best quality was how perfect her body felt against mine again. To admit that, however, would mean acknowledging the way I’d been feeling its absence, too.

I didn’t want to start a fight.

“How’d the blockade go?” she finally asked, turning to face me.

Ah. I’d taken too long. The moment was gone, anyway.

“The way I thought it would.” I rubbed the back of my neck, already missing the softness of her waist beneath my palms. “It took her a while to show her face, but Doris did give me a little to go on in the end. I’m not sure if it’ll amount to anything, but...”

I pulled the piece of paper out of my back pocket and offered it to her.

“What’s this?” she asked, unfolding it.

“An address to a place Melony’s mother owns in Texas. If it exists, it’s a lead.”

“We could certainly use one of those right now. What about this number?” She turned the paper my way. “The name?”

“A bounty hunter. Doris suggested him. I’m thinking about giving him a call.”

“A bounty hunter?” Her eyes widened, then narrowed, a sharp line creasing the skin between her eyebrows. “Is that... safe?”

“He’s professional, from the sounds of things. Ex-military, so he probably runs a pretty tight ship.” I wasn’t sure that ‘safe’ and ‘bounty hunter’ were two words that normally belonged in the same sentence. Bounty hunter and results, on the other hand? Well, we could hope. “Doris trusted him enough to send him after her husband when he went feral.”

She arched a brow. “Do we trust Doris?”

I pursed my lips. I’d been asking myself the same question. “I’d like to.”

“But do you?”

I shrugged. “I think she’s trying her best to help us.”

“It took a blockade for her to get in touch,” Felicity reminded me.

“Yeah, that’s true.” There was no pretending that Doris hadn’t been exactly forthcoming in offering us assistance. She was paying for that now, and all of Carter’s Creek along with her. “She’s carrying a lot of shame, Cheeks. I think, in her position, I would be, too.”

She went silent, her eyes fixed on the wall.

“Cheeks?”

“Sorry. I’m just thinking it over.” She rubbed her palms down her thighs like she was trying to discharge static. “I saw Gena today.”

“How is she?”

“Recovering. She says she remembers something Melony said. Just before she attacked Gena. She said *give me my babies back.*”

Shit.

Then, it was true. She really was that delusional.

She truly believed the boys were hers.

“Doris mentioned something similar,” I admitted. “Melony recently learned she can’t have children.”

“So she’s taken ours instead.” There was an unfamiliar venom in her voice. It might have been one of the first true emotions she’d shown since the boys’ abduction, other than her ever-present sadness and grief.

“Looks like it, yeah.”

“Okay.” She nodded, like she was agreeing with the crown molding. “I want you to make the call. If this Dennis Kerry guy has any chance of succeeding where we’ve failed, then we have to ask, don’t we?”

“You’re right,” I agreed, reaching for my phone. “We need a shifter. A professional.”

And Dennis Kerry sounded like just the man for the job.

Chapter 8

Felicity

One call was all it took.

In two days' time, we would have an audience with Dennis Kerry. Once the bounty hunter wrapped up his current assignment, he'd fly into Boston and drive up to Evergreen first thing. We still needed to discuss specifics before he was willing to commit to the job, but he hadn't denied us from the get-go. That gave me hope.

Hope, as it turned out, was the most fragile object I'd ever held in my hands. I was afraid to touch it too often, breathe in its direction, even glance down to make sure it was still there.

As we awaited Dennis's arrival, I kept myself busy. If this bounty hunter was truly able to do the impossible and track down the shifters who seemed to have blinked out of existence with our sons in tow, then I was determined to provide him with hospitality fit for a king.

I vacuumed like a madwoman, cleaned every mirror, polished the leather of the downstairs couches until each gleamed like it was brand new. I ransacked Nana Jordan's old recipe box and baked until the entire lodge smelled like fresh snickerdoodles, brown butter and oatmeal, salted caramel shortbread, and gooey chocolate chip.

"You know we're not paying him in baked goods, right?" Xander pointed out, helping himself to a Kolaczki filled with apricot jam. He closed his eyes and moaned as he chewed. "Though, at this rate, it may be worth trying."

“I have to do something.” I wiped sweat from my brow with a tea towel, then slung it over my shoulder as I bent to check the oven. The lemon cookies inside were still too soft. They’d need a few more minutes, then several hours to cool before I topped them with candied lemon slices and a light powdered sugar glaze. “Besides, it’s not like they’re going to waste.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining,” Xander assured me, powdered sugar dusting his upper lip. “You’re doing more for pack morale than I am these days.”

With the blockade on Carter’s Creek still in effect, the Evergreen betas had been filtering in and out of the lodge between shifts like industrious ants returning to the hive. I made sure each one of them had a glass of iced tea or lemonade—coffee, for the night shifts—plus a sandwich and as many cookies as they wanted to eat.

They were going through them just as fast as I could bake.

“Shit. The chocolate!” I rushed to the stove, where I had a glass bowl perched atop a pot of boiling water. Turning the heat down, I studied the chocolate with a frown. “Ugh. No, this is never gonna temper the way I want now. Hand me the bag of baking chocolate on the counter? I might be able to save it if I add a little more.”

“Temper?” Xander asked, picking up the bag I’d asked for.

“Yeah. You melt the chocolate, heat it up to the right temperature, so it goes glossy when it hardens again instead of looking kind of dusty and dull. Nana showed me how to do it,” I explained, taking the bag from him.

“I don’t think anyone’s gonna care if they’re eating glossy chocolate or not. Not here, anyway.” He caught my waist as I tried to move past him. “Hey. When’s the last time you sat down?”

I wriggled free of his hold. “I can’t stand the thought of sitting right now.”

“You’re gonna wear yourself out, Cheeks,” he warned.

I shot him a helpless look but not a reply.

Waiting was the worst part of all of this. I felt like a shark in a vast, endless ocean. If I didn't keep swimming—or baking, as it were—I'd stop breathing. I'd drown.

* * *

Despite all my preparations, the hour of Dennis's arrival hit me like a bar of soap in a tube sock. Xander got the call in the early morning before the sun was even up. Dennis had already landed in Boston and secured a rental car. He'd be here around sunrise. If we decided to hire him, he made a point of explaining to Xander, the price of the car, the plane ticket, and the consultation would all be going on our bill.

We were more than willing to pick up that tab.

Xander and I showered, dressed, and rushed downstairs. With barely half an hour's notice, we didn't have much time to get our ducks in a row. For a man who'd taken two days to get here, Dennis was certainly feeling punctual now.

“What do you think he'll be like?” I wondered aloud while I made coffee.

Xander looked up from the mugs he was washing in the sink—last night's blockade crew had already been in and out. “I mean... Probably just a guy, right?”

I rolled my eyes. “Beyond that. I'm just not sure if I should be imagining Van Helsing or Dog the Bounty Hunter.” I dumped the last of our coffee grounds into the filter cradle and set the machine to brew. “Or maybe he's a stubby little bald man in a fedora and a trench coat. I don't suppose you found a picture of him online?”

“There wasn't anything to find. Dude's a ghost. But some of the other packs I reached out to have heard of him and they say he's legit, so at least we know he exists.” Xander held up a grenade-shaped coffee mug that read COMPLAINTS DEPARTMENT: PLEASE TAKE A NUMBER. Threatening, considering the aforementioned number was on a ceramic tag attached to the grenade's pin. A bright pink lip print marred the cup's rim. “Whose lipstick is this? It won't scrub off.”

“Looks like Nana Jordan’s shade. Maybe she joined Connell for a romantic midnight rendezvous at the Carter’s Creek blockade.” I glanced out the window toward the horizon. “Just put it under the sink and I’ll figure it out later.”

The sun was nearly up, which meant Dennis would be here any minute. I wasn’t sure why it mattered to me so much that everything was perfect when he got here. It wasn’t like he was going to judge us for having dirty dishes in the sink—not while our sons were missing. Being a bounty hunter, he’d probably be grateful he was getting something other than beef jerky and gas station fountain soda for breakfast.

But if I’d learned anything about myself over the last few days, it was that I was in dire need of the sense that I could control something about our lives right now. I needed that semblance of the impression that I had my shit together in any small way I could find.

If that meant presenting a clean lodge and an impressive snack spread, I’d take it.

“Did your friends in the other packs say anything about what he looks like?” I cracked open a Tupperware container on the counter and frowned. “Shoot. The night crew ran through all my cookies last night.”

“You’ve got some more in the freezer,” Xander reminded me, crouching down to hide the lipstick-stained grenade mug under the sink. “And, no, they didn’t, but why’s it matter how he looks? He can show up in a clown costume, riding a unicycle for all I care. Just as long as he gets results, right?”

“I guess.” I headed toward the freezer. “It’s not so much to ask that he’s got a kind face, is it?”

If Dennis Kerry was the man who’d bring our sons back to us, I had my fingers crossed that he didn’t look like the type that would terrify them en-route.

“Better if he looks like a rotten old bastard,” Xander mused. “We don’t need a kind man right now. We need a ruthless one.”

“I guess you’re right.” My frown deepened as I surveyed the contents of the freezer. The containers were inside where I’d left them, but every single one was empty. “Where did all my baked goods go? I thought I had a stockpile. Did you move them somewhere?”

Xander moved behind me and peered over my shoulder. “Looks like the evening shift might’ve wiped them out. I’m sorry, Cheeks. That’s the curse of baking so well, I guess. What’ve you got left?”

I sighed and went to the pantry. After a little digging, I emerged with my pathetic spoils. “A singular box of Caramel deLites.” I turned it over, looking for a date. “When did you last buy from the Girl Scouts? I don’t even know how old these are.”

“Probably doesn’t matter,” Xander said. “Nobody likes those, anyway.”

I smacked him on my way back to the counter. “I like them!”

I cracked the box open and tore the plastic, then gave it a sniff. Smelled okay. When I tasted one, it was a little stale but not bad. The mix of caramel, shortbread, coconut, and chocolate reminded me of a nostalgic normalcy. A fleeting April of my childhood when Mom had shackled up with Dan, an accountant with a daughter of his own. Asia had been just around my age, brown-skinned and lanky with a big, toothy grin. Dan had enrolled me in her school and signed me up for her Girl Scout troop. We’d walked around her little hometown selling cookies together for two whole weekends before Mom pulled the plug on the relationship and whisked me away in the night.

I wondered where they were now. Like most elements of my mother’s past, once she was gone, she never kept in touch.

“They’re not bad,” I admitted, savoring the lingering sweetness of the coconut on my tongue.

“Then, cheer up,” Xander said as I began to arrange the cookies on a plate. “Maybe Dennis the Bounty Hunter has

your same kind of sweet tooth.”

* * *

In the end, Dennis the Bounty Hunter didn't arrive in a leather pants or with a patchwork of tattoos. No trench coat or fedora, either.

He looked nothing like I'd imagined.

He arrived on the front porch just as the coffee finished brewing. Xander and I greeted him while the carafe cooled.

He was a little shorter than Xander but had a similar build. They both had the sort of muscle that looked to have been crafted in a field instead of a gym. His hair was a silver and bronze color that suggested it had been ruddy brown during his youth. He must have been around the same age as Xander's dad. A scar marked one side of his face, creating deep and twisted ravines in his cheek. It looked like someone had gone after him with bared claws.

Not exactly a kind face, no, but his eyes were a nice, warm hazel. At their corner, I was certain I spotted laughter lines.

“You're the Millers?” he grunted, wiping his combat boots on the welcome mat. They looked like they were from the same army surplus store where he'd gotten his olive-green cargo pants. His shirt was plain black, clean, and unrumpled despite the fact he'd just come off an extra-early flight.

“I'm Xander.” Xander didn't correct Dennis, even though I hadn't taken his surname. He just struck out his hand. They shook, then Xander gestured to me. “This is Felicity, my mate.”

“It's nice to meet you, Mr. Kerry.” I offered Dennis my hand as well. He took it with a grip so strong, it made me wince.

Dennis's brow furrowed. His grip relaxed. He leaned in and sniffed the air between us suspiciously.

“Huh. Human.” His frown deepened, like I had a weird smell. “Don’t see that very often in these parts.”

Next to me, I felt Xander bristle. “That gonna be a problem?”

Dennis snorted. “Of course not. You ready to talk?”

Xander stepped back and held out an arm, inviting him in.

“Now, I’m in the business of finding people who don’t want to be found,” Dennis explained as we led him through the lodge. “Ferals, mostly. We’ve had more of those in the last six months than I’ve heard of in the last decade.”

“Well, we’ve got one feral for you,” Xander said. “Maybe two.”

“That’s my bread and butter. You’ve got pictures?”

Xander nodded. “In the dining room.”

“I saw your story on the news.” Dennis glanced down at me. His hazel eyes softened for a moment. “I’m sorry this happened to you.”

“So am I,” I said.

He quickly looked away again. Apparently, that didn’t warrant a response.

We entered the dining room. Xander picked up the file folder we’d compiled for Dennis to look over and handed it to him.

Dennis thumbed through it, pausing on the pictures of the boys. They were the same ones we’d given the cops.

“Cute babies,” he commented. “Both alphas, you figure?”

“Thank you,” I said. “And, yes. We’ve had several people confirm it.”

“There are some packs out there who’d do terrible things for just one alpha heir. Two, that’s pretty much unthinkable these days. Under other circumstances, I’d say you two were very lucky.” He sighed as he stared down at the boys’ faces. “South of the border, we’ve had a few cases pretty similar to

yours, even. Every pack needs an alpha, and the birthrates get lower every year, no matter where you go.”

My stomach churned in horror. That suggested we weren't the only parents going through this—just the most recent, or maybe the first here in the States. I wanted to ask him more, like how often those trafficked babies were found, but Dennis spoke before I could.

“It surprised me when I got your call,” he admitted as he continued to thumb through the file.

“Did it?” Xander asked.

“Quincy Houghton, I figured I'd have to chase down someday. His father... well. If Doris gave my name to you, you probably know all about that.”

Dennis's gaze lingered on Quincy's photo for a moment. We still lacked the evidence to connect Quincy to the kidnapping, but over the phone, Dennis had assured us that he wanted to know about any and all enemies we might have. Quincy more than qualified. He had a vendetta against Xander, and he'd attacked me before. Helping his daughter kidnap our babies wouldn't exactly be out of character for him.

Dennis sighed as he flipped the photo over, revealing Melony's picture in the file.

“The daughter's no surprise either. These things tend to run in families.”

“You think they could be cursed?” Xander asked. “If going feral is in their blood...”

“Could be. I've heard of stranger things happening.” Dennis flipped Melony's picture over as well. Now, Xander's grandfather stared up at us. “Samuel Morrow, though? His type's usually above my pay grade. You sure he's involved?”

“We're not sure about anything right now,” Xander admitted. “But he and Quincy have, ah, worked together before, and he's the boys' grandfather. We wouldn't be surprised if he had something to do with it. We just don't have any intel on him right now, or any proof.”

“I see. I’m willing to look into it, but normally, when people are trying to hunt down a shifter with such a pedigree, they want a team a little more high-tech than mine.”

My heart sank. Even if Dennis could find Melony, even if he could track Quincy, and even if he could get the boys back, it only fixed half our problems. Because as long as Samuel Morrow was out there alive, I couldn’t be sure we’d ever be safe.

“You don’t think you can find him?” Xander asked.

“Didn’t say that. Usually, people looking for old-blood shifters are willing to pay top dollar and expect a top-dollar operation in return. Satellite images. State-of-the-art surveillance. I can’t give you that.”

Xander crossed his arms over his chest. “Is there a reason? If it’s just a matter of technology, we’d be willing to buy you any equipment you need.”

Dennis shook his head. “If I needed it, I’d already have it. The reason these shifters can vanish off the grid is *because* they’re off the grid. When they shift, they can travel through places where there are no cameras, no cell towers. They hunt for their food instead of buying it. No credit card transactions to check. No paper trail to follow. No digital footprint, either. They’re wolves. They act like wolves. So, we do, too. My team and I handle our business the old-fashioned way.”

“And you think that’ll give us the results we’re looking for?” Xander asked.

“I’ve got one of the best noses in the business. Sniffing out people who don’t wanna be found is my forte.” He tapped the side of his nose with a finger. “And I’ve been doing this for forty years. Haven’t failed a mission yet. If I didn’t think I could bring your boys back to you, I wouldn’t be here.” Dennis closed the file and glanced over at the table, where the coffee and cookies were still untouched. “Are those Caramel deLites?”

“They are,” I said quickly, rushing over to bring the platter. “Would you like one?”

“If you’re offering.” He tossed the file down on the table and gathered up five cookies in the broad palm of his hand. Calluses rose in thick ridges beneath each of his fingers. He held a sixth cookie up in his free hand, inspecting it with a twinkle in his hazel eyes. “These were always my favorite.”

I almost smiled. “Mine, too.”

Over the next hour, Xander and Dennis discussed possibilities, solutions, and terms. Dennis had trusted agents across the United States that he could deploy at will, including, thankfully, two in Texas. He and Xander agreed that the address Doris had provided us was a good place to start our broader search.

The last photo in the file we gave Denny was Lizbeth’s.

“I recognize her,” he said, pulling her picture from the file. “Not a good thing. She stirred up a whole lot of shit down in Florida about, I dunno, twenty years ago, give or take.”

“In Florida?” That state mostly brought forth memories of Disney World, orange groves, and men in news stories committing irrational and absurd crimes. “What was she doing there?”

“Performing illegal sterilizations of humans in shifter relationships. It was part of some kind of cult thing,” Dennis revealed. He said it so casually, but it made me shudder. She’d been my doctor for a time. That could easily have been me. “I wasn’t on the case, but I know people who were. She’s bad news, so let’s hope she’s not involved in this. And then, there’s Sammy here.” He tapped Samuel’s picture. “Like I said, he’ll be the biggest of the fish to fry. I’d keep my fingers crossed that he’s staying out of it as well.”

“We have people in Maine already trying to track him down,” Xander said. “My uncle—Samuel’s son—is using their connections to the old families there—”

“And getting nothing, right?” Dennis guessed. He shrugged. “These old packs, they’ve got a strong sense of *us* and *them*. Sam Morrow is one of their own. Anyone who stands against him is an outsider, and therefore, an enemy.

They'll be protecting him to the teeth. If the FBI hasn't been able to nab him yet, I'd be mighty surprised if diplomacy was having any effect." He lifted the sheet of paper that Doris had given Xander, the one with the Texas address. "We start here. If we're lucky, Melony Houghton is as delusional as her grandma says she is and is working alone. Best-case scenario, she took both boys down South and thinks they're hers."

"That's your *best-case* scenario?" I didn't mean to be rude, but it sounded pretty awful to me.

"It means they'll be cared for... and easier to find," Dennis explained. "I'll let you know the second my guys turn anything up." He turned to Xander. "Which just leaves the matter of my payment."

Xander nodded and pulled out his checkbook.

For a hefty down payment and contract in which we agreed to cover all Dennis's expenses, plus a bonus when the boys were found, we had ourselves a bounty hunter. I might have said that Dennis struck a hard bargain, but Xander hadn't even bothered to haggle. Whatever Dennis asked for, Xander agreed to.

No price was too high when it came to finding our sons.

"Thank you, Mr. Kerry," I said, shaking his hand after Xander when the business was done.

"Call me Denny," he said. "Now, is the Farmer's Wife still open?"

"Of course," Xander said. "Best restaurant in town."

"Ed and Lola still running it?"

"They are." Xander arched a brow. "You know them?"

"Only in passing. Used to love that place. This whole town, actually. Strange, being back here now. It's been a long time." A wistful look danced in his eyes for just a second. It disappeared so fast I wondered if I'd just imagined it.

It was interesting to me that Denny had been in Evergreen before. Or, rather, it was interesting that he loved this town, yet found it strange to be back. It seemed to me a guy like him

could set up shop pretty much anywhere. Holding down a title like bounty hunter didn't really force you to live in a single zip code.

I wondered what had kept him away.

Denny rose and rolled his shoulders, then cracked his neck. "Anyway, I'll keep you updated." He grabbed the last two Caramel deLites from the platter and gave me a nod in parting. "Thanks for these."

Xander and I stood side by side and watched him go.

"You think he can do it?" I asked, breaking the heavy silence.

Xander heaved out a long breath. "I hope so, Cheeks. I think he's the best chance we've got right now."

Chapter 9

Xander

After Denny's departure, we fell back into a waiting pattern. I took my shifts on the blockade. Felicity baked more cookies with a wild, frenetic intensity, pacing the front porch while she waited for the oven timer to ding.

Luckily, Denny didn't make us wait long.

"How's the blockade?" Felicity asked as I jogged up the drive when I got back from Carter's Creek. The sun was setting on Denny's first day of employment with us, and already we had a lead.

"We're lifting it. Denny ran some checks on the address Doris gave us. It exists. Property taxes are registered to a trust, with Melony's mother listed as the sole beneficiary. So, we've finally got a solid lead." I let out a breath. My chest felt strangely light. "His guys are heading there now. No promises that they'll find anything, but—"

Felicity leapt down the porch steps so quickly, I had to rush forward even faster, terrified she might fall. She launched herself into my arms, winding her hands around my neck and hugging me so tightly, I could barely breathe.

Fuck breathing, though. I didn't need to breathe when her body was flush with mine.

We'd been starving, I realized. All the baking in the world couldn't have fixed that—though not for Felicity's lack of trying. But this? This was what we'd been waiting for. A direction.

A break.

“It might be nothing, Cheeks.” I kept my voice soft in her ear. I hardly wanted to acknowledge it myself, but we had to be careful about how high we set our hopes. “Remember that.”

“Or it might be something,” she whispered back. “It might be everything.”

* * *

We rode the high of Denny’s discovery all night. I ordered pizzas from Rizzo’s, the family-owned joint in town. We got the extra-large kind that could feed a small army, with toppings to suit. Dylan picked them up for us and brought the garlic-scented tower of cardboard pizza boxes inside. The tower was so tall he kept the top one pinned beneath his chin.

Word got out quickly. Before long, members of my pack were trickling in to join us. Nana Jordan, Connell, Mandy Spencer, and Katie Graves gathered around Felicity like moths to a porch light. Luke Spencer and Ambrose Reed posted up near the window with Dylan and me while Sylvia Abner bustled around the main room, distributing napkins and coasters while bossing Becca Reed around. When Gena showed up, even Kingston eventually emerged. The two of them orbited each other for a while, then eventually drifted to a corner, where they spoke quietly away from everyone else.

A case of beer appeared, and I caught glimpses of a bottle of whiskey being passed around, but to call it a party would have been a stretch. The mood was more tense than it was joyful. We were gathering in honor of the end of the blockade and the potential that Denny’s fresh intel currently held. But more than anything, we were bracing ourselves.

By now, Denny’s agents were already in position on the ranch. I couldn’t stop glancing down at my phone, anxiously checking for a new text or a missed call.

Any car they spotted there could be Melony’s. Any movement could be a sign that she was there, hiding away from the world with our sons.

When a knock sounded on the door, every head in the room snapped toward it.

Felicity and I shared a nervous look before I rose to answer it. I was half expecting to find Denny behind it, half-hoping he would have Melony there with him in handcuffs and our boys nestled in the crooks of his arms.

Instead, I opened to door to Special Agent Cordova. She peered around my shoulder, dark eyes scanning the gathering behind me inside.

“Are we... celebrating?” she asked.

“No, of course not,” I said. “We’re just...”

“We hired a bounty hunter,” Felicity supplied. “A shifter. He thinks he may have tracked Melony to her mother’s ranch. We’re just waiting on confirmation now.”

“The one in Texas?” Cordova asked.

My eyebrows shot up. “You know about it?”

“We’re the FBI, Mr. Miller. Just because we haven’t found your sons yet doesn’t mean we’re entirely incompetent.”

My stomach dropped. It was a difficult pill to swallow.

Apparently, Doris’s intel hadn’t been as novel as we’d thought.

“Then, why haven’t you raided the place already?” Felicity asked.

“We did. No one was there. Yet another dead end.” Cordova lowered her eyes to the ground. “I just wanted to let you know, we’ve been ordered to stop looking into the packs on the East Coast.”

“What?” Felicity blurted. “Why?”

Cordova grimaced. “The order came from above me. I’m sorry. I thought we were making headway. Maybe that’s the problem. We were making too much.”

My voice rose to a near-shout. “Then, shouldn’t you be pushing even harder?”

Cordova regarded me with a tired, battle-hardened stare.

“That decision’s not mine to make anymore. I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but it’s out of my hands.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry. Maybe your bounty hunter will have more luck.”

* * *

“She’s right,” Denny told us, standing at the base of the porch steps the next morning. “My guys watched the house all night. No scents around. No cars outside. No one in, no one out.”

“So you have nothing?”

“Nothing yet.”

Just wait. That was the advice Denny had given us last night. After Cordova left, we’d sent everyone else home. He was the first person I’d called.

And look at what waiting had gotten us.

Literally fuck all.

“Maybe there’s nothing to find,” I snapped. “Look. Our CASE team has been ordered to stop looking into the East Coast packs. Someone high up the ladder is making them back down. Forget the ranch. She’s not there. Whoever called the FBI off is clearly trying to hide something. They’re who we should be focusing on now.”

“No.” Denny’s expression didn’t change.

My temper flared. “What do you mean, no?”

“I mean, I’m not your beta, and I’m not taking orders from you,” he said flippantly.

“You’re not, huh?” My brows raised as an acidic sting seeped into my tone. “I think you’ll find I’m paying you to do exactly that.”

He raised a shoulder in a half-shrug. “Too bad. I’ve got a good feeling about the ranch. Call it a hunter’s intuition. I say we give it a few more days.”

“We don’t *have* a few more days.” God, I wanted to punch him. “Every second we wait, our boys get farther away.”

“Send your own people up there, then. See how much good it does you,” Denny suggested. “Those packs are well-organized and fucking impenetrable. You’d need an army just to get through the gates—”

“Then, I’ll form one,” I growled.

“And start a war?”

“If I must.”

He clicked his tongue at me. “You don’t know war like I do. Mark my words, you go on the offensive with any one of those packs, and all the rest will come running to their aid. You, and anyone you bring with you, will go home in body bags. But assuming you do survive the slaughter long enough to search their territory, anything or anyone they don’t want you to find will already be long gone.”

“You want us to do nothing,” I scoffed.

“No, I want you to wait. The Houghton girl’s got a feral streak in her blood, and she knows it. She won’t be running into the embrace of strange packs. She’ll be looking for safety somewhere familiar. Somewhere she can control.” His tone was even, stern. It made me feel like I was getting a talking-to from someone else’s dad.

That only pissed me off even more.

This fucking guy. Taking our money. Wasting our time. Rage burned through me like wildfire, consuming every other emotion as it coursed through my veins.

“We’re done waiting,” I snarled, my eyes flashing. My aura rose up around me, prickling like needles against my skin.

I took a step forward, fully prepared to bash his face in, but the soft touch of Felicity’s hand on my elbow stopped me.

“Xander,” she said, her voice hitching. “Please.”

I glanced down at her pale face. Her eyes met mine, pleading.

Instinctively, I dropped my aura, like I'd done when she'd been pregnant with the boys.

Denny cleared his throat and gave Felicity a nod. "Smart woman you've got there." He turned back to me. "Look, I'm a hunter, Miller. I intend to act like one. When you can't track your prey in the wild, you find their den. You watch. You wait. That ranch? That's the place. That's where she'll go. I'd bet my life on it."

"Consider it done," I growled at him.

If he was wrong—if he failed us—I'd be coming to collect.

Chapter 10

Felicity

Xander helped me back inside, up the stairs, and into our room after Denny left. His anger had dissipated in Denny's absence. The tides of his emotions had quickly shifted into concern for me as soon as the bounty hunter was out of sight.

I was grateful for his arm around my back and his hand in mine. I'd needed it a lot more than I'd thought. With the ranch looking like another dead end and no other leads to turn to, his comforting touch was a blessing I wished I'd asked for sooner.

I'd been flinching away from him for much too long.

The room spun slightly as Xander guided me to the bed so I could lie down.

"I'm sorry about that, Cheeks," he said, his voice gentler and more soothing than I'd heard it in a while. He sat down on the bed next to me and smoothed my hair away from my brow. "I lost my temper with Denny. I shouldn't have done it. If I scared you—"

"No. That's not it." I rolled onto my side to face him. I tucked my knees to my stomach and folded my hands under my chin, feeling vulnerable as a child. "When you raised your aura at Denny, I...I felt it."

"You felt it? How?"

It was a good question. I'd only started to sense shifter auras when I'd been pregnant with the boys. With a few notable exceptions—like with Samuel, who rarely let his down—they only came up when there some dick-measuring or a

fight in the works. Auras were like a warning system to other shifters. *Back off. Back down. If you fuck around, you're gonna find out.* But I'd only been able to feel those auras because of the two shifters growing in my womb. Rylan and Ryder—they had been sensing them. I'd only been picking up on auras because of the boys. It should have stopped entirely after I gave birth.

I thought it had stopped.

Apparently, it hadn't.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Maybe it's some kind of lingering side effect of a shifter pregnancy?"

"Could be," he mused. "Though, I thought all of that would be out of your system by now. Did it feel the same as it did when you were carrying the boys?"

"A little bit, I suppose. It felt like..." I racked my brain for the right way to describe it. The results were hardly flattering. "Like needing to scream and throw up all at once."

Xander was staring at me like I'd just confessed to assassinating Kennedy. Suddenly, I was deeply self-conscious.

"I know how stupid that must sound," I admitted, feeling my face warm.

"No. Doesn't sound stupid to me." His brow furrowed thoughtfully as he stroked my hair away from my face. "That's kind of how it felt the first time I raised my aura, actually. Not exactly the same but pretty close."

"What was different?" It was weird to process that I'd experienced something even remotely similar to what Xander had. So much of his life was still foreign to me, locked away behind a door that only a true shifter could access.

But not this part, for some reason.

"The anger, mostly," he said. "The first time I did it, Ma had just caught Dylan coloring on the wall of his room. With permanent marker, of course, so she was extra pissed. I came in from outside when I heard her yelling at him, and it just... burst out of me, like my finger had slipped against a trigger

while I was holding a gun. Felt like a gunshot, too—for both of us. She said when it hit her, it nearly knocked her on her ass.” He breathed a laugh. “She was so excited, she completely forgot about Dylan and the mess he’d made. I think it might have been one of the few times I actually made her proud.”

I listened intently, always eager for glimpses of Xander’s life before I’d entered it. Unfortunately, as was so often the case about stories of Xander’s childhood, the tale was equal parts bitter and sweet.

“I was angry, though,” I insisted. “I was so angry, I felt like I was going to pass out from trying to hold it in.”

He took my hand and ran his thumb over the ridges of my knuckles. “Are you still angry now?”

“A little. I don’t like waiting any more than you do. I hate that we got our hopes up over nothing, and I hate it even more that Denny’s so unwilling to go down a different route,” I confessed.

“Makes it all feel useless, doesn’t it?” he said, then paused the trail of his thumb. It pressed into the valley between my knuckles, settling on a low point. “Like everything’s moving against us, and if we don’t hold on to what we’ve got, we’ll be swept farther and farther away.”

“That’s exactly how it feels,” I agreed eagerly. “I think you’re right. We need to go back North. Those packs Samuel’s friendly with are definitely hiding something. But...”

“But?” Xander repeated, raising an eyebrow.

“I also think we need to trust Denny,” I admitted. “Finding people is his job for a reason. If his intuition says the ranch is worth staking out...”

Xander sighed. “He’s even more stubborn than you are. I’m not sure I would’ve hired him if I’d known that from the get-go.”

“I’m not that stubborn,” I grumbled. “But every time I think about all we’ve lost, how badly things have fallen apart, I feel like we have to cling to whatever we have left. And I despise clinging to things.”

Xander snorted, then stroked my cheek fondly. “I’ve noticed.”

I chewed on my lower lip, trying to imagine what would happen next if, by some grace of God, Denny was right.

We’d have the boys back with us. That would only ever be a good thing.

But Xander’s mother would still be stuck in her coma, and Xander’s father would still be devastated because of it. Kingston would still be depressed and struggling.

“Something else on your mind?” Xander asked.

“I’m just thinking about...family, I guess,” I admitted. “Speaking of clinging to things. Nana said my mother wants to talk to me. I probably need to suck it up and try to make amends.”

I didn’t want to say it, but if Marianne never emerged from her coma, my mom would be the only grandmother our sons had.

“Ah.” Xander’s brow furrowed. “That’d make anyone anxious. Are you sure you’re up for it?”

“No,” I admitted. “I haven’t spoken to her since... God, since before I got pregnant. But Nana says she seemed... better. This feels like the time.”

“You want me to stay here with you?” Xander offered. “Would you mind?”

I thought about how good it had felt letting him put his arm around me and guide me up the stairs.

“I’d prefer it, actually.”

Depending on what kind of mood my mom was in, I’d probably need the extra support.

I shifted next to Xander, sitting on the edge of the bed. His thigh was pressed close to mine as I made the call.

She answered on the fifth ring.

“Felicity?”

I swallowed hard, suddenly nervous. “Hi, Mom.”

“Felicity. Oh my goodness, it’s so nice to hear your voice!” She sounded like she genuinely meant it, but then she added, with great emphasis, “It’s been a while.”

“Yeah.” I clenched my jaw, already bracing for this to go south. *Don’t take the bait. Have a nice discussion. Move along.* “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m fine, I’m fine. We’re in Miami right now at the Four Seasons. Thomas has some very important business deals to tend to. You know how he is. But enough about me, tell me how you are! I saw you on the news, my poor baby. I’ve been worried sick.”

“We’ve been worried, too.” I reached over and placed my hand on Xander’s knee. He folded his own hand over mine. “We hired a bounty hunter this week. We think he might be—”

“A bounty hunter? That sounds awfully serious. And so dangerous!”

“It’s a pretty serious situation. And dangerous is probably what we need right now. He specializes in tracking shifters, so he’s our best chance—”

“Does this bounty hunter have a name?” she asked abruptly.

I frowned. “Denny. Dennis Kerry. He seems good, Mom. I think he’ll be—”

“I see. He sounds...expensive.” The judgment dripped from her tone like venom. As if the Four Seasons wasn’t expensive. As if she hadn’t invested significantly more money in her BBL and breast implants. “Who exactly is footing the bill for this?”

“Xander is.” I glanced to Xander as my nerves spiked. We’d barely made it past pleasantries, and already, the tides seemed to have turned. “Not that it matters. We can afford it. You don’t need to worry about the cost.”

“Xander can’t track your children for himself? You would think an alpha wolf would be capable of finding his own sons

without bringing in some stray mutt—”

“Denny isn’t a stray mutt,” I snapped, the calm demeanor I’d strived for vanishing. “He’s the best there is. No less than my sons deserve. Why do you even care? We’re not asking you to pay for it.”

“I just didn’t realize that the two of you had so much money to throw away. Meanwhile, Thomas and I are over here spending a small fortune on paying off your grandfather’s gambling debts. You know, come to think, I really wish you would start taking some adult responsibility, Felicity. You’ve contributed nothing to this family. Maybe, just maybe, it’s time for you to pull up your big girl panties and—”

I groaned as I pulled the phone away from my ear.

“What’s wrong?” Xander asked.

“She’s off on a rant again. About the bookies again, of all things. I don’t know what set her off—”

“Give me the phone.”

“Xander—”

“No.” His voice was firm and commanding. It matched the look in his eyes. “I’m fucking tired of hearing about your mother and those bookies. I should’ve done this months ago. Give me the phone.”

There were times that it struck me that I was truly mated to an alpha. His tone brooked no argument.

Gingerly, I put the phone into his hand, and he raised it to his ear.

“Eliza?” From the receiver, I heard Mom pause her tirade at the sound of his voice. “This is Xander. It sounds like you’re going through some hard times, financially speaking.”

He waited as she launched into a response.

“Right. Okay. Whatever you say. Well, I’m happy to inform you that those debts are no longer your problem. I’ll be taking care of it. Just send me the info.”

Xander pulled the phone away from his ear, blinking like a grenade had just gone off next to his ear. I could hear Mom through the receiver. Though I couldn't make out her words, I could tell she was unhappy. Why? Who fucking knew?

"No—no. Just send me the info, Eliza. No—okay. All right. Have a good day."

He looked positively shell-shocked when he ended the call.

"Your mother's a real piece of work, you know that?"

"I'm so sorry." I inched closer to him, turning my body to his. "But, Xander, I can't let you pay down those debts."

"I'm not going to pay them down." He sounded almost offended by the notion. "I'm going to pay them off. It's no skin off my back. We have the money. It's a good investment, actually. She won't have anything to hold over your head again. Or Nana Jordan's."

"But—"

"Don't argue with me on this. I didn't stop you from baking a thousand cookies this week, did I? It feels good to do something. This, I should've done a long time ago."

"I wouldn't have let you." Another ache bloomed in my chest. This one was older, deeper than the others. An ancient wound. "I don't know that I can let you do it now. If I sold Havishford House—"

"It'd be on the market for ages, and we never finished the renovations, anyway. Besides. Once we have the boys back, we'll need somewhere to live." He said it like it was perfectly logical. I supposed, in a way, it was. "The lodge is a good place to have for a headquarters, but we can't raise our family here. Come on." He nudged me with his knee and grinned, the first one I'd seen since this shitshow started. "Just thank me and tell me how handsome I am."

"You *are* handsome. Very." I stared up at him, awestruck and ashamed. "But it's too much, Xander."

"No, it's not. Have you not realized by now? I'd lay a fortune at your feet and live in a cardboard box down by the

river if you asked me to. I'd give up every penny I owned just to see you smile." He shrugged. "And this is nothing as dramatic as all that, so it's fine."

"I don't have any way to repay you," I reminded him. He was already paying for everything, including but not limited to Denny's bounty-hunting services. The only money in my bank account was my last paycheck from Evergreen Hills, and it didn't look like I'd be going back to work anytime soon.

"I'm not asking you to repay me. Aren't you listening? Everything that's mine is already yours." He tilted his head to the side, considering. "But if you wanted... You might consider blocking her number, Cheeks."

"No contact?" It was an interesting notion. My pregnancy had been a lot easier without her involvement. And with the boys still missing, we definitely didn't need the extra stress.

But the whole reason I'd called was to open up a line of communication. Maybe pave the way for our sons to have a relationship with their grandmother someday.

Had it really gone to shit so fast?

"I know she's your mother and all, but hearing her tear into you like that, especially right now..." He shook his head. "It's fucked up. What she's willing to say to her only child, I wouldn't say to my worst enemies. You deserve better than that."

I found my lip trapped between my teeth again as I considered it. No contact. No more hearing about my supposed shortcomings. No more worrying about what she would do to Nana if I didn't appease her, comply, fall in line.

Her meddling in my life had helped Xander and me get together. Even if she hadn't intended for that outcome, I was grateful to her for that. But I was a mother now. The way she treated me... I already knew I would never be like that to our sons. I'd rather die.

"You're right." I pulled her contact up in my phone. My thumb only hovered over the block button for a second before I pressed it.

And just like that, it was done. Another weight off my chest. I'd been carrying it for so long, I'd forgotten how heavy it was.

Xander wrapped his arms around me and folded me against him. His embrace was firm and warm.

He didn't let go for a long time.

I didn't want him to.

* * *

"Felicity!"

Xander's voice jolted me from a dreamless sleep. His hand was firm on my shoulder, shaking gently but urgently.

I sat up with a start, blinking against the darkness of the room that surrounded me.

"What's wrong?" My eyes were aching and sore. I couldn't tell how long I'd been asleep for, only that it wasn't long enough. But the pounding of my heart banished any chance that I'd fall back asleep again.

Had something gone wrong? Were we under attack?

Above me, I could just barely make out the features of Xander's face. His eyes were unusually wide, gleaming with a nervous energy I'd never seen in them before.

"It's the boys, Cheeks." He squeezed my shoulders a little tighter and pressed a fast, hard, and impulsive kiss to my cheek. "Denny's guys in Texas—they found them."

The pounding in my chest turned to an intense flutter, only partly from the kiss.

"You're sure?"

Nausea tap danced with excitement deep in my stomach. I didn't think I could bear a false alarm.

"There's movement at Melony's ranch. They think it's her," Xander said. "But we have to go now, Cheeks. If they're

right—”

“Of course.” I kicked away the covers and sprang from the bed. “Just let me grab the diaper bag. I’ll be ready in five.”

In a mad flurry, we dressed and rushed downstairs. With every step I took, my heart beat a little louder in my ears.

Ryder. Rylan.

It was finally happening.

We were getting our sons back.

Chapter 11

Xander

The plane was a red-eye to Dallas. While I drove to Boston Logan, Felicity ordered our tickets on my phone. One for me, one for her, one for Denny.

“The plane’s pretty full,” she said, scrolling through the seat selection. “We won’t be able to sit together, but I suppose that doesn’t matter. Wait, unless we spring for economy plus —”

“Is there anything in business?” I asked.

“I’ll check.” She did. “No, sorry. Only first class.”

“Then, book first class.” Before she could worry about the cost, I added, “If I’ve gotta be airborne, I don’t wanna be squeezed between some juicy-thighed cowboy and a lady who takes her socks off the second we strap in.” I glanced over at her, chewing the inside of my cheek. “Don’t think less of me if I need my barf bag.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Xander, do you not like flying?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” I mused, squeezing the steering wheel like it was about to float away. “Hate’s a stronger word. And therefore, probably more appropriate.”

Despite my apprehension toward the mode of transport we were about to fling our bodies onto, Felicity checked us in online. We parked in long-term and zipped through security with ease. With only the diaper bag as a carry-on, it was just a matter of slipping off our shoes before heading through the scanners, then lacing them back up on the other side.

“This is so...nice.” Felicity’s voice trembled as we waited for our plane to pull into the gate—maybe a little from excitement, but probably more from nerves. “The last time I was in a lounge, I was just a snot-nosed little kid. They’re fancier than I remember.”

“Not how I would’ve liked you to experience it for the first time as an adult but, hey, at least the champagne’s free.” I swiped a bottle from the self-service bar and poured us each a glass.

“It’s a little early,” she pointed out. She was right, but that wouldn’t stop me.

“Five o’clock somewhere?” I suggested.

“It’s five o’clock here. In the morning.” She frowned, then held up a hand. “Actually, no. If I drink, and if Denny’s guy is right...”

Her voice trailed off, but I understood what she was saying. Or, what she wouldn’t say, like she was trying not to jinx it.

No nursing mother was free to casually drink without considering how much of that alcohol might end up in her breast milk.

She was thinking, as always, of our sons.

“You’ll have time, Cheeks. Just a glass. For your nerves.” I sipped from my own flute, eager to put a liquid cushion of courage between my own nerves and the boarding gates.

Tentatively, she accepted my offering. “Oh, what the hell.”

The champagne was nice, if a little flat and warm. Unfortunately, it did very little to still my pre-flight jitters. As we boarded, I felt an old, familiar tightness in my chest, and a strong impulse to turn around and run.

I’d never liked flying, even if it was the quickest way between point A and point B. But today, the thought of being hundreds of miles above civilization in what essentially amounted to a tin can operating on dubious physics was nothing compared to the big what-if hanging over our heads.

Tonight, we'd either fall asleep with the comforting knowledge that our sons were safe and sound, resting in their crib next to us, or we'd be going home empty-handed, in which case, I doubted we'd sleep at all.

This was for the boys. As long as I reminded myself of that, it made things a little easier.

I'd spend a lifetime up in the air if it meant my sons would be home safe again.

The plane filled up fast. A stewardess came by to take our pre-flight drink orders and offer us hot towels. Another delivered a round of warm mixed nuts. All of it happened without any sign of our pet bounty hunter. I knew Felicity had sent him his ticket and boarding info, but his absence was palpable. I wasn't sure Denny was going to show up.

He finally slouched in just before the stewardesses started closing the doors. He was the very last to board.

"Fucking airports," he grumbled as he slumped into the aisle seat across from us. It was the most relatable thing he'd said since we met. He cast a quick glance over to us. Felicity, knees bouncing impatiently. Me, nursing a plastic cup of Coke spiked with a miniature bottle of Jack Daniels and doing my best not to remember plane crash statistics. "You two okay?"

"Suppose that depends on what we find once we hit Dallas," I said through gritted teeth.

"S'pose it does," he agreed.

I let out a short breath. "I owe you an apology, Denny. It seems like you were right after all. I'm—"

Sorry, I wanted to say, but Denny cut me off.

"We've got four hours between here and Texas," he grunted. "My advice? Get some sleep if you can."

I wanted to finish my apology, ask him for more info about what his guys had found at the ranch, but he pulled his sleeping mask down over his eyes and tilted his seat back before I could.

“You mind if I hold your hand?” I asked Felicity once the flight attendants collected our empty drinks and launched into their safety spiel.

“Of course not.”

She held her hand out, and I locked my fingers into the spaces between hers. Her palm was soft and fine-boned. As the engines revved up, and the plane moved forward, I squeezed it tightly enough that she winced.

“Shit. Sorry.” My heart was thrumming at a thousand beats a minute, but I forced myself to relax my grip.

“We haven’t even taken off yet,” she muttered. “You weren’t kidding about hating planes.”

“Yeah, well.” I scowled, keeping my gaze straight ahead. “You’d hate ’em too, if you had a wolf inside you clamoring to get out.”

“You feel like shifting? Here?” She glanced around warily, and with good reason. Even with the leg room first class offered, there definitely wasn’t enough space for my wolf to make an appearance. “Oh no.”

“Not planning on shifting, Cheeks,” I reassured her. “It’s more like hearing the panicked, primal howls of a wild animal that’s just realized it’s been caught in a trap. One that’s about to launch itself into the air at faster speeds than anyone was ever meant to go.”

The plane was picking up momentum now.

For the boys. This was all for the boys.

I glanced at Dennis, who was blissfully sound asleep. Fucker.

“How have I known you half my life, but I’m only just learning this about you now?” Felicity asked.

“It’s not exactly something I broadcast, Cheeks.” My skin itched. Sweat prickled at my brow. My stomach churned, threatening to expel the alcohol. But to deal with any of that, I’d have to let go of my arm rest and Felicity’s hand. Instead, I gritted my teeth and slumped back in my seat. “Or something

that comes up often. Just ignore me. Maybe the panic will knock me out.”

In the end, the flight went better than expected. To be fair, my expectations had been pretty low. We didn't crash or die, which was all I could've asked for. Turbulence was minimal, and though I didn't get any rest myself, about half an hour in, Felicity fell asleep with her head on my shoulder. Somehow, that calmed me down best of all.

Dennis awoke just as we pulled up to the gate. One of his field agents was waiting for us in Arrivals. He introduced himself as Rabbit, and looked every bit his namesake. Big, wild eyes, a twitchy nose, buck teeth. His short-cropped hair was stark white, though he couldn't have been any older than twenty-five or so. When he moved close enough to shake my hand, I could smell the shifter on him. Definitely a wolf, no matter what he called himself.

He got even twitchier when his eyes landed on Felicity. He started stammering his words to her so badly, I couldn't tell if he was hitting on her or begging her not to hit him. Felicity looked equally perplexed, until Denny smacked him on the back of the head.

“Leave her be, Rab,” Denny said firmly. “She's spoken for.”

“Ah.” Rabbit's gaze shifted to me, sliding from my boots up to my eyes like he was sizing me up. The way his pale skin turned paler suggested that he'd decided we were of very different weight classes. “Well...f-fuck.”

Dejected, Rabbit took the diaper bag from Felicity and waved for us to follow him. Felicity walked at his side, posing questions about his stake-out. Just shaking her hand had made him stammer. Actually trying to hold a conversation with her? The guy was all over the place. His reactions were all exaggerated. His body language, erratic. Felicity held up her end politely, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he kept trying to sniff her hair when she wasn't looking. In fact, she didn't seem to notice the effect she had on him.

Typical Cheeks, not realizing when a dude had the hots for her. Hell, it had taken her fourteen years to realize I wanted her, and I was her mate.

Then again, it'd taken me just as long to realize she wanted me, too.

“Who the fuck is this guy?” I asked Denny, falling into step with him and jerking a thumb in Rabbit’s direction.

“An associate,” Denny grunted. “And a friend.”

“Friend in low places, seems to me.” I scowled at the back of Rabbit’s pale head when he laughed loudly at something Felicity had said to him. “He looks like he’s on something.”

“Nah. That’s just Rabbit for you. He served two tours in the Marines over in Afghanistan as part of one of the shifter divisions,” Denny explained. “Saw some shit. If you’d been through what he’s been through, you’d be jumpy too. But all my guys are clean. We test. You don’t gotta worry about that.”

I frowned, immediately feeling bad. I hadn’t realized that there was a reason for Rabbit’s strange behavior beyond the fact that he had the hots for my woman, but what Denny said made sense. I didn’t know much about the shifter divisions of the military, only that they usually saw more action than the humans. When Uncle Sam could recruit men and women with heightened senses, enhanced physical capabilities, and increased healing capacity, he made the most of them.

Those shifter divisions were no joke. Neither was PTSD.

“He’s one of your betas, then?” I asked, wondering how Denny found guys like Rab.

“Sigma,” Denny corrected. “All my guys are. They come from packs all over. Lots of ’em are ex-military, like Rab and me, but all of ’em are dependable and skilled. He’s good at what he does, and I trust him. That’s all you need to know.”

We reached a slate-gray Toyota Tacoma. Rabbit fished in his pocket for the keys and tossed them to Denny, who caught them swiftly.

“You two in the backseat,” Denny instructed us. “Rab, you’re up front with me. You can catch us up during the ride.”

Without Felicity in his line of sight, Rab seemed to have a better handle on his speaking abilities. I could hardly blame him, I supposed. Felicity was the kind of woman who could make anyone trip over their words. Me included, sometimes.

“So, the ranch, yeah? We got there late, well after dark last night. Took us a while to find the place on account of it being pretty out of the way.” Rab glanced to Denny. “Sorry.”

“No worries, Rab.” Denny kept his eyes on the road. He handled the apology like an alpha, casual and firm. He clearly commanded a lot of Rab’s respect. “Tell ’em what you saw.”

“Right. So, real late last night, a vehicle pulled up the drive. Woman got out of it. She unloaded a bunch of stuff. It was pretty dark out, but we saw one of those car-seat, baby-buggy things with her. She took it inside the house. She’s been there ever since.”

“What’s she look like, this woman?” I asked, trying to tamp down the hope rising inside me.

“Slim build,” Rabbit said thoughtfully. “Tallish, maybe? Hard to tell from a distance like that, and like I said, it was dark. But I caught a glimpse of her from behind after she unlocked the door and turned on the light. Blonde hair—”

My heart leapt. Felicity gripped my knee.

“That’s Melony,” she said.

“We don’t know that,” Denny said. Who the hell else could it be? He glanced back to Rabbit. “You see anyone else lurking around? An old guy, or a hippie woman, or a feral?”

