

# The Protector's HEART

Wilde Creek Book 3

**R. E. BUTLER**

*USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

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# THE PROTECTOR'S HEART

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## CHAPTER ONE

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Malachi Slattery sat in the living room of his alphas' home on Monday morning and waited for Brynn, the alpha female, to be ready for work. Malachi was a protector, a highly ranked member of the pack whose sole job was to keep the pack members safe. He'd been chosen by Acksel as one of Brynn's personal protectors, for those times when Acksel couldn't be with her. Malachi enjoyed being Brynn's protector, and it had absolutely nothing at all to do with the beautiful human woman, Nila, who worked at the doctor's office where Brynn was a receptionist.

*Liar.*

He mentally told his wolf to shut up and glanced at his cell, wondering what was taking Brynn so long. Just as he'd decided to play a game on his cell to occupy himself, he heard the bedroom door open and Brynn said, "Stop making that face, I have to go to work."

"No you don't, love. I can easily support our family. Stay home."

Brynn made a happy sound that made Malachi think that she was going to be really late, and then she said, "Damn it, stop using your wiles to tempt me."

Malachi snorted inwardly as Acksel demanded to know what she meant by that and she rebuffed him, storming down the hallway.

She brightened at seeing Malachi, switching gears from annoyed to happy in two point two seconds. "Hi Mal. Sorry

for keeping you waiting.”

“It’s no problem, Brynn,” he promised. He stood and tucked his phone into his pocket.

Acksel came into the family room and greeted Malachi. “Don’t you think your alpha female should be home resting?”

Before Malachi could ask Acksel not to rope him into a personal squabble, Brynn threw a nearby pillow at Acksel’s head. “As if you would let me rest, you big old horn dog. I’m going to work.” Her scowl softened and she moved quickly to Acksel, kissed him, and said goodbye. She strode to the door, and Malachi looked at Acksel, who said the same thing he said every morning Malachi drove her to work. “Keep my mate and my pup safe.”

“Will do, alpha,” Malachi promised.

He followed Brynn out into the frigid December morning, saying goodbye to Sam, the theto of the pack and the leader of the protectors, who was standing guard outside of the home. Malachi opened the door to his dark green SUV, Brynn climbed into the passenger seat, and he shut the door. Glancing toward the house, he saw Acksel watching from the open door and nodded at him, a second, silent promise to keep Brynn safe.

Malachi considered it an honor to be one of Brynn’s personal protectors. The pack only ran well when everyone could do their job. If Acksel was worried about Brynn’s safety, then he wouldn’t be able to lead appropriately. The personal protectors helped to alleviate some of the stress of the alphas being apart, because Acksel trusted them to keep his mate safe. Some of the lower-ranked wolves thought that the personal protectors were nuts for accepting the role to watch over Brynn. Failure came with a hefty price tag. If something happened to Brynn, Acksel would go on a rampage and the ones responsible would suffer greatly. That didn’t worry Malachi, though. He had no plans to let a hair on Brynn’s head—or her baby’s—be harmed.

As he pulled away from the curb, Brynn sighed.

“How was your weekend?” he asked. Their engagement party had been Saturday, and the pack had gathered at Luna’s, a restaurant in town, to celebrate.

Brynn said, “Okay, I guess. Acksel’s getting weirder and weirder about me leaving. Do you think it’s the baby?”

Mal glanced at her. “Possibly. Males are protective of their females and their pups, though. It could be a combination of things.”

She hummed in her throat and then said, “I’ll probably quit working before the baby is born and take some time off to raise him or her, but I can’t see myself actually stopping working.”

“So why don’t you tell Acksel that?”

“I did. When I tell him about going to work he...distracts me.”

Malachi grimaced, hoping she wouldn’t go into details. He’d known Acksel his whole life, but that didn’t mean he wanted to hear about the intimate details of their life. Fortunately, she skipped over Acksel’s method of ‘distraction’ and said that while he was busy rewriting hundreds of years of pack law with the elders of the pack every day, she found it powerfully boring and didn’t want to help.

Malachi pulled the SUV into an empty space in the parking lot of the Family Clinic of Wilde Creek, where Brynn was a receptionist. The small doctors’ office was run by Frank and Kimmi Channing, and served not only the human population of Wilde Creek, but also the wolves when they needed things like physicals for sports, school, or work. Wolves didn’t naturally get sick, but they still needed proof they were in good physical condition.

“If you don’t want to quit right now, then don’t. He’s just a male who wants his mate where he can see her. He trusts me to keep you safe, but he trusts himself more.”

She gave him a long look, her green eyes searching his face. “The wolfy instinct stuff is a pain in the ass sometimes.”

He grinned. “It’s also totally awesome.”



She snorted. “Time to go before Dr. Kimmi fires me for being late.”

“As if she’d fire you. She loves you.”

They walked to the building and Malachi held open the door for her. She took her bag to the breakroom while he walked to the small office that was being used to house the security system and sat down behind the bank of monitors. When Brynn had been kidnapped and nearly killed in October, the perpetrators—a small group of rogue wolves—had snatched her at work, which was why Acksel insisted she be driven to work and that a protector stay with her. Malachi was the natural choice. He had a background in security and was good with computers. He had a side business with his best friend, Lucian, setting up security systems, although lately Lucian had been out of the country working at his real job, and Malachi had been running the company by himself.

As he reviewed the recordings from the multiple cameras inside and outside of the building, he heard some very familiar footsteps and his whole body went tense, his wolf alert. He watched the open doorway. Nila Caruthers, a nursing assistant, raced by, her dark blonde hair flying behind her. She was running late again. He could guess it was because of her son and a situation at the daycare. Either the little boy was having a bad morning, or something had happened with her ex. His wolf snarled at the thought of that male, who didn’t deserve to breathe the same air as Nila, let alone have had access to her gorgeous curves.

He closed his eyes and inhaled slowly, picking up her naturally sweet scent. She smelled like wildflowers to him and his beast. He forced himself to stay in his seat and not stalk to her and make sure everything was okay. She did not like wolves, because her ex-husband was a total whack-job wolf. He’d mistreated her and her son more often than he’d been kind to them. Even now, she was still technically married to him. According to Brynn, he refused to sign the divorce papers.

Malachi thought it was quite cruel of fate to give him a mate who hated what he was at the core of his being. He’d win

her heart eventually, he was sure, but the problem was he couldn't even get close to her without her defenses going up. He'd only been around her for a little over a month, but he was certain she was meant to be his mate. He just needed to convince her of that.

Turning his attention back to the monitors, he mentally flipped off whoever was in charge of werewolf matings and tried not to think about the alluring woman with the pretty brown eyes.

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By the time the workday was over, Malachi was no closer to figuring out how to deal with Nila than he'd been the first day he met her, when she was crying in the closet of the doctors' office because her ex had beaten up a teacher at her son Jack's daycare when they'd refused to allow him to take the boy.

"Mal?" Brynn asked as he drove her home.

"I'm sorry, Brynn, what?"

"You're like a hundred miles away. What's up?"

"Nothing."

"It's not nothing. It's Nila, right? Tell me what's going on, maybe I can help."

He looked at his alpha and she smiled encouragingly. "I just need her to see that I'm not like her ex."

"Anyone with half a brain would know that. He's a total nutcase."

"She doesn't want anything to do with me on principle. Her ex is a bad wolf, so for her, all wolves are bad. I can't show her I'm different because she won't even give me a second glance."

"I don't know about that," she said.

"What?"

“When we were coming back from lunch today, she’d gone to have lunch with her son and came back a little before us. She stood at the front desk and stared at us while we walked into the office, and then she darted off like her butt was on fire.”

His wolf practically cartwheeled in his head. “Really?”

“Well, she sure wasn’t looking at me. I know I’m pretty, but neither of us swing that way. So yeah... I think she likes you. You’re fighting an uphill battle, but you’re not going to back down.”

“Any advice rattling around in that head of yours?” he asked hopefully.

“I wish I could tell you a way to handle things with her that would guarantee success, but I can’t. It might be enough eventually for her to see you watching over me while I’m working, but I think her ex was really nice in the beginning. It wasn’t until they were married that he changed and began to mistreat her.”

Malachi growled.

“I know you’ll figure it out, Mal. If you’re really mates—and I believe you are from what I’ve seen—then she’ll see the truth of what you are. She just needs time. You can prove you’re not like her ex and take care of her the way I know you’re dying to.”

“How’d you get so smart?” he teased as he pulled the SUV along the curb in front of her home.

“Just naturally brilliant.” She grinned at him as Acksel opened her door and helped her out.

“Thanks, Mal,” Acksel said.

Brynn tried to say goodbye to him, but Acksel swung her up into his arms swiftly and kissed her. She waved at Mal, and he shook his head with a chuckle and headed home.

The place he called home had at one time belonged to his parents, and then Brynn had rented it for a few years. The three-bedroom house was in a development in Wilde Creek, on

a cul-de-sac, surrounded by homes owned by wolves in the pack as well as a few humans. Brynn hadn't done any interior redecorating when she'd lived in the house, but she had planted some shrubs outside that smelled like cinnamon. He was glad when she asked Jeremiah, one of the pack omegas, to transplant the shrubs to her new home with Acksel.

Parking in the driveway, he got out of the SUV, walked up the sidewalk to the front porch and unlocked the red front door. He hung his keys up on the hook just inside the door and shut and locked it, toeing off his shoes before walking through the family room to the kitchen. He made a sandwich and stood at the counter. He had dishes, he just didn't use them. He looked at the kitchen table he'd purchased last week. The oval, glass-topped table had looked perfect when he'd seen it in the furniture store. Too big for one person, but just the right size for a family.

A pang of loneliness and longing hit him hard as he looked at the table and chairs that he'd bought with Nila and Jack in mind. He was really getting ahead of himself by buying things for her when she wouldn't even give him the time of day, but he didn't care. One day she'd be sitting at the table with Jack while he made them dinner, and she'd know that he'd cared about her from the moment they'd met. It was more than a physical attraction—he wanted to take care of her, protect her, and love her, and he wanted her to feel safe.

Someday he'd get beyond the walls she'd erected to protect herself and her son and he'd prove to her that he was the right male for her and would never betray or mistreat her in anyway.

Someday.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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Nila hated being late. Dr. Kimmi was very understanding about Nila's situation, but her good nature could only be stretched so thin before Nila would be finding a new place to work. She shoved her purse into her locker and raced to Dr. Kimmi's office. Knocking on the open door, she said, "I'm sorry."

Dr. Kimmi looked up from the computer and smiled. "It's okay, hon."

"No, it's not." Nila shook her head. She felt like crying. Hell, she'd felt like crying just about every day as she'd battled against her ex, Damien, and his desire to make her life a living hell.

Dr. Kimmi pushed her chair away from the desk and stood, coming to Nila and giving her a hug. "I've been where you are. You have my support and Frank's. Would it help to change your hours so you can come in less often?"

Panic tightened Nila's chest. "I need the money. Damien isn't giving me a cent in support and the daycare is expensive. I'm sorry I was late this morning and that I've been late a few times recently. Ever since Damien made that scene at the daycare, Jack has been terrified to be left there. It breaks my heart every day."

"I wish I could do more for you. Would it help to change daycares?"

"I can't find anyone nearby that will take him, and I'm afraid that if Damien causes another scene Little Tots is going

to let us go, anyway.”

Nila closed her eyes and tried not to let the weight of her problems settle heavily on her. She didn't need to break down right now, even though she would probably feel a little better if she had a good cry. The problems would still be there after she was done crying, though. They always were.

“I'll be more careful of my time in the future. Thanks for understanding.”

“Of course.”

Nila brushed at a stray tear that had slipped through her defenses and walked out of Dr. Kimmi's office. She stared down the hallway to where the reception desk lay. The desk had a tall counter on the side facing her, and she could see Brynn, the receptionist, checking in a patient. Even though she didn't want to look at him, her eyes couldn't help but see Malachi Slattery, Brynn's personal security guard, who was sitting behind her at the reception desk. Ever since Brynn had joined up with her mate, Acksel, Malachi had been coming to the office every day. He never said anything to Nila outside of “good morning,” but she was very aware that he wanted to say more to her.

It had only been a few weeks since the day that he opened the door to the supply room and found her crying after Damien had beaten up one of the teachers at the daycare. She'd been so startled by him that she nearly fell off the stack of paper boxes she was sitting on. His strong arms had caught her and he'd pulled her close, the dark, spicy scent of him making her stomach flip and her mouth water.

She mentally shook her inner slut and pushed the unwanted thoughts of the sexy wolf into a dark corner of her mind. Wolf was exactly why she didn't want anything to do with Malachi. He was a wolf shifter, and wolf shifters were bad news. Just ask Damien, his father the alpha, or any of the other males in his pack who hadn't lifted a hand to help her. It didn't matter if Malachi had the most amazing blue eyes, or that he'd felt rock hard when he'd pulled her against him in the closet. There was nothing but trouble where that sexy wolf

was concerned. For everyone's sake, she needed to remember what being with a wolf had been like. Shivering internally, she ignored Malachi entirely and put her hands on the top of the counter.

Brynn smiled. "Hi, Nila. How's your sweet little boy?"

"Great, thanks. How was your weekend?"

As Brynn talked, Nila could feel Malachi's eyes on her, and she managed to not look at him but only by sheer force of will. All day long it would be the same. She'd come up to get the next patient and Malachi would watch her like a hawk.

Realizing she'd missed most of what Brynn said while she was trying not to think about Malachi, she froze when Brynn stopped talking and smiled at her expectantly. Nila felt put on the spot and she blinked and tried vainly to figure out what Brynn had just asked.

Brynn's eyes darted toward Malachi and she said, "I asked if you'd like to go to lunch with me this week."

Oh damn. Malachi drove Brynn everywhere.

"Sure," she said, not wanting to disappoint her friend.

Don't look at him.

"Cool, how about tomorrow?"

Brynn pushed the first patient's folder across the counter and Nila said, "Sounds good."

Counting it as a victory that she didn't look at Malachi even once as she opened the door to the waiting room and called the first patient's name, she smiled at herself, greeted the little girl and her mother, and led them to the exam room.

They were fairly busy that morning, and she'd had to wait to take her lunch until later. By the time she made it to the breakroom, she was starving. Malachi was sitting at one of the tables, a tablet in one hand and a sandwich in the other. She almost turned around and left, and then she felt like she was being an idiot. Going to the fridge, she opened it and reached for her insulated lunch sack. She gripped it and turned, looking

at the only table in the breakroom, which currently held a very large wolf.

She stared at him. He was so sexy, she had to force herself to remember that he was a wolf shifter and that meant he was off-limits. Her self-imposed sanction on wolf shifters was for her own good. It wasn't just about finding a good guy to go out with, she had to think of Jack and find a father for him who'd treat him well. None of the wolves in Damien's pack seemed to have a paternal bone in their body. The females were treated like toys and breeding machines.

Malachi stood up, his chair scraping loudly against the linoleum with the motion. He walked near her to throw away the paper plate his sandwich had been on, and then he stopped and looked at her.

“What?”

He lifted his gaze and she realized he was looking at her lunch sack. “My sister, Mia, loves Star Wars. I was just wondering where you got that lunch bag, because it would make a great Christmas gift.”

Nilá's hand had involuntarily gripped the bag when he'd turned and focused on her. She wasn't afraid of him, not really. She just didn't trust him, and she didn't trust herself around him.

“A friend gave it to me for Jack, but he doesn't need a packed lunch at daycare, so I decided to take it. I think she got it from a catalog.”

“So you're not a Star Wars fan?” He smiled and it felt like her whole body twitched in response. Damn him and his sexy smile.

“I am.”

“Let me guess, you had a crush on Luke Skywalker.”

“No way,” she said, grinning. “I was all about Han Solo, are you kidding?”

His smile turned into a full-on grin, and she realized that she was letting her guard down around him. This was how



mistakes happened, how things had started with Damien. One minute he was charming and funny, and then his true colors came out and he was an asshole of the highest order. Malachi might be kind to Brynn because his alpha said so, but that didn't mean he wasn't an awful person behind closed doors.

She frowned and looked down at her lunch bag. Her voice came out more cold than she'd planned, but it was effective. "I need to eat lunch now, if you don't mind."

His smile died instantly as confusion lit his features. "Nila," he said, and she put up her hand.

"If you don't mind."

His teeth clicked together audibly as he closed his mouth and turned, stalking out of the lunchroom. She sagged against the counter, a sigh of relief parting her lips. That male was dangerous to her sanity, and to her and Jack's safety. He made her forget he was a wolf, because something inside her responded to him no matter what her brain tried to tell her body to do. She'd taken a chance on a wolf once before, and it had gotten her nothing but heartache.

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Promptly at five, Nila said goodbye to Dr. Kimmi and her husband, Dr. Frank, and grabbed her purse and coat from the locker. The wool coat had seen better days, but it had been a gift from her favorite aunt, who'd passed away two years earlier, and she didn't want to replace it. She said goodbye to Brynn, unable to keep herself from glancing at Malachi, who had his back turned away from her. She almost said his name, but clenched her teeth together and gave herself a mental slap. Pushing open the doors, she walked out into the bitter cold, burrowing into her coat to keep her cheeks from freezing off.

She walked swiftly to her car, cursing the thought of spending a few minutes outside scraping off the snow, when she stopped in front of her vehicle and stared at the clean windshield. Someone had been out here and cleaned off all her windows, scraping the ice and snow away. She looked around

the parking lot and saw that her car was the only one that had been cleaned. Turning her gaze to the front door of the office, she didn't see anyone watching her, but she was almost positive that Malachi was the one who had cleaned her windows. Her treacherous heart thought that was fantastic, but her brain reminded her that it was just a trick. He was a wolf; they were tricky bastards, and she wasn't going to fall for it.

Tossing her bag onto the seat, she slammed the door shut and turned on the car. It took a few minutes for the heat to kick in, and she watched Malachi come out of the building, get into his big SUV, and turn it on. Then he got out, extracted a long-handled ice scraper from the back, and scraped the windows. After putting the scraper back, he walked to the office and escorted Brynn out, helping her into the vehicle.

It made Nila's heart hurt. She'd never had anyone treat her like that, ever. She pushed away the jealous ache and put the car into gear. She'd wasted enough time waiting for the car to warm up; she didn't need to spend more time sitting around wishing for things that would never be. She wouldn't get involved with a wolf again, no matter how sexy he was or how much of a knight in shining armor he appeared to be.

The drive to Little Tots took only a few minutes. As she waited to be buzzed in through the front door of the daycare, she looked over her shoulder. Ever since Damien had beaten up the teacher, Nila hadn't felt safe. She was afraid she couldn't keep Jack safe, either, and that one day Damien would take him like he swore he would. He seemed to leave her alone for a while, and then he would randomly show up demanding she return to his home with his son.

The daycare director buzzed Nila in and greeted her. "He had a good day once he settled down," Dana said.

Nila was glad to hear that. She stopped in the open door of the room where he spent most of his day. Jack was playing with foam blocks. He seemed to instinctively know that she was watching him, and he looked up and then smiled broadly.

"Mama!" he squealed happily as he pushed himself to his feet and toddled over to her.

She lifted him over the gate and he squeezed his arms and legs around her, giving her a loud kiss. “Hi, Jack!”

He babbled at her, fisting a lock of her hair with his chubby hand and pressing his nose against hers.

With one hand, Nila signed Jack out, accepted the diaper bag from the teacher, and waved goodbye. She paused at the front door, looking out into the winter darkness that lay beyond the lights of the parking lot. Steeling her spine, she fisted her keys and opened the door. Jack ducked his head into her neck, his fuzzy cap brushing her cheek, and she stepped out and let the door shut behind her.

She couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. She wished she had super hearing or super sight like wolves did, so she could tell. Fear had made Nila its bitch, and she wasn't happy about it.

Quickly walking to her car, which she parked as close to the entrance as she could, she unlocked the back door of her old sedan and set Jack in the car seat, buckling him in swiftly before shutting the door. She turned and scanned the parking lot. Not seeing anything—although she couldn't see much of anything past the snow that was swiftly falling—she opened the driver's door and sat down behind the wheel. Pushing the door lock and then starting the engine, she rubbed her hands together and pressed the button for the window defroster.

“Did you have a good day, kiddo?” she asked, looking at Jack in the rear view.

“Carrot.”

She smiled at one of his favorite words, which he said somewhere in the neighborhood of one hundred times a day, backed out of the parking space, and headed for home.

She lived in a small house in Wilde Creek, at the end of a cul-de-sac. When she first came to Wilde Creek after leaving Damien, she had been desperate for a place to live. She'd just left Damien for good, taking Jack away in the middle of the night, and for a few days she had stayed with Diane, one of her aunt's best friends, who happened to live in Wilde Creek.

Within a week, Nila had moved into the rental and accepted a job at the clinic, and she'd been there for the last nine months.

Parking in front of the house, she got out and unhooked Jack from the car seat. Jack clutched a lock of her hair as she walked up the steps to the front door and unlocked it. Once inside, she pushed the door shut and flipped the security bar and two dead bolts. The familiar sound of the door locking made some of her anxiety leak away.

After divesting her and Jack of their winter things, she carried him into the kitchen and put him in his high chair. "Are you hungry, little man?"

He banged his fists on the tray and grinned. It took only a few minutes for her to put his dinner together, and then she turned to the fridge for her own meal. Pulling out a tub of beef stew she'd made over the weekend, she poured some into a bowl and put it in the microwave to heat up. As the bowl rotated, she watched Jack as he gripped his plastic spoon and shoveled applesauce into his mouth.