“Nah, boss. Just the blonde. I called straight away. Beauty’s keeping watch now, just in case she books it before we get there.”

Felicity arched a brow. “Beauty?”

Denny snorted in apparent amusement. “You’ll know him when you see him.”

Denny got onto the interstate, taking the I-35E south toward Waco. The land stretched far and flat, cracked asphalt beneath us and broad horizons up ahead. Felicity gnawed on her lower lip. Her hand on my knee was a comforting weight. I wondered if she was thinking the same thing I was.

They said everything was bigger in Texas, but out here with so much open space, it struck me how vast this country was in general. No wonder a shifter could travel incognito with such ease. The cities were huge, but the rural expanses of land between them were even huger.

America was a big place to get lost in. There were so many places someone could hide here if they didn't want to be found.

We got off the interstate after about an hour of driving and passed through a tiny, sparse town that didn't seem to have much going for it beyond its community center. SHARPE CITY BAR-B-CUE, its marquee read in faded letters, followed by a date and a time. COME ONE COME ALL. GOD BLESS!

Beyond Sharpe City, the roads turned to a labyrinth of gravel. The truck kicked up a fat, thick plume of dust behind us. The skies were laced with wispy clouds. Rabbit gave Denny directions for another half hour. I could see what he'd meant about this place being hard to find. When I checked my phone, I realized I had no service. Out this far, there was no relying on GPS.

"It's right up ahead now," Rabbit informed us. "There's a long driveway with a little bit of cover, so she shouldn't see us coming. But we won't want to get too close with the truck."

"We'll park here," Denny finally said, pulling off into the grassy driveway of a field. "We can walk the rest of the way."

Out of the truck, Felicity grabbed the diaper bag from the floor of the backseat. I reached out to take it from her, but she slung the strap over her shoulder and shook her head.

"I'm not going to be of much use to anyone beyond carrying this," she told me. "You should keep your hands free

in case anything goes wrong.”

We walked down the gravel road for maybe five minutes before the ranch came into view. Felicity kept her hand in mine the entire time. Now, she was the one with the death grip.

I didn't mind.

The house was single story, quaint, with car pulled up in front of the garage, and a little red lantern on a post at the end of its long drive. Apple trees lined the driveway on either side. As we neared the turn-off, Rabbit gave a whistle. From somewhere nearby came an echo.

“Coast is clear, Beauty,” Denny said. “Come on out.”

Something rustled in the ditch right next to us. The brush heaved. A massive man emerged from it, so huge I couldn't believe we hadn't noticed him right away. He had the body of a refrigerator, a head like a brick, and a face that looked like he'd been hit by both.

Beauty, huh? He was the ugliest man I'd ever met.

“Hey, boss,” Beauty greeted Dennis in a deep, chesty voice. “Rab.”

He gave Felicity and me each a nod but said nothing else.

“You got eyes, Beauty?” Dennis asked.

“'Bout an hour ago. Same blonde we saw when we called you last night. She came out to get something out of the car, then went right back in.”

Denny turned to me. “You bring something with the boys' scent on it like I asked?”

“Here.” Felicity reached into the diaper bag and pulled out two zip lock baggies. Each contained a onesie. Rylan's had a duck on it. Ryder's, a train. “They're from nine days ago, but...”

She'd been counting, I realized, seeing the worry in her eyes as she offered the onesies to Denny.

“It'll be enough.” Denny took the bags. He opened each and stuck his nose inside, breathing in quickly but deeply.

When he closed them again, he raised his nose to the air next.

“Are they here?” Felicity asked.

“Someone is. Let’s get on with it, then.” Dennis pointed to Rab and me. “You two, with me. Beauty, hang back with Miss Felicity here. Anything goes tits up, whistle.” He turned to Felicity. “And if he whistles, don’t run. Just hide. Quick as you can.”

Felicity shrank back, staring at the ranch house with worry in her eyes. “Shouldn’t we be doing this at night?”

“Nah,” said Denny. “People get jumpier at night, and this is Texas. Don’t wanna get shot if I can avoid it. Figure you all probably feel the same.”

“But... shouldn’t we call Cordova?” Felicity asked. “Or the police?”

It was a good point. This was still, by all accounts, Cordova’s case. Denny had just succeeded where the FBI failed.

She’d called this place another dead end. But Denny had chosen to wait. I was embarrassed that I’d challenged him so hard about that now. He’d been right.

Maybe there was something to his so-called hunter’s intuition after all.

Denny laughed. “We don’t deal with the police. This is shifter business. Best handled in shifter ways. Any cops that come out here will need guns in case things get ugly. I don’t wanna risk that.”

A horrible scene darted through my mind. A slew of cops outside the ranch, armed and ready. Extra jumpy because they knew a shifter might be inside, prepared to shift and maul them the first chance she got. A bullet flying. It would only take one.

If my boys were in that house, it was a chance I didn’t want to take.

“No cops,” I agreed, then took Felicity by the elbows and turned her toward me.

Her hazel eyes were wide. She looked innocent as a doe in the forest, and terrified as one caught in headlights.

“It’s gonna be okay. We’ll make sure of it,” I promised her.

“Be safe,” she whispered, then threw her arms around me. She hugged me tightly and lingered, like she didn’t want to let go. “Bring them back.”

I kissed her forehead, longing for her lips. When we parted, Denny gave me a nod.

With Rabbit falling in behind us, we walked up the drive.

“So, how’re we doing this?” I asked, wary. We’d abandoned all cover. If Melony was staring out the window, she’d see all three of us coming right toward her. Denny and Rabbit, she wouldn’t recognize, but she’d know me right away.

“Casually,” Denny answered. “We don’t wanna scare or even startle her. If she bolts, Rabbit will be after her in a split.” He reached back and rubbed Rabbit’s head affectionately. Rabbit swatted his hand away, grinning like a rowdy little brother. “We don’t just call him Rabbit for his looks. This little shit is fast.”

“But if she knows we’re coming—”

“Then, she’ll have a little bit to think about how she wants to meet us. This girl’s in love with you, isn’t she?” Denny asked.

“Allegedly.” I glowered. I would’ve rather she hated my guts.

“Then, she should be happy to see you, kiddo.” Denny clapped me on the shoulder. “The cover was for Felicity, not you. With your kids in there, we don’t wanna engage in a fight unless we’ve gotta. If it looks like we come in peace, she’s more likely to give us peace in return.”

I clenched my fists but said nothing.

I wanted a fight. I wanted to kill Melony Houghton, hunt down her murderous father. I wanted to skin them both alive

and make fur rugs out of their pelts. For stealing my sons, it was better than what they deserved.

But this was Denny's operation. I'd play by his rules.

For now.

Rabbit peeled off from us once we reached the front porch, slinking around the side of the house. Denny stepped up and knocked on the door.

We stood back and waited for an answer.

It came in the form of a voice, hollering from behind the door.

"I'm coming! Hold on one sec."

Denny and I exchanged a glance. I couldn't tell if the voice was Melony's or not, but she sounded like she hadn't seen us coming. Hopefully, that was to our advantage.

The door opened a few moments later. The blonde woman behind it had wide, fearful eyes, and a smattering of freckles covering almost her entire face.

Immediately, my stomach twisted.

"You're not Melony."

"N-no." She took a step backward. "Melony's not here right now." She glanced between us quickly. Her eyes narrowed hatefully as they lingered on me. "I think you need to leave."

She tried to shut the door in our faces, but Denny stopped her.

"Hey. Slow down, there. We're not looking for trouble. Just answers," he said, his voice the epitome of calm. "You mind telling us who you are, hon?"

"I'm... I'm n-nobody," she stammered.

"Nobody got a name?" I growled.

She tried to shut the door again, putting all her weight behind it. Denny held firm.

Her face fell in horror as she realized she wouldn't be able to send us away.

“Please. I'm... I'm Sarah. All right? I don't know any Melony, and I don't know you.” The look she gave me was pointed and full of venom. A strange way to look at someone you didn't know, though by all accounts, I had no idea how she would have known me.

I'd never seen this woman before in my life.

“Thought you said Melony wasn't here right now,” I said.

“I—I misspoke. I don't know anything. So please, if you don't want any trouble, leave. Before I...” She furrowed her brow with a second wind of courage. She raised her voice to a shout. “Before I call the cops on you both! Don't think that I won't!”

“Now, there's no need—” Denny began, but then a high, abrupt wail burst from within the house.

I would've known that sound anywhere. The moment I heard it, I saw red.

“Move,” I growled, pushing forward. With a hand on her shoulder, I shoved her out of my way. She hit the wall left of the doorway hard as I marched in past her.

That cry. It belonged to one of my sons.

“Xander! Damn it, don't—” Denny called after me. I didn't listen. Anything he said after that, I didn't hear.

I stormed into the house with tunnel vision. The walls could have been painted bright red with yellow polka dots. Cowboys could've been pole dancing in the living room while live gators boxed in the kitchen for all I knew.

My entire focus was on that baby crying, and the familiar scent in the air once I was inside.

Rylan. Ryder. My sons were here.

Whoever this woman was, she had my kids.

“Stop! Please. Please, no.” Sarah followed me in and threw herself at me, clutching desperately at my elbow. “Grayson—I

just got him down. Take whatever you want from me, but please don't hurt him!"

"Grayson?" I glanced down at her without stopping. Her eyes were full of tears.

"He's innocent," she sobbed. "If you ever loved Melony, please—"

I broke her grip on my elbow and pushed her back again.

Grayson. She'd renamed one of my kids.

I'd never hated a name more.

Behind me, more shouting. Some of it was Denny. Some, Sarah. I didn't listen to either. Down the hall, I followed the baby's cries to an open door.

Inside, I found a nursery. Some paint swatches on the walls suggested someone was planning on remodeling it but hadn't gotten around to it yet. The only furniture inside was a changing table and crib. The Ikea boxes they'd come from were still stacked in the corner.

Whatever was going on here, it was a rush job and hadn't been planned well. All this time, we'd been assuming the boys' kidnapping had been premeditated, so why did their nursery look like an afterthought?

When I sniffed the air, I found that familiar scent: baby powder and milk, something similar to fresh bread. A little of Felicity, a little of me.

I made a beeline for the crib. Inside it was Rylan. His face was scrunched up, red and furious as he wailed. His tiny fists thrashed on either side of his face. He kicked his legs like a frog swimming through a pond.

The drumming of my own heart filled my ears, drowning out every other sound. With every beat, warmth spread through my chest as a laugh escaped my throat.

It was the exact face Rylan made when he was trying to poop.

“Hey there, kiddo.” I scooped him up into my arms and held him flush to my chest, rubbing his back and thanking my lucky stars. Every other thought was gone from my mind, save for how right it felt to hold him again, and how elated Felicity would be to do the same. “Oh God, Rylan—”

“His name is not Rylan!” Sarah screeched.

She threw herself at me, face twisted with pure hate. Denny caught her arms and dragged her back toward the doorway. She kicked and thrashed so hard against his hold, he had to wrap his arms around her chest just to keep her from hurting herself as she struggled to get away.

“You put him down! Fucking sperm donor! I’ll kill you, I swear to God—”

“Hey. Enough of that,” Denny barked at her. “Nobody’s killing anyone. Why don’t you calm down and—”

“I won’t let you take him,” she snarled at me. “You don’t deserve to even touch him after what you did! If you hurt him, so help me—”

“What I did?” My eyes narrowed. “What the fuck are you on about?”

She broke into a wordless sob. Her body rocked forward as tears streamed down her face.

My eyes met Denny’s. He looked about as confused as I felt.

We didn’t have time for this shit.

“Where’s Ryder?” I snapped at her, shifting Rylan a little deeper into the crook of my arm.

“Ryder?” Sarah’s lower lip trembled. Her face was red, upper lip glossy with snot.

“The other baby,” I growled. “Whatever the fuck you’ve been calling him. Where is he? Where’s my other son?”

“I’ve only been watching Grayson.” Her chest rose and fell in quick, panicked heaves under Denny’s arms. “There’s no one else here.”

Chapter 12

Felicity

As Beauty and I stood back behind the tree line, hidden from view, we heard no whistle of warning. There was no reason to hide. I chewed my fingernails and bounced on my heels, desperate to follow Xander. Desperate to know how this would pan out.

Barely five minutes after Xander, Denny, and Rabbit left to check out the house, we received our first update. It arrived in the form of a stark white wolf, smaller and scrawnier than Xander's but still huge compared to my small human frame, galloping down the drive at top speed toward Beauty and me.

Rabbit. He was in his wolf form.

He skidded to a stop before us, shifting back into his human form so quickly he ended up naked on his hands and knees—a compromising position for anyone, but an especially vulnerable-looking one for someone as wiry as him.

“Miss Felicity! We need you. Now. C'mon.” His stutter had vanished in the urgency of his voice. Only after a breath did he remember that he didn't have a lick of clothes on in his human form. In an instant, his cheeks turned redder than a tomato, and the stutter returned. “Ah, shit. A-p-p-pologies, ma'am.”

He shifted back into his wolf form quickly, turned back toward the house, and looked expectantly over his shoulder at me.

I glanced at Beauty, who hadn't said a word to me since the others left to confront Melony. “Does he mean for me to...

ride him?”

Beauty nodded. When I hesitated, Beauty placed a hand on my back and shoved me in Rabbit’s direction.

I supposed Rab had said, with some urgency, “now”.

I mounted Rabbit’s lupine back awkwardly. I’d only ridden Xander like this before, and Xander was a much bigger wolf. Rabbit, I was afraid, would give out under my weight.

He didn’t, thankfully. Before I had time to address the other awkwardness—straddling the back of wolf I’d only just met—he took off like a shot toward the ranch house, leaving me with no choice but to twine my fingers in his mane and hold on for dear life.

My heart was racing, torn between hope and fear. The babies must be inside. I could imagine no other possibility.

But if they were, why hadn’t Xander brought them to me? Why hadn’t he come out to get me himself?

Something must have gone wrong.

Rabbit deposited me on the front porch. As soon as I dismounted, my feet were moving through the front door, left ajar. Across the entry way. Down the hall, where the sound of a woman sobbing mingled with Xander and Denny’s shouts, and...

My heart stopped as I picked a fourth sound out from all the others.

Rylan.

Those were the cries of my son.

I broke into a sprint. I knew that sound better than the sound of my own voice, better than the path between my bedroom at Nana Jordan’s and the bathroom in the dark. I burst into a room that looked like it was being renovated into a nursery, ready to hold my boys in my arms again.

“You wanna get answers, or do you wanna feel like a big fuckin’ man?”

“I want my son back, you fuck. Let me at her!”

I found Xander and Denny snarling at each other, teeth bared, foreheads a mere inch away from a mutual headbutt. A blonde woman was on the floor behind Denny, sobbing, her face buried in her hands. My brain barely registered their argument or her presence at all.

Rylan was there, in Xander's arms.

"Rylan!" I rushed to Xander and took Rylan from him. "Oh my God. Oh my God."

I clutched Rylan to my chest, heart so swollen it could burst. My nose pressed to the top of his head as I breathed in, basking in the comfort of his soft, soapy baby smell. He was dressed in a cheap blue onesie. Its fabric was scratchy and stiff beneath my palm as I rubbed his back, like it'd been put on him straight off the hanger without being washed. He quieted as I closed my eyes, rocking and cooing to him.

It was the most natural and easy thing in the world. Holding my child. Soothing his cries. Letting his heart beat against my own.

I opened my eyes to find Xander staring at me. His shoulders were tense. A vein twitched in his neck, throbbing visibly with his own heartbeat. He was angry, clearly, and Denny didn't look too happy, either.

Something was wrong.

"Let's all calm down," I suggested, keeping my voice low. "You're upsetting Rylan." I shifted him to my hip and scanned the nursery. "Where's Ryder? Bring him here and we can figure out the rest."

"I—I can't, Cheeks." Xander shook his head. The veil of anger in his eyes lifted, revealing deep ravines of pain. "He's not here."

He may as well have shot me in the heart.

The next hour was a blur to me. I was awake, I was breathing, but I simply wasn't there. I existed somewhere between my body and slightly to the left. Sounds, sights, their meanings... they all smeared together for me, distant and disconnected. Xander shouted at the woman on the floor some

more. Dennis shouted at Xander in return. The woman, who wasn't Melony, cried and cried and cried. Once, she got up and desperately tried to take Rylan from me before Denny and Xander pulled her away. I snapped back to reality for just long enough to shield him with my body and bare my teeth at her, like I was every bit as much of a wolf as Xander or Dennis.

At some point, Rabbit and Beauty entered, pulling Xander back as he launched into another tirade—half at the woman, half at Denny. At another point, someone must have helped me out of the nursery and into a chair.

I was shell-shocked, I realized. The elation of having Rylan in my arms again was met with the horror that our sons had been separated. That we had no idea where Ryder was, where he might be, when we might see him again.

If we might see him again.

This ranch had been our only lead. Now, it felt exhausted. No Melony. No Quincy. No Samuel or Lizbeth. And only one of our sons.

Rylan was all that kept me grounded. He nuzzled against my chest sweetly, fussing a little with hunger, but didn't cry again. I kept my focus on him, tugging my shirt aside and putting him to my breast. Xander had been right—the four-hour flight here was more than enough to ensure that the glass of champagne I'd had was out of my system. We'd had enough time. Rylan latched quickly, and my chest began to tingle with warmth as he fed.

“Felicity?”

Denny's voice brought me back from wherever I'd gone. I blinked up at him, tracing his scar with my gaze before meeting his eyes.

“Do we know where Ryder is?” I asked. My own voice still sounded so far away to me, like it was coming from the other side of the room. “Where he might be?”

“No.” He took a knee in front of me and hung his head. “I'm sorry. I know that's not what you want to hear right now.”

No, it wasn't, but it was the truth. I'd have to face it sooner or later. Might as well deal with it now.

"Does that woman know where he is?" I asked. That woman. Not even Melony. If Melony thought my babies were truly hers, she was doing a shitty job of being a mother. Maybe she'd had second thoughts about having twins. Too much for her to handle, so she'd abandoned Rylan the first chance she got.

If true, it was a thing I'd never be able to understand. How could a mother choose which of her children to keep, which to throw away? I would have rather died first.

"It's hard to say," Dennis admitted. "Xander lost his temper at Sarah. Bad."

"Did he hurt her?"

A sour taste filled my mouth as I realized that part of me hoped the answer would be yes. Whatever this Sarah person's role was in all of this, she was part of it. She'd played a role in keeping my babies away from me. She deserved whatever she got.

But Dennis shook his head. "He didn't hurt her, no. Not for lack of wanting to, mind you. Just scared her something fierce. Beauty is trying to talk him down now. I want to get the three of you out of here. That sound good to you?"

I nodded, and Dennis helped me up out of the chair. My legs were shaking, the product of adrenaline. I swayed slightly when I found my feet, and Dennis put an arm around me, keeping me steady as he guided me into the kitchen, where Xander and Beauty were. Rab and the woman, Sarah, were elsewhere.

"I'm not going anywhere," Xander insisted. It seemed like part of a longer argument. "Not until I get some answers."

"Yeah? With that temper?" Dennis scoffed as he led me to Xander's side. "Not conducive to getting answers right now. You're gonna call it a night and come back with better manners in the morning, and not a second before then."

“Like hell I am. I have two sons. Until I know where the other one is—”

“You’re going to go to a nice, cozy hotel room to cool down for the night,” Dennis finished for him. “You’re right, Miller. You have two sons. And a mate.” He nodded to me. “None of them will be any better for it if you rip that girl’s head off and end up next to dear old grandad on the FBI’s most wanted list. You wanna be of help to your family right now? Then, you need to take care of what you’ve got.”

“We need to know where Ryder is. What you’re suggesting—just abandoning him—”

“You’re not abandoning anyone. C’mere. Look.” Dennis sighed, then motioned for us to follow. He opened the door to the pantry. Inside, Rab shifted awkwardly from foot to foot while Sarah crouched near the wall, ensconced by canned goods, still crying, and hiding her face.

“She look like she’s answering questions right now?” Dennis asked Xander. “She’s scared shitless. The next time she opens her mouth, all she’s gonna do is start pleading for her life again. You wanna question her, you come back in the morning with a better fucking attitude. You both should be simmered down by then.”

Xander clenched his fists and pulled himself to his full height. “You remember who’s working for who here, Denny? Because last I checked—”

“Xander. Come on.” I shifted Rylan in my arms so I could reach out and touch Xander’s hip. “You heard him. Other people might come back here tonight. Like Melony. Or Quincy, or Samuel, or Lizbeth. Sarah might not know where Ryder is, but they will. And if they show up here, only to find her in shambles like this, they’re going to bolt on sight.” I looked to Denny, who gave me an approving nod. It was the right thing to say. “Denny and his team are professionals. Let them handle this.”

Xander stared at me with a look of absolute betrayal. But as I held his gaze, his expression softened.

“Fine,” he rasped. “Fine. We’ll break for the day.” He shot Denny a glare of warning. “First thing tomorrow, we get answers.”

Denny looked like he wanted to roll his eyes. “You got it, slick.”

* * *

Denny drove us back through Sharpe City, then onto the interstate. Xander and I sat in the backseat of the truck, with Rylan strapped in right between us. Some half-remembered safety article I’d read had claimed it was the safest place in the vehicle for a car seat.

I wished I could build a fortress around his car seat instead so he’d never be in danger again.

About ten miles north, Denny pulled off under the glow of a Holiday Inn sign. We went inside. He chatted for a while with the woman behind the front desk, flirting innocuously, making her laugh. It was strange, seeing him so relaxed and good-natured when, less than half an hour before, it had looked like he and Xander might come to blows.

Denny booked two rooms under his name. He paid for them with his own American Express.

“Best rooms in the hotel,” he informed us. “Miss Renee here cut us a good deal.”

“That’s an awfully cute baby you’ve got there,” the woman behind the desk called out. She winked at Denny. “Pretty cute grandpa, too.”

“Oh, he’s not—” I started, but Denny cut me off.

“Not that cute. For all I know, you jacked the prices up just to make me sweat.” Denny gave her a wink in return, which sent her into a fit of giggles as she slid him our room keys.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Xander’s lip twitch. Denny might have been amused at the prospect of playing Rylan’s grandfather, but Xander clearly was not.

“I’ll be staying in five-oh-five if you need anything,” Denny informed us on the way to the elevators. “Five-oh-six is for the three of you. Housekeeping should be up within the hour with a crib.”

“Thank you, Denny,” I said, taking the card.

He held up a hand. “No need. I’ll be expensing you for all this.”

“Then, you might as well have put it on my card,” Xander said sharply. “Cut out the middleman.”

“Nah. Safer if it’s on mine. We don’t know who else is active in this area. Once they realize that baby’s gone, we’re better off if no one knows Xander and Felicity Miller are anywhere near here. But if they come around asking, they’ve got no idea who the fuck Dennis Kerry even is.”

“Will you be continuing to play grandpa?” I asked, and Xander grunted disdainfully.

Denny smirked. “Why not? I’m just a family man on vacation with his little girl, her adorable son, and her idiot husband. Nothing suspicious about any of that.”

The elevator doors opened. Xander and I stepped inside with Rylan. Denny remained in the lobby.

“Get some shut eye. We start fresh first thing tomorrow morning.” Denny reached in and brushed a knuckle over Rylan’s tiny, chubby fist. “G’night, little man.”

* * *

The hotel room was nice. Maybe not as nice as the Four Seasons, but that kind of luxury had never mattered to me. It was clean, with a comfortable bed, a large tub, and a good corner for the crib.

More importantly, it contained two of the three men I loved the most in this world. Things were almost—if not quite—right again.

“I dreamed about this. Holding him again. Seeing him in front of me and knowing he was safe,” Xander said, lifting Rylan from the carrier. He tucked his finger into Rylan’s tiny fist. “Feels good. Just not quite as good as I’d hoped.”

I leaned forward sniffed at my son.

“He needs a diaper change. That might have something to do with it.”

Gently, I took Rylan from Xander and laid him down on the bed. Xander got up and brought me the diaper bag. Together, we got him cleaned up and into a fresh diaper.

It was like dancing, in a way. We knew the movements, could execute the steps, but we hadn’t practiced as much as we would have liked. We bumped into each other, got in each other’s way. If we’d been standing instead of kneeling next to the mattress, we probably would have stepped on each other’s feet.

But at least in our clumsiness, we found ourselves breathing nervous laughs and apologies instead of growling or shouting at each other. It was promising. It told me that someday we’d have this down to an art—and not the Jackson Pollock kind that occurred across my shirt when Rylan kicked himself free of the clean diaper and let us know, in the most chaotic way possible, that he also had to pee.

“Go take a shower if you want,” Xander offered once we got that situation under wraps. “I’ll watch him.”

I took him up on it. We’d both need to shower when we could from here on out. It was only the two of us now. No fleet of nannies, sinister or otherwise. No cloister of family around us, all clamoring for a little baby time. I found it strangely comforting, how we’d need to trade off, juggle responsibilities, make time. The very thing that would have terrified me about having kids just a year ago was now the thing I found myself enjoying the most.

It would be even harder when we had Ryder back with us, I reminded myself. Twice the babies, twice the dirty diapers. Twice the laundry, twice the feedings, two times as many spit-

ups and tantrums and crayon marks on the walls. But even that didn't scare me. There would be twice as many kisses, too. Twice as many giggles and snuggles and first steps.

Our boys were worth all of it. Besides, Xander and I had faced way more dangerous things together than wrangling twins.

Rylan was asleep by the time I got out of the shower. I emerged, wrapped in a towel, just as Xander settled him in his crib for the night.

"Sorry," he said, straightening. "He drifted off somewhere in the middle of 'Thunder Road'."

My cheeks flamed. "I didn't realize I was singing that loud."

"I can always hear you," Xander said, and my face burned even hotter. We shared a mutual love of Bruce Springsteen, which I frequently indulged myself in while showering. But I always thought I'd been pretty quiet about that indulgence. Discreet.

Apparently not.

He moved to me and placed his hands on my waist, sliding them down to my hips over my towel. His eyes were lowered, head bowed as if in prayer.

"You haven't sung like that in a while."

"It hasn't felt right, I guess." I lifted a shoulder, trying to brush it off. It hadn't felt right to sing, not since the boys were taken. It hadn't felt right to eat, or sleep, or even breathe. With Rylan's return, I'd started singing again. I hadn't even realized it.

And wasn't that a betrayal? How could I sing for one son while the other was still gone?

Xander's eyes met mine. The greens in his irises were gentle as the wind through grass.

"Cheeks..."

“I know.” My shoulders hunched as my body tried to close itself off to him. “I know we have to talk about it. But...”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

“Do you?” I lowered my eyes to the hotel room’s carpet. It was short and stubby, easy to clean, colored a dozen different shades of beige.

“Some of it, I guess,” Xander said, his hands rubbing up my sides to my arms. “I lost my temper; I can own up to that. I was so desperate to know where Ryder was, I didn’t manage keep myself under control. Denny was right. After I lost my shit with that woman, she wasn’t in any state to give us information. I gained us nothing and cost us time. Time we don’t have.”

I frowned up at him. “You had no idea Ryder wasn’t there. If I’d been in your position, I probably would have lost it, too.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. You’ve always been better than me. Even in high school, when those kids were making fun of you... I wanted to break their faces for it. Did, sometimes.” His fingers tightened at my biceps, like he was cracking his knuckles, recalling the way coming to my defense had often left them marked with blood. “But you never lashed out. You always took it on the chin.”

“I didn’t want to.” I slipped free of his hold, running my hands down his arms until his fingers were locked with mine. With my hand in his, I led him to the bed. “For every time you beat some idiot kid up for calling me fat, I imagined doing a lot worse. It’s like you said, when I got it in my head that I was going to kill Melony.” I scoffed at how stupid I must’ve sounded then. “A pack needs more than just killers, but it does need its killers, too.”

“I saw how you bared your teeth at that woman today when she tried to take Rylan from you.” Xander forced half a smirk. “You looked pretty murderous to me.”

“I felt murderous,” I admitted. “But ultimately, no one fucked up that badly. We can try again tomorrow. We have

Rylan with us, no one got hurt, no one ended up dead. It could have been worse.”

“Yeah, s’pose so.” Xander rubbed the back of his neck. “You tired?”

I closed my eyes experimentally. They ached, which suggested that I was, but my brain felt too loud to allow for sleep. “I’m not sure.”

“Can I lie in bed and hold you anyway?”

“Of course.” I smiled and shifted up toward the pillows, crawled in beneath the sheets.

Xander lay on his side and folded his body against mine. One arm moved beneath my neck to wrap across my collar bones. The other was a pleasant weight over my ribs. I wasn’t sure which of us needed this comfort more.

Likely, it didn’t matter. What mattered was that we both needed it, period, and found it in each other.

We could survive this.

I reached to the nightstand and flicked off the light. In the darkness, it wasn’t Xander I found myself thinking about, or even my sons.

It was Melony Houghton.

“I can hear you, you know,” Xander murmured against my neck.

“What?” I was fairly certain I wasn’t singing without realizing it again.

“Thinking, Cheeks.” He snorted. “Sometimes, it’s the loudest sound in the entire world. What’s on your mind?”

I let his question linger in the air and in my brain. My thoughts weren’t just loud. They were chaotic. It took me several seconds just to order them into something I could communicate.

“I just don’t understand why she would give up one of the babies like this but not the other. Why would she only send one baby here?” I finally said. “There was only one crib. One

nursery. But it couldn't have just been a temporary measure. There were paint samples on the wall, like someone was trying to choose a color."

"I noticed that," said Xander. "You don't paint a room in a house you're not planning on staying in."

"Right. So we have to assume that someone—either Sarah or Melony—was planning on moving in and staying for a while. But only with Rylan. Why would she split them up?"

"Hm." Xander pressed his lips against my shoulder, not in a kiss, but like he was ruminating. "Well, might be that she decided two babies would be too much for her. Might be that she didn't have a choice."

"You think someone else took him from her?"

"Could be," Xander said. "You remember what Samuel said there at the cabin, right before they were born? One for Evergreen and Carter's Creek, one for Portersmith. With the FBI being booted off investigating the East Coast packs, someone's certainly hiding something up there. Maybe that's still his plan."

"If Samuel has Ryder..." I shuddered. It was too horrible to even think about. I didn't want that man anywhere near my sons. I didn't want him anywhere near anyone.

"It's hard to say for sure. Not until we get some answers out of Sarah tomorrow." Xander paused, but I could sense he wanted to say more. I waited for him to speak again. Several long moments later, he did. "My dear old grandad wanted you out of that deal, too, I recall. And not just to look at. Fucker."

My shudder was a slight tremor this time. I inched back, pressing my body deeper into Xander's embrace. I feared for myself far less than I feared for Ryder. For as long as I stayed close to Xander, I'd be safe.

I wished I could reach through dimensions, across time and space, and pull Ryder back into my arms as well.

"Are you going to be okay tomorrow?" Sarah was the only thread we had to connect us with Melony now. If being

shouted at by Xander once had wrecked her so badly, a repeat could be disastrous.

I trusted him, but I also knew how hard it was to keep your temper when someone you loved was on the line.

“I’ll try to keep my cool, but I don’t know,” he finally breathed. “If she gives us what we need—if she can cooperate—then I’ll manage. I’ll have to.”

“And if not?”

“Then, I hope Denny moves faster than I do.”

Chapter 13

Xander

Nothing beat a hotel breakfast. Something about the sight of those plexiglass pastry cases and silver chafing dishes, the rows of cereal dispensers displaying their sugar-coated, multicolored wares in fat plastic tubes, the mini fridge of yogurts and individual servings of milk—it just did it for me. I couldn't even pretend it was the quality of the food.

I'd grown up in a house with three siblings. Kingston, Dylan, and I had the appetites you'd expect from growing boys, and Macy was an alpha through and through. She'd certainly held her own. Mealtimes had always been a mad scramble to fill our plates and choke down food as fast as possible. There'd never been any leftovers. Anything in front of us, we devoured. But on the rare occasions that we'd go out to a hotel, we could always count on being able to eat as much as we wanted at the buffets. Even now, they hearkened to some mix of nostalgia and hedonism in me.

Plus, I could heap up plates for both me and Felicity, then carry them back to the room without anyone trying to stop me. All I had to do was juggle them as I pushed the button for the elevator and ignore the sign that said it wasn't allowed.

Back in the room, we ate on the floor with Rylan between us, wriggling on his tummy. It wasn't exactly an idyllic picnic scene, but to me it meant the world.

Halfway there, I kept reminding myself. If we found one, we could find them both.

I tossed the plates in the trash and showered while Felicity fed Rylan. With a towel around my waist, water still slicking down my chest, I lingered in the doorway of the bathroom and watched them.

A fragile, teasing smile curled on her lips as she finally glanced up and caught me staring. “What are you looking at?”

Nothing, I almost said, embarrassed, but stopped myself.

That wasn't true at all.

“I'm lookin' at my family, Cheeks.” I went to her, gripping her arms and bending down. We hadn't done enough kissing lately. Hadn't done enough of anything.

I pressed a long, hard kiss to her mouth. She tasted like orange juice, citrusy and sweet. As she kissed me back, it struck me how badly I wanted to keep on kissing her. Every moment with her was too precious, too addictive. Having Rylan with us had only heightened that sensation. Once we had Ryder back as well, it would only get better still.

It hurt to think of how much time we'd lost, but the promise of all the time we had left ahead of us only excited me. I yearned for it, needed it like I needed water and air.

All the time in the world would never be enough.

* * *

“You gonna manage yourself today?” Denny asked once we pulled out of the Country Donuts parking lot. I had a dozen glazed donuts on my lap, plus three massive Kolaches that Denny referred to as cheese hawgs. All were meant as peace offerings and thank you carbs for Sarah, Rabbit, and Beauty out at the ranch.

I sipped at my to-go coffee and arched an eyebrow at him.

“You gonna break a hip trying to stop me?”

To my surprise, he laughed.

Felicity and Rylan were back at the hotel, catching up on some much-needed mommy and son time. I didn't love leaving them there unguarded, but Denny had supplied Felicity with plenty of snacks and water, plus some extra gadgets to ensure that when she locked the door behind us, it would stay that way. I trusted her not to leave the safety of the room until we got back.

For a little while, Denny and I would be on our own.

"You're a good kid, you know. Good kid in a bad position." His voice was warm and fatherly, a far cry from the shouting match we'd gotten into yesterday. For a moment, it was easy to imagine hearing those words from my own dad.

I snorted. "This mean we're kissing and making up?"

"Can't hold it against you forever. If my babies were missing, can't say I would've acted any differently than you did yesterday," he admitted. "Might've even acted worse."

"You have kids?" I could see it. He had that kind of vibe. Dad energy, even though they were probably closer to my age than my sons'.

"Nah. Never had the moon dream, never met my mate. But if I did have them, I figure I'd feel about the same way you do. Like you'd snap a thousand necks just to see them safe." He glanced my way quickly. "I'd really prefer you didn't snap any necks today."

"I'll try my best," I promised.

It was the closest I'd get to admitting to him that he'd been right. Unleashing my anger on Sarah hadn't gotten me anywhere.

Felicity had been right, too. Denny was a professional. If I wanted results, I'd have to stop playing angry alpha and follow his lead.

Denny turned off the interstate. We were headed toward Sharpe City again.

"That's all I can ask."

* * *

We arrived back at the ranch in even-tempered spirits, if not in particularly high ones. Whatever Sarah told us today—or didn't tell us, for that matter—would make or break our next few days. Best case, Sarah knew where Melony was, and Ryder was there with her. Worst case, nothing at all, or worse still, a lie that would only cost us more time.

“Any surprise visitors?” Denny asked Rabbit and Beauty. We found them in the house's kitchen, brewing coffee and helping themselves to the contents of the fridge. Denny had allowed them one donut and cheese hawg each when we came in, which they had quickly devoured.

“Nah, boss. It's just been us and Sally Sobs-a-lot here.” Rabbit jerked his thumb toward the closed door of the pantry, then stuck that same thumb into the jar of peanut butter he was holding. He scooped out a giant glob, then shoved it in his mouth, making his next words extra sticky. “We did have one incident during Beauty's watch. She tried to sneak up on him and get her phone back, but we dealt with it.”

Denny looked to Beauty. “She hurt?”

Beauty didn't even look up from the tub of Chubby Hubby he was digging around in with a spoon. “Nah.”

“Her phone, though...” Rab nodded to the kitchen table, where the shattered remnants of an iPhone laid. It looked like it had lovingly crushed beneath on of Beauty's combat boots.

“Sorry,” Beauty said, still working at the Ben & Jerry's with his spoon.

He didn't sound sorry in the least, but Denny clapped him on his ham-hock shoulder anyway.

“That's okay, big guy. You break it, he buys it.” Denny turned to me. “I'll put it on your tab.”

“Gee, thanks.” Not only had Denny's agent destroyed any possible leads or evidence we might have found on Sarah's phone, but I'd be paying to replace it. Nice to know that

Denny was so meticulous about his expenses. At this rate, I suspected that tub of ice cream and jar of peanut butter would be showing up on his bill as well.

“We’re gonna go in now,” Denny said. “Keep your cool, follow my lead... and bring the donuts.” He glanced to his goons. “You two, stop shoving food down your gullets and keep watch. Anyone shows up unannounced, we might have trouble. Be ready for it.”

Beauty scowled as he put the ice cream aside. Rabbit dug out one last scoop of peanut butter, then flashed it at us as he gave a thumbs up.

“You got it, boss.”

There was no lock on the door of the pantry. Not even a chair pushed up against it to keep it shut. Sarah must have lost all the fight in her after Beauty wrecked her phone.

“Morning, Sarah,” Denny greeted her as he opened the door. “How’re you feeling?”

From the floor of the pantry’s back corner, she lifted her head wearily. Her blonde hair was messy. Her face was puffy. She looked like she’d been crying all night. As her gaze swept over us, her eyes were full of equal parts hate and fear.

“Are you going to hurt me?” she said in a voice so small and timid, I felt like a jackass just for existing.

This was the woman who’d keep Rylan from us, I had to remind myself. She was lucky she was still breathing, let alone unharmed.

“Just your cholesterol, maybe.” Denny gave her an easy smile and took the box of donuts from me. He popped its top open and held it out to her. “Have a donut.”

She licked her lips as she studied them. Hunger flashed in her eyes.

Had Beauty and Rab not fed her since we left?

Was that some kind of interrogation tactic, or had Denny’s guys simply been too busy gorging themselves to throw some food her way?

“You hungry?” Denny asked.

Her eyes wandered to the corner next to the door. Denny and I followed her gaze and found a dramatic splatter. A few stray chili beans clung to wall, and a dark, reddish sauce stained the floorboards in streaks, like someone had tried to quickly clean up a mess.

Right. So they’d given her food.

She’d just thrown it right back at them.

“Thank you,” she said, crawling toward Denny. Her hand shot out quickly, snatching a donut before she retreated back to her corner.

“No problem,” Denny replied. “If we can get you anything else, you just let us know.”

She paused as she raised the donut to her lips. “These aren’t poisoned, are they?”

Denny shrugged and bit into a donut himself. “If they are, it’ll kill us both.”

She nodded, accepting that logic, but still sniffed the donut, inspected it thoroughly, and pulled it apart before she finally placed a bite into her mouth.

“Mm.” After the first bite, she began stuffing more into her mouth at rapid pace.

“Taste good?” Denny asked.

“Yes.” A little bitterly, she added, “Thank you.”

“No problem.” Denny said. He dropped down into a crouch, placing himself on her level. “Listen. I want you to know that no one’s gonna hurt you. We just have some questions for you, okay? We’d be much obliged if you’d try your best to answer them truthfully.”

“Is Grayson okay?” she asked next, as though she hadn’t heard a word Denny had said.

“Rylan is fine,” I assured her. “He’s with his mother.”

Her eyes widened. “With Melony?”

My lips curled with disgust. She was lucky Denny answered before I did.

“No. With his real mother,” Denny said gently. “That baby you’ve been taking care of, Sarah... that’s not Melony Houghton’s son.”

I watched her, eager to see the moment that it sunk in.

I was doomed to disappointment. The moment never came.

“Yes, he is,” she insisted. If anything, she sounded offended that we were suggesting otherwise.

Denny arched a brow. “How do you figure that?”

“Who else’s would he be?” she snapped. “Melony gave birth to him. She brought him here. She’s paying me to watch him. If you’re looking for a ransom—”

“A ransom?” A sharp laugh left my throat. “For my own son?”

“It sounds like you’re working on some bad information, Sarah,” Denny said. “Maybe you could tell us what you think is going on here, so we can figure out where our wires are crossed.”

Her eyes narrowed slowly. “I’m not sure I should tell you anything.”

“And I’m sure you should.” I tried to keep my voice warm, calm, and level, like Denny’s was. It didn’t work, but at least I tried. “The baby you’ve been watching here is one half of a missing person’s case. Melony is wanted for kidnapping my twins—one of whom we rescued from your care yesterday. So, the way I see it, you can deal with us now, or the police when they get here.”

“And one of those conversations will be happening while you’re in handcuffs,” Denny added. “Whereas for this one... You want another donut?”

She licked her lips again, then scrambled back to grab another pastry from the box in Denny’s hands. She picked it apart in silence for a few moments, like she suspected we might have hidden razor blades or sleeping pills inside.

Finally, she looked back up at us. “What do you want to know?”

“How about you start with why you think that baby is named Grayson,” Denny suggested. “And why you think he’s Melony Houghton’s son.”

“Um. Well...” Her eyes darted between us again, then she took a bite of her second donut. “Okay. A little over a month ago, I got a call from Melony. We had some classes together in college, but after graduation, we kind of fell out of touch.”

“What did she want from you?” Denny asked.

“Just to catch up. Honest. She saw on Facebook that I’d scored a job with Beau Monde. I guess she was interested because they were placing me with a shifter family up in Maine—”

“At Morrow Manor?” I prompted.

Her brows knitted together. “Yes, actually. How did you know?”

“Never mind that now,” Denny said. “Please, Sarah. Go on.”

“Well, we met up. I was staying at my mom’s place at the time, which was a little embarrassing, but Melony was really kind about it. I told her about the training I’d done with Beau Monde on how to take care of shifter babies, and how I was saving up money for my own place. Then she asked how much I’d be making, and when I told her, she offered me double to take care of Grayson when he was born.”

“When he was born?” That was a strange way to word that. “She was... pregnant when you talked to her?”

“Yeah, she was getting close to her due date and definitely needed the help. She was all alone since Grayson’s dad—” She paused. Her gaze focused on me with a glare. “Are you Xander Miller?”

“I am.” And I didn’t like where this was going.

“I thought so. Fuck you. She told me all about how angry you were when she got pregnant, and how afraid she was that

you'd hurt her. That you'd hurt the baby. What kind of sick fuck—”

“Oh, I'm the sick fuck, am I?” I snapped, anger boiling in my chest at the blatant lie.

“Calm down. Both of you.” Denny sighed. “You quit Beau Monde and took the job with Melony instead?”

“Not exactly.” A flush rose to her cheeks. “I mean, I took the job with Melony, but I never officially quit Beau Monde. Melony kind of...convinced me to ghost them, I guess. She said it served them right for underpaying me. She was...empowering, honestly, and helped me throw out my uniform and everything herself.”

The pieces were slowly coming together. A nanny at the Beau Monde agency, assigned to Morrow Manor. A distant connection Melony had made and managed to manipulate. They were both blonde, about the same height and build. Similar facial features, even. And if Sarah had never officially quit, if Melony had known exactly where to get hold of the proper uniform, the proper ID card—

I bet if we checked that list of names Felicity had gotten from the agency, we'd find that on the day the boys were taken, Sarah had been scheduled to work.

Except, Sarah had never made it to Morrow Manor.

Melony had showed up in Sarah's place to case the joint right under our noses in Sarah's place.

“Tell me about when you started working for Melony,” Denny prompted.

“I just started yesterday, actually. Melony had a hard time getting down here. Said she was being hunted, that she had to travel in her wolf form for safety.” She shot me another glare. “It was the only way she and Grayson could get away from him.”

I glared right back at her. Flattering. As if two months ago, when Melony was a captive in Morrow Manor's dungeons, I hadn't argued against killing Melony. If I'd wanted to hurt her then, I would've done it.

And look where that had gotten us. I was being accused of doing something I hadn't done. If I had done it, we never would have ended up in this mess in the first place. A perfect Catch-22.

"Do you think she might have been faking her pregnancy?" Denny suggested, still even-keeled as ever.

"No," Sarah said emphatically, then paused, brows knitting together and lips pursing. "I mean... I guess, maybe. It's possible. But it looked real when we spoke in person. She had a baby bump and everything." Her brows inched a little closer together. "Although, I guess she never posted anything without her shirt covering it up. Maybe, if she was wearing a fake belly... But who would do that?"

I clenched my jaw to keep from laughing in disbelief.

Melony would. It was exactly the kind of batshit thing Melony would do.

"Do you know where Melony is now?" Denny asked.

Sarah opened her mouth, then closed it again before speaking. "Of course not."

Yeah, and I bet you've got a bridge to sell us, too. I kept my mouth shut, though. If Sarah really thought I was capable of hurting an innocent woman and child, then every word I said set us back.

No wonder she'd been in such hysterics yesterday. The evil she must've thought I was capable of would've undone anyone.

"Do you know when Melony will be back?" Denny asked.

"No," she said, quicker this time. "I don't know anything."

"She left you here with her child and didn't tell you where she was going? When she'd return?" I couldn't stop myself from speaking. This woman was lying to us, and Denny was letting her get away with it.

"Melony's had a hard life. Harder than most. And I know what it's like to fall in love with an abusive man," Sarah said, every word dripping with venom and directed straight at me.

“I just wanted to help her however I could.” She hung her head. “It’s what I wish someone would have done for me. That’s all.”

“Thank you, Sarah.” Denny placed the donuts down on the floor. “Have as many of these as you want, okay? They’re yours.”

She looked up hopefully. “Are you going to let me go now?”

“We are in a bit,” Denny said. “But I want to emphasize again—the baby you were watching was registered as a missing person, the victim of a kidnapping.” He paused, like he wanted that to really sink in. “Now, I don’t think you meant anyone any harm. You were lied to, and it got you wrapped up in some shifter business. Shifters deal with their own shit. Unless Xander and his mate want to press charges—”

“We don’t.” I crossed my arms over my chest, hardly in love with this turn of events. Sarah had done wrong, but she’d had bad information. She’d clearly been burned by a man before—someone who would hurt a woman and who might even hurt a baby. Her heart had been in the right place, just in the wrong fucking zip code.

I wanted to see her punished for how she’d kept Rylan from us, how her actions had hurt Felicity. Badly. But I also knew, deep down, it was wrong to throw the book at someone who’d only been trying to do good.

“In that case, let me offer you some advice, Sarah,” Denny said gently. “Get out of this now. Don’t go to the police, or you’re going to find yourself facing some nasty criminal charges you don’t want to deal with. Go back to your normal life. Go home, get some rest, and don’t contact Melony Houghton again.” He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket as he rose and drew several hundred dollar bills out of it. “These are for you. My guys say there was an incident with your phone.”

She sniffed a little, wiping her nose on her sleeve as she took the money. She was crying again.

“What’s going to happen to Grayson?” she asked.

“That’s not his name. Rylan is back with his mother,” Denny answered. “His real mother. He’s safer there than he’d ever be anywhere else.”

We emerged from the pantry to find the kitchen empty. Rabbit and Beauty were posted up in the living room, eyes focused on the windows facing the drive.

“That’s it, then?” I asked Denny once we were out of Sarah’s earshot. “You’re just letting her go?”

“We can’t keep her in the pantry forever,” Denny said. “And I don’t suspect she’ll be paying attention to my instructions. Once she’s free, she might help draw Melony out.”

“You don’t believe her story, either, then.”

He shrugged. “I believe she believes it.”

“What about the part where she doesn’t know where Melony is?”

“Oh, that’s for sure a lie, but my guys will keep tabs on Sarah and this house for a few days. Melony will turn up eventually. When she does, you’ll be the first person I call.”

“So, where do we go next?” I asked. “Back to the hotel to wait?”

“You and Felicity? Back to Evergreen with your son.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “You’ve got a pack to manage and some missing time to catch up on. I’ll take care of the rest. You hired me to find your kids, Miller. Both of ’em. I won’t stop until that job’s done.”

* * *

We booked our return tickets from the hotel room, donned our disguises, and made it down to the lobby just in time for a late check-out. Denny planned to rent a room at a motel in Sharpe City for himself and his team to use as a headquarters while they waited to see if Melony would turn up.

As for Felicity and me, we'd finally be taking Rylan home.

"Hope you folks have a good time on your vacation." Renee from the front desk waved goodbye to us, saving a special flirtatious grin for Denny. She leaned over the front desk to smile down at Rylan in his carrier as well. "You are so cute, little man! If there were only two of you, I'd snatch one right up."

Through our sunglasses, Felicity and I shared a look. Her fingers sought out mine as we turned to follow Denny toward the doors.

"Wait, ma'am!" Renee called out to Felicity. "You left your purse!"

Before I could stop her, Felicity lowered her sunglasses and whipped around. The action shook her scarf loose from her hair, sending it fluttering to the floor.

Renee stared at her like a deer caught in Jesus's own headlights.

"Oh my God," she breathed. "You... You're that shifter couple from the news, aren't you? The ones with the missing..." I could see her playing back the words she'd just spoken to us. Horror and embarrassment quickly bled into her face. "Oh, no. And I told you—Oh, honey, I am so sorry. I never meant—"

"It's fine. You didn't know." Felicity went to grab her purse. She moved to push her glasses back up but paused as Renee continued to stare. "Maybe you could keep quiet about us being here, though? We're trying to keep a low profile."

"Of course," Renee said eagerly. Her eyes wandered to the carrier again. "That baby you've got there—that's one of the missing ones?"

"He is." I bent and picked up Felicity's hair scarf. "We're hoping to find the other one soon, but there are some bad shifters at work here. We'd appreciate it if you didn't mention this to anyone. If word got back to them..."

"I won't say a word," Renee breathed, shaking her head quickly. She mimed zipping her lips, locking them shut, and

throwing away the key. “I wish you folks the best of luck. Your secret is safe with me.”

* * *

We saw no news vans following us as we burned down the interstate toward the airport. It was a good sign. So far, Renee had been true to her word.

“It’ll be good to introduce him to the pack, won’t it? To be home for a little while. To show them that all of this has been worth it.” Felicity and I sat in the backseat, Rylan between us, gurgling softly as Felicity bounced his fist in time to the song on the radio. Denny liked his classic country. The station on the radio he’d chosen was playing “Folsom Prison Blues”.

“Yeah,” I agreed, wondering if such an early introduction to Johnny Cash was good or bad for a baby’s development. On one hand, good taste. On the other, shooting a man in Reno just to watch him die was hardly the stuff of nursery rhymes. “Course it will.”

The unspoken thing still lingered between us, a black cloud that marred every conversation, every moment, every joy.

Ryder was still out there somewhere. If we were lucky, he was being cared for as well as Rylan had been. If not...

I turned toward the window, staring out across the endless stretch of land between us and the horizon. We passed a cop car pulled over near an underpass. A speed trap, it looked like.

I frowned and turned in my seat to watch the car through the back window as we left it behind.

“Hey, Denny?” I asked.

“Yeah?”

“You speeding?”

He glanced down at his speedometer. “Not more than anyone else in Texas. I’m staying with the flow of traffic. Why?”

“I think that cop car we just passed is turning around.”

Denny’s eyes darted up the rear-view mirror just as the cherries and berries lit up behind us.

“Shit,” Denny swore. He clicked his turn signal on, then his hazard lights.

As the cop car’s siren blipped, he pulled over to the side of the road.

Chapter 14

Felicity

It played out along the roadside like a horrible movie in a locked theater. No fast-forward button. No exits. Just long, lingering shots without dialogue or score, except the whistle of the Texas wind and the whoosh of other vehicles as they sped by.

Even though Denny was the only one driving, the officers took all our licenses.

With their hands resting on their guns, they asked us, politely but in no uncertain terms, to step out of the car.

They asked Denny most of the questions. Did he have a gun in the vehicle? Did any of us have weapons on us? No. What business did he have in Hogan County? Personal. We were each frisked, our palms against the side of the truck and our legs spread, but not cuffed or read our rights.

It was humiliating. Every rubbernecker and lookie-loo driving by must have thought we were felons and lawbreakers, though we'd done nothing wrong. Rylan started crying halfway through my own pat-down, but the female officer running her hands down my thigh wouldn't let me go to him. The male officer warned Xander and Denny against trying to do the same.

Hearing his desperate, infant pleas and not being able to do anything about it broke my heart. Most frustratingly of all, the officers wouldn't tell us why they'd pulled us over and refused to let me go to my son.

Luckily, Denny put up a good fight for us. He was as charming with cops as he was with hotel front desk clerks. Though there was no winking or flirtation, he knew how to make them laugh. Within ten minutes, it was as if he and officers were old school buddies at a reunion. He navigated dealing with law enforcement with such ease and good humor, it seemed almost... well, criminal. No law-abiding citizen was so accustomed to dealing with cops.

Not that I could complain. Under the spell of Denny's charms, he convinced the officers to let me tend to Rylan. I held him to my chest, rubbing his back firmly to coax a few burps out of him while Xander clenched his jaw and Denny continued to work his magic.

The confusion, as far as I could tell, seemed to be surrounding Rylan. The cops admitted that they recognized us from the news. With their blessing, Denny reached into the diaper bag and produced Rylan's birth certificate. Xander was allowed to show them pictures from his phone: the one of me and the boys the day I gave birth, and one of all four of us on a picnic blanket at Morrow Manor, with Gena and Kingston bookending us on either side. We looked so happy there that seeing it now almost felt like losing the boys all over again. Gena was hugging me around the waist. Kingston and Xander had their arms around each other. Kingston still had both his legs.

They checked our information on the Amber Alert system, cross-referenced Rylan's birth certificate with the names on our licensees, corroborated with the few pictures I had of myself with the boys, and compared Rylan's face to the picture attached to the missing-person report. In the end, it was enough to convince the cops that Rylan was, indeed, one of our own missing sons. It was a start.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the end.

"We're real sorry about this, ma'am," the male officer informed me as the woman placed her hand on the back of Xander's head and got him into the backseat of the squad car. Denny was already inside. "We've got a woman down at the

station who claims these two and their companions held her hostage.”

I said nothing. Technically, that part of Sarah’s accusation was true.

“What with everything she said about your boy being false, there’s a good chance that this is nothing as well. Hopefully, this is all just a big misunderstanding.” He gave me a tight smile beneath his stiff, gray mustache, and patted my arm. I drew back at his touch, and he looked genuinely remorseful for putting his hand on me. But not remorseful enough to let Denny and Xander go. “If you’ll just follow us down to the station, we’ll get this sorted out.”

I was forced to watch helplessly as the cops got back into their car, then drove away with Xander and Denny.

Thankfully, the truck was an automatic. Xander had tried admirably to teach me how to drive stick back in high school, but after I nearly ruined his engine in the process, we’d both agreed that I’d cause less damage with a vehicle that didn’t need me to shift gears.

With Rylan settled in his car seat, I followed the cops back down the interstate, through Sharpe City, then west to a larger town called Hogan, where I parked outside the county jail. By some grace of God—or more likely as a result of Denny’s smooth-talking—the cops hadn’t booked Xander or Denny.

“We’ve got him back in the interrogation room now,” the male officer informed me. My knuckles around the handle of Rylan’s carrier were white. “Sarah Harper is in the one next door. They’ve all, ah... positively IDed each other, you could say.”

I could only guess what that had looked like. Xander had stayed quiet during his initial arrest, letting Denny do most of the talking. I was pretty sure it had nearly killed him.

Seeing Sarah again, knowing that she’d sicced the cops on us first chance she got—I couldn’t imagine he’d kept his cool for long.

“You’re not much of a talker, are you?” The officer rubbed the back of his neck. “Probably for the best. We’re not a big operation down here, you know. Not much in the way of funding or resources. This kidnapping stuff, especially involving such a high-profile case, and with shifters, no less... it’s a first for us, I’ll admit. Normally, this would be pretty he-said-she-said. We’d let the courts handle it. But if you don’t mind my saying... This Sarah character, it doesn’t look like there’s a scratch on her, and after talking to your friends, seems to me that she was the one in possession of your missing son.” He sighed, searching my eyes like he wanted to find sympathy toward him there. He wouldn’t. “Clusterfuck, ain’t it?”

“When can I see Xander and Denny?” I asked. “We have a flight to catch.”

“I’d cancel it, if you can.” The officer shrugged. What can you do? “Wi-Fi password’s on the front desk, and there’s coffee in the waiting room if you’re partial to that kind of thing.” His gaze drifted down to my breasts, which were aching and full of milk. I wanted to slap him, but I didn’t want to add assaulting an officer to our list of problems today. “We’ve got decaf, too. Anyway, I gotta make some calls. Hopefully, we can have this figured out in an hour or two.”

An hour or two? While our other son was still out there somewhere, in the clutches of God only knew who?

I wanted to slap everyone, I realized. I wanted to scream.

Instead, I got the Wi-Fi password and settled into one of the less-stained chairs in the waiting room.

I put Rylan to my breast and started setting about canceling our flight.

* * *

An hour or two quickly turned to three, then four. If the station had been bustling with activity, it might have been more tolerable. At least then there would have been the impression of things happening, something being done. Instead, officers

filtered in and out from behind the front desk like they were carried by an old, lazy river.

It was easy to convince myself that they'd forgotten I was even here.

The only silver lining of our situation was that it gave me more alone time with Rylan. After missing him for so long, I cherished every moment I got with him. I poured all my focus into him while I waited for an update. I could never get tired of looking at my son. Even the smallest changes in his expression captivated me.

He had such a strong hold on my heart, even this disastrous turn in our day was made better by having him in my arms.

The male officer who brought Denny and Xander in eventually came out and introduced himself as Sheriff Cooper. He sat down in the chair next to me, bearing a peace offering in the form of a white paper bag. The logo on it said Heaven's Diner, and the bottom of the bag was gray with grease.

"Thought you might be hungry." Cooper held the bag out to me like an olive branch. "Should've asked if you were vegan and such, I s'pose, but since you're a shifter—"

"I'm not one. A shifter or a vegan, actually." I took the bag from him and opened it. Immediately, I was greeted by the scent of griddled meat, melted cheese, and fried food. "Thank you. This smells amazing."

"It's a heart attack in a foil wrapper, but Lord knows I've eaten enough of them in my day, and it hasn't killed me yet. They're from the best diner in town." Cooper scratched his chin. "Only diner in town, actually. I took a couple back for your mate and your pa, too."

"My pa?" What the hell was he on about? It took me a moment to connect the dots. "Oh. You mean Denny. He's not my dad. He's just trying to help us." *Unlike you*, I resisted the urge to add.

"Ah. Really? Thought I saw a resemblance there, and Renee out at the Holiday Inn said..."

My eyebrows shot up. “So, that’s how you knew where we were.”

And after we’d asked her so nicely not to tell anyone that she’d seen us, too. Her betrayal had happened so quickly, it was almost impressive. She’d made it all of half an hour before spilling the beans.

“Don’t hold it against her. When Miss Harper tore in here, she was in quite the state. Got us pretty riled up. I called around to every hotel in a fifty-mile radius—there aren’t many. Renee only gave you up when I explained what you were being accused of, and even then, she didn’t sound real happy about it. You can’t be angry at a woman for cooperating with the police.”

I scowled down at the bag on my lap.

Watch me.

“Are you going to let them go?” I asked.

“Need to ask you all a few questions first. But then, yeah, probably.” Cooper rose. “Figure we can get it over with faster if I talk to you all at once. You okay with that? I can wait until you’re done eating. We can go back when you’re ready.”

“No, that’s fine.” I got up, food in one hand, Rylan’s carrier in the other. “I’m ready now.”

Cooper took me through the same door Denny and Xander had disappeared behind when we arrived. Down a short hallway, we hung a left into another room.

Within it, Denny and Xander sat on the same side of a long interrogation table. Denny turned and greeted Cooper and me with a grin. Xander flicked me a glance. I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was furious but too smart to act on it. The room was lit with harsh fluorescents and smelled like stale coffee and fries.

I hugged Xander with one arm, then sat down next to him. Sheriff Cooper took the chair on the table’s opposite side.

“Now, I’ve corroborated the stories I’ve gotten from you so far pretty thoroughly. There’s no question that’s your kid

there, but I gotta say, you coulda made this a lot easier on everyone by just alerting the authorities when you found him.” Cooper gave us all a stern look. “So. How come you didn’t call us?”

“If we called you, it would have made the news,” Denny said. “With one of the boys still missing, we were hoping that the fewer people who knew Rylan was back with his parents, the better chance we’d have at finding little Ryder as well.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” Cooper said. “Not a bad plan. But the cops aren’t here to hinder you.” I begged to differ at this point but bit my tongue. “We could’ve helped, even. If you’d have contacted me—”

“You know how us shifters are, Sheriff,” Denny said politely. “We like to handle our own business. Usually less dangerous for everyone if we do.”

“Can’t argue with you there,” Cooper said. “We’ve had an increase in ferals around here lately, you know. I wanted to believe what they say about your barks being worse than your bites, but...” He rolled his sleeve up, revealing a thick bandage packed around his forearm. “Got this from one of ’em about a week ago. Believe you me, I’m not partial to tangling with a wolf again anytime soon.”

“Bet you’ve got one hell of a battle scar hidden under there.” Denny tugged the neck of his T-shirt aside. “Got this one from a feral myself. Me and my boys specialize in dealing with ’em. Here, I’ll give you my card.”

Denny reached into his pocket and drew out his wallet. It still surprised me how easily he handled the sheriff. He was made of pure, casual confidence, speaking more like a drinking buddy than a suspect. All part of his charm, I was sure.

Next to me, Xander was wound so tightly I could practically feel his annoyance radiating off him. Beneath the table, his knee bounced incessantly.

I definitely felt more in-tune with Xander than Denny right now.

“Appreciate that. I’ll probably take you up on your services, come to think.” Cooper took the card from Denny and pocketed it. “That said, Sarah Harper is a human. We still deal with those on our own.” He arched a bushy eyebrow at Denny. “You really keep that girl locked in a pantry for an evening?”

Denny only shrugged.

And Cooper laughed.

How the hell did he get away with that?

“Ah, hell.” Cooper lifted his arms in surrender. “This is a goddamn clusterfuck, isn’t it?”

“Doesn’t have to be,” Denny pointed out. “How’s the girl doing?”

“Oh, she’s fine now that she’s calmed down a bit. Though, that won’t last for long,” Cooper mused. “We’ve managed to convince her that the baby is really yours. That got her talking. If she’s telling the truth, she didn’t know the baby was kidnapped, which throws all of this into a gray area, but it’s not up to me to decide whether she’s innocent or guilty, unfortunately for her.” Cooper sighed. “We’re gonna have to book her. The State will decide whether or not to press charges, and we’ll let the courts handle it from there.”

“We good, Sheriff?”

“All good here.” Cooper patted the pocket that held Denny’s business card, then rose to shake Denny’s hand. “Next time I’ve got ferals to deal with, I’ll be giving you a call.”

Cooper shook Xander’s hand next, then mine. He even hunched down to shake little Rylan’s fist with his finger as well.

Then, just like that, we were free to go.

“How did you do that?” I hissed, walking alongside Denny as we headed back out to the lobby. Xander fell in behind us. I could hear the clench in his jaw as he ground his teeth.

“Do what?” Denny asked innocently.

“Oh, don’t play dumb. How did you talk us out of that?” I shoved his elbow. “You did hold Sarah hostage. Cooper knows you did.”

“I didn’t admit to anything,” Denny pointed out.

“No, but—”

“Look.” Denny turned around quickly, stopping right in front of me. “He didn’t want to book us. Anyone with eyes and ears could tell he didn’t want to mess with shifter shit. I didn’t have to do anything. I just stayed calm and followed the flow. That’s all.”

He wheeled back around just as quickly and headed out the door.

Xander and I were about to follow him when we heard another door open behind us.

“Ma’am? Ma’am, please!” Sarah’s voice screeched from behind us. I turned and found the female officer who’d brought us in handling Sarah, who was now in cuffs. “Please, tell them... tell them I had no idea—”

I looked to Xander, who had a thousand-mile stare in his eyes.

Sarah was lucky. Innocent or not, she’d assisted Melony in keeping our son from us. She should’ve been grateful she wasn’t dead.

I took Xander’s hand, and together, we followed Denny away.

Sheriff Cooper stopped us just as we were about to head back outside.

“Hey! Wait just a second.” He jogged over to us, flapping a piece of paper. “That Sarah woman? Damn near forgot. She wanted me to give this to you.” He held it out, then pulled it back, like he was having second thoughts. “Probably, I should hand this over to whoever’s handling your sons’ case through the proper legal channels. So don’t do anything stupid with it.”

Denny took the paper and gave Cooper an easy smile. “We’ll keep that in mind.”

He didn't bother looking at the paper until we were back in the truck.

"What is it?" I asked. Xander was still silent. He'd gotten good at knowing when to keep his mouth shut over the last twenty-four hours, but now I wasn't sure he remembered how to open it again.

"An address. Here." There was a growl in Denny's voice as he reached back to pass the paper to me.

It was indeed an address—one in Vegas. Next to it, carefully penned in loopy, girlish cursive, was the word *Sorry*. The paper was stained with tears. Sarah must have written it herself.

"Do you think this is where Melony is?" I asked, offering it back to Denny.

He waved it away. "Might be."

"Then, don't you want it?" If that was where Melony had disappeared to, it should be our next destination as far as I was concerned.

"Don't need it." Denny gripped the wheel tightly for a moment, then turned the keys in the ignition. The truck roared to life.

"But surely it's a clue," I insisted. "If Melony's there—"

"Oh, I bet she is." Denny threw the truck into reverse and backed it out of its parking spot. "My home pack is from Vegas. I know that address well."

"You think your home pack is... harboring her?"

"Fuck, no," Denny scoffed. "That place isn't the pack's. A woman lives there. Owl shifter. Thinks she's a witch as well." He paused. "Maybe she is."

"What would Melony want with an owl shifter?"

"The same thing everyone who goes to Mama Striga's wants," Denny grunted, "She's looking to break a blood curse."

Chapter 15

Xander

“I’m not asking will she break one, I’m asking if she can?”

Denny was being frustratingly evasive about details on this Mama Striga character. Felicity and I had peppered him with questions on the drive to the airport until he growled and told us to drop it.

I’d only just barely made it through check-in before I started in on him again.

“Maybe she has,” Denny grunted. “She’s got enough followers; she must have done *something* impressive. But if you’re asking my opinion... no, I don’t think she can do jack shit.”

Felicity was in the bathroom, pumping pre-flight. Denny and I had claimed a couple of chairs in front of security. Around us, tourists lugged suitcases while haggard parents juggled their boarding passes and children.

Rylan was in my lap, trying valiantly to stick his fingers in my mouth.

“Why don’t you just tell me what you do know about her?” I suggested. “You’ll get fewer questions out of me that way, and I’ll get more answers.”

Denny crossed his arms over his chest. “There’s not much to say. The woman’s a snake oil salesman. Hustler through and through. She preys on desperate people with more money than they have sense, which is saying something, because pretty often, they don’t have all that much money, either. Not that it

matters to her. She'll bleed 'em dry anyway, and when they come crying that her remedy didn't work, she says it's on account of them not believing hard enough."

I raised an eyebrow. "You're joking."

"I'm not. Oldest trick in the book, ain't it? If her magic"—Denny inserted a couple of finger quotes—"succeeds, it's because of her great wisdom and immense arcane power. If it fails, it's your own damn fault." He scoffed. "The fact that Melony Houghton is courting Mama Striga tells me all I need to know. She's going feral, just like her grandfather did, and she's desperate to stop it."

Denny seemed to share Doris's guess about feral wolves and blood curses. I guessed I should've counted myself lucky that Ma's curse was meant to end with her, and that it didn't involve losing her humanity to her inner wolf for good.

"Do you think she has Ryder with her?" I asked, not wanting to probe much deeper into the Mama Striga business. For some reason, talking about her seemed to piss Denny off.

"I can't say," Denny admitted. "Sarah seemed certain that there's only one baby, which means Melony was only planning on faking being a mother of one. Sarah certainly never saw the twins together. Doesn't bode well." His brow furrowed. "But if she doesn't have him with her, she might have information on who does. It's worth checking out. I've still got friends in my old pack. If I ask, they'll check things out." He straightened a little when Felicity emerged from the bathroom with the diaper bag. "You got everything you need?"

She lifted the diaper bag in answer. There wasn't anything else since we'd only packed the diaper bag.

"Good. I've got your flight pulled up here." Denny passed me his phone. "Put your information in and I'll book you in. Your plane to Boston boards in a couple of hours, so you're here with plenty of time."

"We shouldn't be going home," I said a little bitterly. "We should be going to Vegas."

Denny rolled his eyes. “Miller, even I’m not going to Vegas right now.”

“You’re not?” Felicity asked.

“Hell no. Could be Melony’s already en route back to her house down here, in which case, I’d be passing her in the air. More importantly, sounds like her presence here has coincided with an emergence of new ferals. Doesn’t sit well with me. I wanna check that out while we wait to pin her down.” He poked me in the chest. “Meanwhile, you need some downtime.”

I reeled back, a little offended. “I do not.”

“Yeah, you do. You barely said four fuckin’ words between the time we got pulled over and the time we left the station.”

“I was managing my temper!”

“You were shoving it into a cage, locking the door, and throwing a blanket over it like you hoped you might be able to trick it into thinking it was nighttime so it’d go to sleep. That’s not management, that’s a Band-Aid.” He tsked. “You’re too close to this, and I can’t even fault you for it. These are your kids we’re dealing with. That’s about as close as close gets.”

“You want me to go home and do nothing.”

“I want you to go home and take some time. Tend to your pack. Tickle your baby. Kiss your mate. That’s a good woman you’ve got right there.” Denny nodded to Felicity, and she flushed crimson. “You’re young, you’re in love, and more importantly, she loves you back. Lot of other people aren’t so lucky.”

Something gleamed almost spitefully in his eyes, and I remembered what he’d told me about his own love life. He must have been in his mid-fifties. No kids, though. No mate. No moon dream.

I’d had the luck of knowing Felicity since I was sixteen, and we still talked about all the time we’d lost between our first meeting and realizing we were mates.

But Denny had lived his entire life without one. He was, quite literally, a lone wolf.

“Now, the flight home is on me,” he said, recovering. The look in his eyes was gone with a blink. “I’m not gonna bill you for today’s hours, either. Rab and Beauty weren’t supposed to let that girl go until you two were well out of town. It was our bad, so I’ll foot the bill. We good?”

“Yeah.” I typed in our information and passed him back his phone. “Golden.”

* * *

Flying first class with a baby was a hell of a thing. Anywhere else on Earth, an infant was almost guaranteed to earn you smiles and coos and the easy, mechanical exchanges of baby-related small talk. *Oh, what a sweet little boy! What’s his name? Aw, and how old are you, honey? You’re gonna be such a little heartbreaker when you grow up.*

On an airplane, though? The only thing that would’ve earned us dirtier looks was if we started chatting about recipes for homemade bombs. The few times I’d flown economy, I’d noticed people had been most gracious about having a baby on board. They just plugged in their headphones and hoped for the best. Up in business class, the passengers started to get a little more bitter. They were shelling out big bucks for those seats, or burning points, or reaping the benefits of their hard-earned status upgrades. They had expense reports to look over, pitch decks to prepare, sleep to catch up on between inter-coastal meetings. Why should their experience be ruined by a wailing kid?

First class... I saw it the second we took our seats. Every person in the cabin turned to glare, all of them saltier than a package of complimentary peanuts.

“You’d think I crop-dusted them walking in,” I grumbled as I buckled in. I reached for Rylan so Felicity could do up her own seatbelt.

“Or that he did,” Felicity countered. “Maybe Denny should have booked us a little farther back in the plane. We didn’t need to fly first.”

I inhaled and exhaled slowly as I watched the stewardess move down the aisle, taking pre-flight drink orders. “Wish we didn’t need to fly at all.”

We got ginger ales. Felicity sipped at hers slowly. I drank mine like I was tossing back a shot, then ordered another.

“Slow down,” Felicity encouraged me as I raised the second drink to my lips. “How are you feeling?”

“Nervous as all get-out, and emotionally constipated to boot.” I rubbed a hand over my abs and winced. “Christ, after those burgers the Sheriff fed us, maybe not just emotionally.”

Felicity’s laughter was a bright, gentle sound. It reminded me of wind chimes on the front porch, clinking together like Heaven’s own music in the summer breeze. I found myself staring at her like a man starved, savoring the way her nose crinkled up and her pouty lips pulled back to reveal the whiteness of her teeth.

God, she was beautiful when she laughed. Eyes closed, body relaxed, long eyelashes a deep red where they caught the light.

With that kind of gorgeous sitting next to me, a man could almost forget he was about to be defying gravity while strapped to an overpriced armchair launching through the skies.

“What?” Her eyes opened, narrowed, when she caught me staring.

“We haven’t laughed much lately,” I admitted. “I’ve missed the sound of yours.”

Her cheeks flushed the most perfect shade of pink. “I’ve missed yours, too. It’s strange, smiling again after you haven’t done it in a while. Like your face muscles have forgotten what it feels like to move in that way. The first day back in the gym. You okay?”

“I will be.” I folded my arms tightly around Rylan, lowering my voice as our designated stewardess began her safety demonstration. “I fuckin’ envy Denny. The way he handled the cops... I could never do that.”

Cool, calm, collected. Everything an alpha was supposed to be. Everything that, right now at least, I very much was not. While he smooth-talked police officers, I’d been studying various surfaces and imagining how hard I’d have to punch to put my fist through them. It was never hard enough to stop me from yearning to do it anyway. The only thing that had kept me grounded was the threat of losing more time.

Every second counted. Every second we wasted put us further from the thing I really wanted: my family, all home, all safe.

Felicity punched me in the arm. “Liar. I’ve seen you handle plenty of people, Xander Miller. Remember when you talked Mr. Reinhardt into bumping your algebra grade up from a C to an A?”

Oh, I remembered. “He said I wasn’t showing my work often enough. I told him that shouldn’t matter since sometimes I was just doing it in my head.”

“Only, what was really happening was you and Brody were both doing half of each exam, then cheating off each other’s answers to save time,” she reminded me. “But you persuaded him into believing that sometimes you were just the world’s smartest high school quarterback.”

I almost smiled at the memory. “That was a long time ago, Cheeks.”

“Not so long ago that I’ve forgotten it.” She hugged the arm she’d just punched. “On your best days, you’re the most charming man I’ve ever met. Including Dennis Kerry.”

“And on my worst days?”

She rested her cheek against my shoulder.

“I still love you. I always will.”

* * *

We touched down in Boston late, and arrived back in Evergreen even later. When we entered the lodge, it was dark and silent.

Only upon our return did we realize how poorly prepared we were. Felicity's pregnancy should have been spent nesting instead of being held prisoner or on the run. Buying changing tables, highchairs, diaper bins. We'd had all of that and more at Morrow Manor, of course, but that was a four-hour drive from here.

Rylan was asleep when we brought him inside, but we didn't even have a crib to put him in.

"He can sleep in his carrier tonight," I decided, collapsing onto one of the couches in the main room. My boots came off, left then right. I abandoned them on the floor where they fell. "Tomorrow, I'll build him a crib."

"You'll build him a crib?" Felicity placed the carrier on the floor and sat down next to me. "That's... ambitious."

"Nah, it's not," I assured her. "Dad's got some power tools back at his place. I'll get Dylan and Kingston to help me. Between the three of us—"

"You'll bicker so much it'll take a month." She laughed, slipping her own shoes off. "Not that I don't love the idea of you getting all sweaty and working your..." Her voice trailed off abruptly. "Wood," she finished, blushing.

I smiled sleepily and put an arm around her. "Come here, then. Me and my wood miss you."

"Oh, Xander," she protested gently. "It's so late."

"Don't worry. My intentions are pure." I shifted to lie on the couch, pulling her body down against mine. To be fair, I was about half-mast. It had been a while since we'd been intimate. I settled it against her ass, relishing the shape of her body and the heat of her skin. "I'm a wolf, not a dog, and we're both too tired. Worst I'll do is hump your leg."

“I’d say down, boy, but...” She wiggled against me teasingly.

I gave her ass a sharp pat. “Keep doing that and my intentions are gonna be the least of your problems.”

She laughed a little breathlessly. “It feels good. In the morning, maybe. I’m not sure how long we’re supposed to wait before...”

This time, sadness tinged her tone and the silence she’d drifted off into.

She’d just remembered, like I had. We weren’t supposed to be horny. We certainly weren’t supposed to feel comfortable or playful or safe. Happiness was a brief, fleeting thing that only bubbled up in the moments between worry, between heartache, between grief.

I closed my eyes and buried my face into her hair, breathing in her scent. Even wanting my own mate felt like a betrayal to the son that remained missing. How could we even joke about something like that when Ryder was still out there somewhere?

“I love you, Cheeks,” I whispered, holding her as tightly as I could without squeezing the air from her lungs.

“I love you, too, Xander,” she murmured.

I wasn’t certain that I slept. It was hard to say if Felicity did, either. When Rylan fussed, we both sprang up like we’d been awake the entire time. Once he settled down again, we curled back up on the couch together and closed our eyes once more. If I did sleep, I didn’t dream. And if I hadn’t slept, morning arrived far too soon.

“Is he bigger than the last time I saw him?”

“Nah. You’re just getting smaller. He’s the exact same size.”

I startled awake, nearly knocking Felicity off the couch in the process. She awoke herself as I caught her and pulled her to safety.

Morning light filled the lodge. The diaper bag was on the floor where we'd left it next to our discarded shoes. The carrier was there next to it, and it was empty.

A sharp shock of pain hit my chest like a bullet, then radiated through the rest of my body.

Gone. Again. Already. We barely slept—we didn't sleep, and still—

Before my blood pressure shot up so high I gave myself a stroke, I scanned the living room.

Sure enough, Dylan was there, sprawled out on the floor. Kingston sat in his wheelchair, with Rylan lying on his lap, his little legs kicking in the air.

“Jesus fuckin—” I collapsed back against the couch, throwing an arm around Felicity's waist and pulling her back with me. “You two nearly just killed me. That's my son you've got there!”

“You mean my godson? No shit.” Kingston hunched over and beamed down at Rylan. “Hey there, little man.” Rylan kicked his feet in reply, coming within a couple inches of knocking Kingston in the mouth. “Oh, I see how it is. Yeah, you've got two good legs, big friggin' whoop. Rub it in, why don't ya.”

If my heart hadn't still been pounding like it was trying to break through my ribs, I would've pinched myself.

It was the happiest I'd seen Kingston in a while.

“Maybe he'll be a kicker,” Dylan suggested. “Carry on the ol' Miller family football tradition.”

“I thought that died with you,” Kingston shot back at him. “Every ball you've ever kicked came back up and smacked you in the face.”

“Maybe I meant to do that, huh? Maybe I like balls in my —” Dylan scowled and reached for Rylan as Kingston howled with laughter. “You know what? Screw you guys. Give me a turn with my nephew.”

“Fuck no! It's still my turn.”

“Hey! Language!” I cut in, not that anyone listened.

“Aw, c’mon, King! Just for a sec—”

I glanced at Felicity. She looked exhausted but amused.

“Can you imagine if they were both here?” she whispered, settling deeper beneath my arm as Kingston and Dylan continued to bicker.

“It’s a good thing we had two,” I replied. “Those two were never good at sharing. When Ryder’s with us again, they won’t have to.”

Felicity only yawned in reply. Under my arm, she was sweet as a kitten. Sleepy as one, too.

“We’ll build the crib today and call the pack in tomorrow,” I murmured, aware she was probably only half-listening. If that. “It’s a full moon, and I haven’t run with them in a while. Plus, they’ll wanna see the little guy.”

She smiled and closed her eyes. “Everyone will.”

A few moments later, I felt her head grow heavy against my bicep.

She’d fallen back asleep.

* * *

Building the crib proved to be easier said than done. Dylan made the trip to the hardware store to pick up the supplies, while Kingston and I blocked out the dimensions we’d need. Before Dylan even got back home, King and I came to the same disappointing conclusion. It wouldn’t be a day project. In last night’s jet-lagged delirium, I’d vastly underestimated the amount of work this would take.

And so, Dylan was sent on a side quest, this one taking him to the furniture store out on the edge of town. He returned with two bassinets, one for Rylan, and one for Ryder when he was finally home safe. We got the hardware for the cribs unloaded and tucked beneath a tarp to keep it dry. It was a project for after Ryder was here with us again. We could spend

as much time as we needed then, shaping, sanding, painting, and perfecting. They'd be done by the time the boys outgrew their bassinets.

It felt like a promise I'd made with the universe. *If I build two cribs, you'll make sure I have two babies to put in them. You'll bring Ryder back to us.*

* * *

Pack members filtered in and out of the lodge while my brothers and I worked. It reminded me of the blockade days, except instead of coming in and out to grab coffee and baked goods, they were here to see our son.

In just a day, anything we didn't already have for the boys quickly filled the lodge. Boxes of diapers were stacked in pyramids so tall, there was no way we'd ever be able to get through them. Baby clothes, burp cloths, stuffed wolves in every color, and a multitude of baby gadgets arrived like offerings for a tiny, hungry god.

Felicity kept immaculate track of who brought what. She wrote so many thank-you notes that I was worried her fingers would stay clamped around the pen permanently.

"You don't have to do that, you know," I told her as I massaged her palms, rubbing my thumb over her ink-stained fingers. "Wolves love babies. If you thank everyone for the gifts, they're only going to bring more."

"We can't just accept all this generosity without saying thank you," she insisted. "I'm fine—just find me a new pen. My current one is out of ink."

* * *

The pack's run the next day brought even higher spirits. With Rylan returned to us, there was hope in the air. Beneath the glow of the full moon, I shifted with all the others. In my lupine form, I trotted back to Felicity, who lowered our baby

boy down so I could nudge him with my nose and take in all the complexities of his individual scent, all the infinitesimal notes that marked him as him.

When I was done, she stepped back, holding him to her chest. With her auburn waves loose over her shoulders, and her feet bare on the grass, she looked like some kind of moon goddess, walking the earth in a linen sundress. I found myself staring.

Goddamn.

It took a howl from the forest to stir me from her spell.

I ran through our lands, dirt beneath my paws, wind in my fur, the un-scratchable itch of exertion rippling across my skin. To my right, I found Dylan galloping alongside me, a playful glint in his eyes.

He sped up, and I matched his pace. Together, we raced to the edge of the pack lands and back like we were kids again. *Race you home! You're on. Last one back's a rotten egg.*

After the run, the pack gathered to eat and chat. Nana Jordan and Mandy Spencer managed the buffet line, a spread featuring dishes from every pack member, while Connell and Luke flittered about in their orbit—sometimes helping, sometimes being chased away with a wooden spoon.

Being surrounded by our community like this again felt like the first cool breeze after a long heatwave. This was what we were missing, I kept finding myself thinking, and it was almost true.

But even in the golden light of the pack's presence, there were still points of darkness I couldn't shake.

Ryder should have been here for this, too. Every time my heart swelled at the sight of Rylan being passed around and fussed over, it sank at the absence of my other son.

And on the edge of the crowd, I watched Kingston staring off into space like he'd just found himself at a party full of strangers.

Before I could go to him, he swiveled his wheelchair around and rolled away. The door to the den slid shut with a hard *click*. I wasn't sure it would open again for the rest of the night.

"I'm worried about him," I admitted to Felicity.

She'd been watching him, too. "So am I." She hooked her arm around mine, inching a little closer. "But this was a rough night for him. While the rest of you went out to run, he had to sit back and watch with me and Nana Jordan. That can't have been easy for him."

"Shit," I swore. "I didn't even notice."

Some brother I was.

"You can't keep an eye on everything," Felicity said gently. "That's what you have me for. Give him some time. We can talk with him in the morning. Maybe this is what he needs to convince him to start up with his physical therapy again." She pursed her lips. "And to take his pain meds. I know he has to be hurting. One of those hurts, at least, we can do something about."

"As long as he cooperates," I agreed.

Easier said than done. We Millers were historically a pretty stubborn, hard-headed bunch.

Kingston had the hardest head of us all, and tonight, he'd left me with the heaviest heart.

* * *

The run had left my hands and feet caked in dirt. Twigs and burrs tangled in my hair. Felicity picked out the worst of them, then I showered while she got Rylan down for the night.

He was fast asleep by the time I emerged. Felicity, too. The moonlight from the windows illuminated her in an otherworldly glow. My gaze traced the curve of her hip beneath the sheet, the steep drop to her waist, the elegance of

her fingers as they rested on the pillow next to her angelic face.

Need burned deep in my core, a desire I'd been doing my best to tamp down. Between the panic, the heartache, and the grief, there'd been little room left for us. Her body wasn't even ready for me yet. Six weeks, the doctors had told us. We were only at five. But there were other ways. Gentle, sweet ways that wouldn't hurt her while she healed from giving birth.

How could I be in the same room without wanting her? I wanted to wake her up and remind her how hungry my kisses could be, show her the heat of my lips and the talents of my tongue.

I might have done it, too, if I wasn't distracted first.

My phone was on the nightstand, plugged into the charger. Felicity must have taken it from my discarded clothes and started to charge it for me. When I approached our bed, its screen lit up.

Dennis Kerry was calling.

"Miller. I need you," he said the second I answered.

"I'm flattered, Denny, but I'm afraid I'm already spoken for." I kept my voice low, glancing at Felicity as I spoke. She still hadn't stirred.

"Ha. Glad to see you've got your sense of humor back. Sounds like some time at home has done you good." He grunted in approval. "Anyway. My guys have spotted Melony Houghton in Vegas, coming to and from Mama Striga's place. Looks like she's still there."

"And Ryder?" My tired eyes popped wide open. Suddenly, I was on alert.

"No sightings yet. Sorry. But considering that no one's spotted Quincy lately, and Samuel Morrow is almost certainly holed up with his crackpot doctor at one of the old East Coast packs' estates, Melony's our best lead right now. I want to follow it."

"Do it," I said. "Whatever you need to. I trust you."

“Well, see...” Denny cleared his throat. “There’s a hiccup. She’s proving pretty evasive. I reckon if Sarah didn’t outright tell her we tracked her down and rescued Rylan, she’s figured it out for herself. We’re having a hard time keeping on her trail.”

“Shit.” It was an annoyance, but presumably Denny hadn’t called just to bitch. “What can I do?”

“Ah, well... Remember how you were so keen on coming out to Vegas?”

I did, but there was something in his tone that suggested whatever he wanted me to do out there wouldn’t be anything I liked.

Chapter 16

Felicity

Most men would have jumped at the chance to enact the plan Denny had suggested.

But for better or worse, Xander Miller wasn't most men.

He paced the bedroom, rocking Rylan in his arms. It was clear which one of them actually needed the soothing. Rylan was perfectly quiet, but Xander looked like he wanted to crawl out of his skin.

Denny's call had come in while I was sleeping. Generously, despite his reservations, Xander had allowed me my full eight hours. Meanwhile, he'd been up all night.

"It's a good plan," I said again, unfolding one of Xander's T-shirts and smoothing it out on the bed. I refolded it, hot dog style, and rolled it up so it wouldn't wrinkle in his suitcase. "It won't be that bad."

"It will," Xander insisted. "That woman, Cheeks... The mere thought of her makes my stomach turn. She's done everything she can to pull our lives apart at the seams—and she's goddamn obsessed with me!"

"That's to our advantage, isn't it?" I pointed out, reaching for another shirt.

"She's delusional—"

"We wouldn't be in this mess if she was sane."

"She stole our children." His voice rose to a shout, as if I wasn't hearing him properly.

As if I could have forgotten any of Melony Houghton's many sins.

I set the shirts aside and rose. We still had a few more hours before Xander needed to catch his flight to Vegas. Right now, he was in no state to even pack his own suitcase, let alone get on a plane.

I moved to him, placing a hand on his chest. In his arms, Rylan was fast asleep yet again.

"I know how hard this will be for you," I said gently. "But it's the best chance we have to find Ryder. This will help bring him back."

His heart thundered beneath my palm. I moved my hand to his cheek, and he closed his eyes, leaning into my touch.

When Xander opened his eyes again, I could see the hurt in them. It made the swirls in his green irises look like spiderweb cracks in a pane of glass.

"Maybe you don't understand what he's asking of me," Xander said. "I'll spell it out for you, yeah? He wants me to seduce her, Cheeks. Lie to her, take her in my arms, convince her that I love her in the way I only love you. How am I supposed to go through with that? How can you let me?"

I stared at him, suddenly puzzled.

He had a point.

It was a little bizarre, now that I thought about it. I didn't feel at all jealous or angry or uncomfortable with Denny's plan. Most women, I was pretty sure, would have been furious at the idea of their partner flying to Las Vegas to take part in a honey trap. I could already imagine how she would respond: with a delighted grin, a bat of her lashes, and a suggestion that they go get a room.

In so many ways, Melony was every woman's nightmare. Tall and thin with tasteful curves, beautiful and perfectly eager to steal my man, just like she'd stolen our sons.

She was everything I wasn't.

So, why didn't I care?

“I guess I’m just not threatened by her,” I admitted. “Not in that way, anyway. Why should I be? You’re my mate, not hers. You only need to charm her, not fuck her. And even then, I don’t think you’ll enjoy it.”

“You don’t think?” Xander yelled, jaw dropping and eyes going wide.

“Shh,” I hushed, reaching out for our son. “Let me take Rylan. You’re going to wake him, and you’ve only just rocked him to sleep.”

Carefully, I transferred Rylan into my arms and carried him over to his crib. Just as carefully, I laid him down.

The sleepy smile on our son’s lips did more to my heart than any kind of jealousy ever could.

“There.” With Rylan settled, I turned my attention back to Xander. “Now. Talk me through this. What’s bothering you so much?”

“What isn’t? I hate Melony Houghton. Despise her. The thought of being anywhere near her disgusts me. Convincing her that I’m there by choice, that I want her and not you...” He shook his head. “I’ll never be able to go through with it. She’ll smell the lie on me from across the room.”

“You were with other women before me,” I reminded him. Xander and I had known each other for a long time before we got together, but it wasn’t as if either of us had maintained our virginity during those years apart. He’d had other women, just like I had slept with other men. “You don’t even have to kiss her.”

“The women before you—I can’t even remember their names now. There can’t be any after you,” he countered. “You shine so brightly, it blinds me, Cheeks. Your light blocks out every other. When I close my eyes, all I see is you. Feeling like that... how the hell am I supposed to convince another woman I feel that for her?”

I believed him, even after everything we’d been through. Xander could be in a room full of naked Playboy Bunnies all

begging for his dick, and the first thing out of his mouth would be, which way's the door?

"If you don't think you can do it, we'll let Denny know," I relented. It was unfortunate, but I couldn't blame him for being disgusted by Melony. Surely there was some other angle we could work. "Isn't Denny supposed to be our ace tracker? He knows where she is now. He'll just have to narrow it down from there for himself."

"I wish he would," Xander grumbled. "But I don't think he'd be asking for my help if it was as simple as that."

"Then, what do you want to do?" I asked.

"It's just..." He clenched his jaw, then relaxed with a sigh. His boots fell heavy on the floor as he moved to me. His fingers slid up my forearms to my biceps, then tightened like he thought I might pull away. "I need you to ask me to do it."

"Ask you? How would that change anything?"

He frowned down at me, like I'd just asked him if fire was hot.

"Isn't it obvious? If you asked me for the stars, Cheeks, I'd build a jetpack. I'd pluck 'em all out and shove them all into a sack, string 'em together to drape around your neck. The moon, too. I'd bring that for you set like a diamond in a ring. I'd turn the night sky black for you, just to satisfy your slightest whim. And when you got tired of it all, wearing the moon on your finger, being bathed in starlight, I'd go put them all back. I'd rearrange whole constellations to spell out your name."

The way he looked at me then... God, I had no doubt that he would bring me the stars. Another man wouldn't. Couldn't. But Xander Miller would find a way.

"I'm not asking for the stars, Xander," I reminded him. "If you took down the moon, I think it would fuck up the tides." I imagined eerily motionless oceans and a forever dark sky. "The wolves, too, probably."

"And it'd be worth it. Because you asked it of me." He slid his hands back down my arms until our fingers twined

together. “I think if you asked... I could do anything for you. Even this.”

“You’re serious?”

“As an oil fire.”

For Xander, that was very serious. Once upon a time, before we’d been torn away from any semblance of normal life, he’d been a firefighter.

As I recalled, oil fires were the worst kind.

“Okay,” I said solemnly.

If he was going to make me ask him for this, then I needed to take it just as seriously.

I squeezed his hands and stared up at him with profound sincerity.

“Xander Miller, will you please, for the sake of our son and for me, your loving mate, seduce Melony Houghton?”

“Wish you were asking me for anything else right now,” he admitted, then gave a resigned sigh. “Yeah, okay. I’ll do it.”

“Thank you,” I said, my lips curling into a small smile as gratitude pinched my heart.

“But I’m not gonna like it,” he added sternly, reaching for my wrist. “Now, c’mere.”

I laughed as he pulled me toward the bed. “What are you doing?”

“What do you think?” He gripped my waist, and with gentle strength, he pushed me onto the mattress, then settled his body over mine. His knee pressed between my thighs. “I’m not leaving without giving you something to remember me by.”

The deep purr of his voice sent a flutter through my core. As he pressed his lips to my neck, that flutter became a powerful thrum. Heat radiated through me, pulsing up through my spine and down along nerve endings that had been long neglected in the last weeks, nearly forgotten.

I panted and whimpered, arching to meet his kisses, until I remembered—

“Xander,” I yelped, then swallowed my tongue, horrified at the volume of my own voice. With a glance back at Rylan’s bassinet, I dropped into a stern whisper. “Xander. Rylan’s sleeping. If we wake him—”

His lips trailed lower to my collarbones and the swell of my breasts.

“If you’re quiet, we won’t,” he murmured against my skin.

“I don’t know if I can be quiet.” Already, my throat itched with desire to moan for him, to reward his kisses with the noises of pleasure that would only encourage him to create more.

“Mm.” He pulled back, studying me like a problem he was certain he could solve. “Well, if it gets to be too much...” He smirked and put his fingers over my lips. “Just bite down on my hand.”

My eyes went wide as his fingers pressed down against my mouth. Sharp, urgent need sparked between my thighs.

Did he really mean that?

And if so...

Why did I like it so much?

Any questions I had about Xander’s intentions were quickly answered. He palmed my right breast with his free hand, squeezing it so tenderly in a way that made me feel like he wanted to squeeze so much harder. Wherever his lips fell, they burned against my skin.

With a low rumble, just short of a growl, he tugged down the neckline of my nightgown, baring the twin swells of my breasts. He kissed those, too. My nipples stiffened in anticipation.

“They’re gorgeous, Felicity,” he murmured, kissing the valley between them. “Christ, I’ve missed these so much.”

A shiver rattled through me at the sound of my name coming from his lips. He didn't call me by it often. The playful nickname he'd given me when we were teenagers—after the way my face was always flushing pink when I was around him—had stuck. For so long, I'd truly believed I'd only ever be Cheeks to him, his pudgy tagalong, too much like a sister to ever be considered as a woman. His friend, always, but nothing more.

How wrong I'd been.

I was the mother of his children. His mate.

I'd always be something more now.

Xander's mouth made its way left, climbing the slope of my breast. As he took my left nipple into his mouth, I hissed into his fingers, riding the strange wave of pleasure and pain that followed. Pregnancy had left my breasts more sensitive than ever, especially at their peaks. He sucked softly at first, then harder, nipping at me with his teeth. The heat that had been stabbing in my core turned liquid beneath his lips, pooling and growing more insistent.

For the first time in long while, I felt desperately, deliriously alive.

Suddenly, his eyes opened wide. He moaned, shivered, and swallowed. Panting heavily, he released my nipple with a gentle *pop!*

"Your milk," he explained breathlessly. "Fuck. I didn't realize it would be so sweet, so fucking—"

The rest of his review was lost as he moved to my other nipple, sampling it in the same way. It should have felt no different than when I fed our sons, but it did. God, it did. When I fed the boys, the flow of my milk was always a relief, but never quite like this. There was something purely erotic, even dirty, about the way Xander drank from me. Something almost taboo that heightened the sensation, twisting it sensually, turning it dark.

My head spun as I felt the pulse of his lips, sucking and releasing, reverberate through my body. It traveled through my

nervous system until it found its home between my thighs.

My clit throbbed in fast, sharp spasms, quickening when he added in swirls of his tongue. I breathed deeply through my nose, in and out like I'd been running a marathon. His hand was still clasped over my mouth, and I poked my tongue between my lips, finding the valley between his fingers. I lapped against the rough edges of his calluses, whimpering at the salty taste on his skin.

I didn't remember closing my eyes, but for several long moments, I couldn't see a thing. Just a fluttering, bursting brightness, all-consuming, like fireworks exploding behind my eyelids. The orgasm left my ears ringing in that same way. Beneath his lips, my body had become a hand grenade—one so eager to go off that it detonated before its pin was even pulled.

Xander made me come for him, and he hadn't even touched my pussy yet. Just from sucking on my nipples, he made me come.

It was a thrill that I'd been denying myself without even realizing it. Grief was a dark, heavy coat, a fire blanket that could snuff out even the faintest smolder of embers. For so many weeks, I'd wrapped it around me, worn it like armor. Like a hairshirt I suffered for the benefit of an uncaring universe.

If I wanted nothing, took no pleasure, felt no desire, then maybe it would be enough. Maybe it would bring our sons back.

But self-flagellation hadn't returned Rylan to us.

Xander had.

“Felicity.”

He rose from my breasts, breathing heavily. His fingers uncurled from my lips and trailed down my body, all the way to the hem of my nightgown that brushed my thighs. Reaching beneath the silk, he cupped the cleft between my legs in his broad, callused palm. What he found there made him breathe even harder.

“God. You’re soaking for me.”

I tried to think of something witty to say, something charming or clever that would make him smile. As my brain turned up nothing of the sort, I realized I would have settled for something simply coherent.

“Please,” was all I managed.

He did smile then.

Good enough.

“I want to feel you around my fingers,” he confessed, shifting upward. His lips danced over me, mere inches away from my own mouth. “I want to feel your cunt throb for me. Can I?”

Of course you can, I nearly screamed. I was his mate. Anything he wanted from me was already his.

But then I remembered the state of my body after giving birth. Still basking in the afterglow of that first orgasm, I’d completely forgotten. We hadn’t done this for more than a month. The last time he’d taken me, even just with his fingers, had been several days before the boys were born.

My heart thundered with sudden anxiety. Would he still want me? Would it hurt?

“Be gentle,” I whispered, my hips rising against his hand.

“Mm. Gentle.” He closed his eyes, nodded, then pressed his lips to mine. The kiss ended far too soon, leaving me arching and whimpering for another. He smirked down at me, my desperation amusing him. “I can do that.”

His fingers stroked up and down in agonizingly slow motions. They traveled the slickness of my folds, teasing toward my clit, then dipping against my channel. A dozen times, I was sure they would make the plunge, only for him to withdraw once more.

I was quickly coming to regret asking him to be gentle. Xander was stirring a toxic cocktail of impatience and lust within me, one that left my cheeks blazing and my heart pounding in my ears.

He kissed me again as he toyed with my pussy, teasing at first, but with a rapidly growing desperation. His stubble scratched my skin. Even that, the lightest sensation of his bristled five o'clock shadow, was enough to drive me mad.

I needed more of him. I needed it now, and badly enough that I was willing to beg for it.

He must have sensed it in me—or maybe he was ready to beg, too.

With a single finger, he entered me. I gasped when he slid it inside, first in surprise—it didn't hurt—then again in ecstasy. It didn't hurt even a little. It was the opposite of hurt. An itch that only he could scratch. A deep sensation of release.

He moved within me, making come hither movements, and though my eyes were closed, I saw the flash of fireworks again. With just a finger, he stole the darkness from behind my eyelids and replaced it with a bright, blinding light.

I moaned into his lips, the sound soft and pitiful as I rode out the waves of pleasure. My hips rolled upward, my back arching to meet his touch. His hips rocked against me in return, pinning his hand between us. Beneath the pressure of his pelvis, the heel of his palm rubbed against my clit. Immediately, everything complicated and intensified, twisting and tumbling entirely out of control.

“Xander,” I rasped, clinging to him. “God, Xander, please —”

What was I even asking for now? I had no idea. More pleasure, maybe. His tongue, or his cock, or just for this moment to last.

More of him.

“Fuck,” he swore, pulling back.

I cried out as he withdrew his fingers from me. Suddenly, I was too empty, abandoned in my moment of greatest need.

He was quick to make it up to me. He slid off the bed onto his knees. His belt buckle clanked against his thigh as he tore

it open. He drew his cock out, forcefully and rapidly, then hooked an arm under my thigh as he took his shaft into his fist.

He tugged me roughly to the edge of the bed. My leg ended up over his shoulder, slung like the strap of a rifle. In my desperation, I pressed my calf to his spine, pulling him closer.

His mouth met my cunt like a heat-seeking missile. He kissed me there fiercely, lips and tongue moving with a ravenous hunger. Beneath my thigh, I could feel the jostle of his arm as he stroked himself to the taste of me. His other arm settled over my pelvis, pinning my hips in place, while his tongue glided up and down my slit in ways that made it all too necessary to hold me down.