The hours passed so quickly. Dinner, then bath, then bedtime. She laid him down in the crib in the bedroom. The house was supposed to be a two-bedroom, but the second bedroom was where the laundry hookups were, so if she wanted clean clothes, she had to take up half the room with the washer and dryer. She didn't want Jack in that room, so she'd given him the bigger bedroom and put a twin bed in the laundry room. Ever since Damien had attacked the teacher in an attempt to take Jack back several weeks ago, she'd been sleeping in the front room on the couch. She felt like she was being a better protector if she was sleeping closer to the bedroom, which was just off the front room.

When she first moved into the house, Damien had shown up and tried to get in. She'd called the police and he scattered quickly, and she'd called a locksmith the next morning and had him install the extra deadbolts. A few weeks had passed and she wondered if Damien had gotten the hint that things between them were done, but he had shown up the night of the full moon in his wolf form with some of his buddies and they stalked around the house the entire night, howling and

snarling, randomly throwing themselves at the doors. She'd been terrified. It seemed to go that way with him. He'd leave her alone for a little while and then he'd start up again, sending her threatening emails and leaving nasty voice mails, always threatening to get her back someday, calling her his property, issuing thinly veiled threats toward Jack. She was in a vicious cycle with a dangerous male, and she didn't know what to do.

Changing into pajamas, she settled onto the couch and listened to Jack settling down to sleep in his crib. The cul-de-sac was quiet at night. Her neighbors were older and there were no young kids on the street. Behind the house lay woods that separated her development from another one. She'd seen Damien in the woods before, him and his buddies. Watching. Waiting.

She forced herself to stop thinking of her ex and get to sleep, but she couldn't settle her thoughts, until she started thinking of Malachi. She was actually jealous of Brynn. Her mate didn't treat her like shit. He cared about her. Made sure she was well protected with personal guards when he wasn't around.

Closing her eyes, she shoved those thoughts away, too. Thinking about the sexy blue-eyed wolf wasn't helping her rest, it was amping her up. She wanted to call Brynn and ask for Malachi's phone number. Then she wanted to call him and...well, she didn't know what exactly, but the fantasy that streaked through her mind as she wiggled on the couch to get comfortable was of Malachi and her in the storeroom at work. But this time she wouldn't freak out about him being a wolf; she'd settle into his arms and inhale that gorgeous spicy scent and give him the kissing of a lifetime.

Groaning, Nila threw her arm over her eyes and thought about bunnies, and rainbows, and paying the bills. She'd never get to sleep if she thought about Malachi. Like all wolves, he was a dead end, and she needed to remember that. He was nice now, but Damien had been that way in the beginning, too.

Bunnies. She was going to think about bunnies.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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Malachi couldn't stop his body from reacting to Nila as she sat in the second row of his SUV with Brynn on the way to lunch on Tuesday. He was glad that his coat was long enough to cover his waist when he stood up, or everyone in the restaurant was going to get an eyeful of the erection that was pressing painfully against the front of his jeans.

Brynn said something that made Nila laugh, and Malachi stifled a growl. He wanted to make her laugh and be on the receiving end of one of her killer smiles. Right now, Nila was treating him more like furniture than a person. The day before when he'd talked to her in the breakroom, it had been the first conversation they'd had since the day he found her in the storage room. She'd warmed up to him, and then just as quickly, she turned to ice and rebuffed him. He could admit to himself that it hurt his pride. He wanted her to want to be with him, to like being around him.

He pulled into the parking lot of Luna's and turned off the engine. Jumping out, he opened Brynn's door and held out his hand for her.

"You're such a gentleman, Mal," Brynn said with a chuckle.

"Are you kidding me? The parking lot is icy and Acksel would have my head if you slipped and got hurt."

Nila stared at him from where she sat, fiddling with the seatbelt. He held out his hand for her. "I won't bite, Nila."

He bit back the mildly sarcastic comment floating around in his head, unless you ask me to, and waited, trying to make himself appear harmless. Well, he knew he looked anything but harmless. He was too tall and muscular for that. But he could look genial, maybe. Friendly, even.

She really seemed to be wrestling with herself, and then Brynn said, “Nila, I’m freezing my butt off. Would you let him help you out of the SUV so we can eat? I’m feeling like hamburgers.”

Nila seemed to startle slightly, and then she scooted toward him, giving him a wary look that reminded him of a doe about to bolt. Her gloved hand grasped his and he wished there wasn’t any fabric separating their skin. Lending her his strength, he made sure she didn’t fall as she slipped from the seat and her booted feet hit the pavement. For just a moment, she squeezed his hand tighter and looked up at him, brown eyes searching his...for what, he didn’t know. Just as quickly as they had connected, she released his hand and stepped away, a blast of icy wind separating them as easily as the distance she created herself.

Shutting the door, he growled at himself. He was supposed to be watching over Brynn, not ogling his sexy mate. Which made him wonder what the hell he’d do when he did manage to convince Nila to give him the time of day. How could he be Brynn’s personal guard and also take care of Nila and Jack?

Shit. He’d have to talk to Acksel. That was a conversation for later, though, since Nila seemed bound and determined to keep Malachi at arm’s length.

He took Nila and Brynn’s coats and hung them up on the hooks inside the front door of the restaurant, and then followed them to Brynn’s private table. A small placard sat on top of the small round table that read, ‘Reserved for the Alpha.’ Malachi took up his place against the nearest wall and scanned the restaurant. Luna’s was run by Quentin and Paula Smythe, who were pack members. Malachi considered it a safe place, but when Brynn and Acksel first got together, she was pestered by some of the female pack members who thought she wasn’t a good choice for alpha female. Acksel had made changes to

pack law to protect the female mates of pack members if they were human, but Brynn had needed to stand up for herself and prove that she could be a leader. Which she'd done quite well.

His phone buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket and saw a text from his younger sister, Mia.

“Dinner tonight? I’m making pot roast.”

“Sure,” he typed back.

“I also need you to help me move the desk.”

He snorted. “Of course you do.” She never invited him over to dinner unless she had an ulterior motive, like needing him to move furniture.

“Don’t get snippy, I’m feeding you.”

“See you at six,” he answered and slipped the phone back into his pocket.

He scanned the restaurant again, nodded at Zander, a protector and the son of the owners, who was bussing a table, and tried not to appear as if he were eavesdropping on Brynn and Nila’s conversation.

“I don’t know,” Nila said softly as she pushed a French fry through ketchup. “If he shows up at the daycare again and makes trouble, they’re not going to let Jack come back and then I’ll be up the creek.”

“Hopefully he won’t, though. The cops told him to stay away, right?”

Nila shook her head. “When the cops showed up, one of his cronies took the blame and said he was the one who beat up the teacher, not Damien. The teacher was so frazzled that she couldn’t identify Damien from a lineup and they took his pal’s confession. When the police went to arrest him, he’d disappeared.”

“Disappeared how?”

“Who knows? Damien’s dad has a lot of friends, he probably just sent him out of state to another pack, a thank-you for taking the fall for Damien.”



“I don’t understand why he won’t leave you alone. You left him, you gave him divorce papers.”

Nila looked so sad right then that it took everything in his power not to go to her and comfort her. “I don’t know why, either. Falling for his charms was one of the worst things I ever did. I don’t regret Jack, but I regret ever meeting him or his pack.”

Malachi hated hearing how much she despised wolves, even though she clearly had good reason for her feelings.

When lunch was over, he wasn’t any closer to figuring out how to talk to Nila. By the time the work day done, and Brynn was closing down the computer, Malachi felt as tongue-tied as ever when it came to the pretty blonde. Nila, wrapped up in a dark wool coat, a white fuzzy hat covering her hair, looked out the glass door and frowned. “It’s really coming down out there.”

“Do you want to ride with us? We can pick up Jack and take you home, even come get you in the morning,” Brynn offered.

Malachi’s heart jumped into his throat and his wolf whined pitifully in his head, wanting desperately to have her in the SUV with them.

Nila swallowed audibly and looked over her shoulder. “Thanks, but no, I’ll be fine. I guess my plans to go to the grocery are out, though.”

She met his eyes for only a heartbeat, and then she pushed the door open and disappeared into the falling snow.

“Damn she’s stubborn,” Brynn said as she wrapped a scarf around her neck and tugged on gloves.

“That’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

“Hey, we’re talking about two entirely different situations here. You didn’t knock her up and ignore her like a certain alpha male we both know.”

“I thought you forgave him for that.”

“I did, but I reserved the right to throw it in his face anytime I want. Nila’s stubborn in a different way. I wish she could see how sweet you are.”

“Oh, I’m blushing here,” Malachi said.

Brynn slugged him on the arm. “You’re sweet but you’re also kind of an ass.”

He opened the door for her, bracing himself against the cold as he took her elbow and guided her safely to the SUV. He looked at the tracks that Nila’s sedan had made in the parking lot, wishing that she’d taken Brynn up on her offer. He would’ve loved to drive to the daycare and pick up Jack with her and then take them both home. It was important to him that she was watched over. He had driven by her home more than once, even shifting and scouting the woods around her home. Her house was secure enough—dead bolts on the front and back doors, an alarm system—but she’d be safer in his house, that was just a fact.

After dropping Brynn off, he drove to the home that Mia rented in the development behind Nila’s. A small section of woods separated the two streets, and it was easy enough for Mal to shift in Mia’s backyard and trot across the woods to watch Nila’s house, which he did from time to time. He’d smelled other wolves in the woods, but the scents weren’t fresh so he knew that no one had been sniffing around Nila’s house in a couple of weeks.

Stomping off his boots on the front porch, he opened the front door and said, “Hey Mia.”

“Hi Mal, I’m in the kitchen.”

He inhaled the scent of pot roast and his mouth watered. Mia was a damn good cook, something she’d learned from their mom. Their parents had lived in Wilde Creek until Acksel had taken over as alpha a few years ago, and then they had decided to leave the pack and join his dad’s brother’s pack. Malachi had left with them, thinking he’d have a better chance of finding a mate if he were away from Wilde Creek where he’d never even had a passing thought of mating any of

the she-wolves. Now Nila was here, though, and she was his mate. He was glad he'd moved back.

After eating his sister's amazing pot roast and mashed potatoes, he moved the heavy mahogany desk from the family room to the spare bedroom. She wiped the desk off with a dust cloth and he moved the computer to the clean surface. "Planning to write the great American novel?" He teased.

"No, I just want it out of the family room. I keep banging my hip on the edge of the desk when I walk by. How's work going?"

"It's not exactly hard to sit at the doctor's office and look at security footage all day."

"I suppose not," Mia said, smiling. "How long are you going to have to sit with her?"

"I don't know." He frowned, leaning against the wall.

"Well, don't you think that you could just drive her to work, look at the footage, and then leave? I don't know why you have to stay with her all day anymore."

"Because Acksel said so."

Mia hummed. "I'm sure it's not a hardship since you get to ogle the nurse, but really...it's one thing to drive her around, but it's another to sit there all day. Don't you have a business to run?"

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. "I was planning to talk to Acksel about it. I think you're right. I could still drive her everywhere, but I don't need to sit there all day." Plus, he did need to focus on his business. L&M Security wasn't going to run itself, not with Lucian out of the country, anyway.

As if hearing him think his partner's name, Mia said, "How's Lucian, anyway?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Fine."

He'd known for ages that his sister had a crush on his human best friend, but Lucian had strict instructions to steer clear of Mia. He didn't give a damn how Mia felt. Lucian was a great friend, but he led a dangerous life and it would be just

Mia's luck to get caught in the crossfire, and that was something Mal would never allow.

Mia rolled her eyes. "I was just asking."

He snorted. "Yeah, right. How's Reese?"

She looked startled. "Mated now, I guess. I haven't talked to him since I went through my heat cycle in the fall."

Mal mentally scrubbed that thought out of his head. He didn't want to think about his sister going through a heat cycle every September. The boring-as-white-paper Reese had been a safe bet for her to go through the cycle with because he was an honorable guy. Mal flipped through the names of the single males in the pack. "You ever thought about going out with Zander?"

Her brows rose. "No, why would you ask me that?"

He shrugged. "He's a good guy, he's pack, and his mom makes the best meatloaf in town."

"Only you would think a potential mate's qualities should include a family member's meatloaf."

"I'm just saying...he's pack."

"You said that twice," she said irritably. "I get that you think I should be with a wolf, but my wolf isn't feeling that right now, okay? How about you take care of your own love life and leave mine alone."

Okay, he'd overstepped and pissed her off. When they were kids, he'd always enjoyed making her mad, but as adults he didn't like her being angry with him. Closing the distance between them, he hugged her and kissed the top of her head. "I'm sorry. I just want what's best for you."

She hugged him back. "I know. Thanks."

They walked back into the family room and he grabbed his coat and shoved his feet into the boots that he'd left near the front door. He opened the door and Mia whistled. "Wow, it's really coming down out there."

“If this keeps up, no one will be going to work tomorrow,” he said.

“You going to check out Nila’s house?”

He glanced over his shoulder as he stepped out onto the porch. “What?”

“Don’t look coy, it’s me you’re talking to. I know you’ve been shifting, I’ve seen your tracks in the woods. If you’re going to go, you should do it now before it gets much worse and you get stuck here. You know you’re welcome to stay, but if we have a snow day tomorrow I’m planning to watch all six Star Wars movies from the Blu-Ray collector’s set, including all the extras.”

“No thanks.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m heading home; it’s too late now anyway.”

Giving his sister a wave, he trudged through the foot of snow on her steps and made his way to his SUV. He looked at the woods. If he shifted and took a run by Nila’s house, he’d have to stay at Mia’s, which he didn’t really want to do. What he could do, though, was go to the grocery for Nila, since she said she wasn’t going to be able to. He was pretty sure that the doctors’ office would be closed in the morning and the thought of her and Jack going without something they might need made his wolf howl in worry.

Getting into the SUV, he left Mia’s and called his mom.

“What kind of things would a twenty-one-month-old baby like?”

There was a short pause, and then his mom said, “Um, are you talking about your mate’s son?”

He’d told his parents about Nila when he first met her. His mom was dying to meet them, but knew she needed to keep her distance for now.

“Yeah. Nila said that she couldn’t go to the grocery tonight because of the weather so I thought I’d stop myself and take some things over. Unless you think that’s a dumb idea?”

“It’s a great idea, honey. You’ll show her that you were not only listening about her needs, but trying to help.”

As she began to list things he should pick up at the grocery, he made a mental list, hoping he got everything and that Nila would accept his help. Maybe she wouldn’t, and it would all be for nothing, but maybe she would and he’d be one step closer to her seeing that he wasn’t anything like her ex.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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Nila looked out the front window but couldn't see much in the darkness. The power had gone out at 9:30 and hadn't come back on, so an hour later, she'd built a fire in the fireplace and pulled Jack's crib into the front room. He was sleeping soundly in his footy pajamas, his favorite stuffed wolf tucked close.

Headlights flashed along the front of the house as a big vehicle pulled into the driveway. Who was that? She wasn't expecting anyone. Immediately she wondered if Damien had come for her and Jack. The alarm system wasn't working because the electricity was off, which made her wish she'd taken the security company's advice and installed a generator for just such an emergency.

The SUV's headlights blinded her for a moment, but she blinked past the spots in her vision and watched the driver's door open and the interior light illuminate Malachi.

What the hell?

She grabbed her coat and tucked her feet into the boots at the front door, casting a glance at her sleeping son before opening the front door, stepping out into the bitter cold, and closing it behind her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. Malachi had superior hearing; he would be able to hear her even if she was whispering.

He got out, shut the door, and opened the passenger door, extracting two grocery sacks. He didn't say anything until he

reached the bottom step of the porch.

“I remembered you saying you weren’t going to get to the store because of the snow, so I stopped for you.”

He made no move to come up the steps, crowd her, or push past her into the house, like her ex would have done. Of course, her ex didn’t care if she had groceries or not, unless he was asking her to make him something to eat.

Her mouth opened and closed, twice, before she said, “What are you doing?”

With the SUV’s headlights illuminating him from behind, he looked so much like a freaking angel she almost forgot she was trying to keep him at arm’s length. He looked like a guardian angel—arms full of groceries, a halo of light around him, snow falling against his dark hair.

Without stopping his smile, he set the bags down on the top of the porch and said, “I’ll get the others and then I’ll take off.”

He made two more trips to the SUV. When he was done, seven paper sacks were lined up on the porch. “I wasn’t sure what kinds of things Jack would eat, so I called my mom.”

She forgot the cold and the snow. She forgot everything but the man standing on the sidewalk in front of her house, and the words he’d just spoken.

“You called your mom about Jack?”

He shrugged, looking embarrassed. “I don’t know a lot about kids, so I went to an expert. I didn’t think that if I called you you’d tell me what you guys needed, anyway.”

She snorted, but inside she knew he was right. If he’d called her and offered to bring groceries, she would have been too proud to accept. He was being kind, and yeah, maybe he was trying to show her that he was different from her ex, but at the moment he wasn’t asking anything but for her to accept the groceries.

Her mouth opened before she could stop it. “Help me bring them in, but be quiet because Jack is sleeping.”



He smiled so broadly that he looked as if someone had given him the best present ever. She picked up the nearest bag and opened the front door, stepping in and holding it while he picked up several bags and walked ahead of her. She carried her bag to the kitchen and Malachi moved like a ninja, silent and fast, bringing in the other bags and closing the front door quietly.

The kitchen was through the family room, and without the heat, it was cooling quickly. “It’s cold enough outside to leave the milk and stuff on the back porch,” he said, shifting some things into one sack and unlocking the door at the back of the kitchen that led to the tiny concrete porch. She watched him put the cold things – milk, eggs, packages of deli meat and cheese, and an eight-pack of her favorite strawberry-banana yogurt – onto the back patio and shut and lock the door.

He turned and said, “Take care, Nila.”

He made it halfway through the family room before she managed to snap herself out of her stupor and race to him. She put her hand on the front door, not that she could stop him from opening it if he really wanted to.

“How did you know I like that yogurt?” she whispered. She stared up at him, his beautiful blue eyes glinting in the firelight.

He raised a brow. “I pay attention. You have one every day during your break.”

She felt her insides tremble in excitement and scowled internally at herself. She was not going to melt into a puddle of goo because he happened to notice something that her ex, who had lived with her, had never once noticed.

She blinked rapidly, unsure where the sudden stinging tears were coming from, and whispered, “I thought I’d make some hot chocolate, if you’d like to join me.”

“Marshmallows?” he asked hopefully.

She couldn’t help but smile. “Mini and regular.”

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Malachi knew the roads were getting treacherous. He'd almost gotten stuck twice at the end of her development on the way to bring her groceries. The plows were out in force, but the snow was falling too fast for them to keep up. The news on the radio said that they were headed for a state of emergency in town, and that meant that soon no vehicles would be allowed on the road. But damn if he could pass up hot chocolate made by his mate. With marshmallows.

“Take off your shoes, you’ll get my carpets all wet,” she said softly, smiling at him before toeing off her own boots, dropping her coat over a chair, and walking back into the kitchen. He glanced at the fireplace and thought it could use some more wood, so after he divested himself of his coat and boots, he added wood to the fire and then looked at the crib. Jack was adorable. He’d seen him at Acksel and Brynn’s engagement party, which seemed like an eternity ago. He looked just like Nila, but a slow inhale told him that the young boy was more wolf than human.

He joined Nila in the small kitchen. The tile floor was old but clean, the curtains over the one large window in front of the table were cheerful red gingham, and the scent of beef stew lingered in the air.

He caught the scent of gas as she lit the stove with a match and put a pan of milk on to heat. He sat on a padded kitchen chair and took the opportunity of her distraction to look at her in the glow from the electric candles on the counter. She was wearing dark pink lounge pants decorated with penguins, and a dark top under a thick sweater. Her long hair was tucked back into a braid, and he wanted to undo it and run his fingers through the strands.

“How long has the power been out?” he said in a low voice.

“Since about nine-thirty. This house isn’t really insulated well so it cooled down fast, hence the fire.”

“All the lights are out on this street, but my sister’s house still has power. I texted her before I got out of the SUV.”

After she put the cold items in a bag, he put it out on the back porch for her, and then shut and locked the door. He stared down at the two deadbolts, his gut telling him that she’d put them in as a safety measure against her ex.

“I know they won’t stop him if he wants to get in, but they’ll slow him down,” she said, her voice soft and sad.

Mal turned slowly and faced her. Her back was straight with determination, but her eyes were haunted. Once more he found himself struggling not to offer her comfort. His wolf was genuinely aggravated that she was scared and he couldn’t help her.

“I can help with the security, if you’d like. I have a security company.”

Her head tilted just slightly in curiosity. “I thought you were Brynn’s bodyguard.”

“That’s my pack job. I’m a protector, and that means I protect who the alpha says, and he says Brynn. As a sideline, though, I co-own L&M Security.”

“You’re the ‘M’, who is the ‘L’?”

“My best friend Lucian.”

“Is he a wolf?”

“No, he’s human. He’s got a...complicated life, and he travels quite extensively, but he does what he can for the company now until his life settles down.” Not that Malachi ever expected that to happen. Lucian wasn’t planning to retire from his real job anytime soon.

“I don’t want to put you out.”

He blinked, not sure what she was talking about, and then he realized she meant him helping with her home’s security. “It’s not a big deal. I saw the security company sign in the flower bed out front, and judging from the system you have in here, it wouldn’t take much for me to upgrade it so you’d feel safer.”

“Gosh, I don’t know what that would feel like.” She rubbed her arms.

His heart panged. “I want that for you.”

She blinked, tilting her head up until she was looking into his eyes. She stepped closer to him, the sweet wildflower scent of her skin making his mouth water. “Safety?”