I felt the universe split around us. The fabric of reality stretched and strained and tore. My breath hitched hard in my chest. I was gasping for air in huge, deep gulps, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't catch my breath. The sensation was like crying in a way—the brutal, heart-wrenching kind of sobbing that left me thumping my fists against the mattress, and my sinuses burning with tears. But it was like laughing, too—the kind that swelled so great in my chest that my ribs ached, and my face felt sore deep in the muscles of my cheeks.

As I lost myself in yet another storm of pleasure, Xander gave my clit a final suck, then rose, snarling. He stood over me, fearsome and formidable as a dark god. His cock twitched in his fist as he pumped it. Seeing it—its thickness, its length, the veins that ran up and down its shaft like tributaries of a live-giving river—stole every breath in my lungs.

He collapsed on top me, shuddering as he came. His seed shot across my nightgown, all the way up to my breasts and neck. My arms locked around his shoulders, pulling him against me, legs winding about his waist, drawing him in, refusing to let him go.

Our bodies tangled together on the mattress, rocking together. I felt like a rowboat in the middle of a vast, treacherous ocean, one that had somehow managed to weather the storm.

There were no words—not for a long while. There weren't even kisses. For a few minutes, I wasn't sure that my brain would ever function properly again. It was flooded with endorphins, leaving me caught in a stupefying high that seemed to have no end.

Xander nuzzled against me, running his hands down my body, and breathing me in.

Finally, his lips hovered over mine like a question.

I leaned in to accept the kiss. There was something grounding about it, a firmness and a comfort that brought me down just enough that I was able to form coherent thoughts again.

“God, Felicity,” he whispered when he broke the kiss.

He cupped my face and breathed in sharply through his nose, stroking my cheek with his thumb.

“I love you,” he said. “I love you so much, it could fucking kill me. I'd welcome it, even, because it would be because of you.”

“You're not allowed to die,” I informed him, my eyelids fluttering half-closed. Even grounded, I was still flying.

“Any moment I have to spend apart from you is like dying,” he admitted. “But if you're commanding me to live...”

“I am,” I assured him, my voice uncannily throaty and deep. I still hadn't caught my breath. “I need you too much.”

The hand that held my cheek trembled, then moved more firmly against my jaw.

“Then, I'll live for you.”

He kissed me again, harder this time. His tongue pressed between my lips and slid greedily against mine. He tasted like a summer memory, as indescribable as the way the air smelled before a rainstorm.

We stayed entangled like that, kissing and touching and breathing in each other's breaths, as the hours rushed away from us, until it was time for him to go.

* * *

My knees were still weak when we said our goodbyes.

“I’ll miss you, you know.” I reached up to touch his jawline. His stubble was thicker today and scratched against my fingertips. We’d spent so much time in bed, he hadn’t had a chance to shave.

“Not nearly as much as I’ll miss you.” He swallowed hard, closing his eyes, leaning into my touch. When his eyes opened again, they trailed down to Rylan, who was snug against my chest beneath his baby wrap. “I’ll miss you both.”

He hugged me as tightly as he could without squishing Rylan between us. His lips brushed the top of my head, then he buried his nose in my hair. Humidity tickled my scalp as he breathed me in again.

We stayed there like that for a long time. Still, when he pulled away, it was far too soon.

“Ah...” He took a single step back, not looking eager to leave. “Look out for Kingston while I’m away. I know you’ve already got one baby to deal with, but—”

“He’s not being a baby.” A sad smile formed on my lips. “He’s having a hard time.”

“He’s not taking care of himself.” Xander took one of my hands and squeezed it. “Maybe you put his pills in some peanut butter or something. Give it to him on a big spoon.”

I laughed. “I’ll try my best.”

“And Nana Jordan—”

“She’ll be okay. She has Nadia there with her now,” I reminded him. “And we can’t count Connell out.”

“Well, then, take care of Nadia and Connell, too.”

“And Dylan?” I guessed.

“Dylan’s pretty low maintenance, actually. But yeah, him too.” He nodded, and took my other hand. Our bodies drew

closer again. “I need you to take care of all of them for me, Cheeks. The pack needs an alpha, and while I’m away, the closest thing they’ve got to one of those is you.”

“I’m no alpha.” I shook my head gently, unsure of what he meant. “I’m not even a shifter.”

“No, but you’re my mate, and you’re the most capable woman for the job.”

For a moment, I was certain he had to be joking. Xander had been born to lead, trained to do exactly that from childhood.

What had I been trained for? Nursing, I supposed, but Xander wasn’t asking me to start IVs or monitor troponin levels. He was putting me in charge of his family. His people. His entire life here in Evergreen while he was away.

I searched his eyes and found no glimmer of teasing.

He was being completely serious.

Was I up to the task?

“I’ll do my best,” I promised, my heart suddenly heavy.

I’d have to. What he was asking of me was no small favor, and I couldn’t let him down.

“Even if you did your worst, it’d still be pretty damn good.” He glanced down, pursing his lips. “There’s something else I’m worrying about.”

“Still nervous about charming Melony?” I joked, trying to lighten the mood a little.

“Nah. I mean, it still turns my stomach, but she was convinced we were mates when I ignored her completely. I could light a bag of dogshit on that woman’s doorstep, and she’d call it a valentine.”

“What, then?”

“I’m leaving you with a lot of responsibility on your shoulders.” Concern blazed in his eyes. “While I’m gone... who’s gonna take care of you?”

I chuckled. “I’m very capable of taking care of myself, Xander Miller.”

“You are, but you shouldn’t have to,” he insisted. “If you need anything, you ask for it. From Dylan, or Kingston—from anyone in the pack. And if you don’t know who to ask, you call me. Hell, I’ll ask for you.”

“I won’t need anything,” I promised.

“You don’t think you will,” Xander said. “But you might.”

“How can I ask them to take care of me? You’ve just told me I’ll be taking care of them.” I could imagine nothing more mortifying than being entrusted with so much, only to realize how deep in over my head I was.

He sighed and shook his head. “One of these days, you’re gonna have to accept that this thing goes both ways. You take care of them, they take care of you. That’s what having a pack is all about.”

Chapter 17

Xander

When I got off the plane, it felt like I'd been shot up with adrenaline, then repeatedly kicked in the head.

The flight from Boston to Vegas was horrible, an overwhelming cocktail of everything I hated about flying all chucked in a blender. We hit turbulence somewhere over the Midwest, and it seemed to last until the minute we landed. Halfway through the flight, one of the bathrooms had malfunctioned, creating a catastrophic pile-up for the remaining toilet, despite the seatbelt light being on. The guy sitting next to me spent most of the flight filling up barf bags while people in the aisle tried and failed not to tumble into his lap. In the seat across from us, a woman's tiny, angry purse-dog quickly picked up on my scent and determined that we were mortal enemies. It then spent the entire flight barking in my direction while petulantly marking its territory on its panicking owner's skirt.

All that got me through it was the lingering taste of Felicity on my lips. The belief that, when I brought our son back to her, I'd be able to do it again. And again.

"How was it?" Denny asked when he met me at Arrivals.

"Fine," I lied. "Yours?"

"Not bad. Got in about half an hour before you did." Denny jerked his head toward the baggage claim. "You check anything?"

"Nope." I shifted my duffel bag onto my opposite shoulder and headed for the exit. "Let's just get this over with. Where's

Melony?”

“Oh, right. Lemme just snap my fingers and summon her up for you.” Denny deadpanned. “I’m a wolf, Miller, not a wizard. Rental car’s this way.”

We passed out the exit and veered off toward parking.

“Where do we start tracking her, then?” If I had to be here and do this, I figured we might as well be done with it as quickly as possible.

“Today? We don’t.”

“But—”

“We need to plan this out properly, not launch into it with our heads up our asses,” Denny said in a tone that suggested I needed to quickly pull my head out of a certain hole. “Once we’re settled, we’ll worry about tracking Melony down, but not before.”

The rental car was a silver Buick Encore, nice but unassuming. It smelled of cleaning supplies, leather, and pine, like it had been freshly detailed that morning. While Denny drove us out of the airport, I called Felicity to let her know I’d made it in one piece. She held the phone up to Rylan’s ear for me so he could hear my voice. Before we hung up, her tone went breathy, and she told me she missed me.

It was promising. I felt like the rift between us was finally closing. Last night’s goodbye seemed to have left an impression on her.

Bringing Ryder back home with me would leave an even better one.

Billboards advertising strip clubs and musical acts lined the interstate. I watched them, bored, as we passed them. The sun hovered above us, high noon, as we headed south down I-215. Denny followed its curve east, taking us far away from the glamorous casinos and luxury hotels.

“We’re not staying on the Strip?” I asked, eyeing the rocky shoulder and the high walls that separated the interstate from

civilization. Beyond the walls, I could just barely make out rooftops.

Funny that people actually lived here. I only ever thought of the people passing through.

“When I’m in Vegas, which isn’t often, I’ve got a family obligation to stay up in Firebend Ridge with the pack.” Denny didn’t sound too excited about that. “They’ve insisted on hosting you, too, so I’d lose any notions of partying it up at Caesar’s Palace.”

“Suits me just fine.”

In fact, I preferred the idea of staying with Denny’s pack. I’d never been much of a gambler. Anything else of interest in Vegas wouldn’t be half as much fun without Felicity by my side. We weren’t here to play tourist, anyway. We were on a mission. If we needed to make plans, it’d be easier to do that away from the noise, and with our own kind.

Denny’s family’s home was perched high on a ridge well off the interstate. Behind it, there was nothing but mountains and Nevada skies. The sheer size of the mansion reminded me of the lodge back in Evergreen. But where the lodge was built like a rustic New England hunting retreat, the Kerry estate was a luxurious pueblo revival. It looked perfectly at home against the backdrop of the harsh but beautiful desert landscape.

At the front door, a barefoot man in a Dead Kennedys T-shirt and blue jeans greeted us. He looked to be somewhere between my age and Denny’s. As long as I ignored the short, punkish crop of his hair and the fang earring dangling from his left lobe, I could spy a resemblance between the two of them.

“Mikey.” Denny offered his hand for the man to shake. “Thanks for having us.”

“Heya, Denny.” Mikey took Denny’s hand, then used it as leverage to pull him into a bear hug. “Good to see you again. It’s been too fuckin’ long.”

“Dunno about that,” Denny grumbled, shrugging out of the hug.

“Oh, shut up.” Mikey raised his chin to me. “This your friend?”

“Client,” Denny corrected. It seemed to be an important distinction for him. Just when I thought he was finally warming up to me. I suppressed an eye roll. There went all my hopes that he’d be sending me birthday invites when this was all done.

Denny moved between us, brokering the introduction.

“Mikey, meet Xander Miller, alpha of the Evergreen, Massachusetts pack. Miller, this is Michael, my little brother. Leader of the Firebend Ridge pack.”

“Thanks for opening your home to us. Means a lot.” I struck my hand out like Denny had. “And it’s always a pleasure to meet another alpha, of course.”

Mikey shook my hand with a good, firm grip, then smirked and pulled me into a hug as well.

“I’m not an alpha, actually,” he said, releasing me. With a jerk of his head, he beckoned for us to follow him inside. “I’m a sigma like Denny here.” He elbowed Denny in the ribs. “If it’s alpha business you’re interested in, you’ll want Shayla. My mate.”

Mikey led us into the kitchen and indicated a small woman with a mess of tattoos up and down her arms. Her hair was cut in a dark, blunt bob.

“Welcome!” the woman at the sink called over her shoulder. “Call me Shay.”

“You lead the pack together?” I asked. It was a little unorthodox, but unorthodox seemed to suit these two. They were the polar opposites of Denny, with his hard-ass vibes, though they all looked like they shopped at the same army surplus store, just for very different reasons.

“Mikey is just face of the operation,” Shay said with a grin. “I’m the brains.”

“And the looks,” Mikey added. He moved next to her, bumping her away from the sink with his hip and taking over

the dishwashing. “The kid sulking in the corner there is our son. Say hello, Mace, and go shake the man’s hand.”

“Hello,” Mace said sternly, stepping forward. His voice was uncannily deep, with a rusty, door-hinge quality to it. I smiled, remembering when my own voice had changed. I would’ve been around his age. It was around the same time hair started sprouting from my chest.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mace.” I shook his hand, politely choosing to ignore the way he tried to crush my palm. Hormones were rough on any kid riding the waves of puberty. Doubly so for wolves. “Nice to meet all of you, in fact.”

“Oh, you haven’t met all of us yet!” a female voice called out.

From the hall beyond the kitchen, another figure emerged. She wore leather pants with matching boots and jacket—a look I didn’t often see on women her age. Her hair was stark white, cut short and spiky. She looked a little like if Mrs. Claus spent her free time between Christmases riding on the back of a Harley. Her arms were laden with two brown bags of groceries.

“Ellie Kerry,” she introduced herself, bustling over to the kitchen island. “You’ll be Xander Miller, I suspect?”

“I am,” I confirmed, glancing over my shoulder. At this rate, punk rock Santa would be next to emerge from the woodwork.

Ellie deposited the groceries on the counter, then approached Denny and me.

“I suppose I should thank you, Xander. It’s not often my oldest finds a reason to come home.” Her eyes narrowed at Denny. “At least, not one he can’t slither out of.”

“Mom—”

Any further protests from Denny were smothered as she threw her arms around his waist. This hug, he didn’t manage to wriggle away from.

When she finally released him, she raised a hand and smacked him upside the head.

“Denny Kerry, you relentless little shit! Has it been six years, or seven? I’ve lost count. How dare you spend so much time away from us?”

Normally, hearing a parent talk to their kid like that would have made me uncomfortable. It should have reminded me of how Ma talked to one of us when she was pissed off, or how Felicity’s mother talked to Felicity at pretty much any time, regardless of her mood.

But there was an undeniable fondness in Ellie’s tone that softened the blow of her words. Even as she called Denny every name under the sun, there was no mistaking the love in her voice.

“And another thing—” Ellie began, but something made her stop short.

She leaned forward, sniffing, then leaned in closer, until it was apparent that she was sniffing me. “Huh.”

I lifted my elbow and gave myself a sniff as well. “Shit. Sorry. It was a long flight. Now, here I am, stinkin’ up your house—”

“Never mind that.” Ellie leaned back, brow furrowed. She studied me like she was reading a sign in a language she’d once spoken but hadn’t used in a while. “Xander Miller, Xander Miller. What’s your mother’s name?”

“Marianne Miller. Marianne Morrow, before that.” Dropping the Morrow name gave me little pleasure. I didn’t love reminding people that I was related to my serial killer of a grandfather, but no one got to choose where they came from. It was what it was. “Why? You know her?”

“No. I’m sure it’s nothing.” The interest in her gaze said otherwise, but if she didn’t want to discuss my heritage, I was happy to let her drop it. I didn’t particularly want to hash that out, either. “If you want to take a shower, you’re welcome to one. I’ve made up the saguaro room for you. Denny will show you—assuming he still knows where it is.”

“Come on,” Denny said with a sigh, waving for me to follow him. “It’s just this way.”

“Nice family you’ve got here,” I said, genuinely meaning it.

I wondered what had kept him away.

Denny only grunted and scowled. “Mind your own business, Miller. Mom was just being polite. You do stink.”

* * *

The saguaro room, as far as I could gather, was named for the view. It was a mid-sized guest room with an en suite, a lot like the set-up of the rooms at Evergreen’s lodge. Outside the big picture window on the far wall, a giant cactus rose near the house, its three massive arms reaching skyward like the prongs of a big-ass trident rising from a dusty red-orange sea. Before I hopped in the shower, I snapped a pic of it and sent it to Felicity.

As the hot water sluiced over me, I was careful to scrub my pits twice and with plenty of soap. If Denny’s exceptional sense of smell was hereditary, inflicting my B.O. on Ellie Kerry was the last thing I wanted to do.

When I got out of the shower, Felicity had already responded to my text.

Kind of prickly for a dick pic.

I chuckled.

I emerged from my room dressed in fresh clothes and smelling like Irish Springs. When I wandered back into the kitchen, I found Shay at the stove while Mikey rocked a knife over a cutting board at the island. The delicious scent of toasted chilis, fresh cilantro, and tart lime permeated my senses.

“You settled in okay?” Mikey asked, glancing up at me.

“I am, thanks. You have a beautiful home. Feels...” I looked around, unsure of how to describe it. “Homey,” I

finished lamely.

Shay and Mikey both laughed, and I found myself laughing along.

“Be sure to mention that around Denny next time you see him,” Mikey said. “Maybe it’ll remind him to come back more often.”

“Don’t, Mikey,” Shay chided. She shot him a look that made it clear they’d had this conversation before. “You know why he stays away.”

I glanced between them, curiosity tugging at me. Why did Denny stay away? He had a perfectly lovely family here. Was it because of his work?

My gaze settled on Mikey, hoping he’d notice my interest and explain, but he just rolled his eyes and continued chopping herbs.

“Well, thanks again for hosting me,” I said, eager to fill the sudden awkward silence. Whatever exchange had just passed between them clearly wasn’t meant for my ears. “I’m glad to be here.”

At Mikey’s chuckle, the tension vanished. “Beats the Strip, huh?”

“If we ever find ourselves on the East Coast, you can return the favor,” Shay said, tilting her skillet back and forth over an open flame. With a flick of her wrist, she tossed the chilies she was toasting into the air. They gently plopped back into the skillet. “My dad is Frazer Fuller, alpha of the Broken Ridge pack, so I’ve spent my whole life here in Nevada. Hard to even imagine a place so green that someone named a town for it.”

“Of course,” I said, and meant it. I liked Denny well enough, even in spite of his grumpiness, but Mikey and Shay were far more personable. “My mate would love you. You’re all welcome in Evergreen anytime.”

“We might just take you up on that,” Mikey said. “How’s your mate holding up?”

“About as well as she can, given the circumstances.” I smiled as I thought about the response she’d sent to my cactus picture. We’d gathered up enough hope around us that she was making jokes again. It was progress.

When I brought Ryder back to her, things would only improve all the more.

“Denny says she’s human, right?” Shay asked, sounding genuinely interested.

I nodded, grateful that I sensed no disgust in her tone. After our time in Morrow Manor, I wasn’t sure I could stomach anyone else taking cheap shots at Felicity for her humanity.

“And your sons?” Shay asked.

“Shifters,” I said. “Both alphas.”

“Lucky you.” Shay smiled. “Funny how that works out sometimes.”

“You must have some strong genes,” Mikey said. “You got pictures?”

Of course I did.

“They’re adorable,” Shay gushed, holding my phone in her hand, scrolling through photos. She paused on one of Felicity, holding the boys at the manor. It must have been taken just a few days before the abduction. “And she’s beautiful.”

“Gorgeous family you’ve got there,” Mikey agreed, peering over Shay’s shoulder. He turned to me with a serious look set in his brow. “I want you to know, we’re gonna do whatever we can to help find your little guy. And Denny—he’s good at what he does. The best, even. His nose is even stronger than mine. If there’s anyone who can track that woman down, it’s him.”

“Here’s hoping,” I replied, though as far as hopes went, I still had my doubts.

If Denny was so certain he could track Melony here, he wouldn’t have asked me to join him. His plan wouldn’t have hinged on me being able to draw her out.

I reclaimed my phone as the conversation strayed back toward dinner. Shay and Mikey had no problem putting me to work.

“Kinda nice, having someone else around who can chop onions,” Shay commented as I did my best to move the knife in the way she’d shown me.

“I don’t know that I’d call this chopping.” The bits of onion she’d chopped as demonstration were all perfectly even. Mine were in hunks and slivers, not a one the same size. “Butchering, maybe.”

“I’ll take what I can get,” Shay said quite graciously. For far from the first time, I found myself annoyed at Ma for never letting any of us boys into the kitchen to help with dinner when we were younger. “The Kerry nose isn’t always a blessing. The last time Mikey tried, the scent was so strong he cried like a baby. Nearly lopped off his fingers.”

“I wasn’t crying,” Mikey insisted from his position at the stove. “My eyes were watering. Not the same thing.”

“Sure, hon.” Shay looked at me and rolled her eyes theatrically. “Usually, Ellie or I get stuck with the task.”

“Glad to be of help,” I said, and meant it. Even when Felicity and I cooked together, she usually took the reins. I frequently found myself on pot-stirring duty while she did all the impressive stuff.

I made a mental note to pay a little closer attention to what Shay and Mikey were doing. Maybe I could bring her back more than just Ryder. Cooking dinner for her—something more complicated than a frozen pizza—might be a nice surprise.

The three of us worked in tandem, with Shay giving orders that Mikey and I dutifully fulfilled. It wasn’t often that I took commands from another alpha, but the kitchen was clearly Shay’s domain—a world I barely had a foot in. As more ingredients were thrown into the pot, the delicious scent in the room swelled and became more complex. Sautéed garlic. Seared chunks of pork. Green chiles in a dozen different

varieties. I added each to my mental recipe card, storing it all away for later use.

“Do you like cilantro?” Shay asked as I chopped a bundle of it. The herbaceous scent bloomed every time I brought my knife down.

“I think so?” I considered it. “I can’t remember having it and not hating it, at least.”

“Good man,” Shay said approvingly. “The Kerrys all have that gene that makes it taste bad unless you cook it down.”

“Nasty stuff.” Mikey grimaced. “Tastes just like soap.”

* * *

The result of our labors did not, thankfully, taste like soap.

The Chili Verde was pleasantly spicy with bright, tangy notes from the tomatillos in the sauce. Ellie, Shay, and I ate ours with my inexpertly minced cilantro sprinkled on top. Mikey and Mace drizzled hot sauce over their bowls instead. Denny took his plain.

While we ate at the big table in the dining room, the conversation finally turned toward what I’d been desperate to discuss since getting on the plane back in Boston: Melony Houghton, and how we were going to track her down.

“When Denny called and told us the situation, we sent some of our betas out to watch the Bellagio for you,” Mikey explained. “They’ve only spotted her going in once, but we figure once is enough. She’s definitely here.”

“Unfortunately, they lost her scent before they could track her back to wherever she’s staying,” Shay added, as if she’d guessed what I was about to ask. “There’s a big concert in town this weekend, so the Strip is extra crowded. All those tourists, plus the heat—she’s using it to her advantage.”

“Every stinking tourist body she passes is an opportunity to cover up her trail,” Ellie grumbled. “It’s clever of her if she meant to do it on purpose. Unfortunate for us, if not.”

Mikey gave me an apologetic look. “I tried going back and tracking her myself, but her scent was hard to follow. Denny’s nose is a little bit better than mine—”

“A little?” Denny said dubiously, and Mikey shot him a sour look. It was the same face Dylan pulled when I gave him a hard time.

“—but we figure until the tourists clear out a little more, it’ll be too difficult to track her outright,” Mikey finished.

“Did she have a baby with her?” I asked, ever hopeful. If Ryder was here as well, then we were close. Close enough, it didn’t matter to me how difficult it might be to find him, or what lies I’d have to tell Melony to get to him.

“It looked like it,” Shay said. “No one’s been able to get very close to her, but two of our betas have confirmed she was carrying something swaddled in her arms. If it’s not your boy, I’m not sure what else it would be.”

“You bring Ryder’s scent with you?” Denny asked.

I nodded. “It’s packed in a zip lock in my bag.”

“Then, our first order of business tomorrow is seeing if we can catch his scent anywhere,” Denny said. “Our second is getting an audience with Mama Striga.”

“Mama Striga operates at the Bellagio,” said Mikey. “Best hotel on the Strip. She’s got a suite booked there with no check-out date. Swanky place, or so I hear.”

His gaze trailed over to Denny, who turned his full attention back down to his bowl of chili and began shoveling it into his mouth.

“Can we nab Melony there?” I asked Mikey.

“If we can catch her en route, sure,” he said. “But it’ll be harder to get to her once she’s inside. Mama Striga has a whole host of bodyguards, not to mention her devoted followers.”

“Fanatics,” Shay said. “She’s surrounded by true believers—some who would happily kill or die for her. They treat her like a god. Between their offerings, and the payments made by

her clients, she's able to fund an impressive security detail. No one gets into Mama Striga's suite without her say-so, and her muscle escorts her clients on and off the property."

"That's a lot of precautionary measures for an honest businesswoman to take," I noted.

Denny had made it clear he didn't like this woman. Could it be because she was up to something more sinister than just faux curse-breaking? He'd told me she was a hack, but what Shay and Mikey were describing sounded more like a cult.

"Honest? Ha," Ellie barked. "Striga is many things but honest is hardly one of them."

"Her precautions are necessary, though. Her clientele is made up of curse victims, and you don't pick up a blood curse without breaking a blood oath," Mikey explained. Again, his gaze trailed to Denny, who was still intently working his way through his meal.

Shay reached out and put her hand on top of Mikey's. "When it comes to oath breaking, some alphas don't think a curse is punishment enough."

"It's unlikely that we're the only ones with eyes on the Bellagio," Ellie explained. "You can bet that there are other Melonys out there, too, running from alphas far more vengeful than yourself. Striga has to promise some level of protection for them, or they wouldn't come to her at all."

"So, we can't pin her down off-premises, and we can't get to her once she's inside the Bellagio." My brow furrowed. "How do we play this?"

"That's where you come in, isn't it?" said Mikey. "Denny says the woman's obsessed with you. Thinks you're her mate?"

"She's convinced herself that my kids are hers, too," I added. "Couldn't tell you why."

"It's to our benefit now, at least." Shay gave me a small smile. "You're our in."

“And I’ve made my peace with that.” I still didn’t like the idea of speaking to Melony. It would take all of my restraint not to snap her neck on sight. The promise of having Ryder in my arms again was her only saving grace. “But I don’t see how I can charm her if we can’t even find her.”

“We don’t need to find her,” Ellie said with a mischievous grin. “Once she knows you’re in town looking for her, she’ll find you.”

Chapter 18

Felicity

The first morning at the lodge without Xander had been uneventful. Rylan's hungry wail woke me before the sun rose. I took him from his bassinet and put him in bed with me so he could eat before we did anything else. After he was burped, changed, and a little less surly, I took him downstairs to lie on his play mat while I checked my phone for updates. Xander had called just before I went to bed last night, and texted me a second goodnight while I slept.

Unfortunately, the time zones were against us now. I didn't get a response to my good morning text until three hours after I sent it. By the time he called to let me know he and Denny were heading out onto the Strip to search for Melony, it was nearly noon.

It was hard to settle completely into my role as a mother when one of my sons was still missing. Doing it alone was even harder still. Kingston had stayed shut in the den the entire morning, with no signs of emerging anytime soon. Dylan must have left before I woke up. Even taking a shower meant leaving Rylan on his own, which I was reluctant to do.

As much as I enjoyed getting to spend time with Rylan, I found myself almost envying Xander. He was out there doing something, making progress—or so I hoped—while I was, once again, left to play the waiting game.

These last weeks had taken a belt sander to my patience. It was worn so thin I could have seen straight through it if I'd held it up to the light. My brain itched for information. Even sitting down to rock Rylan felt uncomfortable, like there were

pins pricking into my backside no matter how comfy the seat beneath me was. And every few minutes, without even meaning to, I wound up anxiously checking my phone.

Xander's call didn't come in until after dinner—or, rather, when dinner should have been. I'd spent the day so alone and uneasy, my appetite was shot. I'd forgotten to eat.

When my phone finally rang, relief flooded through me.

It was short-lived.

“How's she able to evade you like that?” I asked, exasperated after Xander's abysmal report. They'd seen nothing. Heard nothing. They'd barely even smelled anything, which was the most disappointing news of all. “Isn't tracking by scent supposed to be, like, Denny's special thing?”

“We're on the Las Vegas Strip on a busy weekend, Cheeks. Every sidewalk is shoulder-to-shoulder with sweaty tourists.” He sighed. His voice held a ragged edge of annoyance and exhaustion. “There's a lot of funk in the air. It's pretty overwhelming. Not even Denny can make sense of it most of the time. The few moments he smelled her, it was faint and got swallowed up by the crowd pretty quickly. Finding a trail's not so easy when it's being crisscrossed by hundreds of others, I guess—even for him.”

“But she's definitely there?” I asked, desperate to scrape together any semblance of good news.

“She is. Ryder, too.”

My heart fluttered a little. “You've scented him?”

“I haven't, but Denny has. He says he's sure of it.”

“Oh my God.” It wasn't much, but when you were starving, even the smallest bite of sustenance was a godsend. “Xander, you're so close—”

“And we're only gonna get closer,” he assured me. “Tracking her by scent hasn't gotten us anywhere so we're pivoting. A few days ago, Denny's brother's betas spotted her coming out of the Bellagio, where Mama Striga operates. She

hasn't been back since, which is annoying, so I've booked us an appointment with Striga for while we wait."

"You think she'll give you information on Melony?" It was a brilliant plan, if so.

"I don't know what to think about her," Xander admitted. "The Kerrys have little love for her, and Denny's not placing any bets on her cooperating the way we'd like. But even if she won't pass on any info, she might be willing to give a message to Melony. Let her know I'm around."

"Denny still thinks Melony is going there to cure her blood curses?"

"He thinks she's desperate enough to try. And while we're there..." He paused. "I might ask her about curing Ma's curse, too. Denny's insistent that Striga's a quack, but we've already got an appointment. If there's any chance..."

"Then, you have to try," I finished for him.

Thinking about Marianne Miller rarely brought me any joy. She had once tried to kill me, after all.

But then I remembered how terrified and desperate she'd been on the day I gave birth, tears in her eyes as she swore her love for Quincy Houghton—even when he used her as a human shield. I remembered Tony wasting away at her bedside while he waited for her to awaken from her coma, knowing all the while that even if she did wake up, she wouldn't be the woman he'd fallen in love with.

As long as Marianne's curse prevented her from feeling her mating bond to Tony, she would always be a liability. She would never be fully satisfied or entirely secure in her place with her own family or pack.

And even if Mama Striga was able to break the curse...

Would her family ever trust her again after all the damage she had done? Would the pack?

Those were worries for another day, though. Like so many other things, any redemption she could find would have to wait.

“I hope Denny’s wrong about her,” I said, keeping my musings to myself.

“We’ll see,” Xander replied. There was a pause, like he was keeping something to himself. His tone gentled. “I love you, Cheeks.”

My chest rose and fell, moved by how much those words still meant. “I love you, too.”

“Put the kid on for me, will you?”

I smiled and lowered the phone to Rylan’s ear, half-listening to the murmur of Xander’s voice through the speaker as he cooed to our son, half-imagining the lives we’d lead when all this was over, and our family could be together once again.

* * *

The next morning, I managed to catch Dylan before he left.

“Morning!” I called out to him as he rushed toward the door. At the nape of his neck, I spied a tag at his collar. “Your shirt is inside out.”

He glanced down at it, frowned, then pulled the shirt over his head. “Shit. Thanks.”

“Where are you headed in such a hurry?” I asked, glancing to the keys in his hand.

“Evergreen General.” He shoved his hand through the shirt, righting it. “A bed just opened up.”

I gasped. “That’s great news!”

It really was. After so many weeks of waiting at Morrow Manor, Tony would finally be able to come back to Evergreen. It wasn’t world-shattering, but it was progress. It would be good to have Tony around again, though I suspected he’d be spending most of his time at the hospital than at the lodge.

“They say they’ve reserved it for Ma, but I wanna get over there to make sure. Dad’s working out the transfer now.” He

pulled his shirt back on, right-side out this time. “Figured I’ll pick up some supplies and wait for them.”

“Need any help?” I still hadn’t showered yet, let alone had breakfast, but if there was anything I could do, I was desperate to chip in.

Take care of them. That’s what Xander had told me, not *sit on your ass and wait for something to happen.*

“Not with this, no. But...” Dylan glanced toward the door to the den. As usual, it was closed. “If you’ve got time, maybe you could talk to Kingston for me? I tried telling him about the transfer, but he’s not real keen on listening to me say just about anything right now.”

With Dylan’s face turned, I spied a pink mark on his forehead. The skin beneath it was flushed green with the promise of a bruise.

“Did he do that to you?” I asked, pointing to his head.

“This?” Dylan rubbed his forehead. “Oh. Not a big deal. He threw his boot at me and told me to get lost. Only good thing about him being short a leg, come to think. He’s got half as many shoes to throw.” He laughed but sobered quickly. “Not that I think he’ll do the same to you.”

“He’d better not,” I said. “I’ll throw it right back.”

* * *

After Rylan settled into nap mode and I rushed my way through a shower, I decided to undertake the mission Dylan had given me.

It wouldn’t be easy, but lately, very little had been.

At least this was a chance to do some good.

“Kingston?” I knocked on his door a few times, keeping my voice gentle. “Can I come in?”

“Nope!” he answered promptly through the door. “But you can feel free to fuck off.”

“Okay...” At least he hadn’t thrown his boot at me, but we weren’t exactly off to a great start. “Could you come here, then? There’s something I need to tell you. I can make it quick.”

There was no answer this time, but a few moments later, he opened the door. I was hit with the strong smell of cleaning supplies mingled with the sweetness of scented candles.

“What’s wrong?” Kingston barked at me, his tone implying that there had to be something amiss.

Given the way our lives had been going lately, I supposed I couldn’t even hold it against him.

“Nothing’s wrong.” I smiled when I noticed his hair looked freshly brushed. His beard, which had grown wild since the attack, was surprisingly tame. “You look nice.”

He had a fresh T-shirt on, too... and was that cologne I smelled?

“I’m a little busy here,” he said, glancing behind me anxiously. “You said you could make this quick?”

“Right. Dylan asked me to let you know that your mom is being transferred to Evergreen General.” I shrugged. “That’s all. Good news, right?”

“Ah, shit,” Kingston swore. “So, that’s why he was bothering me. Christ, I thought he was trying to get me to choke down those pain meds again.” He looked down at his lap as if he was a naughty boy and I’d just scolded him. “I threw my boot at him.”

I laughed. “He mentioned.”

“Is that all you needed?” Kingston’s eyes darted behind me again.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “Do you have somewhere to be?”

“No. I’m just—”

“Cleaning?” I suggested, glancing around him in turn. The room looked nicer than I’d expected of Kingston’s depression den. I spotted a dust rag and some spray on the coffee table

behind him, with a bag of trash sitting off to the side. The bed he'd been sleeping on had been converted back into a couch.

“Just, uh... tidying up a little, yeah.” He shrugged. “No reason. Not a big deal.”

“You want some help?” I offered. It was good to see him coming up out of his despair a little. Cleaning was surely a positive sign that he was improving, even if he was still refusing to take his medication. “I’m dying for something to do. It’ll go faster if it’s the both of us.”

“No!” he said, too quickly, and far too loud. “No, I mean... you should let me do it. I’m gonna have to get used to doing things like this on my own, right? It’s, um, a pride thing. Gotta let me do it myself, right?”

“Yeah, of course. I understand. But if you need help—”

“No, I’ve got it. In fact, you should, um... go for a drive or something, maybe.” He flapped his hand in the direction of the door. “Get out of the house for a little while? Might be nice.”

“Might be,” I agreed. “But Rylan’s napping. I don’t wanna wake him.”

“Oh. Yeah, that makes sense.” Kingston rubbed his beard. Another glance behind me. What was he looking for? “Maybe you should take a nap with him. You look...tired.”

“Do I?” I wouldn’t be surprised if it was true. Rylan had woken me up several times through the night.

“I mean, not bad tired, but... naps are good, right?” he said earnestly. “You could just go upstairs, get comfy, lay down for a while...”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were trying to get rid of me.” I smiled. “Actually, I think that’s exactly what you’re doing.”

“If I was trying to get rid of you, I’d be chucking boots your way, wouldn’t I?” he blustered. “Jesus, can’t a guy suggest that his brother’s mate go get some rest?”

I narrowed my eyes, more invested than ever now. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing! I just—”

Before he explain any further, the doorbell cut him off. It rang loud and proud with a brassy chime.

“Shit,” Kingston muttered beneath his breath, just as I swore, “Fuck!”

I held my breath, listening for Rylan. Had the bell woken him?

There was no telltale cry. He was still asleep. Thank God.

But somehow, I suspected Kingston hadn’t cursed for the same reason I had.

“Is that what this is all about?” I asked, nodding to his freshly cleaned room. “Are you expecting a visitor?”

Kingston schooled his face. “Nope.”

“Are you sure?” I cocked my head toward the door. “Maybe you want to go answer that?”

“Don’t know who it is, now, do I?” he insisted with a petulant scowl.

I laughed and shook my head. “Okay. I’ll go get it, then.”

I already had half a suspicion about who might be visiting Kingston. Opening the door confirmed it.

“Hey, Gena,” I said with a knowing smile. “Come on in.”

She was dressed in a pair of high-waisted, dark-wash jeans and a simple light-gray tank top. Casual but cute. Her light brown hair was curled but tousled, and her makeup was perfect, that light and calculated style that made it look like she wasn’t wearing any at all.

Kingston would definitely approve.

Her face went blank as her eyes met mine.

“Oh! Felicity! *Heyyyyyy*.” She dragged the word out for so long, she ran out of breath. She gasped before speaking again. “I just thought I’d stop by to, um...” She glanced around, cheeks flushed, then pulled the basket she’d been hiding out

from behind her back and shoved it toward me. “To bring you this!”

“A gift basket? That’s so sweet of you.” I made a good show of studying its contents. Fancy local cheese and some cured meats from the co-op, which looked pretty tasty, and a bag of avocado cilantro lime Fredrick’s, a flavor Gena knew I didn’t like. They tasted like savory limeade mixed with dish soap. The four-pack of mango-flavored double IPAs also didn’t seem like the kind of gift a nurse would bring a breastfeeding mother, and the DVD in the basket ran more to Xander’s taste than mine. “Hellraiser, huh?”

“Oh, well, Kingston said—I mean, I hear it’s good.” She forced a smile as her cheeks flushed even redder. “I thought you might...like it?”

“*He’ll tear your soul apart,*” I read the tagline out loud, then laughed. “Yeah, sounds like exactly my kind of thing.”

I waved her in and closed the door behind her. If I was feeling cruel, I might have pointed out that I couldn’t exactly crack into any of the IPAs she’d brought, but I was pretty sure she already knew she’d been found out.

“Is today your day off?” I asked as she braced herself against the wall to take her sneakers off.

“Oh. No, um... well, actually, I guess it is.” She grimaced. “Just, every day is my day off now.”

I gasped. “Roger fired you?” It only took a second for the guilt to set in. Kingston, the basket, and any teasing I’d been planning on doing were quickly forgotten. “Is this because of the concussion?”

“Of course not. I mean, he says it’s because I’ve taken too many days off—”

“Gena!” I grabbed her arm. “Oh my God, it *is* because of the concussion.”

“No, listen to me. You know how that place was.” She rolled her eyes. “Understaffed, over budget. They’re replacing us all with LPNs. Roger just wanted an excuse. He fired Lexi, too. I guess he caught her stealing pills.” She considered that

for a moment. “She might have actually been doing that, come to think.”

“Yikes.” I’d never been impressed with Lexi as a nurse, or as a person in general, really, but stealing pills was a whole new low. She was lucky she wasn’t in jail. But Gena was the one I was more concerned about now. “What will you do for work, then?”

“Apply at Evergreen General, I guess. I’ll be starting back at base pay again, which is a bummer, but I hear they’re always hiring. My lease is up at the end of the month anyway, so I figure I’ll try and find a cheaper place. Better than asking my dad for money, anyway.” She walked into the lounge, peering around. “Is, um...”

“Are you looking for Rylan?” I suggested, though I knew full well she wasn’t. “He’s sleeping right now, but when he’s ready to be lavished with attention again, believe me, he’ll let us know. And if you’re looking for Kingston—”

Across the room, I heard the door of the den snap closed. Gena side-eyed me, lips pursed. I gave her a knowing smile in return.

“He might be a little busy right now, but I’m sure he’ll wander out at some point,” I said, choking back a laugh. “I remember how much he perked up the last time you were around.”

“He’s going through a lot right now,” Gena said. “You all are, really.”

“You know...” I studied her face for a moment, calculating. “If your lease is almost up, and you’re looking for a job... What if you moved in here?”

“Here?” She raised her gaze to the ceiling, then scanned the room. “It’s fancy. Very rustic. But as much as I love the idea of being close to my godsons... I couldn’t put you out like that.”

“You wouldn’t be putting us out,” I assured her. “I think we should hire you.”

“As what? A nanny?” Gena laughed. “Don’t get me wrong. Rylan and Ryder are cute babies. Too cute, even. And once Ryder is back, you’ll definitely want the extra help... But dealing with crotchety old men who don’t wanna take their meds is more to my speed. You know that.”

I grinned. “Have you met Kingston?”

A crotchety old man who wouldn’t take his meds was exactly Kingston’s vibe right now.

“Are you serious?” she asked. “You want me to work as Kingston’s...what? Live-in nurse?”

“He needs someone right now,” I pointed out. “Someone he actually wants to talk to and not throw shoes at. And he’s refusing physical therapy already, so it’s not like you could make him worse.”

“Well, that’s true, I suppose.” She glanced at the den, her eyebrows furrowed. “Can I think about it?”

“Sure. Maybe run it by Kingston, too,” I suggested. “See what he thinks.”

“I will.” She smiled, flushing again. “Thanks, Felicity.”

“No problem.” I offered her the basket. “Take this to him. He needs it more than I do.”

Bashfully, Gena reclaimed it. “You know, I think he probably does.”

Chapter 19

Xander

“You’ll need to follow a few rules before communing with Mama.” The short, dark-haired woman who had met us in the Bellagio’s lobby clicked her pen like a punctuation mark. “For everyone’s safety, of course.”

Denny and I had arrived a solid fifteen minutes early for our appointment with Mama Striga.

“Bird shifters,” he’d warned me, “are real jackasses about being on time.”

It was a good call. Our official envoy for the day had promptly collected a cash deposit from me—one thousand bucks in non-sequential bills, which had been a pain in the ass to wrangle on such short notice—then introduced herself as Yusra, one of Mama Striga’s faithful. That was the word she’d used. Not assistant or secretary or even liaison, but *faithful*, as if the Bellagio was a church, Mama Striga a prophet, and she just a lowly parishioner.

Yusra was accompanied by two guys who made Denny and me look like a couple of pipsqueaks trying to sneak into an R-rated matinee.

“Rhino shifters,” Denny had muttered to me under his breath when we first spotted them from the entrance.

They must have been the muscle the Kerrys had been talking about, there to make sure none of Mama Striga’s potential clients were in danger from the alphas they had betrayed.

“We can follow rules,” I assured Yusra. “Hit us with them.”

Beside me, Denny shoved his hands in his pockets and glowered. He’d flashed Yusra his driver’s license when she asked for his ID, but otherwise seemed determined not to speak to her.

“Firstly, you must address Mama with obedience and respect,” Yusra began, clicking her pen again. She headed toward the elevators and motioned for us to follow her. The big guys stayed behind, scanning the crowds, and looking not-to-be-fucked-with. “She is a powerful and prestigious shifter who does not take kindly to unruliness, rudeness, or acts of dominance, which means you will need to keep your auras down. If you are not able to conduct yourself in an appropriate manner”—her gaze focused on Denny for a moment—“you will be shown out immediately, and your deposit will not be returned.”

“Best behavior. Got it,” I agreed. Denny grunted, which was sort of the same thing. “What else?”

“Secondly, you must be honest and forthwith, presenting yourself with an open heart and mind. If Mama asks you a question, you must answer it truthfully to the fullest extent of your knowledge and the best of your ability. Anything she tells you, you must be prepared to believe, no matter how terrible,” Yusra continued.

Denny snorted, and she cast a vicious glare in his direction.

“Will that be a problem?” she asked.

“Not at all,” I assured her.

Things were starting to come together for me now. The longer I spent here, the more I could understand why the Kerrys called this operation a cult.

“Very good,” Yusra said. “Lastly, no flash photography.”

I laughed, and she shot me a stern look.

Apparently, that hadn’t been a joke.

“Before you meet with Mama, you will leave your phones and any other recording devices with me at the door,” she said.

“So she can go through all our files while the owl keeps us distracted,” Denny grumbled quietly, but not quietly enough.

Yusra stopped abruptly, her shoulders stiff. She turned to face us both.

“For that alone, I have half a mind to send you both away right now,” she informed us, then looked to me. “Will Mr. Kerry be able to control himself?”

“He will,” I promised her, thumping Denny on the back a little harder than needed.

We’d come all this way. We were working with our only lead. The path we walked right now was razor thin, and I’d be damned if Denny sent us tumbling over the edge.

Mr. Kerry would do whatever he was supposed to during this meeting. I’d make sure of it.

Yusra took us up in the elevator, then down a long hallway. The doors on either side of us were far more spaced out here than those of a normal hotel. The rooms behind them must have been massive. Suites for high rollers. Billionaires. Celebrities.

And one owl shifter cult leader who was standing between me and our best chance of getting Ryder back.

At the door, another massive bodyguard checked our IDs again. Denny stayed quiet as the guard studied them, which was probably for the best.

He was clearly in a black mood that was hard to contain. Was this how he’d felt back in Texas, when I was barely able to control my rage around Sarah and those cops?

Probably not. At least he’d understood why my temper was on a hair trigger. I had no idea what his problem was.

The Denny who’d charmed the Hogan County sheriff so quickly that we’d never even felt the embrace of a handcuff was long gone now. In his place stood a man who looked at

every bodyguard like he wanted to spit in their face just for the sake of starting something.

The guard returned our IDs and nodded at Yusra. All seemed to be in order. She took our phones, then had the guard pat us down. Yusra really hadn't been kidding about the flash photography. Whatever went on within Mama Striga's suite, the woman seemed dead intent on keeping it a secret.

"Mama will you see you now," Yusra informed us.

The guard opened the door, and Yusra ushered us inside.

I gave Denny a quick flash of my eyes before I crossed the threshold. A warning: *Whatever's going on with you, don't fuck this up for us now.*

Then I was through, with Denny slouching in right behind.

I didn't know what I'd been expecting to see in Mama Striga's suite. Ancient tapestries and incense burners, maybe. Crystals and candles. Dudes in hooded robes chanting in Latin. Some kind of ceremonial gong.

Instead, I found the suite to be no different from any other fancy hotel room. The earthy tones in the rugs and drapes gave it a homey feel, the art on the walls, a hint of luxury. Everything was perfectly inoffensive, clearly high-end but in the blandest way possible. It could have been anyone's suite, anywhere in the world. It certainly didn't look like anyone was living here, let alone long-term.

The singular oddity in the room was the woman.

She sat in a massive, high-backed armchair in front of the fireplace. Behind it, faux flames flickered in the hearth. She was a small woman to begin with, and the sheer size of her chair made her seem even smaller. Her facial features were just as delicate and doll-like as her body, all except for her large, round eyes, which appeared even larger thanks to the thick, round glasses perched atop her nose.

This had to be the famous—or infamous—Mama Striga. Much like her suite, she wasn't what I'd expected. No shamanic robes. No psychic's turban or wild mane of hair. She

wore a tailored white suit, a silver bolo tie, and a ring on each finger. Her white hair was pulled back into a neat, elegant bun.

As we approached her, she lifted a small, wizened hand, bidding us to stop where we stood. Yusra had stressed obedience during this encounter so, obediently, we came to a halt.

Her gaze focused on Denny first.

“Dennis Kerry.” She spoke in an eastern European accent I couldn’t quite place. Her lips curled into a Cheshire Cat smile. “I told you you’d be back.”

I quirked an eyebrow at that. Back? And she knew him on sight as well.

He’d been here before. It would explain how he’d developed such strong opinions about this woman but not why. Had he brought some other client here before? Some member of his pack?

Denny kept his game face on, his expression impenetrable.

“Mama Striga.” Denny stepped forward and bowed stiffly. “I’m not here for me. This is my client—”

“Oh, I know exactly who he is. Alexander Miller.” Striga’s large eyes focused on me.

The tone of her voice suggested that her words were supposed to have some mysterious second meaning, but I couldn’t imagine what it might be. Plenty of people knew who I was now, especially within the shifter communities. It was inevitable. Just a few weeks ago, Felicity and I had been all over the national news, begging to have our sons returned to us.

I wondered if she was trying to imply that she knew something I didn’t, but that was exactly why we were here.

“Nice to meet you, ah...” I furrowed my brow. Was I supposed to call her Mama? That was a little too weird for my tastes. “Ma’am,” I finished, dipping into an awkward bow.

Her smile broadened, revealing a row of teeth that were far too straight, far too white, and strangely large for her mouth.

“Come. Sit with me.” She beckoned us closer, then gestured to the couch across from her. “Will you have some tea?”

“Uh—”

I was about to say sure, but Denny side-eyed me and gave a nearly imperceptible shake of his head.

“I’m good. But thank you,” I said quickly. Message received.

Striga snapped her fingers twice, and a few seconds later, tea appeared anyway. A man dressed in all white placed it on the coffee table in front of Striga while Denny and I took our seats on the couch.

Silence followed, only broken by the pouring of tea, the clink of a silver teaspoon against porcelain, and the rattle of the cup against its saucer.

Mama Striga blew on her cup once, then took a long, slurping drink.

“Ah.” She sighed, sinking a little deeper into her armchair. “Now, then. Shall I guess why you’re here, or will you spoil the fun and simply tell me?” She raised an eyebrow to me, her eyes glimmering almost flirtatiously over her teacup. “I am not a bad guesser. I could impress you if you would like.”

“I’m sure you could,” I agreed, resisting the urge to rub the back of my neck.

We’d been told to keep our auras down, but the longer I sat in Mama Striga’s presence, the more I noticed her own aura radiating through the room. It was mild and distinctly un-wolfish, but still unsettling. I felt like there was a second Mama Striga behind me, her gaze boring into the back of my head.

“We’re honored that you were willing to meet with us.” I chose my words carefully, recalling Yusra’s rules. “We’re hoping you could tell us about your dealings with Melony Houghton.”

“Ah, yes, Melony Houghton,” Striga purred. “The woman who stole your sons.”

“We know she’s been here,” Denny added gruffly. “Don’t try to deny it.”

I winced. Fucking Denny! Hadn’t he listened to anything Yusra had said?

Luckily, if Striga found any offense in Denny’s words, she didn’t show it.

“I deny nothing.” She gave a tiny shrug. “Though, I cannot confirm anything, either, of course. My client list is very confidential. You, Dennis Kerry, are already aware of that.” Her eyes glimmered as she looked at him for a moment before turning back to me. “I’m very sorry, Mr. Miller, but I cannot help you.” Another shrug. “Is that all you wanted from me? I believe Yusra has already informed you of my policy on deposits.”

Denny and I exchanged a look.

Though it would have been nice to know that Denny had an existing acquaintance with Striga before we arrived here today, we weren’t entirely bereft of a game plan.

We’d expected a little push back, especially on our first approach.

It was time to change tactics.

Denny looked elated.

“I understand you have your clients’ privacy to consider,” I began.

“But see, this guy here”—Denny jerked his thumb in my direction—“he’s got a very pissed off federal agent on speed dial. She’s not the biggest fan of shifters at the moment.”

“No reason to be.” I shrugged, just like Striga had. “They keep hindering her investigation.”

“Very frustrating,” Denny said.

“Extremely,” I agreed. “She wouldn’t be happy to learn that Melony Houghton has been in and out of reputable place

like this without being reported to the authorities.”

“Definitely not, what with Melony being wanted for child abduction and all.” Denny rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “Say, Xander?”

“What are you thinking, Denny?”

“I’m thinking that if a wanted felon on the run from the law was being harbored here—”

“Oh, and she definitely has been.” I sniffed the air. Just faintly, I could pick up the cloying vanilla of Melony’s perfume. “Her stink’s all over the place.”

“Well, I just figure the person who books these rooms... She could probably be held accountable, don’t you think?”

“It would be a shame if she was.” I met Striga’s gaze with a steely look of my own. “I would hate to see an innocent shifter become wrapped up in Melony’s crimes.”

“You know what else—” Denny started, grinning.

Mama Striga held up a hand and rolled her eyes.

“You two can drop your little act now. You made your point several lines ago. Yes, Melony has been here. I am a healer, and she’s in need of healing. It is not my job to do the FBI’s work for them. But if you insist on threatening me...” She snorted. “I should have you thrown out for that, you little rule-breakers. But, fine, have it your way. I will tell you whatever you want to know.”

“What’s she want from you?” Denny asked. It was a softball of a question, but a good starting point.

“A similar thing to what you wanted when you showed up on my doorstep thirty-five years ago, Dennis Kerry.” Striga’s smirk was back. “She has been here three times in the last week, always for the same thing. She wants my help with a blood curse.”

I raised an eyebrow as I connected the dots.

Denny. A blood curse.

He must have one of his own.

No wonder his anger toward Striga seemed so pointed and personal. It was. He believed her to be a hack, so presumably, she hadn't been able to break it.

The list of things Denny should have told me before we arrived today was growing longer by the minute.

“Did Melony have a baby with her when she came in?” I asked, doing my best to keep the conversation on track. If Striga kept baiting Denny, we were liable to get kicked out.

“Oh, you could say that.” Striga chuckled, a high and girlish sound. “She seems to think you're the father, Mr. Miller. She's very heartbroken over you. And you know what they say about hell and fury and a woman scorned.”

I clenched my jaw. Now I was the one being baited—and damned if it wasn't coming dangerously close to working. It didn't surprise me that Melony was continuing to spread her ridiculous lies about me.

Didn't mean I was any less pissed off about it.

Focus on the positives, I reminded myself. She has a baby with her. Ryder. All signs suggest he's with her here.

This was the closest I'd been to Ryder since he was taken.

We couldn't stop now.

“Have you been able to help her?” I asked.

“Alas, no.” Striga pouted. “She does not want the help I provide.”

Denny's eyes narrowed. “Explain.”

“Must I? You know how this works.”

“I know you take a lot of money from a lot of desperate people,” Denny said. “I know you give them bum rituals to complete and stupid potions to drink. I know you've got your little cult set up to reassure them that if your fixes don't work, it's the victim's fault, and you're never to blame. So, if she doesn't want your snake oil, I'm not sure what she'd keep coming back here for.”

“You spent a full year doing something very similar, as I recall,” Striga said.

“We’re not talking about me,” he growled.

“Hey. Look. I don’t know how this works. Spell it out for me?” I broke the tension in a way I suspected would speak to Striga louder than any words we could have offered her: I pulled out my wallet. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

Striga perked up at the sight of the cash nestled between the leather folds. “Of course, Mr. Miller.” Her eyes glimmered flirtatiously again. “You should have led with that.”

She held a hand out. I took a few bills out of my wallet and rose, placing them into her palm. Her large eyes stared up at me expectantly. *More.*

When my wallet was empty and her hand was full, she smiled and leaned back, counting her winnings.

“When an individual comes to me to have a blood curse removed, we begin with a brief interview,” she explained. “Some shifters know exactly what caused their curse. Others have carried tainted blood for so many generations, they have no idea at all. And often, we are left wondering exactly what form the curse has taken. Isn’t that right, Mr. Kerry?”

Denny leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. Thankfully, he didn’t respond.

“All of these things, we must know if we intend to sever the ties that bind the curse to the blood,” Striga continued. “Following the interview, I initiate sessions of hypnosis, or, failing that, another method of guiding the victim to a trance-like state. Once achieved, I guide the victim of the curse toward a regression—a journey through their lineage, so to speak, until we can determine the root of the problem. Then it’s merely a matter of digging that root up, and... hmm, burying the hatchet in the hole, I suppose.”

“What’s that mean in plain English?” I asked Denny.

“She’s being deliberately obtuse,” he grunted. “To break a blood curse, you have to fulfill your initial oath.”

“Or reverse the damage that was done when you broke your oath,” Striga added. “That’s all.”

“That doesn’t sound that difficult.” Certainly not hard enough to warrant thousands of dollars’ worth of spiritual guidance.

“I only wish you were correct,” Striga cooed. “Then again, I would be a much less wealthy woman for it if you were. Reversing a forsaken vow... it is an art few are prepared for or capable of mastering. As Mr. Kerry would know.”

“My mother carries a blood curse,” I said quickly, before Denny could open his mouth. “It’s preventing her from feeling her connection to her mate. Is that something you could help with?”

“A very tragic thing,” Striga said sympathetically. “And a very common effect of a curse as well. Do you know what caused it?”

“Some ancient ancestor killed her brother’s mate.”

“An ancient curse. How interesting. And I do love a challenge.” She licked her lips and turned her chin up, like I’d just whipped out a filet mignon. “I would need her here to make any progress on it, of course. And we would need to determine an appropriate price—”

“Melony Houghton,” Denny interjected, which was just as well. Ma was still in a coma. Transferring her all the way out to Vegas wasn’t in the cards right now. “Do you think she’ll come back here again?”

“Of course. I have something she wants.” Striga straightened, clearly proud of that. “Just like you, Mr. Kerry, everyone always comes back.”

“When she does, will you tell her that Xander Miller wants to speak with her?”

“Tell her I’m here alone,” I added, and Striga laughed.

“Oh, how devious of you, Mr. Miller. You are a delight, aren’t you?” She tucked my money into her pocket and snapped again. A second later, the man in white reappeared.

“You’ve paid me well, amused me greatly... and you’ve almost managed to mind your manners. So, I suppose I will see what I can do.”

Chapter 20

Felicity

“The bait is in the water,” Xander declared over the phone. He’d called me as soon as he left Mama Striga’s. Though the news sounded positive, I heard the exhaustion in his voice. “As long as Striga makes good, I reckon Melony will be reaching out soon.”

“That’s good, right?” I held my breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. In my experience over the past year, there was always another shoe, and Xander’s hesitation at the question only increased that worry. “Right?”

“I’m not exactly looking forward to it, Cheeks, but it sounds like she really does have Ryder here, and that’s definitely worth celebrating.”

“You don’t sound like you’re celebrating.” I didn’t hear any champagne bottles being popped or glasses clinking together in the background. “You sound like you’re worried and wiped.”

“Striga had an aura up while we were there,” Xander said. “It was so faint, I barely noticed it at first, but now that we’re out, I’m feeling pretty drained. That could have something to do with it. But also...”

He sighed, and I closed my eyes.

What now?

“Don’t mention it to anyone, but I think Denny’s got a blood curse.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Striga heavily implied it.”

“Another blood curse?” At this rate, half the shifters in the continental U.S. must have been suffering from them. “Are you going to ask him what it’s about?”

“Hell no. He’s gone all quiet and grouchy. If I bring it up, I’m pretty sure he’ll bite my head off and then I won’t be any use to anyone.” A growl of frustration rumbled in his throat. “It’s best to leave it be. For now, at least. I’ll be staying with Denny’s family while we wait for Melony to make contact. And once she reaches out, we might need his nose so we can track Rylan. The situation’s too delicate to have Denny pissed at me or worrying that I might turn on him.”

“Why would he be worried about that?” Denny could be a grouch, sure—he and Xander didn’t always see eye to eye—but he was also a great tracker and a strong ally. He’d helped us find Rylan. Thanks to him, Ryder was in reach now, too.

“He hid it from us, Cheeks,” Xander explained. “He could have mentioned it at any point. It’s not like the subject hasn’t come up. Instead, he chose to keep it under wraps. Probably hoped we’d never find out about it at all.”

“You’re still paying him. That’s why he’s working with us in the first place,” I reminded Xander. “I don’t see how a blood curse would change anything between the two of you.”

“The curse alone, maybe not,” he allowed. “But once you factor in the deception... I’m paying him, sure. I think he’ll do the job he’s been hired for. But we have more than just the boys to worry about. With Samuel and Quincy still out there somewhere... When it comes to choosing allies, we need trust more than anything right now, and I don’t know how much I can trust Denny anymore.”

“Maybe he was just embarrassed,” I suggested, determined to stay hopeful. I didn’t want to dislike Denny. I certainly didn’t want to distrust him. If Xander needed a tracker, Ryder’s fate would be in Denny’s hands. “Your mom hid her curse too, remember?”

“And look where that’s got us,” Xander said darkly. “There are only two ways to get a blood curse, Cheeks. If he inherited it like Ma did, then fine. No skin off my back. That’s his

business. Though, it does make me wonder what other secrets he might have.”

“And if he didn’t inherit it?” I bit my lip, already dreading Xander’s answer.

“Then, he broke his oath to an alpha.” Xander sighed again, heavier this time. “It means he’s not a man of his word.”

* * *

Xander and I kept in touch almost constantly over the next few days. He and Denny were still going out each morning to prowl the Strip, just on the off chance that they might find Melony before she found them. So far, they’d caught her scent in the crowd a few more times but never long enough to follow it.

Over text while they worked, Xander sent me amusing descriptions of people he’d seen on the Strip, complaints about how long this was taking, stream-of-consciousness rambles about what he should order for lunch. From the length and frequency of his messages, I got the sense that he and Denny weren’t talking much.

In return, I kept Xander updated about everything going at home. Marianne’s transfer to Evergreen General had gone smoothly. Dylan reported that Tony had a comfy armchair to sleep in there, the food was passable, and the nurses were nice. Though Marianne still hadn’t come to, her new doctors were optimistic.

“They said they’ve seen bigger turnarounds happen for patients in worse shape,” Dylan announced after returning from a visit. “We’re not even hoping for a miracle, apparently. Just a little luck.”

Equally promising was Kingston’s sudden turnaround. Bashfully, Gena had accepted my proposal, and had started coming over to the lodge each day to work with him. As it turned out, Kingston could be a model patient when it suited him, and being nursed by a pretty brunette seemed to suit him very well.

“He took his meds today,” Gena announced to me in an excited whisper. “Like, he was surly about it, but I think half of it was just for show.”

“That sounds like our Kingston,” I admitted with a laugh. “Do you think they helped?”

“I know they did,” she admitted. “He was so surprised when they kicked in. I don’t think he even realized how much pain he’s been in.”

“You’re a miracle worker, Gena.” Convincing Kingston to do something he didn’t want to do was no small feat. “Do you think you could talk him into some PT next?”

She smiled conspiratorially. “I think I might be able to nudge him in the right direction, yeah.”

* * *

“Are we out of peanut butter?” I called from the pantry. I’d scanned the shelves a dozen times or more, but the jar Dylan had brought home with the groceries yesterday was nowhere to be found.

“Ah, shit. Yeah, we are,” Kingston called back from the kitchen. “Sorry. I polished it off last night.”

It was nearing lunch time, three days after Xander’s visit with Mama Striga. Rylan was nestled in his baby sling, strapped tightly to my chest.

I’d almost forgotten how hungry breastfeeding made me. Supposedly, it only burned a few hundred extra calories a day, but I hadn’t been eating enough after the abduction and was paying for it dearly now. My stomach felt like it contained nothing but a small, starving animal, clawing at my guts as it yowled for food.

“We don’t have any bread, either,” I grumbled, shifting through the preserves. Nearly twenty jars of home-sealed tomatoes and pickles lined the shelves, but those hardly made a meal on their own. “Or crackers. Kingston?”

“Well...”

I poked my head out of the pantry to find Kingston twiddling his thumbs bashfully.

“I needed something to eat the peanut butter with,” he admitted. “Sorry, but Dylan just went shopping yesterday, didn’t he? Maybe there’s stuff in the fridge.”

In the fridge, I found a myriad of vegetables but no fruit. There were chicken breasts in the meat drawer, but I put them back shortly after pulling them out. We were out of pepper and salt.

“How do we have so much food in the house but nothing to eat?” I moaned as my stomach twisted and growled.

“You want me to go to the store?” Gena offered, coming in with a laundry basket balanced against her hip. “Just let me fold these before they wrinkle. I’ll pick up whatever you need. I don’t mind.”

I considered it. Gena had been a big help since moving in, and we certainly needed it. I’d heard the saying about it taking a village to raise a child, but I’d never imagined I’d be raising the village as well.

Now that Tony and Marianne were back in town, we were wrangling laundry for seven, including Rylan, who needed an absurd number of onesies and burp rags for such a tiny person. Apart from that, we were often cooking for even larger numbers. It wasn’t uncommon for the pack elders to drop in over dinner, and we hosted our security detail for an hour or so every time they changed shifts. Twice a day, Dylan ferried leftovers and clean clothes to the hospital, only to return with dirty, empty Tupperware containers, more laundry for the pile, and as many groceries as he could carry, which only lasted for a few days at best.

My era of whipping up cookies and brownies by the tens of dozens was over now. There simply wasn’t enough time. If we weren’t cooking, we were cleaning up after cooking. If we were lucky, we had an hour to scrub the toilets or run the vacuum cleaner before it was time to start cooking again.

Kingston and Dylan were, unfortunately, as useless as Xander when it came to domestic work. Marianne Miller had been determined that no son of hers would ever have to cook or clean, and while Dylan and King were both learning, the curve was steep. Sometimes, I swore they did things wrong on purpose just to get out of doing it, but their constant offers to help out were so earnest that it couldn't be the case. They always managed to bungle things in small but significant ways that would have never occurred to me, like adding too much cleaner to the mop water, or too little detergent to the washer. After one too many incidents, we'd relegated them to dish duty, where they could do the least damage.

I could see now why Clinton and Aubrey had kept staff in Portersmith. After all the complaining I'd done about being waited on hand and foot at Morrow Manor, the universe seemed determined to make me eat my own words. If not for the help from Gena—and Nana Jordan, who came over to lend a hand whenever she was free—the lodge would have fallen apart.

I sighed. "I don't want to keep sending you out for stuff."

"It's no trouble. Really," Gena assured me, then checked her watch. "Besides, it's almost time for Rylan to eat again."

"Crap." As if on cue, my nipples started to sting. My breastfeeding journey had taken a turn for the uncomfortable since Xander left for Vegas. Rylan had no teeth yet, so I wasn't sure how he managed it, but every time he fed, it felt like he was putting my nipples through a shredder.

I groaned and sat down at the kitchen island, putting a hand over my face. Just thinking of everything I needed to do in the next few hours made me feel like I needed to catch my breath.

"Hey." Gena put the laundry basket down and came over to me. Sympathy shone in her dark eyes as she smoothed my hair away from my face. "Why don't you get out of here for a while? Grab something fast to eat, drive around for a bit, pick up some groceries on the way home. We can watch Rylan."

“You’d be okay with that?” I wasn’t even sure that *I* was. Getting out of the lodge for a while did sound nice, though, but I didn’t feel safe taking Rylan with me, and I didn’t love the idea of leaving without him, either.

“You’ve been pulling a lot of weight lately,” Gena said. “And you haven’t left here in days. Plus, you look pretty stressed. A little alone time is good for everyone. You know that.”

True, but still, I hesitated.

“If someone outside the house recognizes me—”

“You’ll wear a disguise,” Gena said. “No one outside of the pack knows you’re back in town.”

“We can send a security detail with you, too,” Kingston suggested. “Just to make sure you’re safe.”

“Right, but the security detail will be switching shifts in an hour or so. We’ll need to have lunch ready, and then Dylan will be back to pick up something for Tony to eat, and then we’ll have more laundry to do...”

My head felt like it had been stuffed full of cotton. When it came to attending to the needs of the pack, this was my first true taste of being the alpha’s mate, and I was tanking it. We weren’t even playing on hard mode yet. When Xander brought Ryder home, there would be two hungry babies to feed, and twice as many diapers to change.

Maybe Marianne’s curse wasn’t what had pushed her off the deep end. Maybe it was trying to raise a family and play her role in leading the pack. For the first time in months, I actually found myself empathizing with her. At that moment, it seemed all too easy: she’d tried so hard to hold things together that it had torn her apart in the end.

“Are you listening to yourself?” Gena asked. “You’re taking on too much. Even if you don’t see yourself getting stressed, *I* do. Don’t worry about feeding everyone. I’ll call in an order for some pizza. You and the security guys can pick it up on your way home.”

“Plus, we could use some Rylan time,” Kingston added. He rolled over to me and reached out. “C’mere, little fella. Uncle Kingston’s gonna teach you how to swear.”

“No, he is not!” Gena screeched, slapping him on the shoulder.

I laughed as I unwound the baby sling.

“After I feed Rylan,” I relented. “And not for long. I’ll be back before the security shifts switch.”

Gena was right. I hadn’t left the lodge since Xander and I had returned from Texas.

Even if I was just running errands, a little time for myself might be exactly what I needed.

* * *

I moved down the final aisle of the Hannaford to the tune of a squeaky wheel. My cart was heavy with so many groceries, practically overflowing, but I felt lighter than I had in days.

It had been months since I’d shopped here on my own. The last time I’d done it, Quincy Houghton had ambushed me at the cart return and threatened to claw my throat out. If Xander hadn’t arrived in time to scare him off, he probably would have done it.

For a long time, I’d worried that I would never feel safe. Even doing something so simple as buying groceries had made my heart pound like I was participating in an extreme sport. But a lot had changed since that encounter. My life had been threatened several more times, for one thing. I guessed you got used to it after a while. For another, Quincy hadn’t been spotted since the day I gave birth. If luck was on our side, he was already dead.

The fact that no one outside our inner circle in Evergreen knew we were back yet gave me a little peace of mind. So did the presence of my security detail in the parking lot, and the privacy afforded by my makeshift disguise.

Tucking my hair under a ball cap and wearing baggy, dull-colored clothes seemed to be working. The other shoppers had taken little notice of me so far. That suited me just fine. I kept my head down anyway, just in case. I'd never been quite as famous as Xander was here. In high school, I'd gone mostly unrecognized, whereas he'd always been the natural golden boy.

But after Marianne abducted me, my picture had ended up in the local paper. The boys' kidnapping had landed me on the national news. And even barring all that, my profile had been greatly elevated since Xander declared I was his mate.

In a town like Evergreen, gossip spread like wildfire. It felt good to be doing something so normal as grocery shopping again, but it would feel even better if I could do it without being watched.

As I approached an open check-out lane, I was confident that I'd get my wish. No one had noticed me yet. I was in the home stretch.

But then a familiar voice said my name. "Lissy?"

She was behind the cash register, dressed in a dark red polo shirt. It clashed with her pink hair, which was duller and limper than usual. It was tied back in a messy bun that showed off more of the natural brown color at her roots than I'd ever seen back when we both worked at Evergreen Hills.

"Hey, Lexi." I tucked my head a little lower. Historically speaking, I wasn't Lexi's favorite person. The last time we spoke, we hadn't parted on the best terms. But now that she'd recognized me, I didn't think I could convince her I was someone else. "It's, uh, good to see you again."

"It's been a long time." She forced a smile. "How are you and Lieutenant Fire Hazard?" As soon as the words left her lips, her eyes widened like she'd just shocked herself with her own audacity. "I mean, um, Xander. Sorry."

"We're okay," I said, unloading my cart onto the check-out's conveyor belt as quickly as I could. Despite my nerves over being spotted, I found myself actually smiling back at

her. *Lieutenant Fire Hazard*. I'd forgotten she used to call Xander that. It felt like a relic from a gentler time. "How about you?"

"Yeah, I'm doing well. Really, really well." She nodded to herself as she reached for the first item to scan. "Um. I heard about your boys. It was on the news. I'm... I'm really sorry."

She sounded sincere, which was unusual. The Lexi I knew usually had her head entirely in the clouds, with no time or attention span for anyone else's problems. Distantly, I recalled she'd been pretty rude to me when I last saw her.

I guessed we'd both changed a lot. She seemed perfectly polite now. Friendly and kind.

"It's okay," I told her. "We're making good progress."

Her eyebrows shot up hopefully. "Are you really? There haven't been any updates on the news, so I thought..."

I bit my lip. Should I tell her?

She'd been through the wringer lately, too, or so it seemed. Fired, like Gena had been, and possibly on trumped-up accusations, and she genuinely sounded invested in the boys' well-being.

"We found Rylan last week," I said, keeping my voice low. "Xander's out tracking Ryder down right now, and it's looking promising. Soon, we'll have them both home, safe and sound."

"Oh my God," she gushed. "That's great news. I didn't know you guys were back in town."

"We've been trying to keep a low profile," I confessed. "After that Morrow Manor piece in the *Boston Examiner*, with those pictures that journalist got of us, we've been kind of hoping that we wouldn't have a repeat. Not until we're ready, anyway."

"Yeah, of course. I can understand that." She nodded enthusiastically. "You know, there was a guy at the Farmer's Wife a week or so ago who was asking about you. A shifter, I think. Older guy? Big and kind of grumpy-looking. If he was a reporter..."

I furrowed my brow thoughtfully.

An older guy. A shifter. At the Farmer's Wife?

If he was grumpy-looking, that could only be one person.

"I know him," I said, thinking of Denny. He fit the description, and he had said that he loved that restaurant. But Xander was the one paying him, not me. Why would I be the subject of his questions? "What was he asking?"

"Just general stuff about you, I guess. I only overheard him talking to Ed and Lola for a little bit." She blushed as she swiped a carton of oat milk across the scanner. "I was grabbing a job application, not dining in. He wanted to know what you were like, what you did for work, who your parents were. That kind of thing."

"Weird," I said with a laugh. Denny was nosy. Who'd have thought? He'd probably done research on Xander, too. He might have been trying to scrape together another lead, or maybe he was just curious. In his line of work, paranoia and over-investigating his clients probably saved him a lot of grief.

"I didn't tell him anything, I swear," Lexi professed. "Like I said, I was in and out. It's good that he's not a reporter, though. I bet there's big money in a story like yours right now."

"Probably, yeah," I agreed.

I'd done my best to put that story from the *Examiner* out of my mind, but it had felt like a real cherry on top of a shit sundae at the time. As if it wasn't bad enough that our sons had been taken, our privacy had been breached as well.

My disguise might not have fooled Lexi, but it was comforting to know that she was so serious about not ratting me out.

"I'll be grateful when there's no story at all anymore," I admitted as Lexi rang up the last of the items from my cart. It was more of an afterthought, really, not even something I was saying in response to anything she'd said.

“I’ll keep you in my thoughts,” Lexi promised, then tapped the register screen. “Can I help you with anything else today?”

“No, this is everything.” I glanced to all the bags and hoped it was everything.

“Okay. Um...” She tapped the register’s screen again. “Oh. Your total is... *wow*.”

I glanced at the number and laughed. Five hundred bucks’ worth of food. It was harrowing to think that in a day or two, all of it would probably be gone.

“Full house,” I explained, then tapped my card against the reader. It would all go on the pack’s account, which was accustomed to big purchases like this one, and thank God for that. If I was using my own bank account, I’d be sweating through my shirt.

“It was good to see you, Lexi,” I said after we’d loaded all the bags back into my cart.

She gave me another smile, this one much brighter than the one she’d given at the start of the conversation.

“Thanks, Lissy,” she said. “Good to see you, too.”

Chapter 21

Xander

Across the table from me, Denny hunched over his burger, eyes fixed on his fries.

“Go ahead,” he said abruptly, shoving several fries into his mouth. “Ask.”

We were at an In-N-Out just off the Strip, taking a quick lunch break before we ventured back out to resume our search.

For three days now, we’d been waiting for Mama Striga to deliver my message to Melony. While we bided our time, we continued searching for Melony’s scent to little avail. The crowds had started to thin out again, but we had yet to uncover any sign of her. If she was still in Vegas, she was laying low.

Without a trail to follow, all we could do was hope she’d visit Striga again, and that Striga would tell her I was in time. We had to hope she’d find us instead.

Denny and I had barely spoken all day. He’d gone quieter after our visit with Striga, which was just as well. I didn’t know if I could trust him anymore. Now that I knew his secret, there was no telling what he thought of me, either.

But if he was offering...

“You have a blood curse, don’t you?”

He snorted. “Real observant, Miller.”

“How’d you get it? Do you know?”

“Oh, I know. You really wanna hear it?”

Of course I did. The nature of his curse would make or break the stability of our agreement.

If he was the victim of a family curse, like Ma, he'd have my sympathy. We might even be able to piece our trust back together—especially if, unlike Ma, the symptoms of his curse didn't screw with his head.

But if he was an oath-breaker, I'd seriously need to rethink how much faith I could put in him, and whether or not that faith was well-placed.

Letting him catch on to how important his answer was wouldn't be a clever play on my part, though. The last thing a liar needed was more incentive to lie.

I kept my voice light, casual, as I scraped up a glob of cheese sauce with my own fries. "Might help pass the time."

"Fine." He nodded to his meal, then grabbed a wad of napkins and wiped his mouth. "Well, you know already that Mikey and I were both born sigmas. We make all right leaders, especially short-term with a small pack, especially if we've got an active goal in mind. But long-term, for a whole pack..."

"It grinds you down after a while," I supplied, thinking of Dylan. "My brother's a sigma. I had to leave Evergreen in his care for a while, back when Felicity was pregnant. He did good, but it got to him."

"We're generals, not politicians. Out in the field, taking action, organizing troops—that's what we're made for. An older sigma might mellow out enough eventually, but a young sigma is no one's first choice to lead a pack."

"Your pack was worried about succession?" I guessed. How was this related to the curse? Had Denny sworn an oath to lead once his father passed, only to back out when shit got real? That didn't seem like him, but it would explain why his younger brother was leading the pack.

"It was a different time," Denny said. "We had biker gangs of shifters pushing in on our territory, running prostitution rings, dealing drugs... Sometimes, our pack was the only thing standing between order and chaos. Dad needed to know that if

anything happened to him, the pack would be in good hands. So, he and Frazer Fuller made a deal.”

“That’s Shayla’s dad, right?” I recalled her dropping his name.

“Yeah. He’s the alpha of Broken Shield, about an hour’s drive north. Shayla’s an alpha too, but she’s an only child. Frazer has no male alpha heir,” Denny explained. “So, he and Dad put their heads together and cooked up a solution: I’d mate with Shayla. When Frazer and Dad died, Shayla and I would combine our packs and lead them together.”

Not an ideal plan. Arranging a mating like that—it was what Ma and Quincy had tried to do. If neither party ever met their true mate, then it could work with dedication, I supposed.

Clearly, that hadn’t been the case.

“But Shayla is mated to Mikey.” The plot thickened.

“We didn’t know they would be. Not back then. I know our dads hoped Shay and I would have the moon dream about each other when we met, but it didn’t happen. So, we swore blood oaths instead—me to my dad, her to hers—just in case one of us found our true mate or chickened out of the deal.” Denny shook his head. “It seemed reasonable at the time.”

“When did she and Mikey realize that they were mates?”

“While I was stationed over in Afghanistan, Dad died. We thought the biker packs had petered out by then. Turns out, no, they’d just gone feral instead. One of them took my dad out. He was trying to calm the guy down, coax him into shifting back.” Denny gave a humorless laugh. “Didn’t work. Never does. My team and I...we were stationed too far out, working on developing some deep cover with an Afghan pack. I didn’t even learn my father was dead until about four months after the fact, when my mission was done.”

“I’m sorry.” Sympathy panged in my chest as I imagined myself in that position. Dad, six feet under before I ever even learned he was gone. “That must have hurt.”

“Old wound. It’s healed over now, but thanks,” Denny grunted. “Anyway. Mikey and Shay met at Dad’s funeral.

They had the moon dream about each other that night. You can put the rest together from there. I came home, ready to fulfill my oath, only to find that they were already shackled up together, leading the Firebend Ridge pack without me.”

“So, you and Shay—you’re both cursed?” I could see why Denny hadn’t mentioned it before. To tell the story of his curse, he had to out Shay’s. It was...honorably, in a way.

“Not Shay,” Denny corrected. “Not anymore. I’m not sure how her curse actually manifested, even. If it was like mine, it never mattered. She had her moon dream before it kicked in, and her dad was able to release her from her oath, anyway. But mine—well. My dad wasn’t about to be releasing anyone from anything, given the whole being dead business. To keep my oath, I’d have to mate with Shay.”

“That’s not a fair deal.”

“That’s what Shay said. She offered, once I was back, to uphold the deal, but I knew she was just being kind. Pissed Mikey off something fierce.” Denny scoffed. “Not that I ever would have taken her up on it. It’s not right, coming between fated mates.”

I frowned as guilt stirred between my teeth. Denny’s tale wasn’t even over yet, but I knew I’d misjudged him terribly. He’d been in an even more dire position than Melony. She’d only had the suggestion of mating between us to go off. She’d taken that and run with it, to disastrous effect. But even with the threat of a blood curse hanging over his head, Denny had refused to tear Mikey and Shay apart.

He’d chosen to break his oath and take the curse instead.

“Is that how you ended up running into Mama Striga, then?” Without any other options, Striga might have been his last chance to break his curse.

“I needed to know how the curse would manifest,” Denny explained. “And, to her credit, she told me. I’ll never have a moon dream. Whoever my mate is, I’ll never know. Maybe I don’t have one at all. I worked with Striga for a long time, trying to figure out some other way to fulfill my oath, but there

was no other option. Either I took Shay as my mate, or I lived with the consequences. So, I chose the consequences.”

“I’m sorry, Denny. That... Christ, it sucks.” I was a bastard for doubting him. Served me right for assuming the worst.

“It is what it is.” He lifted his burger to his mouth again, but paused before biting down. “You said your mom has the same thing? No moon dream?”

“Yeah. Dad had his about her, so at least she knows who her mate is, but she can’t feel the connection.” It hadn’t escaped me how lucky I was that the curse hadn’t passed onto me. Felicity was a human. Wanting her was as simple as breathing, but if I’d never had a moon dream about her, I never would have known for sure that she was mine. Mom, even with knowing, had still been left wanting for more. “It’s kind of driven her a little nuts, I think.”

“Not surprised. We’re shifters. We’re meant to have these connections, feel them, let them shape our lives. At least your mother was able to have you and your siblings.” Denny nudged at his fries almost thoughtfully. “I think that’s the worst part for me. Knowing I’d never get to be a dad.”

I watched his eyes widen, then his brow drop.

“Anyway,” he said quickly, then shoved a handful of fries into his mouth.

He hadn’t meant to say that.

I returned to my meal as well, letting silence settle between us again. I’d do him a solid and pretend I hadn’t heard that last part.

Denny was a tough nut to crack, but even he let his guard slip sometimes.

And somewhere under that hard, growly exterior, there was a big softy just waiting to be let out.

* * *

We spent the rest of the afternoon back on the case—or lack thereof. The Strip was a smorgasbord of sights, sounds, and, unfortunately, smells.

The scent of seared meat drifted from the steakhouses. Other restaurants pumped out the smell of fried food, barbecued, and baked goods. Birthday girls in flamboyant cocktail dresses traveled in clouds of perfume. Roving packs of day-drinking dudes in cargo shorts and snapbacks left scent trails of overpriced tequila and cheap vodka wherever they went.

Every scent blended into the next. I couldn't make head nor tail of any of it. Focusing too much on my nose made me feel a little drunk myself. I imagined for Denny, professional super-sniffer, the mélange was even more overwhelming.

If so, it didn't slow him down at all. He moved up and down the Strip with a dogged determination, until suddenly, he tilted his head back and stopped dead in his tracks.

“You smell that?”

“No.” I scanned the stream of pedestrians coming toward us but didn't see anything, either.

“It's faint,” he admitted. “I'm barely picking up on it myself.” He sniffed the air again, then nodded. “It's her, I'm sure of it.”

He set off in a quick trudge, the way he always did when he thought he'd caught a trail. I fell in behind him, moving a little slower with a little less purpose.

We'd done this a dozen times over the course of the last few days. By now, I'd learned not to get my hopes up. We'd follow the trail for a few minutes—maybe half an hour if it was fresh enough—but eventually, we'd lose it again. We always did. When the Strip had been more crowded, I'd blamed all the sweaty tourist bodies. Now that those crowds had dissipated, it should have been easier.

It wasn't.

Either the city alone was enough to help Melony cover her tracks, or something else was at work.

This time around, Denny zeroed in on a destination in a matter of minutes.

“There.” He nodded to a building across the street.

Even in the daylight, I could make out the neon glow of its sign: THE WOLF WHISTLE. It was accompanied by a knock-off cartoon of the Tex Avery wolf. The lights animated him so his tongue rolled out of his mouth like a red carpet while he used a comically large shoe to smack himself on the head.

“That’s a strip club, Denny.”

That revelation didn’t seem to deter him in the least.

“She’s there. Let’s go,” he grunted, then glanced both ways and jogged across the street.

I didn’t like where this was headed—literally. I’d only been to a few strip clubs in my life and had never found anything inside that I’d actually enjoyed. If a woman was going to take her clothes off for me, I preferred her to actually want to do it, not just because I’d paid for it.

Now that I knew Felicity was mine, I had less interest in nudie bars than ever. The only woman I wanted to see tearing her shirt off and swinging around on a pole was my mate—preferably, in a room that contained no one else but me.

But Denny was already off to the races, and I had no choice but to follow. If he was right—and he probably wasn’t—Melony was inside that building somewhere.

God, if she was in there, I hoped she was fully clothed, and my son was nowhere near that place.

We flashed our IDs at the bouncer. He barely checked them. Given that I was well into my thirties and Denny looked like an AARP member, it wasn’t really needed.

Inside, the club was uncannily dark, especially since it was the middle of the afternoon. Pink neon lit the edge of the bar. It was surprisingly full—or maybe unsurprisingly, given that this was Vegas. Men packed the booths shoulder to shoulder while scantily clad waitresses brought around buckets of champagne

and trays of shots. Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" blasted from the speakers. On the stage, a woman in a bunny mask twirled lazily around a pole.

The whole place smelled like shifters, stale booze, and cloying body spray. Not exactly ideal conditions for tracking anyone—especially not Melony Houghton, whose perfume was pretty sickly sweet itself.

"Look at you two handsome things!" a woman in a fox mask approached us as soon as we were through the door.

Her companion, face hidden behind a cat mask, leaned in and sniffed Denny's shoulder. "Ooh. Wolf shifters. Hot."

"Wanna join us for some drinks?" the fox asked, trailing her fingers down my arm.

"No," I grunted, then barreled through the crowd once I realized Denny had already begun to trudge away. "Denny! Wait up!"

Denny was headed toward the restroom signs, his head tilted back so he could sniff the air. He stopped so abruptly, I nearly bowled him over.

"She was here. She was just right here. Damn it!" he barked, his hands clenching to fists at his sides.

"Did the trail go cold again?" I asked.

"Not cold, no. Just...lost." He growled with frustration. "Every girl in this place is wearing enough perfume to drown a rat in. And the men? God help me, I've never smelled more Drakkar Noir in a single room. Makes my fuckin' head ache." He raised a hand to his head and massaged his temples. "I'm sorry, Miller. I really thought we had her this time. I'm usually better at this."

"I believe you." This brief little misadventure was my latest clue that Melony was actively trying to shake people off her trail. Maybe us. Maybe someone else. If she was purely deep in her mommy delusion, she had no reason to come to a place like this. Chuck-E-Cheese, this was not.

Denny looked defeated, and I could hardly blame him. If I was a master tracker having this kind of bum luck, I would've been pretty down in the dumps, too.

“Come on. Let's grab a drink.” I clapped him on the shoulder and turned him toward the bar. “Maybe she's still here somewhere.”

It was a Hail Mary, if even that, but I wanted to give Denny the benefit of the doubt. More importantly, I didn't want him to feel like a dick for dragging me in here.

Who knew? He'd been so certain, maybe she was still lingering around. If it meant soothing Denny's pride, I was willing to drink a beer and entertain a shot in the dark.

I ordered a couple of IPAs, and we posted up at the corner of the bar. The seats gave us the benefit of being able to scan the club if we wanted to, while also leaving us free to turn our backs to whatever was going on up on the stage.

Felicity, if you could only see us now. Some women would've been pissed as all hell that their mate was taking a break at a titty club, especially while he was supposed to be searching for their missing son. But as we settled in, Denny looked even more uncomfortable than I felt.

Felicity probably would have just laughed.

“I don't know how they do this,” Denny confessed, glancing over his shoulder at the rabbit who was working the stage.

“Twirling around like that, you mean?” I snorted. “One of my brothers frequents places like this. Strippers love him. He says the secret's in the pole. You think it's stationary, but actually, it spins.”

Denny stared at me like I'd just told him I believed there was alien life on Mars.

“You know, sometimes you're almost amusing, Miller.” He shook his head, then jerked his thumb at a nearby booth. The fox and cat who had sidled up to us when we entered were now taking turns sitting on the laps of a big group of men. “I mean that. None of those people are mates.”

I had no argument for him there. They weren't mates, no. I didn't get it either.

Still, it was kind of surprising that Denny shared that take.

"Don't tell me you're some kind of fifty-year-old virgin," I joked. "You've been with women you weren't mated to before, right?"

"A few," he admitted. "Didn't have much of a choice, did I?"

Of course he didn't. Thanks to his curse, Denny would never know the true identity of his mate.

"Were you ever with anyone else?" he asked. "Before Felicity?"

"I mean, I dated a little before I realized she was my mate." I chuckled. "They all hated her, of course. Now I can kind of see why. Even back then, without even realizing it... I was always hers."

He arched a brow. "You knew Felicity before you had your moon dream about her?"

"About eighteen years, yeah." I took a sip of my beer. "We were friends for a long time before I had the dream. Too long, really. Always kind of wanted it to be more, but I didn't want to ruin the friendship with a romance if I was bound to be fated to someone else down the line."

"Huh." Denny turned to face me. Eyes narrowed, he looked me up and down. "Didn't realize you had a blood curse, too. You inherit that from your mother?"

I shook my head in confusion. "No, not at all."

"Thought you said your mother's curse was hereditary."

"It only affects female descendants of the Morrow alpha," I explained. "I'm a Miller. No connection there. No blood curse at all."

"Hmm." Denny continued to study my face. Did he think I was lying? I had no reason to. "Strange. I've never heard of it

taking that long. Eighteen years is a long time to wait for a moon dream about someone you already know.”

I scoffed. “You’re telling me.”

I turned back to my beer and picked at the edge of its coaster. Admittedly, those eighteen years were a sore spot for me. They probably always would be. If my wolf had only gotten his shit together earlier, I wouldn’t be sitting at the bar of a strip club with a bounty hunter. I’d be at home with Felicity, playing with our cubs. There never would have been a Melony Houghton incident. No kidnapping, either.

Felicity would have been mine from the first day I met her. We would have held our mating ceremony right after she turned eighteen. When I ascended to being alpha of the pack, she would have been there at my side. Ma never would’ve had room to meddle in my love life. Quincy Houghton would have had no opportunity to try and force his way into some hare-brained union between our packs.

It would’ve just been me and Cheeks, from day one until the end of forever. It was a notion so sweet, I couldn’t help but long for it, even though I knew there was no traveling through time, no going back.

“She ever date anyone before you?” Denny asked.

“Felicity?”

Denny nodded.

His interest in her surprised me. Most shifters didn’t have much of a care about what humans did.

She must have worked her charms on him. *That* didn’t surprise me. Felicity was easy to love.

“When she was away at college, yeah. I never met any of the guys, which says a lot.” I chuckled, remembering how pissed I’d gotten every time she’d called me, upset about something one of them had done. “She probably thought I’d hate them all, and she would’ve been right.”

“You don’t think they were treating her well?”

“In my book? I don’t think any man ever could,” I admitted. “Even I feel like I come up short sometimes. She deserves the entire goddamn world.”

“Yeah. Yeah, she does,” Denny agreed. His brow creased in the middle. “They say, ah, girls who don’t grow up with a dad, or, ya know, a strong male role model. Sometimes they go after shitty guys: liars, manipulators, cheaters, abusers. That kind of thing.”

I laughed. “You saying you think my mate might have daddy issues?”

“I’m not saying anything.” Denny gave me a hard look and stood up. “I’m just glad you two found each other, Miller. You seem...good for her,” he grunted, then drained the last of his beer. “I’m gonna hit the head, then we better get back to it. Sorry for the detour. Just another dead end.”

As Denny walked away, I turned back to the bar. It was sweet, really, that Denny had taken such a liking to Felicity. He’d even gotten her to talk about her family, which was surprising. I couldn’t even remember if they’d had a chance to speak without me around, so he must have worked it out of her quickly. It wasn’t often that Cheeks opened up about how it felt to grow up without a dad.

I sipped my beer, savoring the bitterness of its hops. Talking about Felicity made me miss her. Everything did. Being away from her for so many days like this felt like I’d left some part of myself back in Massachusetts. Something as essential as an eye or a hand.

I finished my beer and pulled my phone out, intending to text her. While Denny and I had barely spoken to each other these past few days, I’d bombarded her with messages to fill the time. Now that I knew the trust between Denny and I would survive his lie by omission, I wanted to update her. I wanted to harass her for pictures of Rylan, for pictures of her, for news from back home—

“Hey, you,” a breathy voice purred in my ear. My phone disappeared from sight as a pair of hands slipped around me, covering my eyes. “Wanna dance?”

Internally, I groaned. Fucking strip clubs. I couldn't even be pissed at the dancers. I was here on their turf, taking up space without paying. Misguided as she was, this poor girl was just trying to do her job.

“No, thanks.” With one hand, I reached into my pocket for my wallet. With the other, I pushed her hands away from my eyes. “Here. I'll give you a hundred just to, I don't know... take a break or something. Your choice. I'm not here for a dance.”

“I don't need your money, sweetie,” she purred. “I just need you.”

Something in the tone of her voice felt personal. Not strippers-love-me personal, but truly genuine. Heartfelt.

Besides, I'd never known a waiter to turn down a hundred-dollar tip. I didn't imagine an exotic dancer would be any more inclined.

I turned on my bar stool, breathing in. There was no telltale scent, no cloying vanilla perfume—

But standing behind me was none other than Melony Houghton. Here. In this club. In the flesh.

“My Xander.” Her smile was gentle and innocent, as earnest as a child's on Christmas morning. “I knew you'd come.”

Chapter 22

Felicity

As I sat on the front porch swing, rocking Rylan, I anxiously checked my phone.

I hadn't heard from Xander since he set out that morning. I'd grown so accustomed to his constant texts the last few days, the radio silence was gnawing at me.

Hopefully, all it meant was that he'd patched things up with Denny. If they were talking again, Xander wouldn't be free to message me all the time anymore. Maybe Denny's curse wasn't as bad as we feared, or maybe he'd had a good reason for keeping it to himself.

But if there was some other reason, if something had happened—

The front door swung open, interrupting me from my worries.

“Hey, Felicity,” Dylan said, closing the door behind him. He was dressed in a plain white T-shirt and jeans. In one arm, he held a paper grocery bag. I could see some of Tony's clean laundry poking out of the top of it, which meant he was headed to the hospital again.

“How's your dad holding up?” I asked, bouncing Rylan gently as he began to stir from his nap.

“Same as he's been,” Dylan admitted with a grimace. “I keep trying to get him to come back to the lodge, even just for a night, so he can get some sleep in a normal bed, but he won't leave. Doesn't want Ma to be alone if she wakes up.”

“That’s sweet of him.” Too sweet, maybe, though it wasn’t my place to say. Sleeping in an armchair every night probably wasn’t good for Tony’s back, and it would have been nice to have him here at the lodge for a while.

Then again, could we expect anything less from him? No matter what she’d done, Marianne was his mate. Even if she didn’t feel their bond, he certainly did.

If I was in the hospital, unconscious for weeks on end, Xander wouldn’t have left my side either. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that he would have slept wherever he had to, so long as he didn’t have to leave me alone.

“You could come with, you know,” Dylan offered. “I know Dad would love to see you, and some Rylan time might help keep his spirits up.”

My shoulders stiffened, and I choked down a sudden swell of guilt.

I hadn’t asked to join anyone on their visits to see Marianne yet, nor had I driven over myself, either. I should have, maybe. If not for Marianne’s sake, then for Tony’s.

But I’d stayed away.

Marianne’s misdeeds were pretty dire. Less than six months ago, she’d kickstarted this entire mess between Quincy, Melony, and Xander. She’d kidnapped me. She’d tried to kill me, simply because I was a human. All because I wasn’t the mate she’d wanted for her son.

Forgiveness was no easy thing.

“Do you wanna?” Dylan asked.

I bit my lip, then nodded. “Can you give me a few minutes? I need to get Rylan’s diaper bag, then we can go.”

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll wait for you in the truck.”

* * *

Evergreen General had that quintessential hospital smell. Bitter antiseptic, bleach, the milky-powdery scent of that pink soap that was in every bathroom's dispenser. Beneath it all was the faint scent of illness and bodily fluids, covered up by the Sisyphean efforts of the cleaning staff.

Marianne was in the neurological ward, up on the hospital's third floor. Dylan entered first with the bag of supplies. I followed behind him with Rylan in his carrier, still feeling uncertain about how much I belonged.

Tony was Marianne's mate. Dylan, her youngest son. Rylan, her grandson. I knew Marianne would have some affection for him if she ever woke up. After all, Marianne learning that I was pregnant was the only reason I wasn't dead.

But me? I was just the filthy human who'd destroyed the alliance she'd tried to build with Carter's Creek. The woman who'd stolen her son's heart and turned him against her.

Sure, she'd changed her mind about helping Quincy in the end, but had she changed her mind about me? God only knew.

Tony was napping in the armchair when we entered. Dylan went to his side and shook his shoulder gently.

"Dad?"

Another shake, and Tony startled awake.

"Marianne—" His eyes darted to Marianne's bed, where she lay, silent and still.

"It's just me, Dad," Dylan said, his voice soft and soothing. "And look who I've brought with me."

"Felicity." Tony's body relaxed once he spotted me. When he glanced down at the carrier, he even smiled. "God, it's good to see you. And my grandson, too. Dylan said you'd tracked him down."

"This is Rylan." I hauled him over and placed the carrier next to the armchair. "Wanna hold him?"

"I'd love to," Tony breathed. "It's been too long."

Dylan pulled up another couple of chairs, and we sat around Tony while he cradled Rylan in his thin, wiry arms. Tony wore his grief on the outside. It was there in his gaunt cheeks, his thinning hair, the ashy color of his skin. But as he baby-talked at Rylan, there was a light in his eyes. It was the happiest I'd seen him in months.

Eventually, Dylan and I got up and moved around the room. We cleaned up any trash we found, put away the clean clothes on the shelves near the bathroom door, and gathered up any dirty ones we found. Dylan disappeared for few minutes with a Tupperware container of the chicken pot pie we'd had for lunch. He must have gone to the nurse's station or a lounge with a microwave because it was piping hot when he came back.

"You've gotta eat, Dad," he encouraged in a tired tone that told me they'd had this conversation several times before.

"I'm really not hungry," Tony insisted.

"Scared of eating my cooking?" I teased. There weren't many moments where it felt appropriate to guilt-trip someone, but given how thin Tony looked, I didn't mind.

"Of course not," Tony said, taking the bait—and the Tupperware.

Dylan offered to hold Rylan while Tony ate.

We chatted for an hour or so, doing our best to keep the conversation light. Tony had a lot of questions about how the pack was doing, which saddened me a little. Other than Dylan and Kingston, it sounded like no one else from the pack had visited Marianne. But more than anything, he was most interested in Xander's search for Ryder. I regaled him of everything Xander had told me, making sure to highlight the most hopeful parts, and showed him the pictures he'd sent me. The giant cactus outside his room at the Kerrys' house, a few shots of the Strip, a sunset over the desert, and finally, a picture of Xander himself that one of the Kerrys must have taken. He was hunched over a kitchen island, diligently chopping an onion, while Denny and a punk-rock grandma looked on.

“I know that guy,” Tony said thoughtfully, pointing to Denny. “I just can’t remember where from.”

“That’s Dennis Kerry,” I said. “He’s the bounty hunter we hired to help track the boys down. Doris Houghton recommended him to us. She hired him when Quincy’s dad went feral. Maybe you saw him in Evergreen back then?”

“Could be.” Tony rubbed his eyes. “I feel like my memory’s been going a bit. Must really be getting old.”

“It was more than thirty years ago.” More gently, I added, “And you haven’t been taking the best care of yourself, Tony. That’s probably not helping at all.”

“Yeah, s’pose not,” he admitted. “Some days, it feels like... like I don’t deserve to be taken care of.”

“*Tony*,” I laid a hand on his arm. “That’s not true at all.”

“Feels true. Just some days, you know. How can I enjoy myself when she’s still... gone? So far away from me?” He shook his head. “I was a bad mate to her. If I had known that she didn’t feel our bond, that she was cut off from the love I felt—”

“But you didn’t know,” I reminded him. “You couldn’t have known. And you were never a bad mate. I don’t believe that even a little.”

“I should have been better,” he insisted. “Loved her harder. Showed it more.”

I tried a few more times to convince him how wrong he was, but he wouldn’t hear it. Nor would he listen to my apologies for not coming sooner.

“She hurt you, kid,” he said with a shake of his head. “She wronged you more than anyone. It’s big of you that you came at all.”

I was about to suggest that we put on a movie or something—Dylan had raided his DVD stash, and the TV in the room had a player plugged in—but before I could pose the idea, Rylan blew out his diaper all over Dylan’s white T-shirt.

“Goddamn, little man!” Dylan turned his face away, coughing from the smell. “You’re a real weapon, you know that.”

“God. I’m so sorry.” I sprang into action, reaching for Rylan, but Tony beat me to it.

“I’ll change him,” Tony offered, taking Rylan from Dylan’s arms. “There’s a table for it in the restroom down the hall.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Tony smiled. “It’s been a while since I’ve changed a diaper, but I bet I’ve still got some skills.”

I handed Tony the diaper bag, and he disappeared out the door with Rylan in his arms. Dylan, retching slightly, excused himself to the bathroom to try and clean his shirt up. He closed the door behind him. The faint rush of running water sounded from within.

Suddenly, I was alone.

Well, not quite.

I was alone with Marianne.

I stood awkwardly in the center of the room for a few moments, suddenly unsure of what to do with myself.