He nodded, not daring to open his mouth because he really wasn’t sure he wouldn’t say something completely idiotic like please be mine forever.

Something splashed loudly and he looked over her head to see that the milk had boiled over. She gasped and lurched toward the stove, lifting the pan as he grabbed a towel and turned off the gas.

She cursed under her breath and carried the pot to the counter, setting it on a hot pad. He sopped up the spilled milk and wrung the towel out in the sink. Within a few minutes, they were sitting on the couch in front of the fireplace drinking hot chocolate, both of their mugs topped with marshmallows.

While they stared into the fire, they talked about everything and nothing, the sort of light conversation that people tend to make when they don’t want to talk about the elephant in the room. For Malachi, that particular elephant was wearing a giant flashing sign that read, ‘You’re my mate.’ From what little he’d learned about Nila’s ex, he’d spent the better part of their relationship treating her like property and terrifying her. She didn’t need Malachi acting all ‘me Tarzan, you Jane.’ He really wished that relationships came with a manual so he could flip to the table of contents and figure out where to start.

Nila put her empty mug on the coffee table and turned to face him. She blinked slowly, fatigue showing on her face, and then her eyes closed and didn’t open again, as her breathing evened out.

Shit. He should go like right fucking now. As if on cue, his phone buzzed and a text from Mia read, “I hope you got home

safely. They just declared a state of emergency because of the road conditions.”

“I’m safe,” he texted back.

“Home?”

“None of your beeswax.”

“Oh that’s mature.” She signed off that she loved him, and he replied back the same, sliding his phone onto the table and yawning.

“I’m stuck here, sweetheart,” he whispered.

Nila’s answer was a sigh, as she snuggled into the cushions.

Being stuck wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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*N*ila yawned and stretched, rubbing her eyes. She looked to the right and was surprised by what she saw. Malachi was leaning against the arm of the couch, his head propped up on one hand, and his other arm holding Jack as he slept, snuggled against him.

She swallowed hard at the sight. She'd never seen anything sweeter. A blanket was covering her, and she knew that Malachi had done that for her, and also must have caught Jack before he woke her up. She was oddly grateful, but wary at the same time. Glad that he'd helped Jack, but concerned that he'd stayed the night. Why hadn't he gone home?

Easing from the couch, she walked to the front window and pulled back the curtain enough to see in the morning sunlight that another foot of snow had blanketed the world outside her door. She'd lured him into her home with hot chocolate and marshmallows when she'd known that the snow wasn't letting up. A part of her knew that she'd been desperate for some kind of extra protection, because the lack of electricity had meant the security system was useless. But the bigger part of her knew that she just hadn't wanted Malachi to leave.

"It's pretty bad out there." Malachi's voice was soft and deep, and it wiggled down her spine, making her whole body tighten.

She turned slowly and looked at him, so comfortable on her couch with her son in his arms, Jack's blue baby blanket over top of them both. Malachi looked even more handsome

with his short hair mussed from sleep and a shadow of stubble on his chin.

“I’m sorry you got stuck here.”

He smiled at her in a way that said he knew exactly why she’d let him stay, even though she hadn’t consciously made the choice. “I’m not.”

“I didn’t hear him.” She looked at her son, his tawny head tucked into the crook of Malachi’s neck as if he belonged there.

“I got him pretty quick. He just went right back to sleep, but I think that he leaked on me.” He grinned wryly.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay, I promise.”

She moved toward them and stopped next to the couch. He looked up at her, and there was nothing sinister in his eyes, no look that told her a fist might come flying at her at any moment, or that a scathing insult might be hurled in her direction. “It is okay, isn’t it?”

He nodded.

She took her still-sleeping son from him and saw that Jack had indeed ‘leaked’ since Malachi’s dark shirt had an even darker stain on it. Jack made a snuffling sound as he began to wake, and she said, “I’ll be right back.”

When she came out of the bedroom after changing Jack, she found Malachi, naked from the waist up, talking on his cell. “Okay, thanks, I appreciate it.” He tucked the phone into his back pocket and said, “A wolf from my pack works for the power company, and he said that the power will be back on this street in about an hour. Do you have a shovel?”

She realized she was staring at his chest. His amazing chest. When he cleared his throat and said her name, lifting her eyes to meet his was possibly the hardest thing she’d had to do. Him and his damn lickable chest. “I’m sorry?”

“A shovel?”

She blinked. “I can wash the shirt; you don’t have to bury it.”

He laughed, and the sound was so sweet she wanted to make him laugh again. “No, sweetheart, I want to shovel your driveway. And you don’t have to wash the shirt, I can do my own laundry.”

“You don’t have to shovel the drive.” He called her sweetheart. She cursed herself for thinking that was awesome.

“Well, I’ll give you two reasons why I do. One, I’m snowed in because the plows that came through very early this morning blocked me in.”

When he didn’t continue, she swallowed the lump in her throat and said, “What’s the second reason?”

He grabbed his coat from where he’d hung it on the hooks by the front door and said, “Because I want to do it for you. You made me hot chocolate with marshmallows and you let me crash on your couch when it had to be hard for you to do that since we don’t know each other well.”

What he didn’t say was that he was a wolf, and he knew she didn’t like his kind. “The shovel is on the porch.”

He went to the door, and as he pulled it open, she said, “Malachi?”

“Yeah?” He looked at her, his beautiful blue eyes regarding her with nothing but kindness.

“Thank you.”

“It’s no hardship to shovel snow.”

“No, for everything.” She hugged Jack a little closer. “Thank you for everything.”

He smiled at her, a dimple forming in one cheek that made her think of wicked things, and walked out, shutting the door firmly behind him. By the time the drive was shoveled, the power was back on and Jack was happily playing on the floor with his toys while she went through the fridge and salvaged what she could.



“Can I make you some breakfast?” she asked when he stopped back in the house and picked up his shirt.

“No thank you, sweetheart. I have to get going. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

He ducked down on one knee and brushed his knuckle over Jack’s cheek. “Take care, kiddo. Thanks for sharing your blanket with me.”

Jack banged two wooden blocks together, giggled, and then looked at Malachi and said, “Carrot.”

Nila smiled at the sweet scene and said goodbye to Malachi, closing and locking the door when he was gone. She turned and looked around the family room. It seemed empty now without Malachi’s big muscly body taking up room on her couch. “I hate to admit it, J-man, but I miss him already.”

“Carrot.”

“You bet, sweetie. Carrot.”

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With the world unstuck from the snowfall of the previous day, Nila drove to the daycare and dropped off Jack, and then headed to the doctor’s office. She liked her job and the people she worked with, but she didn’t usually look forward to working as much as she did that morning. She pulled her car into the parking lot and turned it off, staring at the big green SUV that belonged to Malachi.

A little streak of jealousy sliced through her, but she shoved it aside. Brynn’s life wasn’t totally idyllic. Her mate had treated her pretty badly and left her floundering while she was pregnant and he hid behind pack laws. She might be loving life now, but she’d been really miserable not too long ago. Nila could relate to that. She’d been pretty naive about wolves when she met Damien. He seemed like a nice guy. He’d treated her like a queen, said all the right things to ease her mind about her concerns that she was a human and he wasn’t. He hadn’t let her near his pack for the first few months

of their relationship, and then she found out she was pregnant. She had been taking the pill faithfully the whole time and was surprised by the pregnancy, but she and Damien were in love and he was excited by the thought of having a child with her. He married her immediately and then he took her to meet his pack.

What a rude awakening that was. She was treated like a second-class citizen because she was human. The females were hostile, some of them even threatening to harm her and the baby because Damien was the son of the alpha and therefore a prized male. It was that night, the first time she met his father, that she saw the real Damien. His nice guy persona melted away so fast that she wondered if she'd ever really seen it in the first place.

Shaking her head to clear the dark thoughts, she exhaled loudly and turned off the car. It rattled a bit as the engine stopped, and she grimaced. She didn't have the money to deal with car repairs right now. She walked through the freshly salted parking lot, the crunch of the salt under her boots loud in the quiet morning, and opened the door of the clinic. She smiled at Brynn and said hello, but walked through the door without saying anything to Malachi as she made her way to the employee breakroom to stow her things.

She wanted to believe that Malachi was different from Damien, but she'd already been fooled once by a wolf in sheep's clothing. Jack counted on her to make good choices. He might have a lousy biological father, but Nila could give him a worthy step-dad, and that man would not be a wolf. She just couldn't risk Jack's safety and happiness because Malachi happened to make her heart thud irregularly in her chest.

She put the yogurt that Malachi had bought for her on the shelf in the fridge and stared at the white container with the strawberry and banana images on the front. He'd even gotten her favorite brand, which showed just how much he'd been paying attention to her.

She hated that her stomach flipped at the idea of him watching her.

Gritting her teeth, she closed the fridge door hard enough to make it rock back and forth. Then she smoothed her hands down the front of her scrub top, which was covered with pink and purple bunnies, and strode out to the front to get the first patient. If she ignored Malachi long enough, he'd get the hint and move on.

She hoped.

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Malachi didn't know what had happened between yesterday and today, but Nila was acting like an ice queen toward him. When she came to get the first patient, she ignored him so expertly that he felt like he'd suddenly become invisible.

"Whoa," Brynn said softly as Nila took the young girl and her father to an exam room. "What the heck did you do to her?"

He frowned. "Shoveled her driveway."

"Oh, you bastard," Brynn said, grinning.

He snorted, looking down the hallway, his wolf whining. He didn't like her ignoring him like that. Before he'd spent time at her house, she'd kept her distance, but now he was sure she was just trying hard not to look at him. Something had happened to change her mind about him.

Brynn spun in the chair and folded her arms across her chest, giving him a long look. "Acksel said you don't want to sit here all day anymore."

"I talked to him about it yesterday. I'll still drive you to and from work, and pick you up for lunch anytime you go out to eat, but I won't be stuck here when I need to deal with my company."

"I'll miss you hanging out here."

"You'll survive. If I don't start paying more attention to my company, though, it might not make it." He rubbed his

temple, worry about Nila's change in attitude clouding his mind.

“What's up with Lucian? Mia said he hasn't been around in months.”

Malachi made a face. “Mia shouldn't worry about him.”

Brynn snorted loudly. “Oh, okay, then why don't you stop worrying about Nila?” He gave her a confused look and she shrugged. “You can't stop thinking about Nila, so why would Mia stop thinking about Lucian?”

He growled. “They are *not* mates. She has a childhood crush on him and needs to get over it.”

“Man, you're a dick sometimes. You don't know what she and Lucian are, because you've done your damndest to keep them apart, what with your never-touch-my-sister rules. You can't stop nature, Mal, no matter how hard you try. You should just let them get together and see what happens. If they're mates they're going to be together no matter what, and then you'll be the jackass who kept them apart for all those years.”

“His life is too dangerous; she could become a target.”

Her brow arched. “Isn't he like a scary-ass body guard or something like that? Luke is human and he kept Eveny safe from those wolves who tried to hurt her.”

“Don't remind me.” Acksel's only sister Eveny had been intent on going through the heat cycle alone in a family cabin in the mountains, and Acksel had attempted to intervene, telling one of the wolves where she was so he could ‘help her out,’ in her time of need. Instead, the wolf had gathered some friends and gone up there with the intention of brutally raping her, and it was only Luke's intervention that kept Eveny safe. Luke's protection of Eveny had begun the slow transformation of the pack from wolf-only to accepting of humans. Before Eveny and Luke became mates, a wolf in the Wilde Creek Pack would be banished forever for choosing a human mate. Now, with Brynn, there were two human mates in the pack, and Brynn's status as alpha female went a long way toward helping the pack accept humans. It didn't matter a bit to

Malachi that Nila was human. She was his, and that meant he accepted what she was. A bit of bitterness swam through him. Didn't Nila know that Malachi was her mate? Even if she was human, couldn't she feel some kind of connection to him? Why couldn't she look past what he was to the male he was inside, and see he was nothing like her ex?

"Wow, I'm sorry if I insulted you or something," Brynn said, rubbing her arms and shuddering.

"What?"

"You're growling, and your eyes are amber."

He pressed his palm to his forehead and forced his wolf down. "I'm sorry. I don't want to talk about Mia and Lucian anymore, okay? I wish a lot of things were different right now, the least of which is Lucian's dangerous life and my sister's interest in him."

Brynn smiled softly. "It's okay, Mal."

The front door opened and a patient walked in. Malachi turned back to the laptop and went over security footage once more, just to give himself something to do so he didn't obsess over Nila's change in attitude.

Unfortunately he didn't have much luck with that.

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Nila pulled a bottle of apple juice from the refrigerator and poured some into a sippy cup, closing the lid and setting it on the highchair tray. There was a knock at the front door and her heart stopped in her chest for a long moment, before she reasoned that Damien would never knock. He'd bang his fists on the door and demand she open it.

Glancing at Jack and seeing him happily playing the drums on the tray with his plastic spoons, she walked quickly to the front door and looked through the peephole.

Malachi.

She'd spent the day pretending to be aloof about him. About lunchtime, she'd become aware that his mood had soured and he looked really unhappy. She knew her own behavior was to blame, and part of her had felt bad.

"What do you want, Malachi?" she called through the door.

"I said I'd upgrade your security system, and I'm here to do that."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Why?"

"I keep my promises."

"You didn't make a promise, though."

She could hear his aggravated, low growl, but for once it didn't frighten her. "If you don't want me here, Nila, I can have one of my people come and do the upgrade instead. I just want you to feel safe, and if you don't feel that way with me here then I'm defeating my own purpose."

She opened her mouth to tell him to send someone else, but she couldn't make herself say the words. Unlocking the deadbolts and security bar and twisting the lock on the knob, she pulled the door open and stepped aside to let him in.

He had several bags that he carried in with him. As she shut and locked the door, Jack called out, "Carrot?"

Nila wasn't sure, but she thought that Jack was calling Malachi 'carrot.' He hadn't said his favorite word since he'd said it to Malachi the day before. Was it a coincidence?

"I was getting ready to feed him dinner."

"Go on and do whatever you need to, I've got this."

He seemed tense; his lips were drawn into a tight line, and he looked like he was clenching his teeth together. She stared at him for a moment longer, feeling the need to apologize. She'd made him mad. Unlike her ex, he wasn't lashing out at her physically or verbally. In fact, he seemed to be doing everything in his power to remain non-threatening and calm.

She walked into the kitchen, uncertainty gnawing at her. As she prepared Jack's dinner, she thought about all that Malachi had done for her since she'd met him. He'd done more for her in a few weeks than Damien had in all the years she'd known him. Damien had been kind on the surface, but he'd never gone out of his way to help her. Never shoveled her drive or brought her groceries, and even though Jack was Damien's son, he never looked at him with any kind of affection. The sort of affection that Malachi gave freely to Jack—that he seemed willing to give to her if she'd let him.

Swallowing the sudden lump in her throat, she pulled a package of pork chops from the refrigerator and put a pan on the stove to heat. She hadn't bothered getting to know anything about Malachi. Considering how much attention he paid to her, how much he'd learned just by watching, she was starting to feel like a colossal bitch.

“Your mom's an idiot,” she told Jack as he picked up Spaghettios with his fist and shoved them into his mouth.

“Carrot?” he asked, grinning widely with sauce-covered cheeks.

“Carrot.”

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Malachi's stomach growled when the scent of cooking pork wafted into the family room. Nila would think a predator had gotten into the house if he didn't stop that grumbling sound. He forced himself to concentrate on finishing the installation of the new security system, which he'd completely revamped. She'd had a bare-bones system before, but it wasn't enough protection. Along with closing out her account with the old security company, he'd added her to his 24/7 monitoring service, which would alert the police and his staff of a break-in.

His phone buzzed, and he pulled it from his pocket. “Hey, Lucian.”

“Hey. I just got an update from our staff that you’re doing an installation in Wilde Creek. Anything I should know?”

“Checking up on me?” Mal joked.

“You know it. Protecting my investment.”

Malachi had told Lucian about Nila when he first met her. Lucian was Malachi’s best friend, aside from being business partners. Malachi wanted Lucian to know what was going on in case something happened to him, so that Nila would always be safe. He knew that if he was incapacitated, Lucian would come and protect Nila in a heartbeat, regardless of his other obligations.

Lucian sobered. “Is this just a general security system, or did something else happen?”

“No, nothing’s happened, but I’ll feel better knowing she’s more protected.”

“Window alarms?”

“Yep.”

“Motion detectors outside?”

“I haven’t installed them yet.”

Lucian hummed. “Sounds like you’ve got it settled. When’s the wedding?”

Malachi chuckled. “I’ll let you know.”

“You do that.”

“Are you coming back to Wilde Creek anytime soon? I’m tired of paying you a salary when I’m doing all the work.” Lucian went quiet and Malachi straightened. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, of course. I don’t know when I’ll be back, but if you need me, you call and I’ll be there in a two shakes. Got it?”

Malachi said goodbye and hung up, sliding the phone into his pocket.

“Was that your business partner?” Nila asked.



Malachi turned to find her leaning against the doorjamb. He nodded.

“What else does he do besides run the security company with you?”

He hesitated, and saw her eyes narrow and a frown mar her pretty face. “He’s a hunter.”

“Like deer or duck?” Her head tilted as her brows rose.

“Not remotely. He hunts rogue shifters for the government. It’s part of the military, a small group of highly trained soldiers that go after shifters who have harmed humans or become unstable.”

“I didn’t know there were people like that.”

“No one knows what Lucian does aside from me. His family thinks he’s just a soldier; they don’t know that he goes after dangerous shifters to help protect the population. He travels a lot, and he’s very good at his job.”

Her brows creased. “No one knows? But you told me.”

He exhaled slowly. “I trust you not to tell anyone what Lucian does. It’s important to him that his family is safe, and the safest thing for them is to be in the dark about the specifics of his job.” He watched her brows draw closer together and this time he didn’t stop himself from crossing over to her and looking down into her beautiful face. “You’re safe, Nila. I wouldn’t have told you if I thought it would place you in danger. He deals with bad guys, and sometimes bad guys go looking for people to hurt in vengeance, which is why he does all that cloak and dagger stuff. But it’s got nothing to do with you.”

She peered up at him, her chocolate gaze roaming his face. “Are you safe? You’re his business partner.”

“He keeps that part of his life separate from our business, so yes, I’m safe.” He wanted to grin like an idiot because she cared if he was safe or not.

She inhaled slowly, her eyes darkening, and the soft, sweet scent of her arousal spiked in the air between them. He almost

bit off his tongue, but he managed to put some distance between them. "I'm going to head outside to install some motion lights around the outside of the house."

"I made dinner. When you're done."

His head shot up. "You didn't have to."

"I know. I think that's why I did it."

He smiled at her and she returned it, turning into the kitchen and leaving him alone. Gathering his things, he headed out into the cold to hook up the motion lights. He couldn't help but smile. She'd made him dinner. He'd dance a jig if he knew how.

Dinner with his mate. Was there anything better outside of naked bodies between sheets? Hell no.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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It took Malachi about two hours to get the outside lights installed. Every now and then she'd hear a ladder moving around, some drilling, and the occasional muffled curse. She put both of their dinners in the oven to keep warm and got Jack ready for bed. By the time Malachi came inside, Jack was snoozing in the bedroom with the door shut, and she was positively starving.

“Come eat, Mal.”

He took off his coat and toed off his boots. “You called me Mal.”

“Sorry. Brynn does. Is that a nickname just for her?” She felt a little stab of jealousy.

“No, not at all. My sister does, too. I like you calling me that.”

He followed her into the kitchen, and her heart started thumping. She'd never really cared if anyone liked her cooking before. Jack was easy and her biggest fan, but serving Malachi dinner suddenly seemed stupid. If he hated her cooking, he might not want to come over anymore.

She gave herself an internal shake. She still wasn't one hundred percent sure what she wanted to do with Malachi anyway. He might be gorgeous, but he was still a wolf, and she'd never had good luck with wolves. She was feeling like a bad hostess and wanted to feed him, that was all this was. She didn't need to read anything into it, because there wasn't anything there. Right?

She pulled the plates out of the oven and turned around, finding him setting the table with silverware and folded napkins. She clenched her teeth to stop from gushing over how awesome he was. Setting the plates on the table, she pulled a jug of sweet tea from the refrigerator and filled up two glasses. She sat down and said, “I wasn’t sure what you liked to eat, but I figured meat was a good start.”

He looked down at their matching plates—pan-seared pork chops, macaroni and cheese, and steamed green beans. His blue gaze met hers, and he flashed her a brilliant smile, making that dimple show in his cheek again. “It’s perfect. I do love meat, but heck, I’d eat anything you made.”

She felt herself blush and turned her attention to the food. While they ate, Malachi told her about his family, and how he’d just recently come back to Wilde Creek to live and rejoined the pack as one of the protectors.

“You’ve mentioned that before. What is a protector?”

He swallowed his bite of food and took a drink of iced tea. “There are two main groups within our pack—the protectors and the omegas. Protectors are those who’ve proven themselves to be good guards. Our job is to keep pack members safe. I’m Brynn’s personal protector, but other protectors guard the alpha house, drive Acksel around, and patrol in the town and the pack’s territory.”

“Why did you want to be her protector?”

“She’s my sister’s best friend, and Acksel and I have known each other our whole lives. As my alpha female, her safety is important to me. But it’s not the most important thing in my world.” His voice deepened and he gazed at her intently.

Her mouth went dry. “What?”

His lips pursed for a long moment and then he said, “You’re important to me, Nila. I don’t want you to hate me just because of my DNA.”

Her chest tightened and her breath froze in her chest. “We’re just having dinner.”