Did I sit down in Tony’s armchair to wait? Put on a movie, like I’d planned to suggest? Sit at her bedside and hold her hand?

None of it felt right.

Instead, I moved to the window and peered out the blinds. In the parking lot below, a car pulled up alongside the building. A woman with a stroller approached it as a man got out of the driver’s seat. He kissed her cheek, then helped get their toddler into its car seat.

A sharpness caught in my chest, like my heart had snagged on barbed wire. Even from three stories up, I could feel their happiness, could see they were in love.

That's what we could have had, I found myself thinking. What we should have had.

But we'd never gotten a chance.

"Xander?" a voice rasped behind me.

I drew in a sharp, quick breath as my heart jumped.

When I turned, I saw Marianne's eyes were open. They darted around the room as she tried to lift her head.

"Marianne! You're... you're awake." I gasped, rushing to her side. "Don't get up too quickly. Take things slowly. I'll go get a nurse and—"

As I tried to move for the door, she reached out and caught my wrist with a surprising strength.

"Xander," she hissed, squeezing so hard it hurt. "My son. Where is he?"

"He's... he's in Las Vegas, Marianne." I tried to tug my wrist away from her, but she held fast. "Please, let go of me. Everything's going to be okay. You've been unconscious for a while now, but Tony is here, and Dylan's just in the bathroom —" I turned to the door again, raising my voice to a shout. "Nurse!"

There had to be a call button around here somewhere. My heart raced as I scanned the frame of Marianne's bed. Her nails dug into my skin.

"Las Vegas. Why?" she demanded. "Tell him to come back. Come back now."

"We can call him in just a moment, Marianne, but first, you need to calm down." I met her eyes. "You're hurting me."

After a moment, her grip relaxed. I found the call button a second later and pushed it several times.

"The boys. The boys are in danger," Marianne said, her voice scratchy but still full of urgency. "You have to believe me."

"We know," I said as Dylan burst from the bathroom, shirtless.

His eyes widened as his gaze fell on us. “Mom?”

She barely gave Dylan a glance. “You know?”

“After you were attacked, Melony Houghton came to Morrow Manor. She took the boys,” I explained. “We have Rylan back with us now, but Ryder—”

“So, they’re already gone.” Her chest heaved. She closed her eyes. “How long—”

“You’ve been out for about two months. The boys were taken... twenty days ago, I think.” I glanced to Dylan, sorrow roiling inside me for him. He hadn’t moved toward the bed. Marianne still hadn’t acknowledged his presence.

“Where’s your phone?” Marianne asked me. “Call him. Call Xander right now. Vegas is just a distraction. A waste of time.”

I frowned, reaching into my pocket. “What do you mean?”

“You forget,” she whispered, turning her head away. “I was there with them—with Quincy, with Father. I know their plans.” She took several deep breaths. “You said you have Rylan back already?”

“Tony has him,” I said. “He’s just stepped out for a moment. But what—”

“He must be the weaker of the two, then. They only needed one.”

“Needed one for what?”

“Call my son,” she hissed. “Ryder isn’t in Las Vegas. And if Xander is chasing after Melony, he’s walking right into a trap.”

Chapter 23

Xander

She'd changed her hair.

The blonde waves Melony had once sported proudly like a lion's mane were gone. All that remained of the gold was the lightness at her roots. The rest was messy and tangled, matted in some places. Even in the dim lights and the pink of the neon, I could tell the color was ruddy brown.

Felicity's color. As close to it as cheap box dye could get.

"I've missed you so much, baby," Melony professed, leaning in.

Bile crept up my throat..

She pouted as the silence stretched between us. "Did you miss me too?"

I swallowed hard.

"Of course," I choked out. You're doing this for Felicity, I reminded myself. *For Ryder. Don't blow it now.* "I... I wanted to... see you."

Technically, it wasn't a lie.

She beamed, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet. "I've been wanting to see you, too. When I found out that you were here and looking for me..." She sighed, her eyes sparkling. "I've waited so long for this, Xander. I can't believe it's finally real."

Because it's not, you nutty narcissist, I wanted to say, but I suspected that would spoil the mood and my half-baked ruse.

“Melony, can we go somewhere else?” I asked, glancing toward the bathrooms. Where was Denny? I wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible, but I didn’t want to risk texting him while Melony was around.

I just needed him to see where I was headed so he could follow.

“Somewhere more private, you mean?” Melony placed a hand on my chest, smiling saucily. “You’re so frisky. I love that about you.”

As she thrummed her fingers against my pec, I decided I’d be burning this shirt as soon as I was away from her.

“Uh. Right,” I said when I realized she was waiting for me to say something. “Hey, Melony?”

Her lashes fluttered. “Yes, my love?”

“Where’s Ry—” I stopped myself, remembering that she’d renamed Rylan. “Where’s my son?”

“*Our* son,” she corrected me with a smile. “Little Grayson is napping right now. Do you want to see him?”

There it was again. Grayson. She hadn’t even bothered to give them two separate names.

“I really do.” Finally, I could tell her something that wasn’t a lie. “Can you take me to him? I’ve missed him.” She continued to stare at me like she was waiting for more. I bit back my pride and added, “I’ve missed you both.”

“Of course you have.” Her shoulders sagged as she let out a contented sigh. “You’re such a good father, Xander. I knew you’d never leave us all alone.” She forced her hand into mine, shoving my fingers apart so she could fit her fingers into the spaces between them. “Come on. I’ll show you. I’m sure he’s missed you, too.”

As she pulled me toward the exit, I craned my neck, hoping to spot Denny. A wave of relief crashed over me when Denny emerged from the bathroom. He caught my eye, then glanced at Melony. When it clicked, he nodded.

A nod was all I needed.

Heart pounding, I allowed Melony to draw me away from the bar.

This was it. It was time.

I was getting my son back.

* * *

“Isn’t this just perfect?” Melony chattered as she led me down a long, dim hallway.

I grimaced.

Perfect wasn’t the word I would have used.

“Is this where you’ve been staying?” I asked, stepping around a puddle of standing water in the dip of the carpet. The overhead light flickered on and off ominously, like it was part of a horror movie set.

Anger raged through me. Had she been keeping my son in this filthy place? He could be sick just from breathing in the air. It was thick with the scent of stale humidity, all mildew and mold.

“It’s not the nicest, I know,” Melony admitted. Big fucking understatement. It must have been the cheapest, jankiest hotel on the entire Strip. “But it doesn’t matter where we are, does it? We could be poor, homeless, starving, and we’d still have our love.” She cast a glance back at me, and I was quick to hide the disgust on my face. “That’s what being mates is all about.”

I forced a smile that probably made me look more constipated than overjoyed.

What she said was true, in a way. Felicity and I would never be starving or homeless. I’d never let it happen. With the pack’s investments, we weren’t even in any danger of ever being poor. But if the worst happened, something so cataclysmic that all my best-laid plans turned to ash and we ended up out on the streets, I knew we’d get through it.

We'd gotten through everything else so far, and we were getting through this.

But by God, the universe saw fit to really make me work for it.

"I'm surprised it took you so long to find me, you know." Melony sounded genuinely disappointed. "I mean, in the end, I had to find you."

"I tried." Another truth. "But I couldn't track your scent. The trail kept going cold."

"Oh. That." She giggled. "It's because of my new perfume. I bought it special, just for this. I have to reapply it pretty often, but it masks my natural scent. I didn't want to be followed while I was here."

Perfume. Special perfume that blocked out her scent. No wonder her trail had kept going cold. Where had she even gotten something like that? And more importantly—

"Followed by who?" I asked. Not me, if she'd been hoping I would find her.

Quincy, maybe? Samuel? Someone else?

Melony didn't answer. We stopped in front of a door, and she let go of my hand. There were scuff marks around the lock like someone had tried to break into it at some point. I hoped it wasn't recent.

"Is Ry—I mean, is Grayson in here, then?" I asked.

Melony laughed and pulled out a key. "Where else would he be, silly?"

She unlocked the door and walked inside, leaving me to follow her in.

"Make yourself comfortable," she said. "I'll go get our baby boy."

The stink of mildew was even stronger in here. She'd left the television on. Wheel of Fortune played on the screen. An elderly woman in neon yellow bike shorts and a lime green

fanny pack jumped up and down, clapping her hands as the wheel spun round and round.

Apart from Melony and me, the room was empty.

“You’ve been leaving him alone in here?” I asked as she stepped into the bathroom.

Where had she been keeping him? In the goddamn bathtub?

“He’s a good baby, Xander,” Melony called back to me. “He’s so quiet and sweet. He barely needs anything at all.” There was a pause, then her voice shifted tones. Baby talk. “Shh. There you are, sweetie pie. Oh, don’t fuss, darling. Daddy’s here now. Your family is all here.” Melony emerged from the bathroom, clutching a bundle wrapped in a blue blanket to her chest. “Here he is. Do you want to hold him?”

My heart sprang to my throat. He was so close. Ryder was right there. When I breathed in, I could smell him.

“Of course I do.” I held out my arms, and Melony drew close.

With motherly tenderness, she shifted Ryder over to me.

As soon as she let go, I could tell something was wrong.

He was too light. Too cold. Worst of all, he wasn’t moving.

I pulled the blanket away from his face, and my heart dropped.

“What the fuck.”

I let the bundle of blankets fall to the floor and backed away quickly.

That was no baby.

That was certainly not my son.

“Grayson! No!” Melony dived for it, sobbing and panting. “You dropped him! Why would you do that, Xander? He’s your son... your only son.” On her knees, she lifted the bundle to her chest again. From the folds of the blanket, a limp arm tumbled out. The plastic hand at the end of it was curled in to a

fist. “Come here, baby. Mommy’s got you now. Don’t cry, poor thing. Everything will be okay.”

Dumbfounded, I stared at her.

I’d known she was unhinged—that had never been the question—but I’d never dreamed she was so far gone that she was convinced a doll was a living, breathing baby.

“Melony, put it down,” I snapped as she stared up at me, looking positively heartbroken.

“No!” she snarled. Mascara tracked down her cheek as her tears spilled over. “You may be willing to throw your own child away, Xander Miller, but I’m not.”

“My own child?” I roared back at her. “My own fucking child?”

Whatever restraint had been holding my temper at bay had snapped the moment I realized my son wasn’t here. Had never been here.

I tore the blanket from her arms, letting it unfurl and fall to the floor. I ended up holding the doll upside down, dangling limply from my fist by a foot.

“Look at it, Melony.” I shoved the doll in her face, shaking it so she could see the way its fingers failed to uncurl, the way its plastic mouth failed to move, and its painted eyes didn’t blink. “Take off the goddamned rose-colored glasses, look at this thing, and tell me, genuinely, that you truly believe it’s a living child.”

She did look at it, then. She stared, teary-eyed, looking between the doll and me.

“But he... he is real.” Melony blinked, then blinked again. Her face fell a little more every time she opened her eyes. “He... he was. Just a moment ago...” She reached out for the doll but came just short of touching it. “Oh, God.” Horror marred her expression as she recoiled, rocking back to sit on her knees. “Oh, God. Xander... Xander, please help me. I’m so scared.” She wrapped her arms around her trembling body. “I think I’m losing my mind.”

I dropped the doll. It fell, face up, onto the blanket between us.

“I think you are,” I said coldly. “Now, tell me where the hell my son is.”

“I... I don’t know.” She sniffled. “It’s been like this ever since I gave you that blood oath. When Grandma Doris made me do it. I wanted to keep my word. Honestly, I did. I wanted to... to do right by you.”

“Then, why the fuck didn’t you?”

She shrank down, making herself look small. “You’re not the only alpha I’ve sworn an oath to, are you?”

“Your dad?” I guessed.

She nodded.

Christ. Two blood oaths. One to Quincy. One to me.

“I think I’ve broken both now,” she admitted. “I couldn’t keep his without breaking yours, or keep yours without breaking his. There are lucid moments, where I have my senses, or half of them... Where I can use logic, reasoning. I can even be clever. Grayson—”

“His name isn’t Grayson,” I growled.

“No. No, of course it’s not.” She hung her head. “He was never mine, was he? Only, I was so sure he was mine. Dad told me it was true. That you were going to hurt him. Hurt me and our son.” Tentatively, she glanced up at me. “Where is he now?”

“You left him in Texas.”

Her eyes widened. “Alone?”

“With a nanny.”

She nodded to herself, slowly at first, then a little quicker. “With Sarah. I...I remember that. I knew I had to come here, to Vegas. To Mama Striga, for Dad. I wanted Grayson to be safe while I was gone.” She glanced down at the doll, then turned her face away. “Is he safe now?”

“He is.” I didn’t bother correcting her on Rylan’s name. It was splitting hairs at that point. In the grand scheme of things, it hardly mattered.

Melony Houghton had broken not one, but two blood oaths. She was suffering from two blood curses as a result—on top of whatever feral-inducing curse she’d inherited from her father.

No wonder she’d lost it.

Under the influences of three separate blood curses, anyone would.

“Melony.” I crouched down so I could talk to her at her level. I was still too disgusted to comfort her, but I tried to keep my voice as calm as possible. If her lucidity was coming in and out, there was no telling how long it would last. I couldn’t risk spooking her. “Felicity and I had two sons.” I held up my fingers just in case there was any confusion about that. “Two. We found Rylan in Texas, where you left him. Now, I need to find Ryder. Where is he right now? Do you know?”

“Ryder?” Her brow knitted together. “I don’t know who Ryder is.”

“The other baby, Melony. That doll you’ve been carrying around”—I pointed to it—“its clothes have his scent. If he’s with your father, or if he’s hurt—”

She looked to the doll again. This time, her brow furrowed. “I would never hurt my baby. My Grayson—”

Her eyes went unfocused.

Shit.

So soon? I was losing her again already. And I’d been so sure that if I kept calm, that if I worked quickly, I’d have enough time, but now...

“Stay with me, Melony.” I took her face in my hands so she could see the desperation in my eyes. “Come on. Work with me here.”

But how could I convince her to do that when she barely knew what she was working toward? At this rate, she'd been more stable when she was flirting with me. When she believed that I loved her, wanted her, that I was her mate.

Fuck.

That was the answer, then.

"Think about your baby," I encouraged her. "Our baby." The lie felt less nauseating now that I realized how badly she needed it, just hold herself together. "Where did you leave him? Did someone take him from you?"

She panted, then closed her eyes. Twin tears rolled down her cheeks, one from each eye. They flowed down to her jaw, wetting my palms.

"The Du Pont pack. Dad—he took our baby. He gave me that... thing, so I wouldn't miss him too much." Her eyes darted to the doll, and I saw the hate in them. "He took our baby to your grandfather. He said... Dad said while I came here to Vegas for him, Grayson would be safer there."

The Du Pont pack. Samuel's mother's family. One of the packs Clinton and Aubrey had visited. They'd sent flowers and lies instead of help.

That would be our next destination. If I had anything to say about it, it would be our last one, too.

"Xander..." Melony whispered, clutching at my shirt. "Will I ever see our boy again?"

I clenched my jaw, not sure whether a lie or the truth would hurt less at this point.

"Let's just take this one step at a time," I said, peeling her fingers away. "I'm gonna pop out into the hall for a second. Then I'm gonna come back and we'll figure this out."

"Okay," she said earnestly. "That's good, yeah. Thank you." She wiped the tears from her eyes. "I love you."

I nodded and got to my feet without answering.

That was the one lie I couldn't tell.

Out in the hall, I found Denny leaning against the wall, waiting for me.

One up-and-down look at me must have told him all he needed.

“Dead end?”

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. “Mostly. But not quite.”

* * *

The next few hours were exhausting as I kept Melony calm and waited for the authorities to arrive. For a time, I had to sit on the bed with my arm around her while she cried into her hands, just to keep her from getting too erratic. When Denny shoved me away and took my place, she didn't seem to notice.

It would have been so satisfying to rage at her. To roar, put my fist through something. To shift into my wolf form and tear her apart.

But what good would it do? Who would that help? Not Melony, certainly. Not Ryder, either. It might make me feel better for a while but not for long.

Instead, I wrapped the doll back up in its blanket, the same way I wrapped Rylan so he wouldn't kick his little feet free. When I handed it to her, she smiled again.

After that, she seemed happy enough to sit by herself, rocking her fake baby, lost in her fantasies of a motherhood she'd never be able to make real.

While she was distracted, Denny and I stepped aside and discussed our next moves.

“The Du Ponts' is the place to go next, I agree,” he said. “The problem will be getting in. When we started this, and I told you we should exhaust all other possibilities before trying to infiltrate one of the old packs, it was for a reason. It'd be easier to steal the Declaration of Independence.”

“You think we could use her to do it?” I nodded to Melony, who was singing a lullaby to the doll. “Maybe, if I fake being

her mate for a little longer...”

Denny scoffed. “If what she told you is true, she’s dealing with three blood curses. One that’s made her infertile. Another that’s gonna turn her feral someday, and we have no way of knowing when. And the third, I’m assuming, has left her nuttier than a jar of extra crunchy Jif. She’s a liability, Miller. Too unstable to count on with such high stakes.” He puffed his cheeks out to release a breath. “I’m amazed you kept your cool around her all this time. There’s no telling what she might’ve done otherwise.”

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged. “She’s hurt. Hurting. Or both. You haven’t met Quincy Houghton properly—not as an adult. But if he was my dad...” I shook my head as I imagined the manipulation Melony had gone through, the way Quincy had taken advantage of her madness and pumped her mind full of lies. “I dunno. I’d likely be off my fuckin’ rocker, too.”

“Huh.” Denny studied my face curiously. “You’re not the same man you were when we flew to Dallas. That man would’ve beaten Melony Houghton to a pulp for bringing us all the way out here over a toy dressed in his son’s clothes.”

I considered it. “Maybe so. I just don’t see how it would help anything. It wouldn’t get us anywhere, hurting her now.”

“You’re not wrong,” Denny said. “I’m just wondering what’s changed.”

I considered that, too.

Not my anger, certainly. It was still within me, trapped in my rib cage, searing just beneath the surface. But right now, it felt like it would hurt more to let it out than keep it in.

Not my disgust toward Melony, either. The thought of having to comfort her again still turned my stomach, even if she was too pathetic to hate.

“I dunno,” I admitted. “Felicity asked me to come here. To do this for her. To do it for our son. And since she asked...” A surprised laugh tore through me. “I think I could do anything just so long as she asked.”

“Goddamn. You really love her, don’t you?” Denny said.

The question sounded rhetorical, but some of the hurt in my chest lessened as I answered anyway.

“Yeah,” I said. “I really do.”

* * *

When Agent Cordova and her team arrived, Denny and I stepped out of the room so they could move in.

There was a scuffle when they tried to handcuff Melony, but Cordova had come prepared. She sedated Melony while the other agents held her down. Limp and barely conscious, she was carried out into the hall, then down toward the exit.

As they took her away, it struck me again how much she'd tried to make her hair the same as Felicity's. Before, I hadn't noticed what she was wearing, but now, I recognized her matching set as something Felicity would wear. She was thinner than ever, almost skeletal, in a way that reminded me of how my father had looked the last time I saw him more of Dad than anyone.

I wasn't sure what was sadder: how hard Melony had worked to make herself look like Felicity on the off chance that I would decide to love her, or how many people had been hurt by the blood curses that plagued our kind.

“What will happen to her?” I asked Cordova when Melony was out of sight.

“She'll be taken to jail. Questioned. Extradited back to Portersmith County in Maine, since that's where the initial crime took place.”

Back to Portersmith County? Shit.

That would be a mistake.

“If you can swing it, keep her away from Portersmith,” I told her. “Not sure if it's possible, but the chief of police there —”

“Booker?” Cordova supplied. “Never liked him. You don't trust him?”

“Melony—or her father, maybe—they’re working with my grandad,” I explained. “I think Booker might be in his pocket.”

“Samuel fucking Morrow,” Cordova swore. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that he’s wrapped up in this.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “Okay. I’ll update the lead on Morrow’s case. We’ll probably be working together from here on out. And I’ll see what I can do to keep Melony out of Booker’s hands. The last thing we need right now is a jail break.”

“I appreciate that.” I cocked my head in the direction they’d taken Melony off in. “What happens after she’s in jail?”

“The legal system does its work. She’ll end up in front of a judge, who will probably deny her bond. After all the trouble she gave us tracking her down in the first place, she’s a flight risk. Then back to jail for a while so our attorneys can build their case against her. And once she’s had her day in court... It’s pretty cut and dry if you ask me. Especially if you’re willing to testify.”

“Of course,” I confirmed. If I couldn’t take my anger out on her, the least I could do was make sure she never did this to anyone else.

“Figured. So, she’ll end up in federal prison. There’s one out in Missouri that deals with shifters,” said Cordova. “My guess is they’ll send her there.”

Federal prison. It was to be expected for a kidnapping offense, but something about it still didn’t sit right with me.

“You should know she’s not in her right mind.” If there was ever proper case for an insanity plea, Melony’s was it. “She’s got more blood curses right now than she knows what to do with. They’re making her...unstable. And on top of that, she’s going feral. She might not be able to choose when she keeps her human form.”

“Goddamn shifters,” Cordova cursed. “In that case, I’ll suggest she be kept in solitary. Maybe talk to whoever ends up defending her and get them to push for a psych eval and a team that can get her some help. I won’t pretend to understand

how shifting works, but if she can't control it, she's a danger to others. Probably to herself, as well."

We fell into step with each other on the way out of the hotel. Just outside the front doors, Denny was waiting for us.

He smirked when Agent Cordova glanced his way.

"Special Agent," he greeted her.

She scowled in return.

"I need to go deal with this, so I'm letting you both off the hook. This time," she informed us. "But any more updates you get on this, you call me instead of pulling any more vigilante shit. Are we clear?"

"Of course," I said. Another lie for today's pile.

Denny arched a brow. "That would mean I need your number."

Cordova's scowl deepened. She didn't respond to that.

"The next incident where I find either of you doing your own work on one my cases, trust that you'll be walking away in cuffs, too," she said sternly. "Are we clear?"

"Crystal." I didn't doubt that she'd cuff us. It just meant that we couldn't get caught.

Denny hemmed and hawed about that one, though. "I dunno. I like a woman who knows her way around a pair of handcuffs." He turned his chin up to her. "Sounds like foreplay to me."

"You... I—" Cordova's cheeks flushed in a way that reminded me of Felicity, though Cordova's complexion was darker, and she looked more frustrated than flustered. If she scowled any harder, her face would stick that way. "Have a good day, gentlemen."

Denny kept smiling as he watched her walk away.

"I think she likes me," he said, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out something round, tossed it in the air, and caught it confidently in his palm.

“I think she’s liable to break your nose.” I shoved his shoulder, the same way I would’ve pushed Kingston or Dylan for hitting on a woman while she was trying to do her job. “What’ve you got there?”

“Melony told you she had a new perfume that masked her scent.” Denny held his hand out, showing off a globe-shaped glass bottle with golden atomizer on top. “I’ve never heard of such a thing myself, but if it works... This was the only bottle in the room.” He smirked. “Thought it might be useful.”

I studied the bottle, considering it. It was only about a quarter full, so she’d used it a lot.

“Cordova might say that taking it was disrupting her crime scene,” I warned him.

“Didn’t hear you telling her about the Du Ponts.”

I snorted, and he grinned a little broader.

Fair enough.

“Come on. I wanna get out of here,” I said, heading away from the hotel.

“The Du Ponts’, then?” Denny asked. “I can book our flights now.”

“We’ll head back to Evergreen tonight,” I agreed. “But first, there’s something else I need to do.”

* * *

Our first visit to Mama Striga had cost me a couple thousand dollars.

Our second was free.

Funny thing about doing business out of a hotel room: once someone knew where that room was and were willing to kneecap the rhino shifter standing guard at the door and swipe his key card from him, it wasn’t all that difficult to get inside.

Mama Striga was seated in the same armchair she’d been in when we first called on her. Today, she wore a pale lavender

suit.

As we stormed in, she stared up at us with especially wide eyes.

“You lied to me,” I snarled.

She blinked, playing the innocent. “Did I?”

“You said Melony Houghton had a baby with her.”

“And she did, didn’t she?”

“A doll. A goddamn doll.” I tossed the fake baby on the floor in front of her chair. “You let us waste days and days of our lives—you let us squander time we didn’t have—over a fucking toy!”

I couldn’t take my rage out on Melony Houghton, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to let Striga get away with giving us the runaround.

Striga regarded the doll expressionlessly. “Then, I suppose when you asked about the baby, you should have questioned what kind.”

I rolled my eyes. I got why Denny hated this woman. Whether or not she could break a curse, it didn’t matter. She was rotten. Any solid she’d done us was negated by how much she’d held us back.

“What else did you lie to me about, huh?” I demanded. “Do you really believe you could help my mother, or was that bullshit too? Melony’s curse—were you ever even trying to break it? Or are you just the fraud everyone says you are?”

Striga scoffed. “I am no fraud, Alexander Miller. The things I could tell you, the things I have seen... they would break your world.”

I studied her. She was so tiny, I could pick her up and punt her right across the room.

“Pass,” I said dryly. “Denny was right. You *are* a fraud.”

“And you are bad at asking the right questions,” she countered. “For example, do you want to know what Melony was really here to ask me about?”

“She came to you to end her blood curse.” My eyes narrowed. “Didn’t she?”

Striga laughed, high and hearty. “Oh, dear me. No, my poor boy. Not at all, in fact,” she said. “Melony Houghton doesn’t want my help ending her blood curses.” Striga grinned wide, like she was genuinely enjoying this. “She wanted my help creating one.”

Chapter 24

Felicity

The second the Impala pulled into the drive, I gathered Rylan up and rushed out the front door.

“Xander!” I called out, my breath hitching as I jogged down the porch steps.

The driver’s side door of the Impala swung open, and Xander emerged from behind the wheel, looking exhausted, but thankfully unharmed.

It was a little past sunrise the day after Marianne had woken from her coma. The sky was tinged purple and pink on the horizon. The rest of the world was still cloaked in muted gray as it awaited the sun.

After Dylan brought Rylan and me home from the hospital last night, I’d fallen asleep on the couch, clutching the baby monitor, waiting for Xander to return. Someone—Gena or Kingston, maybe—had draped a blanket over me and tucked a pillow under my head while I tossed and turned.

In my dreams, I’d seen Xander die over and over again. Melony had killed him in a more horrible way each time. I woke in tears several times, certain that it had been real, only to remember that I had nothing to fear.

“Hey, Cheeks.” Xander left the Impala’s door open. He had time to take only a few steps in my direction before I launched myself into his arms. They wrapped around Rylan and me, protective and warm. “God, it’s good to hold you again.”

“When I was calling you, and you didn’t answer your phone...” I clenched my eyes shut and buried my face in his broad, firm chest. “I thought the worst. We all did.”

Marianne had given us all a scare, one that Xander had only exacerbated by missing my calls. I must have left him a dozen voicemails and twice as many texts before he finally answered.

Denny’s phone had gotten the same treatment.

“I wouldn’t have let anything happen to him,” Denny assured me, closing the Impala’s passenger side door. “He was never in any real danger. Scout’s honor.”

“Denny’s right,” Xander said, then pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “I was in good hands.”

The only hands I was concerned with right now were Xander’s. They rubbed my back soothingly, working away the knots tied into my muscles on either side of my spine. We’d only had a brief chance to talk before Denny and Xander caught their plane back from Las Vegas, so I was up to date on the broader strokes of what they’d been up to but was still short on specifics.

They’d come back as quickly as they could manage. The most important thing, beyond the fact that Melony hadn’t slaughtered them, was that they knew with near certainty now where Ryder was.

The Du Pont estate in upstate New York. There, Melony claimed, he was being kept safe by Quincy, Samuel, and their pureblooded shifter allies.

Safe being a generous and uncertain word.

* * *

Xander and Denny both needed sleep. I could see it in the way they moved around the lounge, slow and stiff, lurching. The signs were in their eyes, too: bloodshot whites, dark, deep bags underneath. They’d spent all of yesterday locating Melony, dealing with her while they waited for the authorities to arrive,

then traveling home. Whatever sleep they'd gotten on the plane hadn't been enough.

But though I'd told them both to get some rest, even offering to make up a guest room for Denny, they'd turned me down.

With Ryder in Samuel and Quincy's possession, time was of the essence.

We needed a plan. A good one. One that would take.

They fussed over Rylan at the kitchen island while I brewed coffee as strong as I could make it. Xander was so exhausted that when he put his mug back down on the counter, he missed the mark by several inches. It fell to the floor and shattered at his feet.

"Shit," he swore, pushing his stool back.

"Don't," I ordered, grabbing a towel. "I'll get it."

Xander let out a heavy sigh. "Thank you, Cheeks. You're an angel."

I cleaned up spilled coffee and the broken ceramic, then poured him a fresh mug. Breakfast next, I decided. I pulled the stove's griddle attachment over the burners and whipped up some scrambled eggs, laying down pats of butter to cook them in and thick slabs of bacon.

With the scents of breakfast stirring them from bed, the others emerged from their rooms. Gena juiced oranges while Kingston and Dylan set the dining room table.

When the food was ready, we all gathered around to eat, and to determine what would happen next.

"Striga said Melony was trying to create a blood curse, not break one," Xander said as he shoveled eggs into his mouth. "Quincy sent her there to see if it was possible. Striga says she refused to help, but—"

"We don't trust her," Denny cut in. "We can't. Moving forward, we have to assume the worst: that Striga gave Melony the instructions she was looking for, and Melony passed them along to her father so he could see them through."

“Why would they want to *create* a blood curse?” I asked. I was eating one-handed, with Rylan cradled in my other arm. He stared up at me with wide, dark eyes. We were still waiting to see if they’d turn to hazel like mine, or to Xander’s rare shade of green. “And why would they need help with one?”

“It’s not hard if you’re trying for it,” Kingston agreed. “All you’d need is to make a blood oath to an alpha, then break it. Doesn’t sound like the kind of thing you’d need a consult on.”

“Striga says they were looking for specific results,” Denny revealed. “Fast-working results.”

“We thought Melony and Quincy wanted to prevent themselves from going feral,” said Xander. “According to Striga, the opposite is true. They’re not looking to stop their curses from taking effect. They’re looking to recreate their curses—to make more ferals.”

“Enough to form an army,” Denny added, and a shiver rattled up my spine.

“That’s so dangerous, though,” I whispered, recalling how fiercely Quincy had ravaged Marianne. One minute, she was tearfully trying to assure him that she loved him. The next, he was tearing out her throat.

“Yeah,” Xander agreed. “I think that’s kind of the idea.”

“Sorry, I’m a little out of the loop here,” Gena said, looking around with wide eyes. “What’s a feral?”

“A shifter who’s stayed in their animal form for too long,” Kingston explained. “Long enough that they have a hard time shifting back out of it.”

“If they can shift back to their human form at all,” Dylan added. “In the end, they lose the ability to exist as a human. They’re stuck as an animal forever, and their mind becomes an animal’s, too.”

Denny nodded. “Their wolves take over completely. They eviscerate any scrap of humanity until there’s nothing left but primal instinct. They’re bloodthirsty, unpredictable—”

“And they can’t be controlled,” Kingston finished. “Even if Quincy can make enough of them to form an army, how’s he figure he’s gonna wrangle them all?”

“They’re as likely to tear him apart as they are to attack his enemies,” Dylan said, looking to Denny and Xander. “Seems crackpot to me.”

“You’re right,” Denny said. “I’ve never known a feral to have control of their own actions, let alone be able to command another feral’s as well.”

“But Quincy may have found a way. Or Samuel.” Xander turned to me. “Did Ma say anything about this? How much does she know of their plans?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. At the mention of Marianne, the crescent wounds her nails had left on my forearm prickled. “She’s been in and out. She was worried about you more than anything. Until we knew you were safe, it was hard to get much out of her or calm her down.”

“The doctors expect she’ll keep on improving from here on out,” said Dylan. “We can go visit her if you want. You can ask her yourself.”

Xander rubbed his eyes and shook his head. “Tomorrow. First thing. I’m pretty beat and not up for it today.” He set his fork down. “Melony says Ryder is with Samuel and Quincy at the Du Pont estate. We’ll worry about the feral wolves when we have to. Getting Ryder back is our main focus right now.”

“Even the FBI hasn’t been able to crack the Du Ponts or any of the other old packs here on the East Coast,” I said. “Cordova was told to leave them alone, which means they’ve got friends in high places. It won’t be easy.”

Something between a groan and a growl noise escaped Xander’s throat. “Nothing ever is. We need a plan. Some way to get in without tipping off their security or spooking them into spiriting Ryder away.”

“When they find out Melony’s been arrested, they’ll be on high alert,” Denny mused. “Depending how much they know,

or how much she can tell them from jail, infiltration is exactly what they'll be expecting."

"So, maybe we don't try to sneak up on them?" Dylan suggested. "Maybe we make the cost of keeping Ryder there so high, they're better off just giving him back."

"That would call for a proper attack." Kingston's brow furrowed deeply. "A show of force."

"It's not my first choice," Xander admitted. "But Dylan might be right. Whatever they want our son for... if they're hurting him—"

"Don't think like that." I put my fork down and reached out to stroke his arm. "Your mom said they wanted the stronger of the boys, and remember what Samuel said the day they were born? He and Quincy both still need male alpha heirs. If they've decided to combine their packs and followers... Maybe that's their plan. Raise Ryder to succeed them someday. If that's the case, they wouldn't hurt him."

It was too many maybes to give me true peace of mind, but we had to hope. What else would they possibly be using a newborn baby for?

"An attack, then," Xander said, staring down at his plate. His eyes sharpened, glinting darkly. "We'll need to rally the pack. Reach out to our allies."

"You'll need the council of elders' approval for that," Kingston reminded him. "Though, I can't imagine they wouldn't grant it, given the circumstances."

"Will Clinton throw in with us on this?" Dylan asked.

Xander shrugged. "When we left Portersmith, their pack was already spread pretty thinly. But this is Samuel we're dealing with here. As long as he lives, Portersmith will be on his radar. If he had the means, I don't think he'd hesitate to take Clinton out and reclaim Morrow Manor for himself. So, with that in mind... there's a chance."

"This is a bloody path you're planning, Miller," Denny warned. "Not to say that it's the wrong one, but your packs have never seen battle, let alone war. And if this drags out

beyond a single night, make no mistake, it's war you're courting. There will be casualties on both sides. You need to be prepared for that."

The glint in Xander's eyes turned to a dark-burning fire as he met Denny's gaze. "You don't think I've realized that? If there was any other way—"

"I can do it," I whispered, my eyes going wide.

"What?"

"Samuel—he wants me, remember?" I gripped Xander's forearm. I needed to, for something to hold onto, before I lost my mettle. "The boys were his second choice for heirs. They're not what he was really after—just what he could get. But what Samuel really wants is a direct heir. Someone to replace Clinton, someone he can raise in his own image." I lowered my gaze to my lap. "And he knows I can give birth to alphas."

Xander shoved his chair back and turned to me. "Cheeks... No. I won't allow it. What you're suggesting—it's too fucked up. I can't let you. I won't."

I looked up at him, my eyes gentle, but my resolve firm. "It's a good trade. Me for Ryder. Samuel gets what he really wants, and in exchange, he gives Ryder back to you. No one needs to start a war. No blood needs to be spilled."

Slick, metallic disgust coiled in my stomach. I could still remember the night Samuel had sent for me, like he could order me to his room to obey his will. He hated humans enough to kill them, but he also desired them. I was a fetish for him, a kink, never mind that I was his grandson's mate.

I was better than a fetish, even. He'd seen Ryder and Rylan, both alphas, both boys. He'd decided that meant I could give him the heir he truly desired.

What I was proposing terrified me. Chilled me to my core.

Still, I meant every word.

"No," Xander growled again, more forcefully this time. "It's not happening, for God's sake. I'm not letting you serve

yourself up on a fucking platter for that...that sociopath!”

His aura shot up with the explosive force of a hand grenade. It hit me so hard that I rocked back in my chair. In my arms, Rylan fussed, then began to cry. Kingston and Dylan both turned a little paler. Denny’s jaw and fists clenched.

Only Gena was unaffected. She looked around, confused, like the conversation had just shifted into different language—one she couldn’t speak or hear.

“Calm down,” Denny growled at Xander through his teeth.

I felt his aura spike, too. It was a gentler vibration but still palpably electric. He and Xander stared each other down until, slowly, their auras began to subside.

“Look, I don’t like it either. Too risky.” Denny turned his gaze to me. “It’s a brave thing to offer. Selfless. But... No.” He shook his head. “I can’t get behind this. It isn’t the way.”

“It’s best option we have right now,” I snapped as I rose, holding Rylan to my chest and bouncing him softly as he wailed. “Unless anyone else has any bright ideas?”

“Not right now,” Xander said. “But we will.”

* * *

I left the others to clean up after breakfast and retreated to our room. The intensity of Xander’s aura had upset Rylan badly. It took me nearly an hour to get him calmed down.

It took a while for me to settle as well. Feeling Xander’s aura wasn’t exactly a pleasant thing. My human body didn’t handle it well. If Rylan had experienced even half the wave of nausea and discomfort that I’d felt, I couldn’t blame him for crying. It wasn’t something I was looking forward to experiencing again.

As I put him in his bassinet, my gaze lingered on his tiny, sleeping face. I loved watching him sleep, with his pudgy baby lips gently parted, making sucking motions like he was dreaming about milk. I loved his sweet, powdery scent. I loved

the sounds he made, even the loud ones, and the way I could recognize his different cries, each distinct, each calling out to me to communicate his needs.

Most of all, I loved looking at him. Ever since we brought him back from Texas, it had been hard to take my eyes off him. He was a gorgeous baby, easy to look at. If he took after his father—and I very much suspected that he would—he would grow up into a strong, handsome man.

Sometimes, I still found myself worrying that if I let him out of sight for too long, he might vanish again. Blink out of existence. Turn to glitter and blow away on the wind.

But every time I did a double take, just to make sure he was still there, my mind was set at ease. He was so perfect that I might have imagined him, but I hadn't. He was real, mine, and here to stay.

My gaze wandered to the other bassinet, which had remained empty in the corner of the room since Xander and his brothers had put it together. At the time, it had given me so much hope. After all, they wouldn't have constructed it if getting Ryder back was a lost cause.

Now, we finally knew where Rylan's twin brother was. We knew who was keeping him from us. I still believed that he wouldn't be harmed—at least, not physically.

There were more ways to hurt a child than violence and neglect. Unless we wrestled him from Samuel's grasp, he would grow up like Clinton had. Like Marianne. Ridiculed, held to insane standards, and pushed to the breaking point.

Samuel might even treat Ryder worse.

I sank onto the bed and hugged myself, guilt coursing through me. Xander and I might not have our own blood curses, but we'd inherited something similar. Intergenerational trauma, they called it. We'd been so determined that it would stop with us.

If we could bring Ryder home, maybe we could make good on that. Until then, my heart hung heavy.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't hear the door open.

"Can I sit next to you?" Xander asked.

I tensed but nodded.

Even when we were at odds with each other, there was nothing my body wanted more than being close to him, in his arms.

The bed creaked softly when Xander took a seat. His thigh pressed flush to mine.

"I'm sorry about that, Cheeks. Raising my aura around you. In front of him." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and hanging his head. "It was wrong."

I glanced his way. "Are you angry with me?"

"I'm... No." He frowned and shook his head quickly. "Of course, I'm not angry. Not with you." He paused, licking his lips, then pinning them between his teeth for a moment. "Denny's right. You're so brave, I can hardly fathom it. And so selfless."

"I'm not trying to be selfless. I'm trying to rescue our son."

"So am I," Xander said. "But you have to understand why I can't send you to Samuel, all wrapped up in a bow like you want. You're suggesting I trade my mate for our son. Put you in danger so Ryder can be safe." He raised his head and stared at me with glassy eyes. "It'd kill me."

"Then, let me make the trade myself." I took his hands in mine, squeezing them tightly. "You don't have to do anything. I can fix this if you'll just let me."

"How can I let you? I'm not doing this Sophie's Choice bullshit, Cheeks. It's fucked up. It's wrong. If it was me who had to go—"

"It's already been you," I reminded him. "You went to Las Vegas to seduce Melony for Ryder's sake."

"And I hated every goddamn minute of it!"

“But you did it anyway. You did it for our son. Now, it’s my turn. Even if it’s a matter of trading his life for mine—I’d die for our cubs, Xander. I know you would, too.”

He let out a breath, tears shining in his eyes. Xander didn’t often look vulnerable, but he did in that moment. If I tapped my finger to his chest, he’d shatter like glass.

The moment passed quickly, though. Xander set his jaw and lowered his brow with determination.

“There’s another way,” he insisted. “There has to be. We just need to find it.” He shook his head. “You’re not going. I don’t wanna hear about this again.”

“But—”

“I said no,” he snapped, his hands tightening so hard around mine that it hurt.

I drew back in shock. This was almost as bad as feeling his aura. Worse, maybe. No one else was around to share in this discomfort. I had to shoulder it all on my own.

“Okay.” Carefully, I pulled my hands free of his. “I’m... I’m sorry. I was just trying to help.”

His face fell, and he grasped my shoulders. He moved his hands down my arms soothingly.

“Christ. No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped. That... you don’t deserve to be treated like that.”

“It’s fine,” I murmured. I clasped my hands together, searching for any ache in my fingers, but there was none. He hadn’t hurt me. He’d only scared me a little, and only for a second. “You were upset. I get it. Just, don’t treat me like the enemy, Xander. We’re in this together. If you can’t get on board with this plan, we’ll just have to find another way.”

“If I could approve of this, I wouldn’t be worthy of being your mate. You understand that, don’t you?” He stared at me until I raised my gaze to his. His greens were pleading. “The thought of that man having his filthy fucking hands on you... It makes my heart feel like it’s being put through a woodchipper. You’re mine. You’ve always been mine. You

always will be. If I can't keep you safe... I've already failed our sons. I can't fail you, too."

"I don't think you've failed anyone, Xander." My heart crushed in on itself at the very notion. If he felt that way about himself, then surely I'd failed, too.

"I need to be better. Stronger. Sharper. More." His hands slid down to my forearms, where he found the nail marks Marianne had left in my skin. He ran his thumb over them gently. "What happened here?"

I winced. "Your mother was pretty worried about you."

"Ma did this?" I nodded, and he growled. "Worried or not, she didn't need to break skin over it. Especially not yours."

"She was scared Melony would kill you." I would have preferred it if she hadn't sank her talons into me, either, but Xander's mother and I had finally discovered one thing we had in common: we both loved her son. "I was worried, too."

"I got the gist of that from all those missed calls and messages," Xander admitted. "But I was never in any danger. How come she thought I was walking into a trap?"

"She heard Quincy and Samuel talking about it, I guess." Marianne hadn't been exactly coherent, and we hadn't been blessed with much time. When her nurses arrived, we were told in no uncertain terms that we needed to leave. "You worry them, I think. They've been making big plans and wanted to eliminate you from the equation. Melony was so unstable, they thought if you got angry at her—if you lost control—then so would she." I gave him a small smile as pride swelled against my heart. "But you didn't."

Xander scoffed. "I nearly did. I wanted to."

"She did kidnap our sons," I reminded him.

He laughed. "Yeah. She did do that. But, I dunno, Cheeks. I keep thinking about the way that woman in Texas—Sarah?—how she looked at me when she thought I was an abuser, and there I was, bellowing at her, out for blood." He let go of my arms and rubbed his palms against his thighs. "I thought about how it felt when Ma would scream at Kingston, or Dylan, or,

God forbid, Macy. Or when your mom was being cruel to you.”

“That’s not who you are, Xander. You’ve never hurt anyone.” I reconsidered that for a moment. Xander had bloodied his knuckles plenty back in high school, usually when my honor was involved. “Well. No one who hasn’t been asking for it.”

“It’s hard to tell though, isn’t it? Who deserves it and who doesn’t. It was easier when we were teenagers. I would’ve thrown down with anyone who so much as looked at you wrong.”

“You did,” I reminded him.

“But Melony’s screwed up in the head. Big time. The bad she’s done... I hate her, Cheeks,” he confessed. “She disgusts me, but I didn’t want to make a woman feel like that again. Not even her.”

“It’s generous of you,” I allowed. “Kind, too.” Kinder than I would have been. After everything she’d put us through, I wasn’t so sure I could have kept my own temper under wraps if Melony Houghton and I were in the same room. “It means something, don’t you think? Quincy and Samuel thought that getting you alone with Melony was a surefire way to take you out. They never expected you to be capable of holding back.”

“I do have a temper,” Xander admitted. “Just never thought it was so bad that someone might try to weaponize it.”

“Samuel and Quincy can’t imagine that anyone would ever choose to be kind.” I reached up and stroked his cheek. “That makes you so much more dangerous than they ever could have believed. It’s what a leader would do.”

He glanced up at me. There was something boyish about the look in his eyes now—puppy-like. Like a golden retriever waiting for a treat. “You proud of me, Cheeks?”

Smiling, I wrapped my arms around him. “Come here.”

I pulled him down onto the mattress with me. He smelled like coffee and bacon, and faintly like the Jack Daniels he must have downed on his flight to keep his wolf at bay. I

buried my face in his neck and found his familiar scent. Spiciness, warmth, something rich and soft like cashmere, or dark soil after a rain.

“God, your touch feels good,” he purred as I reached under his shirt and ran my nails up and down his back. “Keep doing that for a while?”

I obliged. He nestled next to me, and I listened to his breathing as it became slower, deeper.

In my arms, just like his son had only a short while before, Xander fell asleep.

* * *

“Xander?” I called out from the window. I pressed my palm to the glass, peering out into the darkness.

Xander and Denny had spent the day getting some much-needed rest. Gena and I had tried to bring them plates of lunch and dinner, but neither had been interested. Sleep was what they needed, and since we had no better plan for how to infiltrate the impossible stronghold of the Du Pont estate, the rest would only help.

I’d been preparing for bed when something outside caught my attention.

“What’s up?” Xander slurred sleepily. He pushed himself up from the mattress, his golden waves messy from spending the day in bed.

“I just saw something outside. A bright flash of light out on the lawn.” When I first spotted it, my heart had jumped into my throat. What if it had been an explosion? A bomb of some kind? But there had been no sound. Just a sudden brightness, gone as quickly as it appeared. “I think it might have been a camera.”

Xander was out of bed before I could speculate any further. Earlier, he’d woken up briefly to get undressed. He didn’t bother to get redressed. I scrambled to grab my own robe as Xander took off, bare-ass naked.

Thinking quickly, I picked up Xander's robe as well. If he was running around naked, there was only one reason.

He was planning to shift.

It was difficult to match Xander's speed. I'd barely made it halfway to the door, but I could already hear his feet thumping heavily down the stairs. He must have jumped the last several because there was a pause, then a loud thunk when he stuck the landing.

When I reached the stairs, he was already out on the porch.

"What's going on?" Gena asked, meeting me at the bottom of the stairs. "I think I just saw Xander's, um..."

She blushed, which would have made me laugh under different circumstances. I was unfazed by the sight of naked shifters by now, but Gena hadn't spent as much time around them as I had.

"There's someone outside," I told her, heading for the door. "Can you grab Rylan and make sure he's somewhere safe?"

"Of course. But—"

"It's probably nothing," I called over my shoulder. "But we can't be too careful."

On my way out the door, I grabbed Kingston's baseball bat. He was still ashamed of his injury and hadn't shifted since he'd lost his leg, so he'd taken to leaving the bat next to the coat rack for protection.

I'd never been great at sports, but if there was danger out there in the dark, I was more than prepared to thwack it in face.

I ran down the porch steps, then around the side of the lodge. My slippers slipped on the dewy grass, forcing me to go slower than I would have liked.

By the time I found Xander, he wasn't alone.

His lupine form was huge and formidable. Creamy white fur rose in stiff peaks at his shoulders and down the ridge of

his back.

Beneath his massive front paws was a woman. Her legs kicked furiously as she tried to push Xander off of her.

“You can’t hold me against my will!” she shouted. “I have rights!”

Confused and frowning, I approached them. The woman wasn’t a shifter. If she’d been one, she would have shifted already. By the light of the moon and the warm glow radiating from the lodge, I could just barely make out tight coils of blonde hair splayed around her head, and a leather strap a few inches away from her outstretched arm.

“That’s true,” I said, slinging the bat over my shoulder and stooping to pick up the strap. An expensive-looking camera dangled from the end of it, a long, heavy lens attached to it. The flash bulb on it was huge. I’d been right—this was the source of the light. “Funny thing is, we have rights, too. You’re trespassing.”

“I was... lost,” she grunted, still struggling beneath Xander. “That’s all. Let me go!”

“Lost and snapping pictures through windows with your long-range lens?” I let the camera dangle over her hand, just out of reach. “I’m sure that will hold up in court.”

She scowled at me petulantly. “Fine. You can have my SD card. Happy? Just call off your fucking dog!”

“Xander?”

He stayed hunched over her for a moment, teeth bared, chest heaving. She glanced up at him for just a second, then winced and turned her face away.

Xander let up after that, shifting back into his human form. I handed him the camera and his robe. He tugged the robe on, then popped the camera open and drew out the memory card. With a near-imperceptible smoothness that would have made a magician jealous, he slipped it into the pocket of the robe.

“Who the fuck are you?” he barked at the woman, who was still on the ground, catching her breath.

“I’m, uh...” Her eyes settled on the camera. “Leica. Leica...” She looked to the forest next. “Leica Tree.”

“Uh-huh,” Xander intoned, unimpressed. He arched a brow at her. “You wanna try that again?”

She groaned, thumping her fist against the grass. “Fine. I’m Ava-Rose Olsen, *Boston Examiner*. Okay?”

“You’re the one who took those pictures of us at Morrow Manor,” I said, recalling the leaked images. While our hearts were breaking, she’d profited off our pain.

“Guilty.” She lifted a shoulder as she sat up and had the audacity to look a little smug. “Although, if you do take me to court, just know I’ll be thoroughly denying it. Look, you have my memory card. The pictures I took tonight are all on there, okay? So, give me back my camera, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

She got onto her hands and knees, then reached for the camera. Xander yanked it away before her fingers could latch on.

“Not quite yet,” he said. “How did you get onto the grounds of the Morrow estate? We never managed to figure it out.”

She rose to her knees, reaching for the camera again. “I don’t have to tell you a damn thing.”

She dived for the camera. Xander jerked it away at the last minute, sending her tumbling forward. She ended up face-down, sprawled out on the lawn, spitting curses at him.

Xander chuckled. It seemed he hadn’t lost all his edge. After the way this woman had invaded our suffering, making a story out of it, I didn’t even feel bad for her.

“Be careful with that!” she yelled, staring up at her camera in horror as it swung violently from its strap. “It’s expensive! As if I didn’t already lose enough money paying for the tip on your location—”

Xander’s eyes narrowed and sharpened. “Who sold you that?”

Before she could protest again, he stretched his arm out and let the strap dangle from his fingers like he meant to drop it.