His face shadowed darkly and she saw the hurt in his eyes before he schooled his features and looked down at the plate, stabbing his fork into a chunk of pork chop. He didn't say anything else, and her appetite swiftly disappeared. She'd insulted him. Again. He finished eating faster than she thought possible, and then he stood, left the kitchen, and returned with a strange metal bar with rubber on both ends.

"I want to show you the new security stuff, and then I need to go." His voice was calm and clipped, and it made her chest hurt.

He shoved the metal bar under the back doorknob, so the rubber-pronged end surrounded the doorknob handle and the angled rubber bottom pressed into the floor. "This is a security bar. It can withstand 350 pounds of pressure. It won't necessarily stop someone who's really determined to get in, but it will slow them down. I have one for the front door, too. When I'm gone, you should install it."

He showed her the small white boxes on the inside of each window, explaining that they were alarms. If someone broke one of the windows, the alarm would sound. He gave her the new security code, explained how to arm and disarm the system, and then he said, "I canceled your other security program. This is my company's system. If someone tries to get into your house, or you press the emergency button, my 24/7 monitoring service will alert the police and send help."

She felt him pulling away from her emotionally, and it left her feeling colder than the snow on the porch. "Malachi, I —"

He turned to look at her as he adjusted the collar of his coat. He waited for her to say something, but she didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry." She hugged her arms around herself. In a heartbeat, Malachi's strong arms were around her. She stiffened involuntarily, but his gentle hold didn't change. He didn't try to force her to do anything, he just held her. It was the most comforted she'd ever felt.

"I'm not him, Nila, and I never will be. However long it takes for you to see that, just know that I'm not going anywhere."

Her defenses crumbled and she tunneled her hands under his coat and hugged herself close to him. Tears fell as she buried her face in his chest, gripping him like her life depended on it. She cried long enough that her throat grew raw and her eyes burned. He did nothing but rub her back and hold her close, letting her cry on him.

“I-I made you angry before. I’m s-sorry.”

“What?” He cupped her cheek and lifted her face until she was looking at him. “Mad? When did you make me mad?”

“At the table, and when I didn’t let you in right away.”

He brushed the tears from her cheek with his thumb. “I wasn’t mad at all, sweetheart. My wolf was being pretty vocal earlier, and I didn’t want to show you that side of me.”

Her hands tightened on his back, the material of his shirt gripped tightly in her fists. “I know what you are, Mal. I don’t want to hold my past against you, but I don’t know how to stop myself.”

“We’ve got time. I’m not going anywhere unless you tell me to.”

“Okay,” she sighed the word and pressed her cheek against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. He held her for a long time, just the two of them in the family room, and then he gave her a final hug and said goodbye, making her promise to use the security bar when he left.

As she closed and locked the door, setting the alarm and using the security bar, she realized she was shocked at his behavior. He hadn’t tried anything with her. She was upset and vulnerable, and he left. She wasn’t really sure what to make of it.

Picking up the phone, she called Diane.

“Hello honey,” Diane said, answering in her always-cheerful manner.

“Hi. Are you busy?”

“Never for you. What’s up?”

Nila proceeded to tell Diane about the situation with Malachi. Diane was silent for a long moment. Nila collapsed onto the couch, tired from the emotional upheaval of the evening and all the pacing she'd done while she talked.

"Let me ask you this: is this Malachi fellow kind?"

"Yeah. But so was Damien."

"Oh, bullshit."

"Diane! You never curse."

"And you never used to look at your past with such rose-colored glasses. Damien was not a nice male, your aunt and I never thought so. He didn't treat you like a queen; he treated you like you were his property, and he never once treated you like a wolf's mate."

"What?"

"He never marked you or brought you into his pack. You spent full moons waiting for him to come back. Don't you remember crying to us about how you could smell the other women on him but he always said it was nothing? Come on, honey. I'm not saying he never cared for you, I'm just saying that he never treated you like he did. From what you've told me, Malachi is entirely different. Would Damien have slept on the couch for you? Gotten Jack before his crying woke you? Shoveled the damn walk, cleaned the snow off your car, or installed a security system? Get real, get a clue, and grab hold of that male before some other woman smarter than you digs her claws into him."

She didn't like the thought of that at all. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm scared he's going to betray me. I feel like I can't trust my own instincts because I was so wrong about Damien."

"I can't tell you what to do, honey, but I can tell that you already care about Malachi, and he clearly has feelings for you. He wants you safe even if it means he's not the one keeping you safe, and he spent how long at your house tonight and didn't even try to kiss you? Snatch him up, Nila, fast."

Nila chuckled. "Thank you, Diane. I love you."

“I love you too. Now get some sleep, and when you get up in the morning, grab that wolf of yours by the collar, give him the kissing of a lifetime, and tell him you’re ready to be his mate.”

“He didn’t ask me to be his mate,” she pointed out.

“Trust me. My first husband was a wolf, and when a wolf finds his real mate, he can’t help but want to be with her.”

Another point in favor of Malachi and against Damien, who only seemed to show up around the full moon to cause her trouble. Nila ended the call and lay back on the couch, looking up at the ceiling. Diane was right. Malachi wasn’t acting anything like Damien, even back in the beginning when she’d thought Damien was treating her well.

Lifting her phone, she called Brynn. “Hi. Do you have a minute to talk?”

There was the muffled sound of Brynn telling Acksel to leave her boob alone, and then she said, “I’ve got plenty of time to chat. What’s up?”

“It’s about Malachi,” she said, wiggling against the cushions until she was comfortable, as she began to talk to her friend, who happened to be Malachi’s boss.

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Malachi thought Brynn was acting weird as he drove her to work the next morning. She was grinning from ear to ear, but refused to say why. In fact, she hadn’t said a word the whole drive.

“What is up with you? Did you secretly kill Acksel in his sleep for snoring? I know you said you were going to do that once.”

“No.” She drawled the word out and then giggled.

“Brynn,” he sighed, “spit it out or stop giggling, you’re making me batty.”



“I can’t, Mal. But I had a great phone call last night and... it’s going to be a good day, I promise. In fact, I think I’ll stay in for lunch and you should find something to do with yourself. Get some fresh air.”

She giggled again and then coughed, trying to hide it.

He groaned. Mia and Brynn had spent the better part of their younger years driving him nuts, and Brynn apparently hadn’t grown out of it. Then again, neither had Mia.

He escorted Brynn into the office and then went to the room that housed the security system to review the overnight recordings. He paused when he entered the room and Nila was standing next to the chair.

He blinked in surprise.

“Good morning,” she said softly.

He noticed that her hair was down today. Usually she had it up and out of the way while she worked. He liked seeing her hair down.

“Hi, Nila.”

She cleared her throat and her cheeks pinked. “I was wondering if you wanted to go to lunch with me today?”

Clarity washed through him. Brynn knew about this. It’s why she was acting like such a loon.

“I’d love to.”

“Really?” She looked genuinely surprised.

“Of course. Do you want me to make a reservation at Luna’s?”

“Brynn already did.” She paused and said, “You’re not mad, are you? That I talked to Brynn about this?”

He smiled and closed the distance between them. He wanted to hug her, but he settled for just standing close to her. “Not at all.”

“She said that you aren’t going to be coming here anymore, and I thought this might be my last chance.”

“Last chance?”

“To take you to lunch.”

“You can see me anytime you want. I’m not going to be sitting at the reception desk all day long anymore, but I will be driving her back and forth to work, and taking her out for lunch when she wants to leave. I could...” he paused, very certain he was about to cross a line with her, push too hard and drive her away.

“Could what?” She edged closer, tilting her head back to gaze up at him.

“I could drive you, too.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I could pick you and Jack up, take him to daycare, and then drive you to work with Brynn. If you wanted.” Damn, he wanted her to say yes.

Something flickered in her eyes, and he thought for a moment that it was jealousy. She wasn’t jealous of Brynn, was she? Maybe it wasn’t too far-fetched for her to be, considering how much time Malachi spent carting her around town. His mind flickered back to the conversation he’d had with Acksel earlier in the week about what would happen when he finally got Nila to agree to be his mate. Acksel said they’d work it out, but unless someone else stepped in as her personal protector, then Malachi was stuck. Nila would have to share his time with Brynn, while Malachi drove her around.

“I’m sorry,” he said, without thinking.

“Sorry for what?” Her head tilted, her hair sliding over her shoulder. He reached out and caressed a lock, finding it warm and silky.

“I’m sorry that my pack job means I have to be Brynn’s guard.”

“Don’t be sorry for being a male that your alpha trusts. Besides, this is just lunch, Malachi Slattery. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, okay?” She smirked at him, and he tweaked her chin with his finger and thumb.

“Okay. What time?”

“11:30.” Her smirk slid into a full-blown smile and his wolf grinned like a fool in return.

She left him in the computer room, and he sat down heavily on the chair in front of the desk, amazed that things were looking up for him with his sweet mate.

Malachi was nervous and watched the clock constantly. Brynn called him a nutcase for being so twitchy, but he could tell she thought it was a good thing.

Before he got ready to leave for lunch, Brynn said, “Just remember that with us humans, the mate stuff can feel foreign and sound kind of crazy. Humans just meet someone they’re attracted to and fall in love, there isn’t some other furry person in our brains telling us that we’ve found ‘the one.’”

“You said you were drawn to Acksel.” he pointed out.

“Sure. He’s sexy, and I’ve known him forever, but where he knew I was his mate, I doubted that the stuff between us was real. It’s difficult to be in a relationship with someone who’s so positive you’re meant to be together when one of you is just feeling things out. If you go all caveman on her, you’re going to scare her away. Her ex treated her like property. If you start spouting off that ‘mine’ crap that Acksel does with me, then she might think you’re more like her ex than you really are. She deserves to be treated like a queen, and I know you’re the right male for the job.”

“She really called you about me last night?”

“Oh yeah,” Brynn said, grinning. “She was very curious about you and whether it was okay if you went with her to lunch. I said it was fine. I am your boss, right?”

He smirked. “Yes, Alpha.”

She laughed. “I love being the boss. Have fun and be yourself. She already likes you, she’s still just wrestling with her past.”

Nila walked down the hallway at that moment, carrying Malachi’s coat. He was touched that she’d grabbed it for him.

“Ready?” she asked, hopefully.

“Do you want me to drive?”

“If you’d like.”

“I would.”

They said goodbye to Brynn. Malachi offered his arm to Nila and she took it, leaning on him as they walked down the steps and out to the SUV. The parking lot was mostly slush and salt, but he still wanted her to be safe. He unlocked the passenger door and helped her in, and then he came around to the driver’s door and got in. As he turned on the engine, his phone buzzed.

He pulled it from his pocket and glanced at the screen. His company was calling.

He mouthed sorry to Nila and answered the phone.

“Slattery here.”

“Good morning, sir. This is Vivi Parker at the communications center. I have an alert that the windows are being broken at 128 Forrest Road. It’s flagged that we should call you first and then the police.”

“Call the police. I’m on my way. Did you say that windows are being broken, as in multiple ones?”

“Yes, sir. The windows are being broken one after another, very systematically.”

“Damn it. Call me back if any other alarms are triggered.”

He tossed his phone into the cup holder between the seats with an aggravated snarl. “I need to take you back inside. Something is going on at your house.”

“Take me with you.”

“No, it could be dangerous.”

She clenched her teeth and defiance lit her eyes. “If you leave me here I’m just going to drive myself.”

“Damn it, you’re stubborn.” He put the vehicle into gear and pulled out of the parking space. “You’re to stay in the car

and do exactly as I say, got it?”

“Yes.”

He grabbed his phone and called Sam, the head of the protectors, quickly explaining the situation and asking him to send any available protectors to Nila’s house. When he ended the call, he knew that he was potentially driving his mate into a dangerous situation, but he hoped like hell that whoever was breaking her windows was gone by the time they got there. If Malachi got a hold of whoever it was, he was going to lose it, and he didn’t want her to see the dangerous side of his wolf.

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Nila’s phone buzzed as Malachi drove to her home. She pulled it from her purse, glanced at the screen, and then froze.

“No security system will keep us apart,” read the text from an unknown number. She had replaced her cell every time Damien figured out her number. She didn’t know how he was doing it, because the only places that ever had her number were the daycare and work, and the only people she willingly gave it to were Diane and Brynn.

“It’s Damien,” she said.

“What?” Malachi asked, his voice tight with anger.

“He just texted me. He’s the one who’s breaking my windows.” It had been easy enough to overhear the conversation with Malachi and the security company. Someone was breaking all her windows. Dread pooled in her stomach. She hadn’t wanted to believe it was Damien, but the text proved it.

“How the hell does he have your cell number? I thought you told Brynn that you didn’t give it out to anyone.”

“I don’t.” She deleted the text and then called the daycare to check on Jack. Everything was fine with him and no one had seen anyone suspicious hanging around. Breathing a sigh of relief, she dropped the phone into her purse and leaned back against the seat.

“If you’re not giving the number out, then he clearly knows someone who can get him the information. Maybe a private investigator or a crooked cop.”

Malachi turned a corner sharply. Two police cars and several other vehicles were parked on the street in front of her house, and men were milling around in the yard. Since Malachi didn’t say anything about the non-police people in her yard, she assumed they were protectors.

He pulled the SUV to a stop at the curb and turned to her. “I’m going to check things out. Stay put and lock the doors when I get out.”

“Okay.”

His eyes narrowed and he reached out and laid his hand on her neck. His thumb rubbed her throat and she raised a brow at him. “What?”

“I’m making sure you’re not in shock.”

She smiled in spite of how nuts the situation was. “I’m okay.”

“You’re being calm.”

She shrugged. “He could have done a lot more than break the windows. Clearly he was having someone watch the house who reported about you being here. I’m glad that it was just the windows.”

He frowned, his thumb rubbing against her throat lightly, and said, “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

When he shut the door, she pressed the lock button, reassured by the clicking sound of every door being locked. He stared at her through the side window for a long moment, and she wondered what he was thinking. Was he wondering if he was nuts for getting involved with her? She was beginning to think anyone was nuts to be around her.

She watched as Malachi first spoke to the police, and then made his way around the house, apparently using his phone to take pictures of the damage. From the street, she could see the two windows at the front of the house were completely broken

out. It wasn't like someone had just lobbed a rock through them—both windows were entirely gone, the jagged remains glinting in the afternoon sunlight.

Shit, the house was going to be a mess.

With a deep sigh, she laid her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. When she'd made the decision to leave Damien, she'd known that he was unstable. At the very least he acted like a child whose favorite toy had been taken away. She thought he got pleasure from her fear, knowing that he terrified her. He wasn't as muscular as Malachi, having more of a lean, wiry build, but he was still powerfully strong, thanks to his wolf shifter genes.

She opened her eyes and watched Malachi speak to the other men. Even though she couldn't hear what they were saying, she could tell that the men respected him. They weren't afraid of him, that he might lash out unexpectedly just for the fun of it the way that Damien did. No, these men—these wolf shifters—respected Malachi because he was worthy of respect and deserved it.

Twenty minutes passed before Malachi came to her side of the SUV and she unlocked the door. He opened it and a blast of cold air whipped into the interior, making her shiver immediately.

“Come on, sweetheart.” He offered her his hand and she took it without a second thought. He pulled her gently from the interior of the SUV and guided her up the front walk. She gave him the house key and he unlocked it and ushered her inside, cautioning her to be careful of the glass. She gasped as she looked around. Bricks had been tossed through the windows, and littered the floor and furniture. Everything looked broken, as if the bricks had been thrown with more purpose than simply breaking the glass. Looking through the open door of Jack's bedroom, she saw that the crib was destroyed.

She didn't even realize she was crying until Malachi embraced her, bringing her into his warmth and holding her close.

“Shh,” he crooned softly. “It’s going to be okay.”

She ducked her head against his chest and fisted his shirt in her hands. “How can you be sure?”

“Because I know I’m not going to let anything happen to you or Jack.”

“Malachi?” She said his name, and a fine tremble wove through her body.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. “Why are you here with me?”

Brynn had told her that Malachi believed Nila was his mate, that his wolf and his human side were in agreement that she was the woman meant for them. Diane had been right in saying that Damien had never treated her like anything but property. When he said that Nila belonged to him, he didn’t mean he wanted to take care of her forever, he just meant he was keeping her, whether she liked it or not.

Malachi lifted his hand and stroked the curve of her cheek. “You’re my mate, Nila. I want you to be my mate, not because I’m making some kind of Neanderthal claim to you, but because you’re constantly in my thoughts and I can’t live without you. I want you to be my mate because you want me to be yours, because you can’t live without me, either.”

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Closing it again, she leaned her head against his chest and sighed. She was buoyed by his words. He’d been in her thoughts since the day they met. She’d been fighting the connection between them, but here, in his arms, the last thing she wanted to do was fight.

A throat cleared and she lifted her head from his chest and looked at a handsome man with short, dark hair.

Malachi said, “Nila, this is Jeremiah, part of my pack. He’s going to stay here and make sure that the windows are replaced and everything gets cleaned up.”



“What?” She blinked in surprise and turned her attention to Malachi.

He smiled. “Jeremiah is going to take care of things. All you need to do is pack a bag for you and Jack and I’ll take you back to work.”

“A bag?”

“You can’t stay here tonight, sweetheart.”

“But where will I go?”

“Do you even have to ask? Come to my home. Everything that’s mine is yours.”

She shook her head and pushed away from him. “That’s just insane. He broke all my windows because you installed a security system. What do you think he’ll do when he finds me and Jack at your house? I’ll go stay with Diane. She lives here in town and I know she’ll take us in.”

Malachi’s eyes flashed from blue to amber. “My home is safe.”

She took a step back, instinctively tensing to flee if he raised his fist. He seemed to sense her fear immediately. The amber faded from his eyes, and he jammed his hands into his pockets. “If you’re not willing to stay at my house, then I’m going to be there, guarding you.” She opened her mouth to protest, but he shook his head. “Go pack. The police are waiting for your statement, and your lunch hour is almost up.”

He seemed angry. Well, angry was an understatement. He looked like he could punch a hole through the wall, but he had purposely made himself calm down and appear non-threatening. Once more she was reminded that Malachi was not Damien. She almost told him that she’d go to his house, but she knew if she stayed there not only would she never want to leave, but she’d be drawing Damien directly to him, and that was the last thing she wanted to do.

Nodding, she walked into the bedroom and opened the closet, grabbing an older diaper bag from the shelf. She ignored the destruction and the crunch of glass under her shoes

and busied herself packing, trying to decide whether going to Diane's was really the best idea or not.

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Malachi rubbed his snout on the porch railing of Diane's home. She was like an aunt to Nila, and the woman had opened her door without hesitation to Nila and Jack. Malachi sat on the front porch in his shifted form, using his enhanced senses to keep track of what was going on around him. Three other protectors were posted around the house. He'd asked Sam to get some volunteers for the job; and Sam had immediately volunteered himself, and so had Malachi's cousins Devin and Hayden. Malachi would figure out a way to thank them.

Nila was stubborn. He didn't know why she wouldn't come to his house. The house was very safe, more so than Diane's for sure, since she didn't even have a basic security system. He lifted his muzzle and inhaled, sifting through the scents around him and finding nothing but nature and the wolves with him.

The front door opened and shut quickly, and Nila sat down on the top step, a blanket wrapped around her. She leaned against him and sighed loudly.

"I know you think I should be at your place, Mal. It's just that my life is so fucked up right now."

He whined audibly and she ducked her head and rubbed her cheek against the top of his head.

"You're a good guy. I do feel strangely connected to you. I've had to try really hard not to look at you at work, but I can't seem to help myself. I know I've been hiding behind the fact that you're a wolf to keep us apart, but you're more than this furry creature you shift into, I know that." She exhaled slowly and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "I just need some time, Mal. Give me time to get to know you when things aren't so messy, okay? I can't think about a future with you when I'm afraid that Damien's going to take everything from

me. It would be a lot better if he would find someone else to be with, but he always comes back for me. He said he'd never let me go, and that he'd make my life hell if I didn't go back to him, and look at how well he's done that. I can't even marry anyone else because he won't let me divorce him. And you know what's really fucked up? He never treated me like a real mate. He never claimed me as his mate to the pack or marked me, he never treated me like anything but a fuck toy and a maid. I was such a fool, and now I'm ruined, I'm so hopelessly fucked."

Malachi wanted to tell her that she wasn't hopelessly fucked at all, that he would figure out a way to get her free of Damien's hold on her, but since he was in his shift he couldn't do anything but growl softly and nuzzle her throat. She sat with him for a long time, until it grew late and she shivered from the cold. She kissed the top of his head and said goodnight, and he watched her go into the house and lock the door. Settling in for the night, he decided to talk to Acksel in the morning.

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Damien watched from the upstairs window of a house across the street from where Nila was staying. The occupants of the house were gone, and he and his men had broken in through the back door to stake out the house Nila was staying in. He watched with narrowed eyes as Nila sat next to a wolf on the front porch.

She was his! What the fuck was she doing touching another male?

He growled. He should have brought a gun. Then he could have just picked off the males one by one and taken the bitch and his son back. He'd teach her a thing or two about obedience, and make sure she never had an opportunity to leave him again. His mind flipped through ideas on how to permanently ensure that she stayed with him. He'd been toying with her since she left. He enjoyed making her fearful, screwing with her just for his sheer amusement. He hadn't

been without female company. As the son of the alpha, he was a hot commodity and no one refused him. But he was expending his time making Nila suffer, letting her believe she was free of him and then tightening the noose. It was time to get her once and for all.

He left his men to watch the house and wake him in the morning, and flopped down on the bed in the master bedroom. Unzipping his jeans, he reached for his cock, which had gone hard as granite when he'd started thinking of all the ways to make Nila pay for walking out on him. He fisted himself and closed his eyes, imagining the scent of her tears and her pain-filled cries as he meted out his punishment for walking away from him. He'd start by taking his son away, and then he'd break her until she had no will of her own. He chuckled darkly. Enjoy your last night of freedom, bitch.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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*N*ila felt unsettled all day. She'd almost called off work and kept Jack home, but Malachi promised she'd be safe, and she believed him. He'd sent a protector to the daycare to keep a discreet eye on things, which helped her feel better about leaving him there, and she'd seen a strange car in the parking lot of the clinic and recognized one of the males from those who had patrolled around Diane's home last night.

Malachi had been a reassuring presence with her during the day. Even when she was with patients, she was aware of him at the reception desk, keeping an eye on things. No longer only guarding Brynn, but also guarding her. The day crawled by, but by the time she was ready to leave, she felt like she could breathe a little easier. She'd expected Damien to retaliate further, maybe smash the windows again or slash her tires like he'd done two months earlier.

She and Jack had ridden with Malachi that morning. He'd taken Jack to the daycare first and then picked up Brynn. He'd seemed lost in thought for the drive to the clinic, but she'd had a lot on her mind, too. After her revealing one-sided conversation with him the night before, she'd decided that she wasn't going to give Damien the satisfaction of scaring her into walking away from Malachi. It had been tempting to just push him out of her life and go back to the way things were with just her and Jack, but the truth was she didn't want that life anymore. She didn't want to look over her shoulder forever or sleep on the couch anymore, and she wanted to really share her life with a man who respected and cared for her. That man was Malachi. He'd shown himself to be more of

a man than Damien ever had, and she'd be a fool to walk away from him.

As she pulled her purse from her locker, she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. She lifted it and glanced at the screen. It read 'Mem Hosp'. Her mouth went dry and panic seized her. Why would the hospital be calling?

"Hello?"

"Am I speaking with Nila Caruthers?" A brusque female voice asked.

"Y-yes."

"Miss Caruthers, I'm calling from Woodland Memorial Hospital. You are listed as the emergency contact for Diane Gordon. She was brought into the ER earlier."

"What happened?"

"You'll have to speak to the doctor on call. Come to the ER entrance and check in with the reception desk and a doctor will meet you."

The call ended and she stared at her phone. Malachi was suddenly there, and she turned to look up at him. "It's Diane. She's in the hospital."

His eyes narrowed. He reached past her and pulled her coat out, holding it for her. "Come on, sweetheart, let's go."

He wrapped his big hand around her elbow and walked her out to the reception area. Brynn stood, looking worried. "Is everything okay?"

"We need to go. Call Sam and Acksel and tell them to meet us at the daycare."

Brynn nodded and pulled her phone from her purse as Malachi led Nila out of the clinic and to his SUV. He opened the back door; Brynn climbed in and then Malachi led Nila around to the passenger side and helped her in.

He left them in the SUV and moved swiftly to the other car with the wolf and spoke to him for a quick moment before

climbing in behind the wheel of the SUV and starting the engine.

“Devin is going to follow us,” Malachi said.

“Sam and Acksel will meet us there.” Brynn said. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Nila turned in the seat and looked at Brynn. “Something happened to my friend Diane, and she’s in the ER. I don’t know what it could be, except that someone hurt her.”

“Your ex?” Brynn asked softly.

Nila nodded tightly and felt her eyes sting with tears. Malachi’s arm slipped over her shoulders and he squeezed. “Hey, it’ll be okay.”

She leaned against him, the seatbelt biting into her hip and chest, but she wanted to be close to him. “Why is this happening?”

He didn’t answer her, but he didn’t have to. She knew exactly why it was happening. Damien was going to get to her one way or another, but first he was going to go after the people she cared about. She looked at Malachi; the grim determination on his face, the tight set of his jaw.

He glanced at her. “Don’t.”

She blinked in surprise. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t look at me like you’re saying goodbye because things just got fucked up. I’m not going anywhere.”

She pressed her forehead into his shoulder and closed her eyes. “Good.”

It took only a few minutes for her and Malachi to pick up Jack. By the time they exited the building, there was another SUV in the parking lot and Brynn was talking to Acksel.

“I already moved the car seat,” Acksel said.

Malachi had explained to her inside the daycare that Brynn was going to take Jack home with her so that she and Malachi could go to the hospital. Malachi was concerned that Damien might try to take Jack if he were with them at the hospital.

Nila didn't want to leave her son, but she knew Malachi was right. Malachi opened the passenger door of the SUV and Nila strapped Jack in. He babbled at her, and then looked over her shoulder to Malachi.

“Carrot?”

Nila glanced backward. Malachi was grinning, and it made her stomach flip. He was sexy, and this situation sucked big old donkey balls. In a perfect world, she would be going home with Malachi and spending the night with him while Jack slept in his crib in the next room. But her world was far from perfect.

She pulled a sippy cup of juice from the diaper bag and gave it to Jack along with a few of the toys she kept tucked inside. She kissed his cheeks and whispered that she loved him, and then she slipped from the SUV and told Brynn what things he liked to eat for dinner.

Brynn hugged her. “He'll be fine with us, honey. I hope your friend is okay.”

She stood with Malachi and watched the wolves get into the SUV, Brynn sitting in the second row next to Jack.

“Let's go,” Malachi said, nodding to Devin, who was going to follow them.

She let him lead her to the SUV and shut her inside, and then they were on their way. She didn't know what she would see at the hospital, but she hoped that Diane was okay.

---

Malachi listened as the ER doctor explained that Diane had been beaten severely when she left her house earlier that day. Neighbors had found her after she crawled to their house and called for help.

“She's heavily sedated now, but you can see her. She'll be here for a few days, and then she'll need to be released into someone's care.”



Malachi answered before Nila could. “We’ve got it covered.”

The doctor nodded and left, and Nila turned and leaned heavily against him. Immediately he wrapped his arms around her.

“Are you ready to see her?”

“No. I’m scared for what happened to her. You heard what the doctor said.” She lifted her head and looked at him, her eyes wide with fright. “I never wanted this for her. I screwed up.”

“How?”

“I should have gone home with you. You wouldn’t have been caught off guard by Damien and his buddies and beaten within an inch of your life. I put her in danger. She could have been killed because of me.”

He saw panic and guilt tighten her features. He growled lightly and cupped her face. “You didn’t cause anything. Your ex is a vicious nutcase. No male of honor attacks a female for any reason. You made a choice, and Diane welcomed you. She’s your friend and there’s nothing wrong with helping friends.”

She swallowed hard and blinked tear-filled eyes at him. “I can’t take care of her during the day, I can’t lose my job.”

“I said it’s handled, trust me.”

She smiled briefly and tears surged over her cheeks. He brushed them away and kissed her forehead. “Go see Diane. I’m going to make some calls.”

She gave him a watery smile, took in a shaky breath, and pushed open the door to Diane’s room. Malachi waited until the door shut before pulling out his phone.

By the time visiting hours were over, Devin was sitting on a chair outside of Diane’s room to guard it, and arrangements were made for Diane to go home with Kammie, one of the omegas.

Nila held his hand as they walked out of the hospital. “What’s an omega?”

“A non-ranked wolf.” He opened the passenger door and helped her inside, and then shut the door and climbed in behind the wheel. “How much do you know about pack hierarchy?”

“Next to nothing,” she admitted. “I only know the alpha is the boss.”

He smiled at her as he pulled away from the hospital and headed to Acksel’s home. “That’s very true. So the alpha is the boss. Under him is the beta, who handles discipline issues among other responsibilities, and is the authority when Acksel isn’t around. Our beta is Ren. Then there’s the theto, who’s like the beta but accountable to him, and is the head of the protectors. The protectors, like me, are ranked underneath the theto, from the fourth position down. Then you have the omegas. They’re not ranked, either because they’re female or they’re males who are too weak through injury or age to be of use to the pack, or decide not to engage in rank fights.”

“The females are automatically omegas?”

“Yes. Females are part of the general omega population and aren’t ranked, except for Brynn, who’s the boss of everyone except Acksel.”

She snorted a laugh. “I think she believes she’s the boss of everyone.”

He grinned and reached over for her hand, which she freely gave. “I’ve heard of packs where females are ranked, but it’s not our pack’s way. The females and the pups are important, the life blood of the pack, and the protectors are to keep them, and the other omegas, safe.”

“Are wolves ranked right away when they shift?”

“No. We’re automatically omega. The alpha allows rank fights during the full moon, and a male can fight his way out of omega status and become a protector.”

“So it’s just alpha, protector, and omega?”

“It works best when it’s simple.”

“You’re a protector.”

“Yep.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, and he glanced at her when he came to a stoplight. “What?”

“I was just wondering how hard it was for you to fight your friends in the rank fights.”

He shrugged. “It’s not fun, but the pack works best when people are ranked appropriately. When I came back, I fought for the fourth rank because that’s what I was when I left, and I knew I was the best male for the position.”

“You don’t want to be theto or beta?”

He shook his head. “Their positions come with a lot of responsibility. I like being fourth because I’m still highly ranked but I don’t have the burden of leadership.”

She hummed in her throat and said nothing. He let the conversation drop, thinking over what he’d said. He enjoyed sharing pack life with her. She seemed completely out of her depth with wolves, and he could thank her asshole ex for that. Females were not treated well in her ex’s pack, and Nila hadn’t even had the luxury of being a true mate to him, protected and cared for by his pack. Malachi could admit that it was better this way, though, at least from his perspective. She wasn’t wearing her ex’s marks on her neck, and Damien’s pack hadn’t come for her.

He parked in front of Acksel’s house and turned in the seat to face her. “When I was a kid, there was a she-wolf in the pack whose mate was a real jerk. He didn’t treat her well. He had a gambling problem and wasted what little money they had at the OTB. They had young pups, and there were times when I remember my mom taking food over to her, and my and Mia’s old clothes. One night, he hit her and trashed their house. In the morning, our alpha banished him from the pack and dissolved their mating. She moved into the home of a widowed she-wolf and was taken care of by the pack.” Nila looked at him curiously but said nothing. “What you’re going

through now isn't supposed to happen. Damien abused you. His alpha should have stepped in and protected you."

"Damien is the alpha's son."

"Doesn't matter. Females are to be protected at all cost, treasured members of the pack that are never to be harmed."

She swallowed audibly and the scent of fresh tears filled the air. "I'm human."

He shook his head. "It still doesn't matter. You're precious, no matter what your DNA is."

He hugged her, finding the seatbelt release with his fingers so she could be freed, and pulled her closer. She was here with him, and no matter what hell was going on outside, in the end it only mattered that she was his.

"When you're free, Nila," he said softly, "I mean really free, I want you to choose me. I want to be your mate and take care of you and Jack."

She tucked her head into his neck and sighed, but said nothing. He was going to take her non-response to mean she was thinking about it, and that was better than a flat-out no. He knew they were a long way from really being together, but the first step could come from him setting things right in her world and making her safe.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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*N*ila laid Jack in the playpen in the master bedroom at Malachi's house. He hadn't woken up when they'd taken him from Acksel's house, or when she'd changed him into his footy pajamas and put him to bed. She looked down at him, and then around the room, sighing. The room was very masculine and smelled spicy and dark like Malachi. The furniture was dark wood, the navy carpeting plush under her bare feet. Her emotions were all over the place, her mind a riot of all the things that had happened recently.

Malachi had one of the omegas pack another bag for her and Jack, because when the protectors had gone to Diane's house to check on things, they'd found the bag she packed for herself and Jack destroyed, the clothes and personal items ruined. Two protectors were stationed at her house to make sure nothing else happened. She probably could have argued to go home. The windows had been replaced, the entire house cleaned, and everything that had been damaged had been thrown away. But she didn't want to go home. She didn't want to be in a place where Damien could get to her and Jack again.

Malachi whispered from the doorway, "It's late and I'm going to turn in. I'll be sleeping on the couch in the family room. Call if you need me."

She turned and looked at him. He smiled briefly and moved to leave, and she said, "Wait."

"Yeah?"

She blinked, glancing down as Jack slept soundly in the playpen that had been brought from her house, and then letting her gaze roam to the big bed. “Will you stay with me?”

“I’m not leaving the house,” he said, his head tilting in confusion.

She grimaced. “No, I mean in here. With me.”

The silence between them made her fidget and kind of wish she hadn’t said anything. Wasn’t it enough that he was in the house with them? Shouldn’t she just be grateful for all Malachi had done?

He moved so quickly and silently that she gasped in surprise when he was suddenly in front of her. “You have a very expressive face.”

“Um, thanks?”

He chuckled. “I wasn’t saying no to the request, I was just arguing with my wolf a bit.”

“You talk about him like he’s another person inside you.”

“He is, in a way, but not a person. I have normal human thoughts, but then sometimes the more wild part of me makes itself known. The wolf can be very vocal about certain things.”

“What things?” Her voice came out breathy.

“You, mostly. Being around you makes him antsy.”

She didn’t have to ask what he meant by that, because she could see the answer in his eyes. Before she could say anything else, he said, “I’ll sleep in the bed with you, Nila, but you have to promise to keep your hands to yourself.”

She rolled her eyes. “I think I can control myself.”

He grinned, that adorable dimple showing, and walked into the adjoining bathroom. She heard the water running in the sink and took the opportunity to change into the sleep shirt that was tucked into her bag. She was staring into the bag when Malachi came into the room.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“Who packed my stuff?”

“Jeremiah, why?”

“He touched my things.”

He looked confused. “And? Since your other bag was trashed, I asked him to pack you a new bag with a few days of clothes. Did he forget something you need?”

“No, it’s just weird that a stranger went through my drawers.” She lifted up a black lace thong. “He only grabbed my sexy undies.”

Malachi chuckled. “He might be a non but he’s still a man.”

“What’s a non?”

“A full wolf who can’t shift. Do you want me to beat him up for touching your sexy things? I really don’t mind that he packed that kind of stuff.”

She snorted. “I bet you don’t.”

After cleaning up in the bathroom, she joined Malachi on the big bed. She didn’t even have time to wonder if he wanted to cuddle with her, because as soon as she climbed onto the bed he hauled her up next to him and covered them with a blanket. A click sounded and the table lamp next to the bed was turned off.

The room was bathed in darkness, but a sliver of light from the hallway was showing through the cracked door. Malachi curved himself around her back, letting her use his bicep as a pillow. He was naked save for a pair of boxer briefs, and she felt the ridge of his arousal against her back.

She moved to turn onto her back to see him, but he prevented it. “If you turn around, sweetheart, then things are going to get sexy really quickly. It’s better if we just sleep, especially since we’re not alone in the room at the moment.”

Her cheeks heated. “Fine,” she said, finding the humor of the situation, “be all noble and keep your hands to yourself.”

His warm lips found her neck and he nipped her gently before kissing the mark. “It’s only because I don’t want to wake Jack when I make you scream in pleasure, okay? Don’t think I don’t want you, because I do. I want to make you come a hundred times, taste you, touch you, make love to you.”

A shiver raced down her spine and her nipples beaded. “Malachi,” she whispered.

“I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart. We’ll pick this up another time, when we’re not in the same room with your son.”

She closed her eyes and tried to quell the desire that rushed through her. It wasn’t hard when he pointed out that Jack was right there, sleeping soundly in the playpen. Thank goodness Malachi was thinking clearly enough for the both of them.

“Goodnight, Mal.”

He kissed her neck again and murmured goodnight. It didn’t take long for her to drift off to sleep. In her last bit of wakefulness, she wondered at her feelings for the protective male. She’d been so intent on keeping him away from her and Jack, but here she was just a few weeks after meeting him, letting him hold her while they slept and taking refuge in his home. She didn’t know what the dawn would bring, but she wasn’t as worried about it as she would have been if she were alone. Malachi was taking care of her, and she had no doubt that he would continue to do so. There was something very honest and real about him. He wasn’t trying to charm her or lull her into complacency. He was just a good guy, right down to the very center of his being.

She wanted to tell him that she was sorry for being such a bitch, but when she opened her mouth she yawned instead and decided to tell him in the morning. Relaxing in his arms, she absorbed the warmth and comfort of him and slipped away into sleep.

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Monday morning, Kammie opened the front door and smiled at Malachi as he wheeled an older human woman up the makeshift ramp to Kammie's front porch. "Good morning, I'm Kammie," she said, smiling at the woman.

The woman's face was black and blue from a severe beating, and her left arm and right ankle were in casts.

"I'm Diane. Thanks for taking me in." The woman smiled in spite of the bruises and cuts on her face, and Kammie smiled back. Kammie knew what it felt like to be beaten by a wolf, and according to Malachi, Diane had been attacked by several of them because she'd harbored Nila, Malachi's human mate, who had a crazy wolf ex.

Malachi introduced Nila to Kammie as Jeremiah took over, pushing Diane into the front room. Earlier that day, Jeremiah and Adam, both omegas, had brought over a hospital bed and a suitcase of Diane's things, and oversaw a human male from Malachi's security company as he installed a system in her home to make sure they were well protected. Kammie's home was going to be watched over by the protectors to make sure that Nila's ex didn't try to harm either of them. Kammie had suffered enough at the hands of her uncle during her teen years to know that she wanted to help keep Diane safe. At least Kammie had the ability to heal faster because of her wolf nature, and she was stronger than a human and could shift and escape if she needed to.

Nila came up the ramp swiftly and hugged Kammie. "Thank you so much. Diane is the only family I have left outside of my son."

Malachi cleared his throat noisily and Nila looked at him with a raised brow. "We're not official yet, I haven't said yes."

He hummed in his throat and Kammie had the distinct feeling that if she hadn't been there, Malachi would have enjoyed making Nila say 'yes' to whatever question she was referring to. Probably to mate with him. Kammie smiled at Nila and said, "I'll take good care of her. Come by anytime. Malachi has my cell and house phone numbers, and I'll report to him if anything is up."

“She’ll be safe here with the patrols, Nila,” Malachi said. “Go say goodbye so I can take you to work. We can stop by after dinner and you can spend time with her if you’d like.” Nila smiled again and left Kammie on the porch.

Kammie wrapped her thick sweater tightly around herself as Malachi turned to her. “There are three protectors patrolling your home. They’ll be in six-hour shifts, but there will always be three guys here. If anything looks off at all to you, call me immediately. I don’t care what time it is. It’s important to me that you and Diane are safe.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome. Thank you.”

She nodded at the big male and turned and headed into the house. Diane had been settled into the hospital bed that was tucked into the corner of the family room. Nila was sitting on the edge and holding Diane’s uninjured hand. Both of them had tears on their faces. Kammie stepped into her bedroom and brought out a box of tissues, handing it to Nila discreetly. Then she went into the kitchen and busied herself with breakfast.

Nila stopped into the kitchen to say goodbye, leaving with the omegas and Malachi. Kammie carried a lap tray to Diane. “Your meds say you need to take them with food. I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I stocked the kitchen with all sorts of things.”

Diane looked at the tray, laden with scrambled eggs, pancakes, apple juice, and bottled water.

“Oh, it’s perfect. I haven’t had anyone cook for me in ages; I’m always the one cooking for everyone.” She lifted the fork in her right hand and said, “Thank goodness those assholes didn’t break my right arm, or I’d have to learn how to do everything left-handed.”

“It’s good to find the humor in these situations,” Kammie said.

Diane swallowed a bite of pancakes as Kammie opened the water for her. “Sounds like you know something about being

knocked around.”

“Yeah. But he’s gone and won’t be back.”

“How do you know?”

“He was banished. If he shows up in town, Acksel will kill him.”

Diane raised a brow. “I think I like your alpha.”

Kammie brought out her own food and sat with Diane, and then after the dishes were put away, she walked into the family room to ask Diane if she’d like to watch TV and found her trying to open a new package of cards.

“Can you shuffle? I’m out of commission but I’d love to play some UNO, if you’re up for a few games.”

“I’d love to.”

Sitting on the bed, she made herself comfortable and shuffled while Diane moved the lap tray until it was between the two of them.

“I might be a bit of a card shark,” Diane said with a wink.

“I’ll watch out for you, then,” Kammie said, chuckling as she dealt out the cards. She could tell she was going to enjoy Diane living with her. As a human, Diane wouldn’t pressure Kammie like some of the she-wolves did, demanding that she make herself available to work for them. Even though all females were omegas, some of the females thought they were better than others, as if service to the pack was beneath them. Those females, who treated Kammie like a second-class citizen and saw her as too weak to be of any real value, ordered Kammie to cook and clean for them, threatening to tell the alphas she wasn’t performing her duties. Kammie spent a lot of time hiding from the pack during the full moon hunts because her body was scarred from her uncle’s abuse. She liked letting her guard down with the sweet human. It was nice to be appreciated without feeling obligated.

Kammie tried to focus on the cards, but she found her mind wandering to something Jeremiah had said to her earlier in the day.

“I’m thinking of going, you know?” he said, after he’d brought in the hospital bed.

She had looked up at him in surprise.

“Leaving? What do you mean?”

He’d shrugged his broad shoulders and looked away from her. “It’s hard to be on the bottom. At least you like being an omega; I’m forced to it because of my genetics.”

“Where would you go?” She didn’t mind being an omega. She liked to help, and that’s what omegas did.

“I don’t know. Somewhere. Anywhere but a place where everyone looks down on me for not being able to shift.”

“I don’t think less of you for not being able to shift. You know how much flack I get for never shifting in the yard with the others? They think I’m weak because of my scars and my fears.”

Jeremiah shook his head, turning his brown eyes to her. “I don’t think you’re weak.”