“Just some woman,” Ava-Rose said quickly, scrambling to her feet. “Pink hair, works at the grocery store here in town. I don’t know her name, just—”

“Lexi,” I groaned, putting a hand to my head. “I ran into her when I was getting groceries the other day. Of course, she sold us out.”

And after I’d been so certain she was turning over a new leaf, too. My cheeks flamed. I was so fucking stupid. I’d told her enough that we’d be lucky if Ava-Rose was the only reporter we’d have sniffing around the lodge now.

“Look,” Xander said, lowering the camera. “One of our sons is still missing. We know where to find him, but to get him back, we need to know how to get past the security of a place like Morrow Manor.”

“Can’t the FBI do it?” Ava-Rose asked. “They’re supposed to handle stuff like this, right?”

“They’ve been instructed to give the old packs of the East Coast a wide berth. It would take someone pretty high up the food chain to give an order like that,” Xander mused. “Might even be a story for you there—unless you plan on playing paparazzi for a gossip rag for the rest of your career?”

Ava-Rose perked up a little. “I don’t, in fact. Would you be willing to go on record saying that?”

“You scratch our back, we scratch yours.”

She licked her lips, then struck out her hand. “Okay. Deal.”

“How did you breach Morrow Manor’s security?” I asked as she and Xander shook on it.

She snorted. “It was too easy. My great-grandmother used to work as a maid on one of those big shifter estates, way back when you were all constantly battling each other for territory. Places like the one in Portersmith, they’re all built on top of catacombs, with a secret path off the estate just in case the

alpha and his family needed to make a quick, quiet getaway during a battle or whatever.”

“Would Clinton know about something like that?” I asked Xander.

He shrugged. “Maybe not if Samuel didn’t tell him, which wouldn’t be a surprise. I was down in the dungeons for a little while, though. They looked like they could possibly be attached to a greater network.”

“Most of them are forgotten about, honestly,” Ava-Rose professed. “I explore them sometimes, just seeing if I can dig up any new shifter dirt. Humans love that stuff, you know? Some are under water now, or half collapsed. Morrow Manor’s weren’t all that bad, though. The hatch was already open and everything. I just had to crawl inside.”

I glanced at Xander. “Do you think that could be how Samuel escaped when the feds came for him?”

Xander scowled. “I’d put money on it.”

“Ooh. Juicy.” Ava-Rose shifted from foot to foot impatiently, rubbing her hands together. “You know, since I have you here, maybe you’d be willing to give an interview? We could do a sort of mash-up kind of thing. A profile piece, even. Grandson of a serial killer, father of missing twins, his hot human mate, fighting together against the powers-that-be to track down their babies where the FBI has failed? People would eat it up.”

“Or you get the fuck off my property before I break your expensive little camera,” Xander suggested. “We’re not your fucking story.”

“You know what? I actually have somewhere to be.” Ava-Rose grabbed for the camera again. This time, Xander let her take it. “I’ll be in touch about that FBI corruption thing, though. You did give me your word.”

“I did,” Xander agreed. “Call ahead next time.”

Ava-Rose grinned tentatively, then took off toward the driveway. Xander and I went back to the house together, where we found Dylan on the front porch, watching Ava-Rose go.

“Kingston and Gena have Rylan in the den,” Dylan reported. “Who the fuck was that?”

“A reporter,” Xander grumbled. “Maybe you could ensure that she’s escorted off our lands and sent on her way?”

Dylan nodded, then pulled his shirt off over his head. “You got it.”

We left him to finish undressing so he could shift. When I glanced back through the doorway, his blonde wolf was already trotting down the drive.

I replaced Kingston’s bat by the doorway, heart racing a little.

“If the Du Pont estate has one of those escape tunnels...” I started.

“Then we’d have an in. You mind putting some coffee on? I’m gonna go wake Denny.” Xander grabbed me around my waist and pulled me to him, kissing me hard and quick. “I think we’ve found our other way.”

Chapter 25

Xander

Our other way came together quickly. We'd spent so long starving for information, for opportunity, there was little hesitation from anyone on our side.

We'd gone through the photos from Ava-Rose's memory card. Most were creepy paparazzi-style shots. A few were of us—Felicity and me in our bedroom at the lodge. Others were of people I didn't recognize. A couple kissing in a park. A silver-haired man in a rumpled white shirt and loosened tie, frowning at documents behind an apartment window. A young woman sitting on a curb, her anguished, mascara-streaked face lit with the glow of a nightclub's neon sign. All had been caught unawares in intimate moments, like they weren't real people, just characters in a story Ava-Rose had yet to write.

The final images on the memory card were of me and Felicity again—the ones from Morrow Manor that had ended up in the *Examiner* piece. Last of all was an eerie shot of an open hatch out in the woods with wooden doors. Weeds and brush clung to the rusted handles.

If we were lucky, there would be something similar out in the timber beyond the Du Pont estate.

And for once, it seemed luck was on our side.

"Map," Dylan announced proudly the next day as he strode into the dining room with a sheet of paper in hand. It still smelled like warm, fresh ink.

He slammed it down on the table where Denny, Kingston, and I were seated, discussing plans of attack. The map in

question appeared hand drawn. It was labeled DU PONT MANOR in messy writing. A thick, black circle with a crooked arrow pointing to it bore an additional label: ESCAPE HATCH.

“Where’d you get this?” I asked him.

“Chatted up your reporter friend when she tried to turn around and come back toward the lodge last night.” He smirked. “I gave her my number before she took off, and she just sent me this. She’s very helpful.”

“I bet she is.” Dylan had gone out to follow Ava-Rose in his wolf form. If they’d exchanged words, he’d been naked the entire time she spoke to him.

Dylan showing his dick had just saved us the trouble of hunting for the Du Pont hatch ourselves.

“Good work, Dylan. This helps a lot. I think I want to do this tonight,” I announced. “Anyone have a problem with that?”

I glanced around the table. No one seemed opposed.

“Want me to rally up some betas?” Dylan offered.

“No. You, me, and Denny. That’s it. We get in, we grab Ryder, we get out.” I looked at Kingston, feeling a twinge of guilt. Gena’s presence had done a lot for his morale. Moving her in here was one of Felicity’s best ideas to date. But he still hadn’t recovered enough to try a prosthetic yet, let alone shift, which meant, once again, he’d be left out. “You’re gonna stay here to hold down the fort. Protect Felicity and Gena and Rylan. Got it?”

Kingston’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t think their escape hatch will be wheelchair accessible, huh?”

We stared each other down for a long moment. He broke first, cracking a grin.

Relief rushed through my chest. He really was getting better.

I laughed and shook my head. “They’d be in a world of trouble if it was.”

* * *

“You don’t have to come in with me, you know,” I told Felicity as I pulled the Impala into Evergreen General’s visitor parking lot. The claw marks Ma had left on Felicity’s arm during her last visit were still red and raw. “You and Dad could take a walk or something. It wouldn’t be a big deal.”

She looked out the window, staring up at the hospital. The sky above it was cornflower blue, with only a few cottony wisps of clouds.

“No. We should do this together.” She reached out for my hand. I gave it to her, twining our fingers together. “I’m your mate. Whether your mother likes it or not. She loves you, and so do I. As long as we have that in common, we can figure the rest out.”

Saint Felicity strikes again.

The tension in her shoulders told me she wasn’t exactly looking forward to this, but the determination in her hazel eyes assured me she’d be doing it anyway.

“I love you,” I murmured, squeezing her hand.

We entered the hospital together and found Ma’s room. We’d decided not to bring Rylan along, though that was more for his safety than any slight. Ma hadn’t exactly been gentle with Felicity when she woke up from her coma. Hopefully, it had been a one-off, but we couldn’t risk her pulling an encore with Rylan in the room.

Healing the rift she’d torn in our family would take time and caution, but we’d put in the work if Felicity was willing.

As soon as we entered Ma’s room, Dad leapt up and wrapped us in a massive hug. He felt stronger than he had the last time I saw him. His hair and body were both still thin, but he’d regained some color in his face.

“Come on in,” he said, pulling us deeper into the room. “She’s a little groggy, but she’s awake.”

“Xander?” Ma’s eyes cracked open. “Is that you?”

Felicity gave me a nod, and I approached Ma’s bed. She was still hooked up to oxygen and an IV. She didn’t look much like the Ma I remembered, but then, I’d rarely seen her without her makeup and hair done.

“Hey, Ma. I’m glad you’re...” I paused, searching for the right word. Alive? Awake? Not actively trying to kill my mate? “Feeling better,” I finished lamely.

“Never mind that,” she rasped. “Your father tells me you’re going to take your son back. Back from my father and Quincy.”

“I am.”

She closed her eyes and nodded, just once. “Take my hand.”

Tentatively, I did as she asked. Her grip was weak, her skin more papery than I remembered. Her fingers were cold, but her palm was warm.

“He hates you, you know,” Ma told me. “Quincy, too. They both do.”

“Ah...yeah.” I glanced back at Felicity. “We kinda figured that.”

“It’s a compliment,” she said. Her lips curled into something close to a smile. “I’ve never known Father to hate anyone he doesn’t see as a threat.”

* * *

Felicity and I sat with my parents for about an hour. It was tense at times, even a little uncomfortable when the silence stretched on for too long. Ma didn’t stay awake for the entire visit, but she tried her best. When we left, she was polite to Felicity, and told me she loved me.

“This meant a lot to her, kid,” Dad told me as he hugged us goodbye. “I hope you know that.”

“We’ll be back,” I promised.

“Maybe even with the boys next time,” Felicity added, and Dad’s eyes went misty.

“I’d like that.” He embraced us again, tighter this time. “You be safe tonight. We’ll see you when you’re back.”

Felicity and I said our own goodbyes on the front porch of the lodge. She’d dressed Rylan in a hooded onesie with little ears stitched on. It made him look like a tiny bear.

“You can’t convert him, you know,” I joked, rubbing the fuzzy fabric atop Rylan’s head. “He’s gonna be a wolf, no matter what you dress him up as.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it.” She drew closer to me, cradling Rylan between us as she popped up onto her tiptoes. I hunched down obligingly, and she pressed a firm kiss to my lips. “I don’t know if you’ve realized, but I’ve kind of taken a liking to wolves.”

I held them close to me for as long as time allowed. But it was a long ride to upstate New York, and Denny had us on a tight schedule.

“Come on, Romeo,” he grunted, smacking me on the back of the head. “You can get right back to sucking face when you get back.”

“Just come home to me safe.” Her hand caressed my face, thumb smoothing up my cheekbone, then down my jawline, like she was committing me to memory. Just in case. “That goes for all of you.”

Dylan, Denny, and I piled into the Impala. I took the back seat while Dylan drove and Denny rode shotgun.

It allowed me to turn around and stare at the porch as we headed down the drive. There was a wistful smile on Felicity’s lips. She took Rylan’s hand in hers, making him wave goodbye as we drove away.

* * *

It was dark out by the time we made it to the Du Pont estate. So dark that I couldn't even tell what color the manor was. All I could see was how large and foreboding it looked, perched at the top of its hill, surrounded by a thick copse of trees.

We parked on a back road and hiked to the spot on Ava-Rose's map. The hatch was a good distance from the fence that encircled the estate, so we didn't have to worry too much about being heard, but we moved quietly and stayed on alert anyway. There was no telling what patrols the Du Ponts might have ordered, or what else might be lurking in their woods.

"There it is," Denny announced, pulling the last of the brush away from the wooden doors. They creaked on rusty hinges when he yanked them open. The wood was so rotted, chunks of them fell away as they hit the grass on either side.

"Hasn't been used in a while." I turned my flashlight on and shone the beam of light down the hole. Stone steps descended deep into the darkness, the light barely kissing the last steps. "Dylan, your reporter friend is sure that these tunnels are still functional?"

"She says she hasn't used them in a few years, but last she checked, they were good," Dylan said. "Even if they're not, can't turn back now, can we?"

"No, we can't," I agreed, turning off my flashlight. "This is where we part ways, then. I'll be back with Ryder, or I'm not coming back at all."

The latter wasn't really an option. Not with my mate and other son waiting for me back at home. I had a pack to lead. A family to rebuild.

With that in mind, my words were more like a promise.

I'm coming back. I'm coming back with my son.

I took a step down into the hatch, but Dylan reached out and grabbed my shoulder, stopping me.

"Xan, come on. You don't need to go in. I can do this for you. I might've failed as a leader when you were away, but this shit is what I was made for." His eyes locked on mine, earnestly seriously. "It's like you said. Let me be your hand."

“You didn’t fail as a leader, dumbass.” I shoved his hand away and punched him in the arm. “You kept the pack together until I came back. That’s not failure. You’ve got nothing to make up for. Now, what I need you for is a lot simpler. Just stay out here and keep watch with Denny. Whatever happens inside the Du Pont house, I need to tackle it on my own.”

I meant it. For too long, I’d relied on others to do my bidding for me. According to Dad, it was what an alpha was meant to do. Delegate.

“If you ask a beta to dig you a hole, he’ll ask you for a shovel,” he’d told me once when I was just a kid. “Ask an alpha, and he’ll have a team assembled on your property within the hour, digging as many holes as you like.”

But tonight, it was important to me that I didn’t put anyone else at risk.

I’d dig my own hole.

“Denny, you still got that perfume?” I asked, holding out a hand. It wasn’t really perfume, we figured, but there was no pretending that the bottle Denny had swiped from Melony’s hotel room wasn’t handy. It had successfully cloaked Melony’s scent the whole time we’d been in Vegas. Here tonight, it would hide mine as well.

“Yep. Half for you, half for me. I’m coming with,” Denny announced, as though he hadn’t heard anything I’d just said. I looked at him, annoyed, and he shrugged. “If shit goes tits up in there, you’re not gonna fight your way out with a baby all on your own. The kid”—he jerked his head in Dylan’s direction—“can stay here, make sure our escape route isn’t compromised. You and me, though? We’ll go in. Together.”

“This wasn’t the plan,” I reminded him. “There’s not much of Melony’s perfume left. Even less if we have to split it between us.”

Denny grinned and started spritzing himself. “Then we’ll just have to be quick about it, won’t we?”

He tossed the bottle to me when he was done. Grudgingly, I gave myself the same treatment with what was left.

Denny's scent was already covered, and frustratingly, he did have a point. I saw little to be gained from arguing with him.

With our scents masked, we descended into the hatch, entering the catacombs of the Du Pont estate side by side.

* * *

"Lot of fucking ferals around," Denny growled beneath his breath.

He'd been sniffing the air ever since we emerged from the catacombs and found ourselves on the grounds behind Du Pont manor. The reporter's guidance had led us true. The tunnel had been a little damp, but apart from getting our boots a bit wet, we'd had no trouble at all.

"You can smell the difference?" I whispered back.

"It's nuanced—but yeah, a little. A true feral has a pretty strong stink to them. Heightened hormones, maybe, or something else to try and warn others away." He breathed in through his nose again, deeper this time. "These here aren't all the way gone, I don't think, but there's still something off about their scent chemistry. They've got a bit of a skunky odor, like something that's not quite rotten yet, but it's well on its way."

We stuck to cover, keeping low and creeping behind hedges, stone walls—anything that would keep us out of view.

The grounds were full of tents and campfires, with large clusters of shifters hanging around. They were all dressed in ragged or mismatched clothing. Most were skinny and small. As we drew closer, we realized why.

"Teenagers," Denny whispered. "God, some of these are just kids."

"Is that where the feral stink is coming from?"

He swallowed, then nodded as two girls walked past us, passing a bottle wrapped in a paper bag between them. They

couldn't have been much older than Denny's nephew back in Vegas. Both had a haunted look in their eyes, like they weren't entirely there.

"Quincy figured it out, then." Dread twisted in my gut. "He's making ferals. Out of *kids*."

Just when I thought he couldn't stoop any lower than he already had, that fucker had found a fucking basement.

Was this what he and Samuel wanted Ryder for? Were they planning on doing this to my son as well?

"Come on," Denny said, straightening. "None of them are gonna stop us. Let's head inside."

"You sure about that?"

"Look at 'em, Miller," Denny scoffed as one of the girls stumbled. Her friend didn't even try to catch her, just stopped and waited until the first girl had righted herself, then they continued on. "They look like homeless teenagers—and from the smell of things, someone's been plying them with wine. They're in no state to be stopping anyone from doing anything. Just look like you're meant to be here. We'll be fine."

Denny strode toward the house. No one seemed to even notice he was there.

I swallowed hard and followed him.

With our scents masked, and only a horde of the cursed and inebriated to guard the manor's grounds, we managed to walk right in.

Inside the mansion, I expected we'd go right back to crouching and sneaking. We didn't. The door we came through led us into the kitchens, where a dozen haggard-looking human servants were diligently scraping, washing, and drying a mess of dirty dishes. They glanced at us as we entered. Each bowed or curtsied, before quickly returning to their work.

"This is too easy," I murmured to Denny, my heart pounding in my throat. "Why isn't anyone stopping us?"

“If you think your defenses are impenetrable, there’s no reason anyone would be inside who isn’t meant to be,” Denny replied. “Plus, this isn’t just a mansion anymore. It’s a war camp. I bet they’ve got strange shifters coming in and out of here all the time.”

“So, we just...what? Stroll on in, grab Ryder, and run?”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” Denny said, still far too nonchalant for my liking. This man has nerves of fucking steel. “Come on. Let’s see if it works.”

Just off the kitchen, there was a narrow stairway. I never thought I’d say it, but I was glad Felicity had made me watch *Downton Abbey* with her so many times.

“Servants’ staircase,” I told Denny. “This should lead up to the rooms.”

He nodded, and we mounted the stairs. Each step was so short, half my foot hung off of each board as we ascended.

At the top of the stairs, we found a long, wide hallway that reminded me of the one at Morrow Manor. Doors lined either side of it, until the wall to the right gave way to a larger set of stairs.

If there was a nursery anywhere in this mansion, this would be the most likely location.

I looked to Denny. He was sniffing the air again. With a finger pressed to his lips, he gave me a single nod.

He had Ryder’s scent. Melony hadn’t misled us.

My son was here.

I let Denny take the lead. He paused at each door he passed, breathing in slow and deep, before moving on.

As we neared the end of the hall, my skin began to prickle. The hair on my arms and the back of my neck stood on end. A nauseating sensation stirred in my stomach. It reminded me of when I was a kid and ate all my Halloween candy in one sitting, except instead of just wanting to throw up, I wanted to throw a punch.

I knew this feeling. I'd almost forgotten it, but Samuel Morrow's aura was unmistakable.

The farther down the hall we traveled, the more intense his aura grew. Denny was moving a little more stiffly now. Though he made no sound, I knew he was feeling it too.

The aura peaked as we passed what must have been the master suite. Its double doors were larger and grander than any of the others, and slightly ajar.

"—stinking ferals," sneered a haughty male voice from within. "Honestly, cousin, when I said I would open my home for your allies, I thought you meant the kind that bathed."

A pouring sound followed. Liquid being tipped into a glass.

"A necessary malodor, my friend." That was Samuel's voice. I held my breath as I listened. "Believe me, I have no more love for the ferals than you do. But where that Striga bitch failed us, Houghton has succeeded. He's worked hard to turn this many, and we must give them quarter. When he's back from his trip to the South, he'll have even more to add to the ranks. And we cannot pretend they do not have their uses."

"We can't?" The first voice again. "So far, all I've seen them do is chew my throw pillows, piss on my rugs, and drink my wine. Those criminals he picked up in Texas do seem delightfully dangerous, I'll admit. I wouldn't want to make enemies of them. And they are easier to deal with now that we've put them out of the mansion and onto the grounds. But I fail to see the prudence in this feral army business. I have no use for untrained mutts."

"I do," Samuel replied. "Your wine will keep them under control for now, but in three months, they'll all be unrecognizable. Fully turned, blood-bound to Houghton, and prepared to march on Evergreen. Their training won't matter then. They'll obey his every command."

The nausea in my stomach rose into my throat, clinging to my esophagus.

Quincy hadn't just begun forming his army of feral wolves—he and Samuel had plans in place to use them against my people. Against my pack. I wasn't sure what blood-bound meant. I'd never heard that term before. But Samuel sounded so certain that it would allow Quincy to command this army of ferals he was building.

Three months. It wasn't enough time.

“That's fine and well, Samuel,” the first voice scoffed. “But honestly. All this for a woman? A human, no less?”

My blood began to simmer. Felicity. They were talking about my mate.

Samuel snorted. “She births alphas. In pairs, Gregory! Bred properly and managed well, she could solve everything. Through her, we could remake our world.”

In a flash, the simmer in my blood rose to a boil. I wanted nothing more than to push through those doors and leap at Samuel's throat. He wouldn't have such disgusting things to say about Felicity if he was drowning in his own blood.

Denny elbowed my ribs and shot me a stern look. He cocked his head toward the rest of the hallway, as if to say, *we need keep moving, jackass.*

I clenched my fists, letting the short crescents of my nails dig into the heels of my palms. I rode out that small pain, pressing harder and harder, until it replaced the anger boiling in my bones.

He was right. If I stopped to kill Samuel now, no matter how much I wanted to, then all was lost. Even if I succeeded, if he was at all able to alert his faithful before his last breath, we'd be outnumbered a hundred to one.

Samuel Morrow, I thought to myself, pinning his name to a curse in my mind's eye. Someday, I will kill you, you greasy old fucker. Someday, I'll make you pay for all of this. I'll choke the light from your eyes myself.

At the very last door in the hall, Denny nodded.

This was the one. It had to be. There was nowhere else to look.

As quietly as I could, I twisted the handle and opened the door.

The room was dark, illuminated only by the embers in its hearth. The walls were plain. A changing table and crib marked it as a nursery, but the crib was empty.

My heart sank. Where was Ryder?

I couldn't bear the thought that this would be yet another dead end.

Denny nudged me with his elbow and pointed to the left. In the corner nearest to the door, a woman sat slumped in a rocking chair. Her hands were folded on top of her belly as she slept.

I recognized the fringed shawl around her shoulders, the gray curls piled atop her head, and giant glasses perched at the tip of her nose.

Dr. Lizbeth Ellington, Felicity's ex-OBGYN during our time trapped at Morrow Manor. The woman Denny claimed was wanted for forcibly sterilizing human women in shifter relationships. The woman Samuel had ordered to cut my twins out of Felicity on the day of their birth, and who had seemed all too eager to comply.

Next to her was a bassinet, almost identical to the empty one that was waiting for Ryder back at the lodge.

I glanced at Denny. He nodded again. A shadow would have made more noise than we did as, together, we crept toward the bassinet.

Ryder, my son, lay nestled inside it. He wore a soft-looking blue onesie and a tiny stocking hat. His eyes were closed, but his tiny belly rose and fell slowly with every breath he took.

My boy was fast asleep.

My chest caved in. He was bigger than I remembered. In the time we'd lost, he'd grown. But still, he was so small. So

innocent. Sleeping so peacefully, oblivious to the den of evil he'd been placed in. Anger and elation warred inside me, then collided with my grief. But soaring over all of it was a tsunami of love and hope that wiped out everything else in its path.

What did we do anything for if not for love?

I glanced at Lizbeth. She didn't stir. Still, my hands hesitated over Ryder's body.

I wanted nothing more than to pick up my son and clutch him close to my chest, but I needed to approach this with care. Getting into Du Pont Manor had been shockingly easy, but getting back out undetected with Ryder would require a little more finesse.

If he began to cry, or even fuss, we risked waking Lizbeth. And if we woke her, the rest of the manor would soon be on us like flies on dogshit.

My hands trembled. It never should have scared me so much to hold my own son, but here we were.

Carefully, I scooped him into my arms. My heart had never pounded harder, but as I drew him to my chest, he didn't make a sound.

Relief. Denny and I shared another nod. We were in the home stretch now. I played our route back to myself in my mind: out the door, down the hall, down the stairs, through the kitchens. Outside, across the lawn, down into the tunnels, up through the exit where Dylan was waiting for us on the other side.

Denny moved first, heading for the door to hold it open for me. I fell in behind him, willing Ryder to stay silent, sleeping. I wished there was some way to explain to him how imperative it was that he didn't cry out, but he was so small. So new. Babies cried because they were hard-wired to believe that if they made sound, they would receive comfort.

A two-month-old child was never meant to be in a position like this, where even cooing in his sleep could be the difference between freedom and imprisonment. Life or death.

I was halfway to the door when it happened.

An ear-splitting crackle of explosions shattered the silence. Bright lights flashed through the windows outside.

Shit.

I froze. So did Denny.

Was the manor under attack?

The cheers that sounded a second later said otherwise.

Outside, over the ferals' camp, someone was setting off fireworks.

And in her rocking chair, Lizbeth stirred.

"What..." She looked around wildly, but the lights were already gone.

The only disturbance left for her to see was Denny and me, standing in the nursery, taking Rylan away.

"You!" Lizbeth hissed, staggering to her feet as she glared at me.

She threw herself forward, her dress tearing and fringed shawl slipping to the floor as she shifted.

"Go!" Denny hissed, rushing to meet her.

He shoved my shoulder and launched himself at Lizbeth as I turned and hunched to protect Ryder.

They clashed together as I stumbled toward the door.

Chapter 26

Felicity

I'd never felt at ease in liminal spaces, those places in the world only meant for passing through. Gas stations, with their harsh lighting and bathroom tile floors, made me mildly and inexplicably nervous. I'd never crossed a bridge or an overpass without an intrusive thought cutting across my mind: what if it collapses right now? Or now? What if crumbles and sends me tumbling to my death? I even still held my breath when I drove through tunnels, counting the seconds like a little kid. One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, my eyes focused on the light at the end.

Waiting was a liminal space. Not as creepy as an empty gas station late at night, maybe, but a space we'd lived in for far too long.

And I'd never waited harder than I had tonight.

I stood at the window near the front door, cradling Rylan and scanning the drive for headlights. Over the last few hours, dozens of vehicles had arrived: family, friends, pack members, all here to join us as we braced for whatever news returned from the Du Pont estate. They came bearing casserole dishes and salad bowls covered with cling wrap, bags of chips and cases of soda, even some beer and wine. While I was tempted by the opportunity to claim a bottle of red and drink myself into a stupor between this moment and the one when Xander returned to us, I fought the urge.

Whatever happened would happen. But if I stayed sober, when he brought Ryder back to me, I could put him to my

breast. I could feed him, burp him, and lay him next to Rylan so they could finally fall asleep together again, side by side.

“Come get something to eat, baby girl.” Nana put an arm around my waist and tried to pull me away from the window, but I didn’t budge.

“Watched pot never boils,” Connell said sagely at Nana’s side.

“I’m fine.” I kept my gaze locked on the night. Everyone who had any reason to be here tonight had already arrived. The next pair of headlights to show up at the end of the driveway would be the Impala’s.

I hadn’t heard anything from Xander since he left with Denny and Dylan, but I had to believe they’d make it home.

Nana Jordan and Connell stayed by my side for a little while before peeling off. They were replaced by Gena, then Gena and Kingston, then others. The world moved around me. I stayed still. In my helplessness, magical thinking took hold: if I were to leave the window, or even to look away from it for a moment or sit down, the universe would take it as a sign that I didn’t care enough. No lights would appear at the end of the driveway. The front door would stay shut.

My vision focused and unfocused. Distantly, I was aware of how insane I must have looked, with knees locked, swaying like I was in a trance as I stared into the night.

At one point, Nana came over and took Rylan from me. “Time for bed,” she told me, and though I missed the comfort of his tiny body against my chest, my arms were grateful for the relief. I’d held him for so long, my muscles ached.

The hours ticked on and on, uncaring. I watched for so long, I began to feel the night staring back at me. In the darkness, visions of a dozen horrible futures danced, leering. *What if Xander’s hurt? What if he was killed? What if Rylan was never there at all?*

Just as I was beginning to fear that all hope was lost, I spotted a pinprick of light in the heavy darkness. It was so small at first, I didn’t trust it. What if it was a trick of my

eyes? But as it grew larger and larger, so did the feeling in my gut.

This is my mate. He's come back to me. He's brought our son.

"They're here," I whispered, so quietly no one else could possibly have heard it.

It was only then that I realized how hard I'd been fighting back the urge to scream.

"They're here!" I shouted the words loud enough to stir the whole lodge.

I raced out the door as the pack stirred behind me. I ran to the Impala, reaching it just as Xander opened the door.

As soon as he climbed out, he was in my arms. I had no words to describe the relief that flooded through my being.

Where words were concerned, he only had one.

"Backseat," he breathed as I buried my face in his chest.

I released him to glance through the Impala's rear side window. There, fastened in his car seat, was my son. Our son. I tore the door open and unbuckled him with shaking hands.

A sob left my throat as I lifted him up and clutched him to my chest. I pressed my nose to the soft blue cap on his head, holding him as tightly as I dared.

"Thank you," I choked out through my tears as I turned to Xander once again. I pressed myself into his arms, and he wrapped them around me. "Thank you for finding him. Thank you for coming back."

"Of course I came back, Cheeks," he whispered. "I'll always come back to you."

We stayed together like for a time, our bodies encasing Ryder in a protective bubble. My chest was so full, my heart felt like it was about to burst.

Only after my tears subsided a little did I pull back and really look at Xander. I'd been so desperate to have my body against his, his appearance had barely registered at first.

But now I could see the tangles in his hair and the exhaustion in his eyes.

His face and chest were splattered with blood.

Abruptly, my heart twisted. I glanced back into the dark of the Impala, but it was empty now. Denny and Dylan weren't with him.

Xander had brought Ryder back alone.

"Whose blood?" I rasped.

"They're alive, Cheeks. That's all matters." Xander glanced at the crowd that had formed on the front porch and shook his head. "Let's just get the boys upstairs, okay? I know everyone will want to celebrate, but... I can't. Not right now."

He placed his arm around me, and I hugged Ryder closer to my chest. The crowd parted, staring at us in awe as we climbed the porch steps. A few people reached out to touch us as we moved past, as if we were something holy. Relics that would bless the faithful. Living saints. But no one tried to hold us back.

Without another word, we retreated inside together.

Back in our room, Nana Jordan sat on the bed. Rylan's bassinet was next to her, and he was sleeping soundly inside it.

Nana looked Xander up and down, then glanced at Ryder in my arms. She gave Xander an approving nod.

"Welcome back. I'll leave you to it." She rose and headed for the door, pausing only to press a kiss to Ryder's stocking cap, and another to my cheek.

She closed the door behind her. For the first time since the boys were taken, our little family was all in the same room together, alone.

Xander had gone quiet. He helped me get Ryder into a fresh diaper and a clean onesie, then excused himself to take a shower. As thrilled as I was to have Ryder back, it was tempered by the unanswered questions of what had happened to Dylan and Denny, and why Xander had come home splattered with blood.

“Come here,” he said when he emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel. He sat down on the bed, then patted the mattress next to me. “Sit with me for a little while.”

I moved to him, doing as he’d asked.

“Are Dylan and Denny okay?”

“Dylan’s fine,” Xander confirmed. “Not a scratch on him. He’s with Denny at Evergreen General right now.”

“Denny?”

“He’s been in better shape, but he’ll survive.”

“Is that whose blood was on you, then? Denny’s?”

“A little. Mostly, though... It was Lizbeth’s.”

“Fuck. She was there?”

“Samuel assigned her to nursemaid duty. I’ve got no idea what she ever saw in him, but... Well, she won’t be seeing anything in anyone now.”

I frowned, trying to make sense of his words. “You blinded her?”

“No, Cheeks. I killed her.” Xander’s voice was ragged, somehow deep and high all at the same time. He leaned forward, bowing his head. “I’m not proud of it. It felt like shit, even as I was doing it. But she shifted and pounced at me. Denny... he jumped in front of us. He took the blow. Then they were on the floor. He was using half his strength to keep her jaws shut so she wouldn’t make any noise, and the other half trying to keep himself from crying out as she clawed at him. And I... I couldn’t let her kill him, Cheeks. It was kill her, or let him die, so I made the choice.”

I reached up to his temple, brushing his hair away from his face. “It was no choice at all. You did what had to be done.”

“Maybe so, Cheeks. I just...” He choked on his words and had to swallow before he continued. “I don’t wanna keep things from you. Understand that. Just, maybe, if it’s okay with you, you could just let me hold you for a while. And maybe we don’t talk about this again.”

“It’s okay with me,” I said, placing my arms around him. “I understand.”

* * *

The next few days were trying, though they should have been some of the best days of our lives. Somehow, the story broke that we’d recovered both of the boys. Reporters descended on the lodge, enough of them that Xander had made the call to stop using the pack to keep them off our land, and had simply called the police instead.

The threat of being taken to jail for trespassing scared most of them off. The others, we placated with a press conference. Being in front of the cameras again wasn’t how I would have chosen to spend our first days now that our family was whole, but after we gave the reporters the sound bites they were so hungry for, they eventually began to lose interest and fall away.

One bright, warm day, we went to visit Denny at Evergreen General. His wounds had been serious, but he’d pulled through. As we neared his room, we found a familiar face already waiting outside.

“Special Agent Cordova,” Xander greeted her dryly.

“Mr. Miller. Miss Jordan,” she replied. As she looked to Xander, she arched an eyebrow. “You and your friend Mr. Kerry have a fascinating knack for breaking rules, you know.”

“You here to arrest us?” Xander asked.

“I’m not. I just... thought I would pay Mr. Kerry a visit. I heard he was wounded during the recovery of your son.” She pursed her lips. “I was very sorry to hear about his injuries, and very glad to learn that you all made it out all right.”

Xander’s expression was stony and unreadable. “Didn’t have any other choice, did we?”

“No, you didn’t.” Cordova’s sigh was heavy. “We failed you. The Du Pont estate was off limits to me and my team. If you hadn’t decided to go there on your own, I don’t believe

your boy would ever have been recovered. I'm just sorry I couldn't help more. I don't mean to make excuses, but..."

"Your hands were tied," I finished for her.

She gave me a solemn nod.

"You know, if you ever want to talk about the order you received, the one about leaving those old money packs alone, we know a reporter who might like a word," Xander told her.

She tilted her head to the side. "Do you, now?"

Xander asked for her notebook and a pen. She handed them to him, and he wrote down Ava-Rose's information. I wasn't sure if she'd reach out, especially after she tore the page out, but at least she pocketed it instead of throwing it away.

"I'll leave you to it, then," she said in parting. "Good luck to you both."

Inside Denny's hospital room, we found him in high spirits.

"What're a few more battle scars?" he joked, gently patting the bandages wound around his abdomen.

"I suppose I owe you hazard pay," Xander said.

Denny nodded. "And overtime."

I couldn't tell if they were kidding or not.

We stayed to chat with him for a while. I noticed that he and Xander were both avoiding speaking about what had happened. Killing Lizbeth seemed to weigh heavier on Xander than I'd imagined, but I suspected there was something else they were holding back. Dylan had felt it as well, and knew as little about it as I did.

"I figure it must be something they saw inside the manor," he'd confessed. "I don't know what it could be, though. I was only standing watch."

Several times as we sat there in Denny's hospital room, I considered asking them about it. I didn't like being out of the loop. Ultimately, I decided against it. Hearing Xander and

Denny joke and banter and snip at each other had created an air of normalcy that I wasn't entirely prepared to shatter.

They'd fill me in when they were ready. Until then, I could live with being kept in the dark for a while.

We were just saying our goodbyes when I heard a familiar voice bellowing from out in the hall.

"Where is my daughter?"

My shoulders slumped and tensed all at the same time. Like a levy had just broken within me, all the energy in my body rushed out, leaving me immediately spent.

I should have known better than to think that just blocking my mother's number on my phone would ever be enough.

"Get away from me! Don't you touch me! I have every right to be here, how dare you—" Whatever poor soul had been trying to hold her back must have lost their grip, because a second later, Mom burst into the room.

Her face lit up when she saw me. "Felicity! My baby! Good God, sweetheart. When I saw you on the news, I caught the first flight here. I've been looking all over for you! You've had me worried absolutely sick, and—"

I sighed. "Hey, Mom."

"Eliza?"

My head whipped around to Denny.

"Denny?" Mom's eyes grew wide. Her jaw dropped for a moment, then her face twisted abruptly with rage. "Well, I never. You worthless, conniving—"

"Stop it!" I stepped between her and Denny, tired as I was confused. My mother's very presence here was like a flash-bang in a crawlspace. How did she know Denny? How did he know her? In that moment, it hardly mattered. She'd only just made her entrance, and I was already done. "I am sick of your name-calling. I'm sick of your tantrums, and your thinly veiled, ham-fisted manipulations, and I am especially sick of hearing you put other people down. This man risked his life to bring my sons back to me. I don't know how you know each

other. I don't care. I will not have you bursting in here and speaking poorly of him or at him. Do you understand?"

"Eliza," Denny said again, his voice heavy with warning as Mom marched toward me.

"Oh, don't you Eliza me, Dennis Kerry," she snapped at him before locking her gaze on me. "You don't know how we know each other? You don't care? What do you think, Denny? Should you tell her, or should I?"

"Eliza, just slow down for a second," Denny groaned. "For fuck's sake—"

"I'll do it, then. You see, Felicity, this man has been lying to you. He's not who you think he is." She glared in Denny's direction. "You wear so many hats these days, don't you? Shifter, bounty hunter, savior of poor, defenseless babies... and yet, you never thought to come back to Evergreen and meet your own."

"That's enough, Eliza," Denny said.

"Agreed." Xander pushed between us, grabbing my mother by the shoulders. "Why don't you step outside until you can calm down?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked, looking helplessly between Denny and Mom.

"He's your father," Mom spat. "Your no-good, lying, cheating—"

There were more insults, but they turned quickly into protests as Xander pushed her out the door and down the hall.

I was left alone in the room with Denny, every muscle frozen.

"Is it true?" I asked him, and he nodded.

My heart lodged in my throat. After all the days we'd spent together, all the time he'd spent with Xander and me while we tried to find our sons...

"When did you know?" I forced the words out. It suddenly felt ridiculously hard to breathe.

“Sometime between the second I first knocked on your door, and the second you opened it.”

“From the start, then.”

“Yeah. From the start.” He lowered his head. “I’m sorry it came out like this, though. And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, for what it’s worth.”

“Denny... You didn’t tell me at all,” I pointed out. “If my mother hadn’t showed up and lost her shit when she saw you... would you ever have told me?”

“Honestly?” He shrugged. “No idea.”

My jaw dropped. His candor stunned me.

For thirty-two years, I’d gone without a father. Without even the knowledge of whether he was alive or dead.

Now that I finally knew who he was, I wasn’t sure which was worse: that he was a liar, or that he was willing to tell such harsh truths.

“Look. I already spent the last month lying to you by omission. I’m not gonna lie to you now,” he said. “I’ll never know if I ever would’ve told you or not. I thought about it a couple of times. Always decided against it. Maybe, with enough time, I would’ve spilled the beans. Maybe not.”

It was a sort of honesty, I guessed. Harsh truths. I preferred it to lies.

I moved a little closer to him. “What stopped you?”

“Guilt, mostly. Awkwardness. I dunno, kid, you were already going through so much shit. Part of me didn’t want to dump more on your plate. Another part of me thought that sounded like a pretty good excuse.” He snorted. “Plus, what if I told you and you hated me?”

“I still might.” It was an empty threat. Denny had bled for me. He’d thrown himself in the way of danger to keep Xander and Ryder safe.

That counted for a lot.

“I didn’t cheat on your mom, for the record,” Denny said. “We were never together. Not like that. She came on pretty strong to me that spring I was here in Evergreen, working the Houghton case—and I’d just realized I had a blood curse that meant I’d never know my mate. She was pretty, I was reckless... it was doomed from the start.”

“Did she tell you about me?”

“Nah. We had a fight the night I left. She was pissed that I was leaving, but I’d told her from the start I wasn’t looking for anything serious and that I had another job to get to...” He shook his head. “Messy. She told me to never speak to her again, and I thought she was off her rocker, so I took her up on it.”

“That...does sound kind of like Mom,” I admitted. It was the same pattern her other relationships had taken, too. It made me wonder, though... if I’d been an accident, and Mom had never planned on speaking to Denny again, why had she kept me? She’d never had another baby, not even with the men she’d married.

Was it because Denny was a shifter? Had she hoped I’d become one, too?

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. That thought made me a little sick.

No wonder she’d always been so disappointed in me. She’d probably been hoping for an accessory. A little wolf-cub she could play dress-up and fetch with, show off for tail-chaser clout. Haul around in her Birkin bag like a little purse-dog.

“Does this mean I’m... half-wolf, then?” I asked, and Denny tilted his head to the side thoughtfully.

“Have you ever shifted?”

“No. Of course not.” I might have put this puzzle together a little more quickly if I had.

“I’d say you’ve got wolf in your blood,” Denny said. “Having twin shifters—alphas, at that—tells me you got a little of it from me. Might even explain why it took Miller so

long to have his moon dream about you. Any shifter kid of mine would've inherited my curse. But since you're human..."

"A half-wolf with a half-curse." *With a mother who only ever half-loved me. Ha.* "Yeah. I guess that would make sense. Couldn't even be a whole disappointment."

Denny frowned. "I'm not disappointed in you. You're a better kid than I ever dreamed of. What's there to be disappointed about?"

My lips curled into a bitter smile as I brushed his kind words away. "You're not my only parent."

"Ah. Shit. Your mom?"

I nodded.

"What was she like when you were growing up?"

"Not the best parent, admittedly, or the most stable. I spent a lot of time being told I wasn't good enough. Spent a lot more of the time just...alone."

"Yeah, then maybe you should hate me," Denny said. "If I'd known you existed, I wouldn't have let any of that shit fly. I would've been there for you. From day fuckin' one. That's the truth. I know that for sure."

I believed him. The hurt in my chest was beginning to unwind itself, falling limp.

"You didn't know, though," I said. "Mom never told you, so what could you have done?"

Denny merely shrugged.

"Where do we go from here?" I asked.

"I guess that's up to you, kid. Now that the cat's out of the bag, I'm feeling a little less chickenshit about all of this," he said. "Xander's already met my family. Maybe you can, too, someday. They liked him. They'll like you even more. Especially my mom. If you cropped your hair short and started wearing leather, you'd look just like she did when she was young."

My lips quirked. "I think I'd like that a lot."

“I wouldn’t mind being in your life, either,” Denny said, a little more tentatively. “Wouldn’t mind making up for lost time.”

“I’ll talk to Xander. And I’ll think about it.” There was no telling how he felt about all of this. I was sure he’d agree with whatever I decided, but this wasn’t just my life Denny would become a part of if he stayed. It was Xander’s, too, and the boys’. “It might be nice.”

He nodded, falling silent again. It was a little awkward, but then again, things were bound to be, weren’t they?

I’d take the strangeness of this moment over the dread of the last month any day.

“Do you want a hug?” I offered.

He chuckled. “Mind the bandages, and I could handle that.”

Carefully, I folded my body over his and draped my arms around his neck. He wrapped his around my waist, hugging me much tighter than I was hugging him.

“You’re a good kid, Felicity,” his voice rumbled in my ear. “I’m glad you’re mine.”

I swallowed hard, determined not to cry. It was no small feat.

Those were words I never thought I’d hear, especially not from any parent of mine.

“I think you could be a good dad,” I choked back. “I’m glad you’re mine, too.”

Chapter 27

Xander

In the end, I let the hospital's security guards deal with Eliza. She left me with a parting gift before they took over: a set of nice, deep teeth marks on my hand.

It was worth taking a little nip from a human. Felicity had made it clear that she didn't want her mother in her life, and I had no problem enforcing that.

A short while later, Felicity emerged from Denny's room.

She wasn't crying, which was a good sign.

"What'd he say?" I asked.

"He apologized. I think he meant it, too. And he asked if he could be part of the boys' lives. Part of my life, too."

"What'd you tell him?"

"That it wasn't entirely up to me. You get a say in this, too."

I frowned. That complicated things, didn't it? I liked Denny. He seemed like a good guy. I wouldn't say that we owed him for getting the boys back. Despite being Felicity's father, I was pretty sure he'd still be sending me a bill. But in a very real way, I owed him my life.

"I don't like that he lied to you," I said.

"No," she agreed. "That was shitty of him. But to his credit, he didn't know I existed until he showed up to take the boys' case."

"And he did help us find them."

“He did.” She cracked a smile. “He’s charging you an arm and a leg for it, too.”

“Ah, that doesn’t matter. Can’t have your father going destitute, begging for money on the street corner and sleeping beneath a bridge, now, can I?” I joked.

“I suppose not.” She wrapped her arms around me and pressed her cheek to my chest. I stroked her back.

“You know, of all the people Mom’s ever been with, he’s among the better of them, at least,” she murmured.

“Yeah, just think. Thomas could have been your dad.”

She made a retching sound. “Ew.”

I laughed. “Yeah. Denny’s looking pretty good now, huh?”

“He’s my dad either way, I guess. Should we throw him a bone?”

I smiled down at her and brushed my fingers over her cheek. “Somebody’s gotta.”

* * *

With the boys safely home, and Denny recovering, I would have liked to put my feet up. Relax. Spend time with my family, kiss my mate, and enjoy our hard-won peace.

But that peace would be short-lived. I knew it. Denny knew it. And, I suspected, the others had begun to catch on as well.

“You’re just gonna have to tell them,” Denny warned me the day he was discharged from the hospital. I wanted a moment to pick his brain, so I’d gone to pick him up on my own. Felicity and I agreed that Denny should stay at the lodge for as long as he wanted. Denny had accepted the offer—at least in part because he was the only other person who knew what was yet to come.

“I know, and I will,” I assured him. “I just needed a few days. I think we all did. The last storm’s barely passed us, and

another's already on the way.”

“That’s the thing about being a leader,” Denny mused. “People think it’s all prestige and glory. In reality, you’re just the world’s most depressing weatherman.”

We drove back to the lodge in comfortable silence. It was one of Denny’s better traits that I’d come to appreciate. He didn’t feel the need to fill the space with meaningless words.

When he did speak, he knew exactly the right thing to say.

“Wanna talk about it?” he asked.

“Talk about what?”

He snorted. “I know you’re a natural blond, Miller, but that’s no reason to play dumb.”

I gripped the steering wheel a little tighter, clenching my jaw. Apart from my confession to Felicity on the night I brought Ryder back, I hadn’t spoken to anyone about what had happened when Lizbeth attacked Denny. Felicity had been kind enough to honor what I’d asked of her afterward and hadn’t brought it up again.

But another one of Denny’s finer traits was that he had no problem being the asshole addressing the elephant in the room when it suited him.

I still hadn’t completely forgiven him for not telling Felicity that he suspected she was his kid.

After a while, I sighed. The pressure that built in my chest every time my mind touched the memory of that night wasn’t going to go away by ignoring it. I couldn’t ignore it. It was like a canker sore, a tooth abscess. I couldn’t help poking it with my tongue, even though poking at it made it hurt.

“I’d never killed anyone before,” I admitted quietly. “And I know it was the right thing to do, and I know I don’t regret it. I never will. I know I’m being a pussy about it, even—”

“Fuck off,” Denny grunted. “You’re not.”

“You don’t think so?” That surprised me. I knew Denny had been in Afghanistan. I knew he’d likely seen combat.

Rabbit and Beauty—the sigmas on his team—they'd seen it, too. Furthermore, they specialized in dealing with ferals, and there was only one way to deal with a feral in the end.

I didn't expect to find sympathy from a battle-hardened veteran. I wasn't sure why I was confessing my feelings to Denny, except that he'd asked.

“Look, Miller. Killing someone, even in self-defense... it changes you. It changed me. Life is a precious thing. You only get one shot at it. Taking that away from someone, even an enemy, it's nothing to take lightly.” He spoke softly, keeping his eyes on the road up ahead. “Just take heart in the fact that if you're wrestling with what you've done, and what you had to do. It doesn't make you a pussy, Miller. It means you're not a sociopath. It's not supposed to be easy. That's the thing that separates a weak man from a strong one, in my book. The weak do what's easy, even if it's wrong. And even if it's hard, the strong do what's right.”

I swallowed and nodded, unsure of how to respond to that. Denny let the silence linger again. It enveloped the interior of the Impala all the way back to the lodge.

“You know,” Denny spoke up again as I parked. “When you're ready, you might think about talking to someone about it. If not me, then maybe a therapist. I could even recommend you some groups if you want.”

I grimaced. “I don't think therapy is really my style.”

“Yeah, mine neither,” Denny admitted. “In that case, talk to your mate. When you're ready. If she's anything like her old man, she can take it. She'll want to, even.”

“I'll think about it.”

Felicity *would* want to, I realized. For a man who'd been absent for her entire life, Denny knew his daughter pretty well. But that was a problem for another day.

“There's something else you and I should talk about first, though.”

“Yeah?”

“Ferals,” I said. “I need you to tell me everything you know.”

* * *

The next day, another trip was made to Evergreen General. This time, it was Dylan in the driver’s seat. He went to pick up Ma and Dad. Ma’s condition had stabilized enough that her doctors had approved her being discharged. It was finally time for her to come home.

Once they were settled in, I gathered everyone in the lodge’s lounge. Gena pulled up a chair so she could sit next to Kingston. Nana Jordan and Connell had arrived arm in arm. Dylan sat in the center of the couch, bouncing his knee impatiently like he already suspected the nature of the announcement I’d be making. Ma and Dad sat off to the side, away from everyone else, and Felicity was perched in an armchair, our sons cradled in her arms.

Denny had been right... about a lot of things, actually. But most importantly, he was right that we needed to warn the pack about what we’d witnessed at the Du Pont estate.

I was dreading making the announcement. There was just no avoiding it.

If Quincy and Samuel wanted war, then whether we liked it or not, we’d be going to war.

Denny stood by my side as I recounted every detail I could recall. The small army camped on the Du Ponts’ lawn, some of them criminals, some only teenagers. The news that Quincy had found a way not only to create feral wolves, but somehow bind them to his command.

“My father was killed by a feral,” Denny said solemnly. “Our pack was plagued by them for the last years of his life. Ever since, I’ve made it my business to track and eliminate as many of them as I can. Bullets won’t stop them, save for a headshot. At best, they might slow them down.”

“Zombie rules,” Kingston muttered under his breath. “Shit.”

“Their behavior is violent and erratic,” Denny continued. “They’ve spent too long in their wolf forms, and the more often they shift, the harder it is for them to shift back until they can’t do it anymore. Once that happens, every element of their humanity gets eaten up and burned away. They’re not in control of themselves. All they want to do is kill. If you’re lucky, you only have to deal with one at a time.” He cleared his throat and lowered his gaze to the floor. “Lucky is something we’re not.”

“These won’t be your average ferals,” I continued. “They’ve formed up in some pretty formidable numbers, and those numbers are only going to grow. Plus, if what we overheard is true, Quincy has found a way to command them. Blood-bound, Samuel called them.”

“Blood-bound...” Dad looked around the room with confusion. “Any of you ever heard of that? I sure haven’t.”

One by one, they all shook their heads.

“It’s something I’ll look into,” Denny said. “Until then, we need to prepare.”

“In three months, Samuel and Quincy believe they’ll be ready to march on Evergreen.” I scowled. “Quincy wants to annihilate our pack, and Samuel wants to take Felicity for himself.”

“Fuck that,” Kingston swore. “It’s not happening.”

“Fuck that indeed,” Nana Jordan agreed. “My baby girl already has a mate.”

On the faces in the room, I saw anger. And fear. Only Felicity kept a neutral expression. I’d told her all of this the night before. She’d had time to prepare.

“If they’re coming for us—for me,” she said, “Then we should be ready for them.”

I nodded in agreement. “We need to ask the pack to get ready for war.”

The discussion that followed involved little resistance. Our family was brave. Together, we could be strong. We could give as good as we got.

Only Dad and Ma hesitated to add in their opinions. As the others fell silent, finally, Dad cleared his throat.

“Your mother and I...” He reached over and took Ma’s hand. She flinched a little but didn’t pull away. “There will be bad blood between her and the pack. If there’s war coming to Evergreen, she can’t be here for it.”

“They’ll see me as a traitor,” Ma said after a beat. Her voice was scratchy and meek. “I can’t undo the things that I’ve done. Least of all to you, Felicity.” Ma met Felicity’s eyes. It was the closest thing to an apology she’d given Felicity. Felicity returned the look with a tight nod. The closest thing to forgiveness Ma could expect. “We can’t risk undercutting your leadership by being here, Xander. Your father, they might be able to forgive, but not me. I’ll only drag you down.”

“They’ve got a point,” Denny agreed. “Anyone the pack can’t trust is only gonna be singled out in the days to come.”

“We’ll find you somewhere safe to go, then,” I promised them. “The rest of you... We need to be ready to fight.”

* * *

On a moonlit night in mid-September, the pack gathered at the lodge.

I paced in the den, trying to block out the sound of the crowd gathered in the lounge just outside.

Normally, public speaking didn’t rattle me this badly. But normally, public speaking involved spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations, not rallying an entire pack to face down a bloodthirsty feral horde.

“What do I tell them? What... what am I even supposed to say?” I asked, raking my fingers through my hair. “The world’s fucked, die with me here or die running?”

“Fuck, no!” Kingston said. “You tell ’em to pull up their big boy panties and prepare to kick some feral ass.”

I blinked rapidly. Well, that was one way to put it.

“Could just plagiarize something,” Dylan suggested. “Napoleon’s got some stuff you could steal. Just change all the parts about the republic to the pack, no one would be any the wiser.” Felicity and I both shot him a stern look, and he held his hands up in mock surrender. “What? It’s what I’d do.”

“Just speak from your heart, kid,” Denny suggested, as if it was that simple. “That’s all anyone can ask of you.”

I went to Felicity, who sat perched on the couch that Kingston pulled out every night to use as a bed. I dropped down to one knee and took her hands in mine.

“What do I tell them, Cheeks?” I asked. If there was anyone’s advice I trusted right now, it was hers.

Yes, she was human, but somewhere in her bloodline, we knew Denny’s wolfishness lurked.

If she’d been born a shifter, she would’ve been an alpha. The finest one I’d ever known.

She dropped my hands and cupped my cheeks, turning my face up toward hers.

“The truth,” she said, her voice ringing clear as a church bell. “You tell them the truth.”

Chapter 28

Felicity

The lodge hadn't been this full since our mating ceremony. Even during the pack runs, some families chose to spend the full moons under their own timbers, on their own lands. Since bringing the boys back, every member of the pack had been here at least once, even if only to tickle our sons' chins and wish us well—but never all together like this, all at the same time.

From the hearth of the fireplace in the lounge, all the way to the foyer, pack members had gathered. Every single one. While Xander had tried to determine what he'd say, the grazing table that we'd set up had been picked clean. Every glass in the lodge was half-full and in hand.

Now, the pack was hungry for something more substantial.

As we stepped out of the den, the murmur of conversation dropped off. All eyes were on us.

Or, more specifically, on Xander.

He was their alpha. Their leader. In times of peace, Xander's duties toward the pack mostly involved settling small disputes between members, officiating over ceremonies, and maintaining good relationships with the alphas of the pack's allies. But the silence his presence commanded now spoke volumes about how important he truly was to these people.

We were no longer in times of peace. Now, Xander was the man who would tell them what was coming. The one who would decide how we'd respond when it arrived.

“Come with me,” Xander whispered, taking my hand. “If I’ve gotta do this, I want you by my side.”

“Of course,” I agreed, and he folded my fingers in the crook of his arm like he was escorting me to a ball.

Kingston and Dylan fell in behind us as we crossed into the room.

Along the back wall, the council of elders had already taken their places in front of the hearth. When we passed them, each inclined their head to Xander, then to me.

It was a striking reminder. Xander was the pack alpha, yes, but I was his mate. His partner. A human, but not an outsider any longer. If he was king of the Evergreen wolves, then I was his queen.

At the center of the hearth, Xander lowered his arm, and my hand slipped away. He turned to me, took my face in his palms, and kissed my forehead. His lips burned where they pressed, like he’d branded an imprint of them right between my brows.

With a great breath, Xander turned to face the pack.

“As I stand up here in front of you all tonight...” Xander gaze swept across the crowd. He sighed. “I don’t know what any of you are expecting me to say.”

The silence was deafening. Maybe the pack didn’t know the answer to that, either.

Xander cleared his throat and continued on. “Maybe you want me to tell you that we’ll hunt down our enemies and crush them between our jaws—make ’em pay for all the grief they’ve caused us,” he suggested. “Maybe, you want me to soothe your worries, put your fears to rest. Tell you that there’s nothing to worry about, and we can all go on with our lives.” He shook his head. “I can’t do that.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd. He was telling them the truth, they must have realized that.

But the truth was harsh. It wouldn’t be an easy thing to hear.

“There will be more worries up ahead,” Xander told them. “There will be things to fear, things we *should* fear. And we do have enemies. Plenty of them. Strong ones. If we fight them, I can’t even promise you that we’ll win.”

“Bad start, bad start,” Kingston groaned beneath his breath.

“Jesus Christ,” Dylan hissed next to me, “He’s not addressing his troops. He’s giving a fucking eulogy!”

“Be quiet and let him work,” I hissed back at them. “He’ll bring it back around.”

“He’d better,” Kingston grunted.

Dylan shot him a tense look. “If he doesn’t, the pack will walk.”

I scanned the crowd. No one was headed for the exits yet.

He had time.

“For most of my time as your alpha, we’ve been a pack at peace. That’s what we’ve been for decades. If I had my way, we’d stay at peace for centuries yet to come,” Xander said, his voice louder now, deep and clear. “But for the last year, we’ve also been a pack in crisis. We’ve been attacked. We’ve been stolen from. We’ve been threatened, mistreated, abused, and still, we’ve banded together. We’ve fought hard to keep our peace.”

He paused. The pack was silent again. Within that silence, his next words rang out like a gunshot.

“We can’t afford that anymore.”

In the crowd, I watched faces pale. Bodies squirmed with discomfort. Someone—I couldn’t tell who—swore audibly in a whisper heard by a hundred ears.

“I don’t want a war,” Xander went on, keeping their attention focused on him. “I’ve got no hunger for it. There are people here among you tonight who’ve experienced it firsthand, and they’ll tell you exactly what I’m telling you now: there’s no glory in war, and very little justice. Nothing to love and a hell of a lot to despise. But sometimes we don’t get

to decide whether or not a battle is coming. We only get to decide if we run, or roll over, or if we stand and fight back.

“Somewhere out there tonight, Quincy Houghton is hard at work. He’s building an army. Filling his ranks with feral wolves. Some of them are the cruelest, vilest of our kind. Murderers. Rapists. Terrorists who want nothing more than to destroy everything they touch.”

The murmur in the crowd was sharper this time, more anxious. Feral wolves were dangerous in their own right. Feral wolves who had been capable of such terrible things, even before they completely lost their ability to control their darkest urges—Xander hadn’t been lying. There was plenty about that to fear.

“Some of them are only teenagers,” Xander added, his lips curling with disgust. “Some are just kids. He’s gathering up the desperate, the forgotten, the alone—those who have lost their way, and those who have nowhere else to go. He’s forcing them to abandon their humanity and become the same kind of monster that he is. He’s asking them to kill for him. To die for him. I don’t know much, but I know that asking a child to lay down their life at your say-so—that’s evil.”

“Damn right it is,” Kingston whispered.

“I don’t roll over for evil men.” Xander’s green eyes shone bright. “I don’t run from them. When they arrive, I intend to fight. Stand with me or don’t. I won’t ask you to kill for me. I won’t ask you to die for me. What I will ask you is this: do you want to live in a world ruled by the actions of evil men?”

“Hell no!” Kingston was the first to shout it, a fierce battle cry. It was met with a quiet rumble of agreement.

In that moment, I knew Xander had them.

“Do you want to raise your cubs in a world controlled by the madness of evil men?” Xander asked next, his voice rising an octave.

“Hell no!” came the response—not just from Kingston this time, but from Dylan and dozens of others in the crowd as well.

“When evil men come to our town, when they knock on our door, do we run and hide?” Xander shouted.

“Hell no!”

“Do you we let them in to take whatever they want from us?”

“Hell no!”

“Or do we—” Xander paused for a split second, grimacing. “Pull up our big boy panties and kick some feral ass?”

“Holy shit,” Kingston breathed as a fearsome cheer rose up from the crowd. His fist beat victoriously against the armrest of his wheelchair. “He said it. He said my line!”

Xander didn’t wait for the cheer to die off before he spoke again.

“When Quincy Houghton brings his army to Evergreen, we’re gonna tear from his brows the laurels he’s won. We’re gonna teach the world what happens when you violate the territory of the Evergreen pack. And when we’re done—then, we’re going to have our goddamn peace.”

At this, the response from the crowd was loudest of all. Fists were raised, chests thumped, and howls split through the air against the sound of a hundred voices, all rising in unison.

At my side, Dylan was smirking and shaking his head.

“What’s so funny?” I asked him, and he laughed.

“That last bit,” he revealed. “He was paraphrasing Napoleon.” His smirk broadened as he stared up at Xander. “Guess he listened to us after all.”

* * *

The hours following Xander’s speech were a blur. The low murmur that we had interrupted when we entered the lounge before Xander’s speech had swelled into an energetic din of voices, all clamoring to be heard. Every pack member wanted

to shake Xander's hand and offer their assistance toward the war efforts.

We hadn't even fought a battle yet, but the pack was ready to prepare for our first.

I stayed by Xander's side as he gave Dr. Garcia his blessing to begin training people on dressing wounds and applying emergency first aid. The idea was floated that Gena and I might be able to help. I wasn't opposed to that idea, though I tried not to think about how, if my services as a nurse were required, it would likely be because someone we knew and loved was hurt. The Riley boys offered their hunting and butchering services, which Xander also accepted. If we were forming a militia, we'd need to feed one. Becca Reed, blushing and stuttering, offered to serve as Xander's personal secretary, which he politely declined. When Ambrose Reed stood before Xander, he lowered himself to one knee and pulled a bowie knife, which he moved toward his own arm like he intended to slice his skin. Xander relieved him of the knife just the nick of time.

"No more blood oaths, Ambrose." Xander passed the knife off to Kingston, then helped Ambrose back to his feet. "We've had enough of those. You'll follow me because you want to, not because you're bound to it."

Ambrose protested but eventually relented. He had little other choice since Kingston refused to return his knife.

"Do you think it worked?" Xander asked me once the wave of eager pack members streaming toward us finally ebbed.

"Xander..." I stared up at him with confusion, then gestured to the pack. "Every one of these people is behind you on this. If you ever doubt that, just look around."

Xander's gaze followed the path of my hand. The lodge was still full. It bustled and swelled with life. There had been no walkouts, no protests. Even the bristle of fear and worry that had hung in the air before Xander had spoken had dissipated.

He pursed his lips, his brow furrowing as he turned his gaze back to me.

“It’s hard to look at them,” he admitted. “I feel like I’ve just sentenced them all to death.”

“I don’t think you have. The opposite, actually.” I raised my hand to his cheek, brushing my fingertips against the stubble of his beard. “You reminded them what they’re living for.”

“Mm. Maybe so.” He folded his hand over mine and pressed my fingers to his skin a little harder. “But when Quincy attacks... if we fail...”

“Can you just shut up and drink your own Kool-Aid for a second?” With my free hand, I slapped his other cheek gently. “Quincy wants three months to build his army. Three months is what he needs. But, Xander, your army is already here.”

He drew back slightly. “Are you saying you think we should attack first?”

“I’m saying that if you can harness this energy here tonight while Quincy is still scrambling to get his shit together...” I cast a glance over my shoulder at the crowd, where toasts were being raised to an Evergreen victory. “Maybe you can’t prevent a war. But when it starts, we’ll be ready. More ready than he is. We can be organized and collected and strong. We start off holding the high ground.”

He had a peculiar look in his eyes and stared down at me for a long while. I couldn’t tell if he thought what I had just said was the most brilliant thing he’d ever heard, or the most ridiculous.

But then his irises blazed. He pulled me to him and kissed me hard.

“The high ground,” he breathed when he broke the kiss. “You’re right. Of course you are.”

Xander turned, his hand blindly seeking mine as he scanned the crowd. When he spied Kingston and Dylan, he headed toward them, tugging me along behind him. He only paused when the path between the bodies became too narrow,

and he had to turn his body to shield mine from the crush of the crowd.

We were pushed together by the others, our bodies so close our hips were touching. Xander placed his arms around me protectively and hunched over me slightly, encapsulating me. If it had begun raining inside the lodge at that moment, I wouldn't have felt a single drop.

The pressure of the crowd decreased only a few seconds later but Xander lingered. His eyes were closed, his chest rising against me. He squeezed my hands extra tight.

"Thank you," he whispered. "For being mine."

Then we were off again. Whatever fire I'd lit under his ass had clearly caught.

"You two. Over here," Xander barked to Dylan and Kingston, then cocked his head for them to follow.

He led us out the double doors to the back porch, where the night was warm and humid.

"What's up?" Dylan asked. His eyes darted around, scanning the backyard like he was anticipating trouble.

"You told me once you didn't mind being my hand," Xander said to him. "That still true?"

Dylan held out both his hands, palms up. He glanced at each, then at Xander again. "God gave me two of 'em," he said. "Don't know what else I'd use them for."

"And you." Xander turned to Kingston. "You still worried about being useless?"

"Comes and goes," Kingston grunted, tipping back in his wheelchair, balancing precariously. "Why?"

"Because I need you. I need you both. Macy, too. In the months to come, I'll need you all." He clapped Dylan on the shoulder. "I'm giving you command of a squad. Take six of our pack members. Ones you can trust. You'll need some strong fighters, but don't count out survival skills, either."

"Cool," Dylan said. "What for?"

“Feral wolves won’t be showing up for a fight in pick-up trucks. They won’t be pulling into the driveway spoiling for a brawl. When they come from us, they’ll come by land, from whatever direction we least expect. And no one knows this land better than us.”

Dylan arched a brow. “Are we talking guerrilla warfare here?”

“Might be. Can you handle that?”

Dylan smirked. “Of course. I’ll pick my six tonight and let you know the names. One of the Riley boys, I think. Mandy and Luke Spencer wouldn’t be bad picks either.”

“When you’ve got them, I want you to talk to Denny. He’s a sigma like you. He’ll be able to give you some guidance on where to go from there.” Dylan nodded, and Xander turned to Kingston again. “King?”

“I’m not gonna be leading any squads any time soon, Xan,” Kingston pointed out, placing his wheels back on the ground. “Besides, I’m a beta. All I’m good for is taking orders.”

“And I have one for you,” said Xander. “But that’s not all you’re good at, King. You’ve spent the last decade sowing your wild oats all across New England.”

Kingston’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t think I’m gonna be able to fuck my way to an Evergreen victory, Xan.” His gaze wandered to the glass doors, where the lodge was still brimming with energy inside. “Besides, me and Gena... She’s not my mate, no, but things are getting serious anyway. I’m not gonna throw that away just for—”

“I’m not asking you to sleep with anyone.” Xander rolled his eyes. “I want you to start working on outreach. You’ve got connections beyond our established allies. Talk to ’em. Let ’em know what Quincy is up to. What’s coming to Evergreen could easily end up on their doorsteps if we fail. See if they’ll throw in with us.”

“You’re asking me to reach out to my exes?” Kingston barked a laugh. “Jesus. That’ll be awkward.”

“Do you think they’ll hear you out?”

Kingston tilted his head from side to side, considering. “Maybe some of ’em, yeah. The White Mountain girls, I can almost guarantee. They’re not much for monogamy, so there’s no bad blood. And they already love Felicity. Plus, they’re all alphas. We could stand to have a few more of those around.” His expression firmed with confidence. He nodded. “Okay. I’ll hit them up first, then see who else I can rustle up.”

“Good.” Xander bowed his head and sighed. “I never wanted any of this, not for any of us. But Felicity pointed it out to me.” He squeezed my hand in his. “Quincy’s taking three months to prepare for whatever he’s got planned. That means we’ve got three months, too.” He shook his head. “We can’t squander them.”

“We won’t,” Dylan promised. “Whatever Quincy throws at us, we’ll be ready.”

“More than ready,” Kingston agreed. “We’ll throw it back at him twice as hard.”

Chapter 29

Xander

Time was a fickle thing. Sometimes it moved like cold molasses. A second could last an hour. An hour felt like a day. Other times, it was like trying to hold water with a sieve.

When the boys were missing, every moment I'd spent waiting had felt like I was contained inside a bubble. Within, time had been an agony that seemed to stretch on without end, while outside, I watched the world move on at breakneck speed.

Now that they were back with us where they belonged, I was determined to pop that bubble. Even things out. Take control of the time we had.

A few days after I rallied the pack, I pulled up at the lodge in Clinton's blue Impala. It still didn't drive as nice as my truck, but I had to admit that the muscle car had grown on me. At this point, Uncle Clint was going to have a hard time convincing me to give it back.

Out on the lawn, I found Denny, Dylan, and Kingston. They were huddled up, gathered around something. As I approached, hands in my pockets, Dylan glanced up and noticed me.

"Where are you coming from, looking so smug?" he called out.

I smirked as I felt the lump in my pocket, the velvet beneath my thumb. It was strangely heavy for how small it was.

I could tell them, I supposed. It wouldn't hurt anything. Denny might have something to say about it, but Dylan and Kingston would be thrilled.

To say it out loud might jinx it, though. After the year we'd had, I had no desire to test my luck.

"Just running some errands," I answered, which was technically true. "What are you up to?"

Dylan grinned. "Look at what Denny brought us."

He shifted aside to reveal a rifle laying across Kingston's lap.

"A gun?" I looked to Denny, immediately wary. "I don't mean to look a gift horse in the mouth here, but—"

"Bullets won't stop the ferals," Kingston finished for me. "We know."

"It's not that kind of gun," Dylan explained.

Kingston lifted the rifle up and held it out for me to inspect. I took it into my hands with care.

"Rab had it shipped up from Texas for us," Denny said. "He's always liked to tinker with this kind of stuff. Normally, we use darts to take down ferals, but it's not very efficient if you're dealing with more than one at a time. So, when I mentioned we'd probably be looking at an army of them..." Denny shrugged. "There's nothing Rab likes more than a challenge. He says to tell Felicity hello."

"I bet he does." I studied the rifle, turning it over in my hands. "How many rounds does this hold?"

"Ten, for now," said Denny. "But Rab's working on a prototype for something bigger, maybe one that can take belts. It'll take a while before it's ready, but—"

"We've got time. Send him my thanks." I glanced between Dylan and Kingston. "You two know how to use this?"

"Haven't tried it out yet," Kingston said. "But I figure if I can get accurate with it, I might be of some use to you when it's time to fight. Even without shifting."

“And we were thinking that me and squad, perched up the trees, might be able to take down a whole lot of them before they even make it to our front lines,” Dylan added.

“If you’re okay with it, I can get the schematics from Rab and start working on arming your troops,” Denny offered.

I nodded and passed the rifle to him. “Make it happen.”

A non-lethal option that could still effectively take down a feral wolf was exactly the kind of thing we needed right now. Most of the pack was made up of civilians. Not all of them would be willing to kill, and this gun would mean they didn’t have to.

Kingston had a point as well. He wasn’t the only one who couldn’t rely on shifting. Gena, Nana Jordan, Nadia, and Felicity all deserved the right to defend themselves. If worst came to worst and our forces fell, Rab’s rifles might be the only things standing between them and the feral horde.

Not that I particularly enjoyed thinking about that, but I’d rest easier knowing they had something.

“Have any of you seen Felicity?” I asked, glancing around.

There was no response beyond some shrugs, but the Flamingo was in the driveway, which meant she was here.

Down the slope of the drive, I spotted Nana Jordan sitting with Connell on a picnic blanket. They were on baby duty today, and had the boys between them, enjoying tummy time. A little farther out, near the tree line, Dylan’s guerrilla squad were shooting the shit. The Riley boys were teaching Katie Graves how to roll cigarettes. Mandy Spencer was nestled beneath her husband’s arm.

No sign of Felicity out here.

I parted ways with Denny and my brothers, heading toward the front porch. Inside, I suspected I’d find Gena and Nadia hanging around the kitchen. If Felicity wasn’t with them, they might know where she was.

I had something to show my mate. Two things, actually.

I was eager to see how she might respond.

As I jogged up the ramp I'd built for Kingston, the front door opened, and my search ended.

Felicity grinned up at me, dressed in a sundress with big golden sunflowers printed on it. Her hair was tied back from her face with a deep green linen scarf.

"Hey, you." She held her arms out for me as I closed the gap between us, then wrapped them around my neck.

I wound my own arms around her waist, drawing her close for a kiss.

"I was just looking for you," I confessed.

"Fancy that. I was looking for you, too." She cocked her head toward the door. "Come on. I want you to see what I've been working on."

With my hand in hers, she guided me toward the dining room. The big table there was covered in papers, with markers and highlighters scattered across it. A tablet with a little keyboard attachment was propped up by its case to one side.

"What's all this?" I asked, picking up one of the papers. It had an October calendar printed on it. Felicity's neat, pretty handwriting filled every date box from margin to margin in tiny but remarkably readable cursive.

Dinner: Slow cooker carnitas, elote salad, grapes, one line read. On the date beneath it, she'd written: Breakfast: scrambled eggs with spinach and feta, hash browns, oranges.

"I've been meal-planning," she said with a smile. "What do you think?"

"It's ambitious. And impressive," I said, continuing to scan the suggested meals. Just reading them made my stomach rumble. "Looks like a lot of work, too. What did you need to do all this for?"

She laughed. "Well, I've had a little taste of what it's like to run this lodge like a castle now. Trust me. It's necessary. Look here." She grabbed the tablet and pulled up a beautifully organized spreadsheet. "If we order dry goods in bulk—staples like beans and rice and flour, even coffee—it costs more up

front, obviously, but it's actually cheaper in the long run, and they'll keep for a long time."

I tracked the columns of the spreadsheet, which compared the prices for different goods at different retailers, nodding approvingly.

"That's sharp of you, Cheeks."

"It's important," she said simply, whisking the tablet away. "I don't know how deep your coffers run—"

"Pretty deep," I said. "This is kind of what they're for."

"—but if we're going to be caring for the whole pack, then it doesn't make sense to be making grocery runs twice a day," she continued, placing some more papers into my hands. "I've got ordering schedules and ingredients lists whipped up, too. I haven't figured out what to do with all the venison the Riley boys have promised us yet, but I will. Plus, Ed and Lola from the Farmer's Wife? I've talked to their sons. They're willing to give us good prices on whole cows and pigs, and if the Riley boys don't mind doing the butchering, we'll save money there, too. We might need to invest in a couple of freezers, but—" She glanced up at me and realized that I'd stopped looking at her papers several sentences ago. I only had eyes for her. "What are you looking at me like that for? I'm not being silly."

"No," I agreed quietly, admiring the sparks that went off in her eyes at the notion. "I don't think you are."

"I'm being proactive," she insisted. Her nose wrinkled adorably as she shoved my hip. "Although, when you look at me like that, it makes me a little afraid that I'm overdoing it." Her brow furrowed. "I'm not overdoing it, am I?"

"No, Cheeks. You're...you're fucking incredible." I moved closer, taking her face into my hands. When I turned her gaze up toward me, her eyes looked even larger and more beautiful than ever. I smoothed the worry from her brow with my thumbs. "Everything I ever could have wanted from a mate and more."

"Good." She grinned, looking pleased. "I want to be a good mate for you."

“There could never be any better.”

“And I want to be a good leader, too,” she said earnestly. “For the pack. I know I’m not an alpha, or even a shifter—not really. But—”

“You are perfect. Honestly.” I chuckled and reached into my pocket. “I’ve got something for you, too.”

Her mouth fell open as her gaze wandered to my side.

“Xander Miller, I swear to God, if you pull out a ring—”

“Nah,” I said a little sheepishly, shifting my fingers away from the blue velvet they’d been brushing up against. The dining room probably wasn’t the right place for this, anyway. Instead, I pulled out a slip of paper and handed it to her. “Here.”

Felicity’s brow furrowed as she studied it. It had been folded over several times, but once she unfolded it, the letters were still pretty clear.

“Debt paid in full,” she read in a slow, breathy voice. Her hazel eyes glistened as she raised her gaze to meet mine. “The money owed to those bookies... You took care of it?”

“Told you I would.” I smirked. “You’d be surprised how cagey those bookies were about giving me a receipt. I made them sign it, see?” I pointed to the splotchy scrawl of a signature at the bottom, right beneath my own name.

“So, it’s finally over. Grandpa Jordan’s debts...they’re gone.” She sounded like she could hardly believe it.

Now, I was doubly glad I’d gotten the receipt. She held the proof right there in her perfect, beautiful hands.

“I needed them gone. The next few months are gonna be rough ones, Cheeks. I won’t pretend otherwise. But I figure, if we can get through them without any more ultimatums from your mother,” I said. “Or bookies showing up at Nana’s house with baseball bats, or—”

She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me so hard I saw fireworks.

“Xander?” she whispered, stroking my cheek when she pulled back.

I blinked, still dazzled. It never failed to amaze me how I could be stone fucking sober, and kissing her could make me feel drunk. “Yeah?”

She smiled up at me and trailed a hand down my chest. It traveled toward the buckle of my belt, where her fingers hooked into the waistband of my jeans.

“I want you to take me to bed.”

I swallowed hard, just once, as my cock stiffened against denim. I nodded.

She didn't have to ask me twice.

I swept her up into my arms, carrying her bridal style. She earned herself a chuckle from me as she struggled, kicking her feet, and holding onto my neck for dear life.

“I'm too heavy!” she cried out through a laugh. “You'll drop me!”

I rolled my eyes and held her a little tighter, just to give her peace of mind. “I'm not gonna drop you, Cheeks. You barely weigh anything.”

It was true. The stress of the past two months had eaten away at all those delicious curves I loved so much. I took her up the stairs just as easily as I would have carried a suitcase. Luckily, she was shaped more to my liking than a Samsonite, and even nicer to hold.

A Samsonite, for instance, lacked tits. As I tossed Felicity down on the mattress of our bed, hers bounced gorgeously, barely contained beneath the fabric of her sundress. I palmed one as I folded my body over hers, lowering my mouth so when she moaned, I could stifle it with a kiss.

Her tongue tangled with mine, hot and slick. She tasted like strawberries, the last of the summer. The sweetest. I moved my hips between her thighs, grinding against her. Soon, I was the one moaning for her, and she was the one stifling the sound with her mouth.

“God, I want you.” I pulled back and breathed the words like a prayer.

“I want you, too,” she said, her eyes darting to the side. “But the door?”

I glared in its direction. It was still open. An annoyance, but something I could easily fix. I took off my shirt and kicked off my boots as I went over to close it, undoing my belt on the way back.

Someday, we’d have our own house. No one in it but me and her and our cubs. Even then, I supposed we’d need to relegate our friskier activities to closed rooms, but the boys had grandparents. Godparents. Aunts and uncles. They wouldn’t be there all the time.

And when they weren’t, I’d fuck Felicity with every door open. Every window, too. I’d have her without a care in the world.

“Happy?” I asked, crawling onto the bed with her once more.

“Yes, actually,” she preened. “Now, come here and kiss me like that again.”

My cock throbbed with need as our lips and tongues met once more. I rode the mounting wave of desperation for as long as I could bear it.

There was something so simple about this, effortless and inevitable as walking outside in a storm and feeling rain on my skin. She made my entire body ache with wanting, from my toes to the roots of my teeth.

Our lives hadn’t exactly been easy ones. Our love—that hadn’t been so easy, either. But wanting her came so naturally, it was a wonder I was able to do anything else.

Wanting Felicity Jordan was the easiest thing in the entire world.

I worked off my jeans and boxers while I continued to kiss her. It would’ve been more practical to get up and take them off while standing, but I didn’t think I’d survive it. I needed

my mouth on her skin. It was as imperative as my heartbeat, as being able to breathe.

My own breath quivered, humid against the valley between her breasts. I'd never thought of myself as a man who'd do anything close to quivering before I had her kiss and lick and bite, yet here I was. She made a surprisingly delicate thing of me. She could turn me to a puddle with no more than a look. I took her wrists in my hands, pinning them down, just to make sure she hadn't stolen all the strength from my muscles as well. She hadn't—but it didn't matter.

The more I fought to prove how strong I was now, the more I felt my lust pulling me apart.

“Taste me,” she panted. A command.

I'd never fancied myself the type to follow orders, either. Usually, I was the person giving those. It wasn't an alpha's place to be on the receiving end.

But this was my mate. I didn't just obey her. I reveled in the chance. Hungrily, my mouth roamed to the neckline of her dress. I tore it back with my teeth, nuzzled at her breast until I worked it free of her bra, and took a nipple into my mouth. It was stiff beneath my tongue, pearly with sweet milk. As I sucked, she gave a delicious whimper. I moved to the other, giving it the same treatment.

I could have done that for hours if it wasn't for the insistent hardness of my cock. It throbbed for her, urging me to end the foreplay and sheath myself inside her heat.

I took it in my hand as I kissed farther down her body, undoing the tie of her sundress so I could part it as I descended.

Taste me, she'd ordered. This was no time for insubordination.

There was still more of her to taste.

I settled between her thighs. Even just breathing her in created a fresh wave of intoxication. She was sweeter than any wine, and left me more delirious than any whiskey. I didn't

even need to drink alcohol anymore. Any time I needed a fix, I could just get drunk on her.

With my tongue, I explored her folds. It would have been a thrill to tease her, to make her whimper and mewl and beg, but I had no patience for it. Precum poured out of my cock, so much and so slick that I had to tighten my grasp on my shaft just to keep it from slipping out of my grasp.

Instead of teasing her, I latched onto her clit, working it with determination. Her arousal pooled at my chin. I only paused once before I made her come—and even then, it was only to laugh when I realized that she tasted like strawberries down here, too. Tart and sweet, all at once.

“Inside me,” she panted, her fingers in my hair. She tugged my head up and stared me down with a panicked seriousness. “Xander. Please. Fuck me now.”

The urgency in her voice roused me in a way nothing else ever had. We could have been separated by a field littered with barbed wire, broken glass, and land mines, and I would have crawled happily through all that and worse just to have her here like this, beneath me like this...

Begging for my cock like *that*.

Breathlessly, I moved my body over hers. Normally, I had to run miles and miles before my lungs started to burn like this. Being out of breath was a strange sensation for me... except when it came to my Felicity.

This woman took my fucking breath away.

I braced my weight on an elbow as I positioned my cock against her. The honeyed heat radiating from her cunt was as intoxicating as her scent on my lips. I closed my eyes and breathed in as deeply as I could, my nostrils flaring as I savored the moment.

It was an incredible fucking thing to want someone so bad that it hurt. That desperate, Godawful, divine aching—it was a feeling I’d only ever felt for her.

“*Xander*,” she said forcefully, twisting her fingers into my hair. With a firm tug at my roots, she reminded me that I

wasn't the only one wanting.

I opened my eyes again, grinning as I panted. "You're so fuckin' hot when you're bossy, you know that?"

She opened her mouth, probably to snap something clever back at me, but I didn't give her a chance. I placed the tip of my cock at her entrance and pressed into her. Instead of a saucy retort, she rewarded me with a goddess-like moan.

My own voice quickly joined hers. I pushed in an inch, then another. What little air I had left in my lungs left my throat in ragged groan. She was so slick I could have easily filled her with a single thrust. The pleasure would've killed me, of course, but I would have died a happy man.

Instead, I took her slowly, forcing myself to hold back. She was so small, so delicate, that I feared I would break her with even a single wrong move.

At least, until she reminded me that I couldn't have been more wrong. Felicity tugged at the roots of my hair again, wrapping her legs tightly around my waist. Her pillowy lips pulled back as her expression grew fiercer.

"More," she growled through her teeth. "I want all of you. Every inch."

At that, all self-control was out the window.

I thrust hard and deep, giving myself over to my longing, my animalistic need. Giving myself over to *her*. She cried out in response but not for long. I stifled the sound with my mouth, crushing my lips forcefully against hers.

We fucked in a way that felt only half-human. Consciousness faded away. Instinct took hold. She dug her nails into my shoulder blades, pounded my chest with her fist, sank her teeth into my lower lip, and raised her hips to meet my every thrust.

She reminded me that, deep down, I was more than just a man. I was a wolf.

And somewhere deep down, in a way, so was she.

She came for me with an arch of her back and a thrash of her shoulders, like every wave of orgasm was kickstarting her heart. After a short, gasping recovery, she arched beneath me again, even harder. I joined her this time, spilling myself into her until every ounce of energy fled my body, and my body was left slumped over hers like a dying man clinging to an altar.

I rolled aside before I crushed her, and she moved to lay her head on my chest with the same heady exhaustion.

I'd never felt so alive.

"I love you," I rasped once I'd caught enough of my breath to speak. They were the only words my brain could conjure up or string together, and that suited me just fine. "God, Felicity, I love you so much."

"I love you, too," she whispered back to me. I glanced down at her and found her face aglow with the light of her smile.

I grinned back at her, thinking of the second gift I had waiting for her. It was there in the pocket of my jeans still, abandoned in the middle of the room.

If all it had taken to prompt this kind of delight from her was a piece of paper, I couldn't wait to see how she'd react to a ring.

Chapter 30

Felicity

Over the next two weeks, we continued to fortify, readying ourselves for attack.

On the best days, the threat of war was a distant and evasive thing, like a weird, faint smell you only noticed when you opened the fridge, then forgot once the door was closed. Other days, the frenzy of preparation and worry consumed every hour, and all I could do was take the boys into their nursery to draw them away from it all. Sometimes, with Nana or Gena, or with Macy and baby Nora. Sometimes alone.

On those days, I rocked them in the chair Xander had built for us. I sang them every song I knew: “American Pie” and “Jungleland” and even “It’s the End of the World as We Know It”—at least, until Xander overhead me and mentioned that it might be a little too on the nose. I stared down at their little faces, mapping every feature, every expression, imagining what they might look like when they were older, when all the bad was behind us and there were only clear skies up ahead. Memorizing them so I would never forget.

It was a balmy day near the end of September, and the gravel drive at the front of the lodge was full of vehicles. There was a buzz of activity at the lodge, inside and out.

In the kitchens, Gena and Nadia were under Nana Jordan’s wing, prepping supper for a small army while Connell and Kingston hovered around in hopes of flirtatious smiles and treats. In the backyard, Dylan and Denny tested out their new dart guns, shooting blanks at straw dummies sewn into the shapes of wolves.

I sat with Xander on the back deck, watching the darts fly. Rylan and Ryder were in their bouncers by our feet. Xander's toe rocked Rylan while I rocked Ryder.

"I wish this could last forever," I whispered, shifting to lay my head in his lap. The sun was already sinking in the sky. It had been setting earlier and earlier lately. Soon, we'd be starved for daylight. "We won't get many more days like this."

"Yeah. Autumn's here." Xander took a deep breath and released it. "I can smell it in the air."

"I'll miss the summer," I admitted. "But I mean... these peaceful days. Days where we can do this without worrying about being attacked or ambushed. Days where we can just enjoy being a family again."

"Yeah, s'pose that's true as well." Xander snorted and stroked my hair. "It's almost funny, you know."

"What is?"

"I spent so long trying to prevent it," he explained. "We both did. We tried diplomacy, we tried reason, we tried ignoring it all and waiting for better days to come." He sighed. "But it takes a lot of people to stop a war. Only takes one person to start one."

His face twisted with concern. It was a look I'd grown accustomed to lately. Whenever I glanced at him, there was always a good chance I'd catch that same hard line in his lips, that same furrow in his brow.

"At least you know it's not your fault," I said.

"Maybe. Maybe not." He gazed off thoughtfully toward the tree line. "I play it back in my head sometimes, you know. There are so many moments where, if I'd done just one thing differently, it could have changed everything. If we'd come back to Evergreen sooner, or if we'd never gone to Portersmith in the first place. If I'd put Quincy down when he showed up at Macy's mating ceremony. If I'd just sat and talked to Ma instead of pushing her away."

"If you'd never asked me to be your fake girlfriend?" I kept my tone light and teasing. We'd been over this before.

“I should’ve asked you to be my real girlfriend,” he scoffed. “Should’ve asked you that eighteen years ago, the day we first met.”

“You didn’t know me back then,” I reminded him.

“I didn’t need to. I was a sixteen-year-old boy.” Like a blessing, his lips shifted into a smile as he turned his gaze back down on me. With the tip of his finger, he tapped the tip of my nose. “And you were hot. That’s all I needed to know.”

“I wasn’t hot.” I smiled despite the way his words made my eyes roll. “Not back then.”

“You were,” he insisted. “Still are. You always will be.”

Somewhere between Xander’s certainty and my unwillingness to challenge him about it again, silence settled between us. Xander stroked my hair idly, and I closed my eyes, relishing his touch. It was a more comfortable silence than those we’d shared after the boys were taken. There was a relaxation in it, an acceptance woven from understanding and love.

I knew Xander’s inability to change the past often weighed heavy on him. Sometimes, I wondered if that was how all leaders felt.

For all I knew, I had been hot. Xander seemed to think so, at least, which meant I had nothing to gain from arguing the point.

“For a long time, I didn’t think I’d ever have kids, you know,” Xander finally said. It felt like the continuation of a thought, some part of a conversation he’d only been having with himself before he remembered that I couldn’t read his mind.

“I didn’t think I’d have them, either,” I said, glancing at the boys near our feet. They were utterly cherubic while they were sleeping, so sweet and darling it made up for every moment they were surly and wailing. Beyond them, Dylan was hollering up a storm while Denny laughed and thumped him on the back. One of their darts must have finally hit true.

“Well, you wouldn’t,” Xander mused. “When you’re raised the way we were, it’s hard to imagine someday, isn’t it? So much easier to think *nah, never*. Not for me. But then, suddenly, one day you were mine, and the next, you were pregnant.”

“We weren’t very careful,” I admitted. He was right—it had all happened so fast.

“We were inevitable.”

I opened my eyes and stared up at him, admiring the way the setting sunlight brought out the red notes in the golden stubble along his jaw. His gaze was raised to the skies, like he could see something floating in the clouds, far beyond my own sight.

“Once it was happening, all I could think about was how badly I wanted to protect you all. Stop the worst from happening. Ensure the best. How bad I wanted you, and them, and to have you all in a time of peace.” His laugh was rough and forced. “Nothing ever turns out exactly how we imagine it, huh?”

“Could be worse.”

“Could be better, too,” he lamented. His thigh shifted under my head. “Sit up for a second, will you?”

Obliging, I righted myself. Clearly, something was on his mind. Whatever it was, I’d do it the courtesy of facing it with a straight spine. He was right, after all. We couldn’t keep taking things lying down.

“There’s no turning back time now,” Xander said, taking my hands and looking down at them very sternly. “But the way I figure it, future’s still up for grabs.” His eyes flicked up to meet mine. “Right?”

“Absolutely,” I agreed. We had to believe that much was true. If we didn’t, there was no point.

To my surprise, he smiled.

“I’m gonna win this war for you, Felicity Jordan,” he vowed. “And when it’s over, I’m gonna make you my wife,

just like I made you my mate.”

I found myself grinning back at him, the memory of Xander at our mating ceremony fresh in my mind. “Naked, then?”

He laughed. “That would be a crowd pleaser. But, no.”

He scooted closer to me, bending one knee and stretching his other leg out. He drew me as near as our bodies would allow, bowing his head down and resting his forehead against mine.

“I wanna see you in a big, stupid white dress, with your hair curled and a flower crown on top of your head, all draped in diamonds and veils.” His voice was low, like we were two children in the schoolyard telling secrets. His green eyes glimmered, barely an inch away from mine. “I wanna wear a stupid, uncomfortable tux, and spend the whole day worrying about spilling food on it—and I probably will, and you’ll give me hell for it, but I won’t mind. I wanna see you walk down the aisle toward me, piano playing “She’s the One”, and you’ll be looking at me, thinking, *this fucking guy*.” His smile broadened as he voiced my imagined words, giving imaginary Felicity an undue amount of derision toward him in her voice. But as he spoke his imagined response, his tone shifted to pure, happy-go-lucky disbelief, punctuated by a crooked smile. “And I’ll be looking back at you thinking, *this fucking girl*.”

Slowly, I squinted at him, suddenly suspicious.

I had a sense that he was getting at something here. But, to be fair, I’d been wrong about this a few times before.

“Is this...a proposal?” I asked, still wary.

Xander reached into his pocket and drew out a small velvet box. “Guess it is.”

He held it between us, our bodies curved over it like the archway of an old church. With a flick of his thumb, the box popped open.

“Oh my God.” I glanced between Xander and the ring, still half-certain that this was some kind of ruse. “Xander, it’s...it’s

beautiful.”

“It’s yours.”

I drew back a little. I nearly had to just to take the whole thing in. “It’s huge.”

He chuckled. “I’ll never get tired of hearing you say that, you know.” My hands trembled as Xander plucked the ring from the box and slid it onto my finger. “When I went to the jeweler, I asked ’em, ‘What’s the biggest, most expensive rock you’re legally allowed to sell me?’ and they said, ‘Manhattan, probably’, but I didn’t think that would fit on your finger. So, this was the next best thing.”

I held my hand up to the waning sunlight, impressed by how pleasantly heavy the gold band felt against my knuckle, enthralled by the way the fat diamond caught the light.

“It’s so...*tacky*,” I blurted out, then burst into laughter.

“We can always take it back if you want,” Xander offered, reaching for it.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” I yelped, pulling my hand away. I clutched my fingers against my chest protectively, even as Xander made half-hearted swipes at the ring like he was planning on repossessing it. “I love it.”

He grinned. “Good. I want everyone to know you’re off the market from a mile away.”

“They’ll know it from space.”

I held my hand out again, lower this time. For the better part of the year, I’d known that I was Xander’s mate. For shifters, that was the most significant and profound thing two people could be. I was already the mother of his cubs, the woman who’d stood at his side while he roused his pack to ready them for war. By comparison, wife was such a silly title—something that would only matter when it came to the real estate on my left ring finger and taxes.

Like usual, we were doing this ass-backward.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Unable to stop smiling, I wound my arms around his neck and crushed my lips to his. The ring box clattered to the ground as he took my jaw in his hands, deepening the kiss. He breathed out as I breathed in.

“What are you two sucking face about?” Denny barked.

We broke the kiss to find him marching toward us across the lawn.

I flashed my ring at Denny while Xander grinned. “We’re engaged.”

Denny bent down and peered at the ring—as if it was possible that, in his eyes, the diamond was actually too small.

“Didn’t think you should ask her father for permission first?” he asked Xander.

“Would you have given it?” Xander countered.

Denny scratched his chin. “Nah,” he admitted. “Am I invited to the wedding?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Someone will need to walk me down the aisle.”

Denny straightened. His cheeks flushed slightly as he rubbed the back of his neck. “I...I’d like that. You know—”

Denny cut off abruptly. He raised his nose to the wind, his shoulders tensing as he sniffed the air.

“Get the boys,” he ordered without moving. “Get back inside.”

“Why—” I started to ask, and Denny turned to me.

“Go!” he snapped. “Now!”

“What’s going on?” Xander asked. He gathered up Rylan as I took Ryder into my arms.

“A wolf. I don’t recognize the scent.”

“Not from our pack?”

Denny sniffed again and shook his head hard. “No.”

A chilling howl rose from the trees. A moment later, another followed as, and in tandem, we scrambled to our feet.

“Those yours?” Denny asked.

“Luke and Mandy. They’re on patrol. That’s the alarm.” Xander passed me Rylan, shifting his body to shield us from the trees. He shot a glance over his shoulder. “Dylan!”

“I’m coming!” On the lawn, Dylan was already gathering up the dart gun. He slung it over his shoulder and sprinted our way.

“Inside,” Xander told me sternly. “Send Connell out, then lock the doors.” He kissed me quickly, then pushed me toward the house. “Go.”

As I rushed to the porch doors, they opened for me. Gena stood in the doorway, arms outstretched. I passed her one of the boys as I slid inside.

“What’s going on?” She scanned the yard behind me, her eyes wide.

“Wolves,” I said. What else? “I think we’re under attack.”

The color drained from her face.

I sent Connell out, like Xander had asked. With a surprising speed for a man his age, he rushed for the door. Kingston tried to follow, but I stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“We need you here,” I whispered, nodding to Gena. She was withdrawing into the lounge in a slow, backward walk, her shoulders visibly trembling as she clutched Ryder, her eyes locked on the windows. “She’s scared. Help me keep her calm.”

Kingston held my gaze for a second, then wheeled over to her. Whether he believed me or thought I was just trying to placate him with something to do other than joining the fight, it was immaterial now.

A sharp, pained sound burst from the woods as Connell opened the door.

Please let it be the other guys, I thought when the cry was followed by ferocious snarls and then a soft, heartbreaking whimper. Let them be the ones hurting. Let our people be safe.

“Is it ready?” I heard Xander shout to Dylan.

“Only one way to find out,” Dylan replied, tossing him the dart gun, then the door slammed shut again.

I took Rylan into the kitchen and passed him off to Nana, though not before relieving her of the butcher’s knife she was wielding.

“Are they going to hurt us?” Nadia asked, her knuckles white as she twisted a kitchen towel in her fists. “Are we going to die?”

“No one’s going to die. The pack will protect us. That’s what a pack does.” I took the kitchen towel from her, and after a moment of consideration, handed her a cast iron skillet from the drying rack near the sink. With the way her hands were shaking, I wasn’t sure I trusted her with the knife.

To Nana, I cocked my head toward the stairs. “Gena has Ryder. Take her and Nadia upstairs with the boys.”

When they were gone, I posted up at the base of the stairs with Kingston. It was only then that I remembered I should be afraid as well. Through the windows to the backyard, we could see the others lined in front of the door. Denny, Connell, and Dylan had already stripped down and shifted. They crouched low to the ground, ready to pounce at the first sign of attack, in a crescent around Xander, who stood scanning the tree line with Dylan’s gun tucked under his arm.

Save for Nadia and her skillet, if the other wolves broke through and managed to get inside, Kingston and I would be the last line of defense.

That was when the fear finally took hold.

If our enemies made it inside, I knew it would only be because Xander was already dead. Dylan, Connell, and Denny, too.

I held my breath and gripped the knife so tightly my knuckles turned white. The moments passed like time was suddenly moving through quicksand. Every second seemed to stretch on and on while we waited for the attack to hit, as though a dozen secret bonus seconds had been shoved into the space between each.

When the stillness at the tree line finally broke, the opposite occurred. Everything moved so quickly, I barely had time to process it all until it was done.

If I'd blinked, I would have missed it. A massive gray wolf pounced from the cover of the brush. Three quick cracks as Xander fired the gun.

The wolf hit the earth hard, bouncing once, then rolling to a stop. Xander's darts had caught it in the middle of its leap. It tried to rise but faltered. Tried again and fell.

It didn't get back up.

"Stay here," I told Kingston and ventured back toward the door.

"Hey, no!" Kingston called after me. "If there's any more of them out there—"

"There aren't. Denny said he only smelled one. I'll keep my distance," I promised. "I just want to see if the darts worked."

Outside, Xander and the others were already approaching the fallen gray wolf. It must have been the intruder Denny had smelled. A lone wolf. A scout, maybe? The howls we'd heard suggested that there had been a skirmish. I spied a ragged wound along the wolf's hind leg, which stained its rump red.

But where were Luke and Mandy? If this wolf had made it to us...

A sudden chill coiled tightly in my stomach.

Had it killed them both? Or injured them so badly, they couldn't give chase?

Carefully, I opened the door.

“Is it dead?” I called out to Xander.

“Nah,” Xander hollered back. “Just out cold. The darts worked.”

He was crouched at the wolf’s body while Denny, Dylan, and Connell flared out around them, still in their lupine forms.

“Is it feral, you think?” I asked.

Bravely, Xander gripped it by its muzzle and pushed its lips back. “It’s got fur in its teeth. Rabbit, from the looks of it. So, feral, yeah. Probably.”

He sighed and rubbed his temples as he rose.

“Let’s get it tied up for now,” he instructed the others. “If we can get it to shift back we might be able to...”

I frowned as my ears perked up to a sound. It was faint for me, especially at a distance. When Xander paused, I knew it must have been much louder for him.

“What’s that noise?” I shouted to Xander.

“The beeping?” he replied. “Yeah, I don’t know. Maybe ___”

Xander’s eyes went wide as his gaze trailed back down to the wolf.

“Shit,” he swore. “Get down! *Bomb!*”

The wolves scattered. Xander threw his body toward Dylan—and Denny pounced in Xander’s direction.

Before I could make sense of what was happening, the world split.

Light exploded from the place where the gray wolf laid. Dirt burst from the earth. Smoke rose up in a rapid, choking flume that blocked out everything—

Except for the sight of four bodies—one human, three wolves—sent flying from the epicenter.

When they hit the ground, they didn’t get back up.

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* * *

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She can hate me all she wants, but our love is written in the stars...

I rarely show my face in the human world, although for her I'll make an exception. Most mistake me for a handsome, wealthy stranger, and refuse to believe I am the stuff of myth and legend.

Not my Celeste. I see the awareness in her eyes, followed by the most delicious fear.

Wolf Shifter.

However, I'm not just any wolf shifter. I'm a Lunar Lord, and she doesn't yet know that she's in the presence of an immortal. Nor is she aware that I've waited hundreds of years for her.

She still refuses to believe she's mine. No matter. Her family and her fiancé mean nothing to me. Her contempt and hatred of me even less.

Because, whether she likes it or not, Celeste is going to be my Lunar Bride...

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Possessive Wolf Daddy

Wolves Of Evergreen: Book 2

Skye Wilson

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