“I don’t think you are, either. Screw genetics. Genetics gave me a rotten uncle and terrible father.”

He smiled half-heartedly and said, “Thanks for listening to me bitch, but don’t say anything to anyone, okay?”

She nodded at him and he’d left, but the conversation had stuck with her. Maybe the right thing for her to do was take off. She could walk away from the pack and find a new life somewhere. Maybe get some land somewhere so she could hunt in her own territory and not worry about who was looking at her scars and thinking she was damaged. Now, playing cards with Diane, Kammie was beginning to see the benefits of leaving the pack life behind. It’s not like her mate was in Wilde Creek. If he was, she’d yet to meet him. Maybe she’d run into him someday in the woods and he’d sweep her off her feet.

She snorted, laying down a red ‘draw two’ card and making Diane curse. Shoving aside the thoughts of her current status as an unmated omega, she turned her attention to the

card game. She'd find a mate someday and he wouldn't care that she was scarred. Jeremiah would find his happily ever after too, she was sure of it.

And birds could suddenly fly out of her butt.

Snorting at her dreamy sub-conscious and her snarky inner bitch, she laid down a 'draw four' card and Diane cursed a blue streak while she pulled more cards from the deck. "I'll get you back, don't worry about me."

Kammie grinned. "I'm sure. UNO."

"Damn it!"

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## CHAPTER NINE

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Tuesday evening, Nila stood in the bathroom off the master and leaned closer, inspecting her makeup. She always wore a little mascara and blush to the office, but she never really wore makeup because she didn't go anywhere. Jack didn't care if she had lipstick on. Tonight, though, Malachi was taking her to dinner for their first official date. Mia and Brynn were sitting in the family room with Jack, waiting for her and Malachi to leave so they could babysit.

She hadn't been on a date in ages. Not since she and Damien had gotten married. He'd decided she didn't need things like dinner dates once they were married.

After work, Malachi had driven her to the daycare to pick up Jack and then to Kammie's to visit with Diane. Then, on the way to his home, he'd asked her to go out with him. She hadn't even had to think before saying yes; it was just automatic. But now, as she looked over her outfit and makeup, she was nervous. She smoothed her hands down the black dress, the silk warm against her palms, and looked into the mirror again. She'd left her hair down, because she knew that Malachi liked to see it that way, the dark blonde tresses falling past her shoulders.

Stepping from the bathroom, she found Brynn sitting on the bed.

"I just wanted to wish you a good night. Mia and I are going to take great care of Jack, and there are even extra protectors here, just to be safe. Although, honestly, that's because Acksel insisted on it, since I wouldn't let him come.

Mia and I are going to do girl talk after we put Jack to bed, and I can't complain about Acksel if he's sitting right there. Well, I can, but it irritates him."

Nila smiled. "Thanks for coming. I know you'll take good care of Jack."

"After my little guy is born, you can return the favor. Maybe Jack and my guy will be best friends and rule the pack someday."

Nila's eyes widened. "Would your pack accept Jack? He's not... I mean, his dad is from another pack."

Brynn raised a brow. "But he's your son. Of course he would be welcomed once you and Mal...you know, make things official."

Nila shivered. "He hasn't asked me."

"Well, things are kinda shitty right now. Mal is a great guy. I've known him my whole life, and I think of him as a brother. If I thought he was an asshole, I'd tell you, because I consider you a friend, too. He'll ask you when the time is right, although there's no rule against a lady asking her man to be hers forever." Brynn winked with a smile.

Nila hugged Brynn when she stood, and Brynn said, "You look amazing, by the way."

"Thanks. Thanks for everything."

"That's what friends are for."

Nila walked out of the bedroom with Brynn and found Malachi holding Jack and pointing at pictures on the fireplace mantel. "This is my dad and mom."

"Carrot?"

"You got it, buddy."

Jack reached for Nila, and she took him, giving him a hug and kissing his cheek. "Have fun tonight, Jack."

"Mama."

He grabbed a lock of her hair and fisted it, grinning at her. Brynn joined them and said, “Come here, little one, Aunt Mia and Aunt Brynn are going to spoil you rotten.”

He went to her easily and Nila slipped into her coat, which Malachi held for her. “You look beautiful, sweetheart,” he said into her ear.

“You look pretty good yourself,” she said and smiled. He was wearing black slacks and dress shoes with a black dress shirt and a red-and-black patterned tie.

They said goodbye while he pulled on his coat and he escorted her to his SUV and helped her inside.

“I made reservations at the Steak House.”

“Sounds great.”

He reached into the back seat and lifted a bouquet of roses, handing it to her.

“Um, wow. Thank you.”

“I heard that humans like to give flowers on their first dates.”

She chuckled and lifted the dark red roses to her nose, inhaling the sweet scent. “Did you?”

He hummed as he turned the SUV on. “Yeah. But I would’ve given them to you anyway.”

“What do wolves give each other on first dates? Rabbits?”

He shot her a grin. “Only if we’re really crazy about each other.”

Their conversation was light on the way to the restaurant. They talked about his security company and the changes to how he would be guarding Brynn, taking her to work and picking her up, but not sitting around any longer. She felt the little twist of jealousy again, but didn’t say anything. What could she say, anyway? Please stop doing your pack job and guard me.

Malachi’s warm hand squeezed her thigh. “I’m going to step down from guarding Brynn full time.”



“What?”

“I talked to Acksel about it yesterday. When things are settled with your ex, I’m going to stand down from being her personal guard, and someone else will take over. Then I can just guard you and Jack.”

“We don’t need a guard.”

He gave her thigh a light squeeze. “I just mean that I won’t be dividing my time between taking care of you and protecting Brynn. As a protector, I have to look out for her like I would anyone else in the pack, but I won’t be with her full time. I’ll be able to focus on the security company as well as taking care of you both.”

“I don’t know if things will ever be settled with Damien. Every full moon I kinda wish that he’d be trampled to death by deer.”

Malachi laughed. “Death by deer? Sounds painful.”

“You probably think I’m nuts for thinking that.”

“Not at all, sweetheart. He’s been tormenting you for a long time, but he’s not going to get to do that anymore. I want you to think about moving into my home permanently.”

She didn’t say anything for a long while, and neither did he. Her heart was pounding as she replayed his words in her head over and over. The SUV stopped and she found herself looking at the restaurant.

Unbuckling her seatbelt, she turned in her seat. He did the same, and reached for her hand. “I don’t want to rush you but I’m finding it harder and harder to be without you. Your house is fixed; you could go back there, and I’ll patrol every night with guards to make sure you’re safe. But I don’t want you there, I want you with me. I feel like such a dick.”

“Why?”

“Because I promised myself that I’d take it slow with you, and not push you. Your ex makes my wolf irrational. We both want you with us so we can keep you safe, but I’m trying not to be a Neanderthal about it.”

Her heart clenched. He was such a sweet guy. The wolves she'd known in the past wouldn't have cared what she wanted, they'd have just ordered her. Damien's pack treated women badly, a fact she hadn't known until after they were married.

"You watched me, all this time while I was at work."

Even though it was dark in the SUV, the lights from the instrument panel providing only bare illumination, she could see his eyes boring into hers. "I couldn't help it, but I was trying to be subtle."

She snorted. "You're too imposing to be subtle, Mal."

He chuckled. "I suppose. I tried, though. I didn't want you to hate me, even though you hated all wolves."

"I've learned about the differences between your pack and his. You're nothing like him. I'm still scared a little, but I feel like I can trust you."

He swallowed audibly. "Your trust is everything to me. I'd die before I hurt you."

She leaned forward, reaching for him, and he closed the distance until their lips were nearly touching. Just a heartbeat passed with them frozen there, and then their lips met. A shiver raced down her spine, and she dropped the roses, wrapping her arms around his neck. His tongue swiped over her lips and she opened them, sighing as he swept his tongue into her mouth and the first, heady taste of him filled her. He tasted as wild and spicy as he smelled, and her stomach clenched as their tongues danced together. He groaned when she scraped her short nails over his neck, and the sound rumbled in his chest like a wolfy purr. He held her close, his touch firm but gentle, as if she were made of glass and he might break her if he held her too tightly.

The kiss deepened, and a moan caught in her throat as he kneaded her back through her coat. She suddenly wished they weren't in an SUV with a console between them, in a restaurant parking lot.

The kiss gentled between them, and they parted, both breathing hard.

“We will.”

“Will what?” He blinked at her in confusion. She thought it was adorable.

“Move in with you.”

The confusion swept away quickly and he pressed his lips to hers once more. “I won’t ever let you down, Nila. You and Jack will be safe with me, and we’ll take our time getting to know each other until you’re ready to move forward.”

His concern for her feelings made her stomach flutter.

“You’re amazing.”

“I’m lucky to have you; I don’t want to screw it up.”

She didn’t want to screw it up either. As he kissed her once more and then turned off the engine, she was reminded of her current married status. There had to be a way to divorce Damien and keep him away from Jack, too. For now, she shoved the thoughts of Damien into the far corners of her mind and watched Malachi as he opened her door and helped her out. The scent of grilled meat filled the air, and her stomach growled.

“Hungry, sweetheart?” Malachi chuckled.

“Starving.”

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By the time Saturday rolled around, Nila had moved in with Malachi and they were in the final stages of clearing out her home. He could have had every omega in the pack at her house, packing and cleaning, but he wanted to be part of the process as well. He asked Jeremiah and Adam to help with the heavy lifting, since they were both strong in their human forms. Although Jeremiah couldn’t shift, Adam could, but he was an omega because he’d been badly burned when he was young and it had damaged him enough to make his wolf form weak. Nila wanted to help out, but Kammie brought Diane over to visit so Mal left her at the house.

Mia had volunteered to help with the cleaning, so she and several omegas were currently in the bedroom, making sure it was spotless so Nila could get back her security deposit.

The house had come furnished, but Nila had bought a few small pieces of furniture which were currently in the truck, and Jack's baby toys had filled up two large boxes.

Mia came out of the bedroom with a spray bottle of window cleaner and a roll of paper towels under her arms. "That's the last window cleaned. I'm going to clean out the kitchen cabinets since they're empty of dishes now."

"Thanks, Mia."

She smiled. "You're welcome, Mal. I like her and Jack a lot, and I want them to be with you where it's safe."

He picked up a floor lamp and wrapped the cord around the base. "I suppose I owe you dinner for this?"

"You'd suppose right, although I am partial to pretty, sparkly jewelry."

He shook his head at his sister with a smile and carried the lamp out to the truck. "This is the last of it," he told Adam.

"Okay. I'll follow you."

Jeremiah stayed to oversee the clean up, and Malachi got into his SUV, which was full of Nila's things, and drove home. He couldn't help but smile as he drove. Nila was there with Jack, waiting for him. He'd never imagined that something as simple as going home would fill him with so much joy. His wolf was practically doing cartwheels in his head.

Since Jack's crib had been destroyed, he had bought a replacement which was now in the bedroom down the hall from the master. She'd noticed the pale blue walls and the new navy carpeting when he'd given her an official tour of the home. The other bedroom was set up as an office for him. When he and Nila had kids of their own, he'd add on to the house to make sure they had plenty of room.

He stopped in front of his house and carried a large box of dishes up the front walk. He noticed that Kammie's car was

gone. Nila, with Jack on her hip, opened the door before he could shift the box to one arm and open it.

“Hey,” she said, smiling at him.

“Hey yourself,” he said as she opened the door wide and stepped aside. She greeted Adam as he followed behind Mal with more boxes. Malachi directed him to put the boxes in whatever room they were labeled with.

“Ready to unpack some more things, sweetheart?” he called over his shoulder as he carried the box into the kitchen and set it down on the counter.

“Yep.”

She put Jack in the highchair that was next to the kitchen table, placed a few toys on the tray, and joined Malachi at the counter. He hugged her and she rested her cheek on his chest with a sigh.

“Is everything okay?”

“You did all that security stuff for me at the house and now it’s all wasted time and money.”

He tipped her chin until she looked at him. “None of it was wasted time or money; it helped to keep you safe. And besides, this morning I removed all the hardware, and can use it on another job.”

“Oh, I guess that’s okay then.” Her eyes glittered as she smiled at him, and he lowered his head to kiss her. Their lips met for just a bare moment before Jack banged a plastic toy on the tray and broke the mood.

They smiled at each other and she left his arms. He immediately felt the loss of her warmth. It had taken a while for her to warm up to him. The first few weeks that he’d known her, he wasn’t sure she would ever give him the time of day, but now she was living in his home and trusted him with her and Jack’s safety. It was a heady feeling, but the weight of the situation still sat heavily on his shoulders. She was technically married, although he supposed humans would consider them ‘separated,’ since they were no longer living together. The strangest thing to him was that she bore no

marks on her neck. A wolf who would marry a woman but not mark her must really have a screw loose. Malachi would have marked her immediately. A marriage could be dissolved by divorce, but the markings that bound a couple together in a mating lasted forever. Once Mal's wolf had scented Nila as his mate, he had wanted no one else, and could think of nothing but marking her and keeping her forever.

His gums tingled as he thought about marking her lovely, untouched neck, but he shoved the thought away. For now they were taking things slow physically, and that meant the fangs needed to stay where they were.

By the time his SUV and Adam's truck were emptied, and Jeremiah had called to say Nila's former home was empty, clean, and the keys returned to the landlord, Nila and Jack had become permanent fixtures in his home. He hoped like hell that she would want to stay with him forever. While they'd eaten dinner, taking turns encouraging Jack to eat the cut up hot dogs and cooked carrots that he seemed to love so much, Mal found himself falling in love with her. He'd cared about her from the beginning, from the moment he'd laid eyes on her in the storage room, but it had been a superficial affection based on his wolf's instincts. But now, after getting to know her over the last few weeks and seeing her strength and warmth, he'd come to covet her smiles and admire her courage.

He very badly wanted to take her to bed and make love to her for a few days straight to get their relationship started off right, but he knew that wouldn't happen. Slow meant no serious touching, even though his fingers itched to see how soft her skin was, and his mouth watered at the thought of tasting more than her sweet kisses.

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Nila dried Jack off after his bath, rubbing a towel through his tawny hair and dressing him in a pair of footy jammies. She found herself thinking often of Malachi, who was cleaning the kitchen up after their meal.

“Ready for bed, Jack?” she whispered as she sat down in the rocking chair from her old house, which Malachi had set in the corner of Jack’s bedroom. And it definitely was Jack’s bedroom. She could see that Malachi had made the room up for Jack. The walls were freshly painted and the carpeting was new, and it had been empty of furniture, as if he were waiting for them. The new crib Malachi bought looked wonderful in the room next to his dresser and the rocking chair.

“Mama,” Jack said as he snuggled closer, his face pressing into her neck. His breath skirted across her skin and the sweet smell of him made her heart ache. She rocked slowly, humming a children’s song about teddy bears and picnics, but in her mind she always switched them to baby wolves.

She hummed and listened to him drift off to sleep, letting her mind slip to thoughts of the male in the kitchen. She didn’t know what it meant to be a true mate to a wolf. Damien had made sure that she was totally clueless about pack dealings, and had led her to believe that their marriage meant something. She could see now that it had been a way to control her. Pregnant after a few months of dating, she had felt he was an honorable guy because he proposed right away. She didn’t want to be a single mom, so she said yes, trusting that he would take care of her and Jack. By the time she was ready to give birth, Damien had become verbally abusive, seeming to enjoy making her cry. He wasn’t even there when Jack was born, and sent his mom to pick her and Jack up from the hospital. She should have left him right then, but she’d persevered, thinking being a father would make him a better husband. All it really did, though, was make him feel trapped. The verbal barbs he slung at her were slowly replaced with physical abuse. The first time she tried to leave, he told her he would kill Jack, so she’d stayed. She only confided in Diane, who helped her leave when Jack was one. Damien found her right away. He tried to drag her back home and threatened to kill both her and Jack, but Diane called the police and Damien disappeared. She’d never been truly free of him, and she still wasn’t, not as long as their marriage was intact.

She stood slowly with Jack in her arms, her sleepy sweetie softly snoring as she moved to the crib and lowered him

gently. She tucked his favorite stuffed wolf against his side, blew him a kiss, and left the room, closing the door behind her.

She could hear the sound of a fire crackling, and smelled burning wood as she walked down the hallway to the family room. Malachi was sitting on the couch facing the fireplace, one arm slung over the back. He seemed to be staring into the fire. She walked around the couch and his gaze snapped to hers.

“Is Jack all tucked in?”

“Yeah.”

“I know you don’t drink wine, so I poured you a glass of Pepsi,” he said, leaning forward and lifting a wine glass for her. She took it and sat down next to him.

“In a wine glass?”

“I’m all about class, baby.”

He lifted his glass to her and she said, “What should we toast to?”

“How about perfect days?” She raised a brow and he added, “Today was perfect. It deserves to be toasted.”

“Was it perfect? Adam gouged your wall when he carried the rocker in, and I may have broken a coffee mug when I was putting my dishes away.”

“Gouges can be fixed with spackle, and I already know you broke a coffee mug.” He wiggled his brows and she laughed.

“To perfect days,” she said, touching the rim of her glass to his.

“Perfect.”

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The orange and yellows of the flames flickered over Nila’s beautiful face and made his heart ache. Damn, he was falling hard for her. But that was okay, because he hadn’t ever fallen



for anyone before, and he was glad his first, and only, was his mate.

She took his wine glass and set it on the coffee table next to hers. Her hands trembled. If he hadn't been watching her closely he might have missed it, but since he considered himself her personal non-creepy stalker, he caught it.

He'd opened his mouth to ask her what was wrong, when she turned to face him, her hands cupping his face as she drew close to him. They'd kissed. A lot. She was addictive as hell. But tonight felt different. Their lips touched and he slipped his arms around her and pulled her closer. Tongues touched and teased, dancing together as he tried to reason with his body that Nila was still in no-touch-land, and they shouldn't try to dry hump her on the couch.

She made a soft sound in her throat and slipped one hand around to grip his neck, her fingernails digging into his flesh lightly. She nipped his bottom lip as their mouths parted, and he was panting as he stared into her dark eyes.

Because he had no blood left in his brain, he wasn't able to stop himself from saying, "I want you in the worst way, Nila."

Her nails dug into his neck a little more and she smiled softly. "I want you, too, Mal."

He mentally shook himself, trying to get rid of the fog in his head that being around her always seemed to cause. She leaned forward and kissed his neck, right over his pulse.

"You smell so good," she whispered huskily.

He gripped her waist with his hands, his fingers kneading lightly. He opened his mouth, but all that came out was a soft growl.

She chuckled against his neck, and then opened her mouth over his flesh and bit down. Her blunt teeth didn't do any damage; he only felt pressure and heat. But his wolf took notice, and his gums and fingertips tingled as he suddenly found himself needing to push his wolf away so he didn't scare Nila. The last thing he wanted to do was make her afraid of him.

She released his neck and licked the mark she'd made. It wasn't permanent, which he didn't like, but maybe she'd be willing to bite him every night.

No, damn it, he growled at himself. She was theirs, but she was emotionally vulnerable and he wouldn't take advantage of her.

She sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck, her breath skirting over the mark. "I haven't been with anyone in a long time, Mal; I want you to be the last male who ever touches me, because I want to be yours for real."

He blinked in surprise, the sexy haze in his head dissipating as he absorbed her words.

Pushing her gently to arm's length, he looked at her. She was smiling, almost shyly. He brushed the hair off her shoulder and hooked his hand behind her neck, letting his thumb rest on her pulse. He could feel the thrum of her pounding heart as he stroked her throat, envisioning his permanent mating marks there.

He'd wanted to let her take the lead in their relationship. He was bossy by nature, but with Nila he never wanted her to feel like she was forced into anything. She was his, but he'd been content to wait until she was ready. The last few weeks had been hell, but she was here and he wasn't going to push her away.

"I want to be the last male who ever touches you, too, sweetheart. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, Mal."

He cupped her face and pressed his lips to hers, a hungry growl lodged in his throat. She was his and that was all that mattered.

Her nails scraped against his skin as she tugged on the bottom of his shirt. He pulled away from the kiss to tug it over his head, and his breath caught in his throat as she undid the buttons of the pink top she wore. He didn't want to blink for fear he'd miss her baring her body. He helped her push the top off her shoulders, and then he let his fingers slip down the soft

curve of her lush breasts. She wiggled a bit until her bra came undone, and he helped pull it off and toss it aside.

Her hands landed on his chest, her cool fingertips tracing his muscles. He kissed her again, delving his tongue into her mouth, her sweet taste making his head spin. Her breasts pressed against him as he pulled her closer, the tight tips of her nipples abrading his chest. Tipping her backward, he settled her gently on the couch and released her mouth, kissing down her chin, the column of her throat, and her collarbone, until his lips found one nipple and he covered it with his lips, sucking gently.

Her hands fisted his hair, and she groaned his name.

He couldn't believe how soft her skin was. It felt like heaven under his fingers, as he slipped one hand from her back and cupped her other breast. He gazed at the tight nipple, watching it harden further. Glancing at Nila, he found her chewing her bottom lip, her eyes hooded with pleasure.

He worshipped her breasts, sucking and licking the tight buds until she writhed under him, panting for breath and fisting his hair so tightly he was surprised he actually had any left.

He kissed down her stomach, his chin bumping the unforgiving material of her faded jeans. She smelled amazing, even muted through the fabric. Hot and sweet and wet, and all his.

Undoing the button and zipper of her jeans, he spread the material, looking at the waistband of her panties. He kissed the space just over her panties, and her stomach twitched.

He sat up, and she untangled her fingers from his hair. Her hips lifted in silent invitation, and he hooked his fingers into the waistbands of both her jeans and panties and tugged. He moved out of the way to divest her of the clothes that prevented him from seeing every inch of her.

He tossed her jeans behind him as she pressed her feet into the couch and her legs spread slightly at the knees, baring just a hint of her to his hungry gaze. He touched her knees and

urged them apart further, and she opened herself to him fully. The sweet scent of her arousal surrounded him, making his gums tingle again and his heart pound. His cock scraped the inside of his jeans as it hardened further.

He glanced up her body to see her smiling softly at him. His fingers tightened on her knees and he said, “We could go to the bedroom.”

Her soft smile spread into a wide grin. “That’ll be round two.”

He growled at her playful tone. Bending forward, he inhaled slowly, letting her scent saturate his senses. He would never forget the way she smelled when she was turned on, like wildflowers heated by the sun—warm, sweet...his.

Her pussy was free of hair. He nuzzled the juncture of her thigh and she giggled. Smoothing his hands down the inside of her thighs, he felt her tremble as he lifted his head and kissed the top of her pussy. He pushed her thighs open further, making room for his shoulders before pressing his lips against her hot flesh and touching her clit with his tongue. She arched under him, and he slipped his hands under her hips and lifted her lower body off the couch. His brain fizzled out as the first, heady taste of her exploded on his tongue. He groaned, and she echoed the sound.

He lapped at her clit, wiggling his tongue over the fleshy bud until her breath hitched in her throat as he stroked the top of it. Lifting her closer to his mouth, he sealed his lips over her clit and ran his tongue over the top of it, rubbing and licking. She clawed the couch as her body trembled, and he sucked harder.

She cried out his name as her back bowed and her body tensed. Releasing her clit, he tilted his head, pushing his tongue into her pussy to lap at the sweet taste of her climax. She moaned, shivering, as he fucked her with his tongue.

“Mal, please, Mal,” she moaned, tugging on his hair.

He lifted from her body and said with a snarl, “Mine.”

“Yes, I’m yours. Make love to me.” Her voice was rough with use, and he flexed his fingers on her ass before lowering her to the couch.

He couldn’t control the trembling in his hands as he stood up and undid his jeans, shoving them off with his shorts. He looked at Nila and she lifted her arms to him. A well of need opened up in him. He’d never wanted anyone more than he wanted her, and it had nothing to do with his attraction to her physically and everything to do with the emotional tie. She was his mate; his everything.

He went to his knees on the couch and leaned over her, placing one hand on the cushion where her head rested, and with the other, he grasped his throbbing cock. He squeezed the base, trying to stop the orgasm that was pushing hard. He didn’t want to come like a teenager on the first stroke.

When he felt like he was back in control, he watched her face as he pressed into the tight, hot heaven of her body. Her gaze locked with his as she hooked one hand around his bicep, the other resting on his chest over his heart. Her mouth fell open as he pushed into her, but she never stopped watching him, and he couldn’t look away either.

As he sheathed himself completely inside her and his vision winked out a few times from the sheer pleasure, she wrapped her legs around his waist and hooked her ankles in the small of his back. The motion drew him even deeper into her, and he bit the inside of his cheek to control himself.

Angling his hips back, he slipped his cock nearly entirely from her and thrust back in, slowly, until he was certain she was ready to take him. Her nails dug into his arm as she lifted her hips to meet him.

He drew in and out of her a few times, slowly, making sure she was ready for more. Her head lifted and she kissed him, her thighs tightening on his waist as she urged him to move faster. He stroked into her body as his tongue played with hers, and he moved his free hand under her hips and lifted her up, moving faster and harder until their kiss broke and her breath gusted from her mouth.

“Yes, fuck, yes,” she panted as her nails sank into his chest.

He found the angle to make her come again, his body hitting hers just the right way so that her pussy clutched at him rhythmically and heat flooded his cock. She rubbed her body against his, using her legs as leverage to keep rubbing her clit against him. His balls drew up tight and the base of his spine tingled, but he gritted his teeth, determined to let her come before him.

He lifted her a fraction higher and she screeched in pleasure, her heels digging into his back as her pussy locked down on his cock, and he couldn't have stopped himself from coming if he'd had a gun to his head. The world dropped away until it was just the two of them, and the hot pleasure that poured over him as his cock spasmed inside her welcoming pussy.

His fangs elongated and he snarled, fighting his wolf's instinct to mark her neck and make her theirs. It was too soon, and he hadn't asked her. The urge to bite rode him hard as his cock spasmed a second time and his vision blurred. Doing the only thing he could think of when he had zero blood left in his brain, he sank his fangs into his bicep and bit himself.

Nila stopped squeezing his waist with her legs and her arms moved around him, tugging on his body until he lowered enough so they touched, chest to hip. He kept most of his weight off her with his arms, and extracted his fangs from his bicep. He'd heal quickly, even if his wolf was a little pissed that he'd bit himself instead of her.

Nila pressed her face into his neck and hugged herself closer, and he held her tightly, never wanting to let her go.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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Nila had never felt such peace on the heels of pleasure. No one had ever rocked her world the way that Malachi did. He'd made her come twice, and he'd seemed determined to make her happy. Which she so totally was. She was certain now that she and Malachi were meant to be together. Something had clicked in her heart for him. She knew she was human, but maybe humans could have mates, too, and if so that meant that Malachi was meant to be hers and she was meant to be his.

She inhaled and smelled something metallic.

“Mal?”

He lifted off her slightly, his hair mussed from where she'd gripped it so tightly, a sleepy, sexy look on his face.

“Yeah, sweetheart?”

She looked at him, wondering why she smelled blood, and then she saw bleeding teeth marks on his bicep.

“What did you do?”

He glanced down, looking guilty. “I bit myself.”

She frowned. “Obviously. But why?”

“I needed to bite something and I didn't want to bite you.”

Immediately, the afterglow faded and her happiness leaked away with it. “I see.” She felt like she'd been sideswiped by a truck. That he wouldn't bite her when they made love meant that he didn't want to mark her as his mate. It was Damien all

over again. She'd opened her heart to Malachi and he'd treated her just the same.

He pulled from her body and then sat up, hauling her into his lap. His finger curled under her chin, and he tilted her face until she was forced to look into his eyes.

“Sweetheart, you misunderstand. I didn't want to bite you because I haven't asked you to be my mate officially, and I didn't want to take that choice from you. Once I mark you, you're mine forever, no matter what.”

She blinked and tears leaked from her eyes. “I thought...”

“Because I'm a jackass.” He kissed her lips and cupped her cheek, brushing the tears away with his thumb. “I know you believe you understand what being my mate means, but I'm not going to rush into things until you know everything there is to know. Then I'll ask you properly, declare us mates to my pack, and bite your pretty neck and mark you.”

She let out the breath she'd been holding. “I'm sorry, I ruined the snuggling.”

He chuckled and cradled her in his arms. “It's okay, love. We'll snuggle after round two.”

Looping her arms around his neck, she kissed his throat. “Thank you for taking your time with me.”

“I would never betray your trust, Nila. You mean the world to me.”

She closed her eyes and inhaled his spicy scent. “You mean the world to me, too.”

When she woke in the morning, she found Malachi on his back on the bed, Jack sprawled on top of him. The footy pajamas were missing, and he was wearing only his diaper. Jack's mouth was open as he breathed deeply in sleep, his thick lashes casting shadows on his chubby cheeks.

She went up on one elbow and looked down at Malachi, whose eyes opened slowly. He grinned.

“How do I keep sleeping through Jack waking up?”



“I wore you out.” He kept his voice low to match her whisper.

She gave his shoulder a light slap and he chuckled softly. “Where are his jammies?”

“His diaper leaked, and by the time I figured out the diaper he was already asleep, so I just brought him in here. The bedding was a little damp, and I was worn out from you keeping me up half the night.” He winked.

“Thanks, Mal.”

His smile slipped and he looked serious. “You do know that I want him as part of our family, right? You’re a package deal as far as I’m concerned, and I want Jack to be part our new life together.”

She felt tears sting her eyes. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Someday, when you’re ready, we can give him a sister or brother to play with.”

“I’d like that.”

Her heart actually felt like it would burst. It had been one thing for her to care for Malachi and want to be his mate, and she’d known that he cared about Jack, but because they hadn’t talked much about their relationship yet, she wasn’t sure what his feelings were. In Damien’s pack, males ostracized the pups of other males if a female became pregnant before she was mated. Malachi accepted her and Jack without reservation.

They talked quietly until Jack woke, and then Malachi took him into the kitchen while she changed the linens in the crib and then joined them.

“Oh yeah, look at you, champ,” Malachi said as he sat in a chair in front of Jack’s high chair, cheering him on as he ate yogurt.

“Carrot,” Jack said, grinning widely before shoving his spoon into his mouth.

Malachi looked at her with a smile. “Is he calling me carrot?”

“I think so. It’s his favorite word.”

“That’s cool.”

She busied herself with making breakfast for them, watching as Malachi talked to Jack and Jack babbled at him. Malachi leaned back in his chair and said, “What are your plans for the day?”

“Are you talking to me or Jack?” she teased.

“I’m pretty sure Jack’s plans for the day involve chewing on as many things as he can get into his mouth.”

She laughed. “That sounds about right.”

“I thought we could go buy a Christmas tree. I don’t usually decorate since we spend Christmas day with my folks, but I thought maybe this year they could come here? Christmas is in eleven days, in case you didn’t realize it from the thousands of commercials on TV.”

“I’d love to do that. I haven’t celebrated the holidays in ages.”

“After that, we can go to Mia’s. She sent me a text this morning and invited us to dinner tonight. She’s a pretty good cook.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Nila’s own family was gone, and she envied Malachi. She had been the product of a one-night-stand; her mother hadn’t even known what his name was. Her mother had gone to live with her sister, Betty, who helped to raise Nila, as her mother worked two jobs to keep their heads above water. One night her mom went to her second job and never came home. There’d been a fight at the bar she waitressed at and someone pulled a gun, and she was caught in the crossfire. Betty had done the best she could, and Diane had helped, too. When Betty died of cancer just before Jack was born, Diane had been the only person there for her.

Malachi stood and hugged her. “What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice muffled by his shirt.

“You look so sad.”

She lifted her head and he kissed her. “I was just thinking that Diane is the only tie I have to my family now. You’re blessed.”

“I know, sweetheart, but my family will be yours and Jack’s too. And the pack is like a big family, with Acksel and Brynn as the overbearing parents.”

She laughed. She reached over and turned off the burner so the eggs didn’t scorch, and hugged him back.

“Do you hear from Jack’s grandparents at all?” Malachi seemed to be choosing his words carefully.

“No. Damian’s dad, Isaiah, is widowed; his wife died shortly after Jack was born. He had no siblings. One time, before I left him, Damien shoved me and I hit my head on a cabinet and was bleeding pretty badly. He left me there, bleeding. I didn’t have a car at the time, so I called Isaiah. It was two hours before he came over with one of the pack members who had some medical training. I told him that Damien hurt me, and he said that I chose him as my husband and I should’ve known what I was getting into. He doesn’t think much of me because I’m human, and he never claimed Jack as his grandson.”

Malachi’s hold on her tightened just slightly. She peered at him, noticing that his eyes were flashing from blue to amber. “Malachi?”

“I’m not angry at you, sweetheart, I’m furious that Damien put his hands on you. You never told me that. When you talked about how bad it was, I think you skipped some things.”

“I was stupid.”

“It’s not stupid to want to believe that someone is a good person. You got out, that’s the important thing, but I want you to tell me everything.”

“Why?” Her mouth went dry and her throat tightened. She didn’t want him to think less of her for how long she stayed.

“Because I don’t want there to be any secrets between us, and also because Acksel is going to speak on our behalf to

Damien's alpha and ask him to force Damien to sign the divorce papers."

Her breath seized in her chest and for a minute, she couldn't hear anything over the buzzing in her ears. "Wh-what?"

"I spoke to Acksel last week about the situation. We can't get married until you're divorced, and I may be patient, but I'm not patient enough to wait for him to die of old age. I want you to be free to make your own choices, Nila. You're not free right now, because you're still tied to him."

"Isaiah won't care. The legal marriage is a joke to their pack."

"We'll handle it. But I really need to know everything. Can you tell me?"

She looked at Jack, who'd moved on from yogurt to Cheerios. "When he's done eating."

When they were finished, she cleaned Jack up, put him on the floor in the family room with his favorite toys, and turned on the television. She found the kids' channel he liked and then walked into the kitchen.

Malachi was waiting for her at the table, and she joined him, taking the fresh cup of coffee he'd prepared for her. She looked at the steam that rose from the surface. Malachi placed his hand on her forearm, and the slight weight and warmth was enough to tell her that he wasn't going anywhere, no matter what she told him.

She'd done a lot of foolish things in her life. She'd snuck into a movie theater and gotten caught. She'd skipped school and missed an important test, almost screwing up her ability to pass the class and graduate. But the stupidest thing she'd ever done was fall for Damien's lies. His clean-cut good looks had fooled her into ignoring the beast that truly lurked beneath the skin. She'd been impressed that he was a wolf shifter, led to believe that he thought she was special enough to date even though his pack didn't care for humans. Then she got pregnant, and married, and then...the verbal barbs came. She

was too fat, too lazy, too stupid. Nothing she ever did was right, but she kept trying hard to make him happy.

“He cheated on you?” Malachi asked. His face was blank, his features carefully controlled.

“On the full moons, but probably more frequently than that.”

“And he never marked you?”

“No. I didn’t know anything about that until Brynn told me.”

“The marking means that the man and the wolf are claiming the woman. It’s a territorial thing, too. If another wolf sees the mark, he’ll know she’s taken.”

“No one ever messed with me from his pack.”

He leaned back in the chair and drummed his fingers on the table. “Tomorrow, Acksel is going to tell Isaiah that you are not truly mated to Damien, and that the legal marriage is a hindrance to everyone involved.”

She wasn’t sure it would matter to Isaiah, but maybe hearing the words from another alpha would tip the situation in her favor.

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Malachi left his home Monday morning with Nila and Jack in the SUV and drove to Brynn’s house. At the moment, nothing was changing about the guard situation with Brynn. Originally he’d thought he could stop sitting at the clinic all day, but since Damien had beaten up Nila’s friend, Malachi didn’t trust that he’d stay away completely.

“Should I get in the back seat?” Nila asked as he stopped the SUV in front of the house.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because she’s your alpha.”

“Mate trumps alpha.”

Her brows rose. “Does she know that?”

He chuckled. “Of course.”

Brynn and Acksel walked down the sidewalk together and Brynn climbed in the back seat, greeting them all. Malachi rolled Nila’s window down and said, “I’ll be back after I get the girls settled.”

Acksel nodded. “We’ll be ready.”

He rolled the window up and pulled away from the curb. Nila asked, “I thought it was just you and Acksel going to see Isaiah? What did he mean by ‘we’?”

“Acksel knows Isaiah by reputation only; they’ve never met. Alphas stick to their own territory, and Dorlan is far enough away from Wilde Creek that their paths have never crossed. If it was just me and Acksel that showed up to see Isaiah, he might think that we were a weak pack or that we saw him as weak. Either way, we might end up with him bringing his pack here and causing trouble. Acksel is bringing Sam and a few other protectors, along with his dad, Dade, and Hollis, one of the elders.”

Nila was quiet, chewing her bottom lip, which was something he noticed she did when she was worried.

“What, sweetheart?”

“I’m putting a lot of people out.”

He glanced in the rearview and found Brynn frowning. She said, “You’re important to Malachi, and that makes you important to the pack.”

He reached for Nila’s hand and she took it, lacing her fingers with his immediately. He wasn’t sure what else to say, so he let the silence hang between them. He pulled into the parking lot of the daycare first. Nila took Jack inside and dropped him off, and then he drove to the clinic. Malachi escorted both women into the clinic and followed Nila to the breakroom.

She leaned against the counter and he placed his hands on the counter on either side of her body and looked down at her.

In a low voice, he said, “What’s bothering you?”

“I’m worried.”

“About your safety? Don’t. Two protectors are already in place here, and they’ll make sure you’re safe while I’m gone.”

“I’m worried about you.” She blinked her big brown eyes at him, and he swallowed at the sudden lump in his throat. She really cared about him.

He pressed his lips to hers, and she made a soft, sad sound in her throat and wrapped her arms around him. He pulled her close as they kissed, and then he lifted from her lush mouth and cupped her face. “I’m going to set you free so I can work on making you mine forever. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“You’ll be careful?” She chewed on her bottom lip and he gently pulled her lip from her teeth with his thumb.

“Of course. You’re not going to get rid of me that easily.” He smiled, but she didn’t smile back.

Kissing her forehead, he hugged her and said, “I need to go, they’re waiting for me. I’ll be back before the day is over, and if there’s a problem, you can find Devin and Hayden outside.”

He left her in the breakroom, took a few minutes to scan the security footage from the night before, and then he left. He was anxious to get to Dorlan and get the situation settled.

When Malachi stopped in front of Acksel’s home and programmed the GPS to head to Dorlan, he was aware of two other vehicles pulling next to him. He glanced up and saw Sam and two protectors in one SUV, and Dade’s truck with Hollis in the passenger seat. Acksel walked down the sidewalk, opened the passenger door of Malachi’s SUV and sat down.

“Nila said that there’s a gas station on the edge of Dorlan that’s run by one of the pack members,” Malachi said.

“We’ll stop there first and ask for a meeting with Isaiah,” Acksel said.

Malachi nodded, put the SUV into gear and pulled away from the curb. The drive to Dorlan took over an hour, and Acksel and Malachi talked about the pack and Nila's situation. Acksel was not the most compassionate male on the planet, but he didn't approve of females being abused in any form, and believed that it was an alpha's responsibility to ensure that everyone within the pack was safe. That included the mates and pups, whether they were entirely wolf or not. Isaiah's pack was all-wolf, the way that the Wilde Creek pack had been not too long ago.

Acksel's sister Eveny had been about to choose to leave the pack in order to be with her human mate, Luke, which was something that would have resulted in her banishment from the pack. She would never have been allowed to set foot in Wilde Creek again, under penalty of death, just because she loved a human. Malachi had never given much thought to what would happen if he were in a similar situation. If it weren't for Acksel changing pack law for Brynn so that she, and any other mates who were human or other forms of shifters, were welcomed into the pack, Malachi would be taking banishment for Nila, and he wouldn't have hesitated. Some other packs didn't care what sort of mates their people took, but most had wolf-only laws. He was glad that Wilde Creek wasn't one of them, but it wouldn't have mattered in the long run. Nila was his, and he'd do anything to make her his and keep her safe.

Acksel grunted, and Malachi glanced over to see him reading the divorce papers that Nila had given to Malachi. "I wonder if Damien didn't sign the papers because there's also this little thing here that says he waives parental rights to Jack." Acksel made a motion to one section of the papers.

"I wondered that myself. But if he really cared for his pup, he wouldn't be terrorizing Nila and withholding support. According to her, when they were together she had to beg him to give her money for diapers and clothes for him. When she left, she had nothing at all, and if it weren't for Diane she'd have wound up on the street. I think that if he actually wanted Jack, he wouldn't just be terrorizing Nila but would be demanding that Jack be returned to him."



“He might see Jack as a means to an end. If he keeps his parental rights, than Nila will never be free of him. Sever that link, along with the divorce, and she can be free.”

That was what Malachi wanted for her. He wanted her to be free of her past so she could make her own choices. When he asked her to be his mate officially, he didn't want anything in the way of their happiness. He wanted to mark her and marry her as soon as she was ready and willing to be his.

“Brynn will skin you alive if you get married before we do.”

Malachi chuckled. “Get out of my head.”

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Dorlan Auto was just about the filthiest place Malachi had ever set foot in, and that included a fraternity bathroom after a party. They waited for the owner of the shop to bring word back from his alpha. The male reminded Malachi of a rat, with a sharp nose and beady eyes.

“Alpha Isaiah is meeting you at the park outside town. It's neutral territory,” the male said after thirty minutes. He handed Sam a slip of paper with an address scrawled on it.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Acksel said.

As they walked out of the shop and to the vehicles, Sam said, “I feel like I need to take about a hundred showers. That place was disgusting.”

“Me, too.” Acksel said, his nose wrinkling in disgust.

Sam led the way and Malachi and Dade followed, heading out of Dorlan and to a neutral-ground park. The ‘park’ as it turned out, was a grassy field with a rusted swing set and some picnic tables that looked as if they were about thirty years old. As they walked into the park, they found a small group of males next to one of the decrepit picnic tables. One male sat at the table, and the four other males with him stood in a row behind him.

“Welcome to Dorlan,” the male who sat at the table said. “My name is Isaiah Caruthers.”

Acksel extended his hand and introduced himself as he sat down. He tried to hide his grimace, but Malachi saw it. “Thank you for meeting with us.”

Isaiah was a thin male, but the sort of thinness that came from a life of hard living. He was graying and unkempt, his long hair pulled back in a ponytail and his beard long enough, and dirty-looking enough, to make Malachi want to spray him down with Lysol.

“I understand you wish to speak to me about my son, Damien.”

Acksel folded his hands on the table top, and although he appeared relaxed, Malachi knew that he wasn't. “One of my pack members has entered into a relationship with Nila Caruthers. She is technically married to your son, and has been separated from him for nine months. I would ask you to see that he signs the divorce papers and releases Nila.”

Isaiah stared at Acksel in silence for a long moment and then said, “I don't see what my son's affairs have to do with me. Does your pack come to you with such inconsequential things?” The distaste was clear in Isaiah's voice.

Acksel's head tilted just slightly. “Your son is attacking the mate of one of my pack members. As alpha, I take issue with that.”

Isaiah's brow lifted. “She's human.”

Malachi bit back a vicious snarl.

“Regardless,” Acksel said, “Nila is Malachi's mate and he wants her free from her past obligations so he can mate her appropriately. Your son never mated her. Their marriage is by human standards alone. As her true mate, Malachi is within his rights to demand her freedom.”

Isaiah straightened slightly and eyed Malachi as he stood behind Acksel. “My son didn't want to really mate her because he would have been kicked out of the pack. He didn't want to

ruin his life because she was too stupid to remember birth control.”

Malachi tensed, wanting to leap over Acksel and punch Isaiah for the numerous insults to his woman.

“Regardless of your feelings on her humanity, will you assist, or do you accept that my pack member will be doing whatever is necessary to ensure he can mate Nila properly?”

Isaiah’s eyes narrowed. “Do not threaten my son.”

“Release Nila.”

Isaiah threw up his hands with a growl, and then he leveled a calculating gaze at Malachi. “We’ll settle this in the old way. Tomorrow at sunset, you will bring the human here to the park and she will watch you and my son fight for her. The winner keeps her; the loser walks away forever.”

Malachi bared his teeth.

Acksel raised his hand and Malachi bit back the growl in his throat. “I have some ground rules.”

Isaiah snorted. “You would.”

Acksel ignored the barb and said, “The fight is limited to human form. If either shift, they forfeit. When Malachi wins, Damien will sign the divorce papers within a week and you will swear as his alpha that he will never bother her again.”

“If your wolf wins, then I will agree to those terms.” Isaiah said the words, but Malachi didn’t trust him.

With the details set, Malachi and his pack left. Acksel was quiet on the way back to Wilde Creek. Malachi didn’t mind, because he needed the time to think as well. Nila was not going to be happy about this. She was human and hadn’t spent much time around wolves, so she wouldn’t understand this was the way things needed to be so that he could set her free. Her human marriage to Damien was like a tether around her neck. Malachi could mate her, but he couldn’t make her his wife and Jack his son until Damien was legally out of the way.

Malachi stopped in front of Acksel’s house and shifted into park.

Acksel cleared his throat. “You need to mate Nila tonight.”

“Uh, not that I don’t want to, but why tonight?”

Acksel turned in his seat until he was facing Malachi. “Aside from the fact that she’s your mate and you care deeply for her, going to the fight tomorrow night with her already marked will go a long way toward showing that she’s yours to Isaiah’s pack.”

Nodding, Malachi’s mind raced as he thought over how little time there was between now and when they needed to leave tomorrow for the fight. He should be training, and not sexing up his mate, but he couldn’t deny that officially mating her – tonight – was extremely appealing.

“I’d like to take her to the altar and talk for a bit tonight.”

“Of course. You can drop off Jack here before you go, and tomorrow he can stay with Brynn while we’re gone.”

“Thanks, Acksel.”

His alpha smiled at him. “You’re one of my oldest friends, and you’re also a pack member. That means a lot to me. I want you to be happy, and if that means we have to take a posse up to Dorlan so you can kick her ex’s ass, then that’s what we’ll do.”

Acksel got out and Malachi headed back to the clinic. It was almost time for the girls to stop work for the day, so he didn’t have much time to wait before Brynn and Nila were in the SUV and they were heading to the daycare. Acksel had contacted Brynn and told her what was going on, so Malachi only had to explain things to Nila. He waited until he’d made dinner for her and himself and they’d fed Jack together.

An hour after they’d been home, they headed back out and took Jack to Brynn and Acksel’s house, where Mia was also waiting to play with Jack. He noticed that Nila didn’t seem to mind leaving her son with pack members, and it made him happy to know she trusted them, and trusted him as well.

He’d made sure she was dressed warmly. As a shifter, his body ran hotter than a human’s and he didn’t mind the cold as

much as she would, and he didn't want her to be uncomfortable.

The snow from several days earlier had hardened, and it crunched under their boots as they stepped off the back porch and down into the yard. Malachi stopped and Nila did, too. He pointed up. "Wolves have been tied to the moon forever. When the moon rises in the sky, it's a compulsion that we can't ignore. We have to shift – hunt and run and commune in our wolf forms. We're pack by nature. Although there are lone wolves out there, those that have been banished by deed or choice, wolves feel a need to be with other wolves on the full moon."

He clicked the button on the battery-operated lantern he carried and took her gloved hand in his. The lantern illuminated the area in front of them as he led her toward the woods.

"Wolf packs are traditionally wolf-only. Our laws have always stated that if a member chose to mate a human or another type of shifter, he or she would be banished. Some wolves take the banishment willingly for their mate, believing it's better to have their mate without the pack than the pack without their mate, but some wolves don't want to be that noble and stay with the pack, ignoring their mating needs."

"Why would your laws say that a wolf can't mate with whoever he or she wants?"

He sighed. "I don't know. Call it specist or exclusionary or whatever, but my pack was the same way until recently. Acksel's sister, Eveny, knew that mating with Luke, who is human, would mean she'd be banished from the pack, but she didn't care. Acksel didn't mate with Brynn until recently because of the laws, but now he's changed the laws so that our people can mate with whoever they want."

They walked through the woods in silence, the snow and ice crunching under their feet the only sound. The altar came into view and he stopped in front of it and placed the lantern on the smooth marble surface.

He looked down at her and she tilted her head back until she was looking into his eyes. Sometimes he felt like she could see right through him. He clasped both her hands and said, “It wouldn’t matter to me if being with you meant I lost the pack. I’d gladly go rogue for you and Jack. My pack laws are different now, though, and that means that I don’t have to leave. When we mate together, you’ll become an honorary member of the pack. The protectors will protect you and Jack the same as they would any other member. You won’t be shunned for your humanity; you’ll be revered as my mate.”

His heart started to pound as he stared into her eyes. She looked at him expectantly, and he pushed back the desire to strip her and mount her on the altar, fairly certain it wasn’t what the creators of the stone monument had in mind when they’d carved it.

“Nila, since the moment my wolf urged me to follow the sound of your tears and I found you in the storage room at the clinic, I’ve known that you were mine. Everything that I’ve done since that point was with you and Jack in mind. I took over the house that Brynn had been renting from my folks and completely redid the interior, and I willingly sat next to Brynn every day so I could catch glimpses of you. I also shifted and watched your house from the woods sometimes, and I occasionally drove by your house.”

Her brow rose. “You were stalking me?”

He made a face. “It’s not stalking if you’re my mate.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sounds like semantics to me.”

“Semantics?”

“Sure. You say mate, I say stalker.”

He huffed her name. “Nila.”

She giggled. “I’m kidding. I knew you were watching me, at least at work. I didn’t know about the other stuff, but I’m not surprised. You’re a very determined guy, but you never crowded me or pushed yourself on me. I’m here now by choice, and that means the world to me.” She paused and said,

“If I told you I wanted to go get Jack and go to Diane’s for the night, would you stop me?”

His wolf clawed at him from the inside, howling in dismay. Although he wanted to snarl and tell her no, he knew he wouldn’t. He couldn’t. “I’d drive you there myself.”

Her face softened and her eyes glittered suddenly with unshed tears. “That’s why I want to be your mate, Malachi, because you gave me the choice. You accept me for all my flaws and my humanity, and you care about Jack as if he were your own flesh and blood. I don’t want to be anywhere but where you are for the rest of my life.”

Now his wolf wanted to howl for joy, and Malachi would have danced a jig if he wouldn’t have looked like an idiot. He settled for wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close, dropping his mouth to hers. He loved kissing her. She tasted as sweet and wild as she smelled, and her body fit against his perfectly. He loved how he could hear her heart beat faster and scent her arousal even in the frigid night air. His attraction to her had started with his wolf’s recognition of her as his mate, but his attraction to her now wasn’t based on some wolfy knowledge or physical things. It went far deeper. He loved how much she cared about Jack, and how great a mom she was. He loved how she wrinkled her nose when she thought something was particularly funny, and the way she cared about her patients.

He’d fallen in love with her. He’d been aware of his slowly deepening feelings for her as they’d grown closer, but he hadn’t really admitted the words to himself.

Breaking the kiss, he stroked his thumb over the curve of her cheek and said, “Nila, I love you. I want you to be my mate, and when things are settled with your past, I want you to be my wife and I want to adopt Jack. Will you mate me and marry me?”

Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. For a heartbeat, she said nothing, and then she grinned and tears slipped down her cheeks. “I love you, too, Mal. I will absolutely mate you

and marry you, and I know that you'll make a great father for Jack.”

A great weight lifted off his shoulders as he pulled her even closer and they kissed. In his mind, his wolf was doing cartwheels, and he grinned inwardly. It hadn't really been that long since he'd found her – just a few weeks – but the journey to get to this place had seemingly taken forever.

He pulled from the drugging kiss and nipped her lower lip. “I need to explain some more things to you, sweetheart.”

“I'm all ears,” she said, hugging herself closer and laying her cheek on his chest.

His wolf growled in approval and Malachi smiled. She'd said yes. Everything else was just details.



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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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*A*fter spending two cold hours in the snowy woods, she and Malachi walked back to Brynn and Acksel's house and took Jack home. She was quiet on the drive to Malachi's house, looking at Jack as he tried to fight to stay awake. The girls had worn him out, and she smiled as she realized that not only was she getting a family when she married Malachi, but Jack was, too. A big family that wasn't just Malachi's parents and sister, but also the pack. Acksel had made it clear before they left that when she mated Malachi and he adopted Jack, her son would become a pack member, able to join the ranks when he shifted sometime during his sixteenth year.

She'd always been worried about Jack growing up in Damien's pack. He would have been encouraged to see her as unworthy because she was completely human, and she'd always assumed that Jack would be treated differently because he was only half wolf. But Acksel's pack didn't care about that anymore. Brynn was carrying Acksel's child, and Acksel had ensured that the pack laws were changed so that Brynn and their kids were considered full pack members. Nila wouldn't be a true pack member like Brynn, because she was the alpha female and that was special, but Nila would be an honorary member, and Jack would have full membership rights. So would any children she and Malachi had.

The time spent in the woods had been eye-opening. He'd told her not only about his people and their ways, but also the truth of his feelings for her. Love. He said he loved her. She loved him, too. She wasn't exactly sure when it had happened, and maybe it was fast, but it felt right. She felt connected to

him on a superior level, as if they really had been made for each other. Their relationship might have gotten off to a rocky start, what with her trying to push him away and him secretly stalking her, but they were solid now. It wasn't just a connected feeling, she just flat-out loved him. Loved how sweet he was to Jack, how he treated her like a queen, and how he let her know that he supported her no matter what her choices were.

When he stopped the SUV, he got out and opened the back door and removed a nearly-asleep Jack from the car seat, lifting the diaper bag over his shoulder. She stared at him in surprise as he walked around the front of the SUV and then opened her door.

“What’s with the look?” He asked as he held the door for her.

“You just constantly surprise me,” she answered, stepping down onto the snow and standing next to him as he shut the door.

“Oh? I like being surprising.”

He held her hand as they walked into the house together. She'd lifted her hands to take Jack from him and put him to bed when he said, “Why don't you go run a nice hot bath for us? I'll put him to bed.”

“There you go again, surprising me.”

He pressed in the code to secure the house and she listened as the electronic deadbolts on the front door engaged. She kissed Jack's cheek and whispered goodnight to him. He kept trying to stay awake, his eyelids staying closed for longer and longer periods of time.

She sat down on a small bench at the door and took off her boots, putting hers and Malachi's on the rug at the door and hanging up their coats while he took Jack to bed. Her stomach clenched with anticipation as she thought about taking a bath with Malachi. She nearly ran back to the master bathroom, but instead forced herself to walk slowly. Peeking into Jack's bedroom, she saw Malachi standing at the crib, rocking Jack in

his arms, whispering to him. She couldn't hear what he said, but Jack was smiling as his eyes fluttered shut. She blew him a kiss and walked to the bedroom, tugging off her sweater and dropping it into the laundry basket.

The tub was a shower/tub combo with frosted glass doors. She pushed the door open and turned on the faucet, testing the temperature with her fingers and then closing the drain when it was just right. She'd never really been a bath person, but the idea of sharing a bath with Malachi made her want to reconsider that stance. Maybe baths were sexy when her mate was involved.

She stripped and leaned out of the bathroom to put her clothes in the basket when she saw Malachi come into the bedroom. His face lit up when he saw her, and she smiled at him, stepping back into the bathroom. He carried a tray in and set it down on the marble counter; on it were two mugs, a carafe, mini marshmallows, candles and a matchbook.

He tipped the carafe and poured what turned out to be hot cocoa into both mugs, dropping mini marshmallows on the top. Then he set the candles on the counter and began to light them. She glanced at the tub, decided the water was high enough, and turned off the faucet.

Malachi flipped off the light, and the small room was filled with the golden flickering candlelight. She watched him strip. His thick sweater came off first, and then the t-shirt underneath, revealing his chiseled upper body. His arms were thick and roped with muscle, and his abdomen was a study in masculinity. Her gaze drifted down to his waist as he undid the button and zipper of his jeans. As he shoved his jeans down his legs, her mouth watered at the sight of his thick cock.

He moved in front of her and touched her chin with his fingertips. She looked up at him. "The way you're looking at me is driving me crazy."

She placed her hands on his waist. "How am I looking at you?"

He smirked. "Like you could eat me up."

“I thought the big bad wolf was the one who did the eating?”

He chuckled, picking up the mugs and stepping into the tub. “I know I froze you outside while we were talking so I wanted to warm you up the right way.”

He handed her the mugs and sat down, stretching his legs straight out and leaning against the tub. She knew it had to be freezing against the back of the tub, but he didn't show it. He patted his thighs and she straddled him, handing him one mug.

“Let's toast getting warm,” she said.

“And our mating,” he added.

“You warm me from the inside out, even without the hot cocoa and bath.”

“Me, too, sweetheart.”

Their mugs clinked softly and they both sipped on the cocoa. It was sweet and chocolaty, and just warm enough to make her groan in pleasure.

They drained the mugs and she set them on top of the toilet and looked at him. “I want you to know that even though it was suggested to me that we do this tonight, I'm not mating you because my alpha thinks it's a good idea. I'm doing it because the thought of you going one more day without my mark in your neck would make me insane.” His hands rested on her knees, his fingers kneading the flesh. “If you don't want me to mark you tonight, I won't. It's your choice.”

“Can it be undone?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “No. Mating is like marriage for my people, more important than a piece of paper from the government.”

“I just...it's not that I don't want to be yours forever, I just wanted to make sure you'd be mine, too. You won't have any marks; how will anyone know that you're mated?”

He relaxed. “I'll smell like you, for one. It would be hard for anyone to not realize a male is mated, because they'll scent his mate on him. If you want to bite me, you can.”

“It won’t be like your marks though.” He had explained that when he marked her, his fangs would be elongated and would cut through her skin, leaving two permanent marks on the side of her neck. She knew it would hurt, like getting poked with two big needles, but she didn’t care. She wanted to belong to Malachi in every way.

“No, but I don’t care. I want you to trust in me, and if that means you want to bite me and mark me, I’m okay with that. Whether I wear physical marks or not, when I bring you before the pack on the full moon as my treasured mate, everyone will know that I’m taken. I would never betray you, Nila. There will never be anyone else for me but you, forever.”

She could have cried at the sweet words, but she didn’t want him to think she was an emotional nutcase. Instead, she leaned forward, placing her hands on the cool tile on either side of his head, and kissed him.

His fingers slipped into her hair and he took over the kiss, angling her head the way he wanted to deepen it. Damn she loved him. He rocked her world in every possible way.

One of his hands slipped from her hair and inched its way down her chest to brush his fingers against her nipples. She wiggled on his lap as he tugged them lightly, alternating from one to the other as his tongue swept possessively into her mouth. His hand fisted in her hair and he gently pulled her away from him, arching her neck and bending his head to suck on her nipples. He plumped her breast and licked at the tip as she wiggled further up his lap. Her hands left the tile and she gripped his shoulders, arching her back and pushing her breasts into his face. Grinning against her flesh, he nipped at her nipples, tugging and teasing them in turn until she was writhing on top of him.

With a soft growl, he lifted from her and kissed her hard. She moaned as his hand slipped down the front of her body. He rubbed her clit lightly.

“Damn you’re wet, babe,” he groaned against her lips.

Her hips canted as he stroked her clit with the tip of his finger. “You do that to me.” She reached for him, fisting his

hair in her hands and kissing him. He teased her, flicking her clit with quick strokes until her body shivered and her pussy clenched. Need filled her like something wild and alive, and she couldn't think of anything better than his cock inside her as he claimed her.

"Please," she whispered as she lifted from his mouth and gazed into his eyes.

His finger slipped to her entrance and he stroked her lightly before lifting his finger to his mouth and sucking off the silky evidence of her arousal. "You taste so sweet." His lips parted and she saw a hint of his fangs. She shivered in response.

Gripping her hips, he lifted and pulled her forward until she hovered over his cock. She reached for him with one hand, grasping his thick length and holding him until the hot head of his cock breached her. She gasped and he froze, holding her in place. She shifted her hips, wiggling on him, and her knees spread wider until she straddled him completely and then she sank down on him slowly, feeling every inch of him as he filled her. His hands gripped her hips tightly and she inhaled deeply and looked at him.

He looked so sexy, teeth bared in concentration, his fangs elongated slightly. The steam from the water around them made his skin glisten. She leaned forward and touched the edge of one fang with her finger. It seemed to get bigger as she touched it, and his cock throbbed in her pussy.

She lifted her hips slightly, letting him slide nearly free before she pressed herself back down onto him, until the backs of her thighs were flush with his legs. He touched her clit again, his thumb pressing against the bundle of nerves and making her close her eyes in pleasure. She hooked her hand behind his neck and leaned in to kiss him again as she began to lift herself from him in a slow rhythm. His thumb stroked her clit and she sucked on his tongue, her stomach twisting as heat flared through her. Their bodies moved together as one, his hips lifting as hers descended, the water splashing as they made love. His chest vibrated as he growled, and his thumb began to work her clit faster. Her pussy clenched his cock as

he rubbed her just right. Sparks lit her vision, and she lifted her mouth from his and moaned.

She couldn't move fast enough; the tidal wave of pleasure that rose inside her was fueled by his firm touch on her clit and the growls that rumbled in his chest. Her nails dug into his chest as she came, her body quivering as heat rolled through her and she shouted his name.

His thumb kept rubbing her clit, and his other hand pressed into the small of her back as he moved her on his cock. He latched his mouth onto the side of her neck and she moaned loudly. She felt the heat of the bruise that would form as he licked and nuzzled her neck and pushed her body to another climax. The pressure on her clit increased, as the bud throbbed under his attention. She wanted to tell him that it was too much, but her body revolted at the idea of him stopping. He did things to her body that no one had ever done before. She wanted everything that he could give her.

“Oh, yes,” she moaned, closing her eyes and letting herself go into the sensations. He sucked on her neck in the same spot, his thumb driving her wild and his cock moving in and out. She felt herself draw close to the edge, the pleasure spiraling tightly inside, pushing her forward to another dizzying height of bliss.

Her body jolted as pleasure flooded her. She cried out his name as she came, and felt his fangs press into her neck. She was so overwhelmed with her climax that she couldn't even muster a complaint as he pierced her with his fangs and marked her. He growled and she felt his cock spasm deep inside. He extracted his fangs and licked across the tender wound, then pulled her close and leaned back. She was cradled against him as the pleasure slowly ebbed.

Even the rapidly cooling water couldn't make her want to leave his arms right then. She'd just sleep right here, with his cock still lodged in her pussy and her neck aching from his mark.

She didn't think she'd ever felt safer.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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After dropping off Jack, Nila, and Brynn Tuesday morning, Malachi returned to Acksel's house and trained for the day. Sam and Zander were guarding the girls personally, and two other wolves were stationed at the daycare. Malachi was a good fighter. Not the best – that was Acksel – but not the worst by any stretch. He had a feeling that Damien was a dirty fighter, though, and he wanted to be as sharp as possible for the fight. He didn't expect to lose; there was too much at stake. Both Nila and Jack's life hung in the balance. He had no doubt that Damien would not be kind if he got his hands on them again.

He ducked a punch from Ren and smashed his fist into his chest, knocking the big male back a few paces. "Ah, shit," Ren grumbled, rubbing his chest.

Ren was the beta of the pack, Acksel's right-hand. Not only was he a great fighter, he was an honorable guy. He wasn't going to the fight tonight because he was staying in Wilde Creek to keep an eye on the pack, but when he'd volunteered to spar with Malachi, he'd been happy to take him up on it.

"You're getting slow in your old age," Malachi taunted, bouncing on his feet a few times. His energy was running high and his mind was racing. Nila was in danger until Damien was put down. The fight tonight would change everything.

"I'm only a year older than you." Ren cracked his neck and snarled.



“Stop teasing each other like school girls and fight, for fuck’s sake,” Acksel grumbled from where he stood on the porch watching them. The air was cold but calm, no harsh wind whipped at his skin. They’d abandoned jackets to make it easier to move, and the shirts had come off a bit later as adrenaline and sweat combined to make them uncomfortable.

“Would you fight dirty, you bastard?” Malachi challenged. “I know they don’t fight fair up there, don’t pussyfoot around.”

Ren growled angrily, his dark eyes flashing to the amber of his wolf, and just as he tensed to strike, someone barreled into Malachi from the side and he went down to the ground, hard. His head swam and his vision blurred, but he could see the fist swinging at his face and he threw up his arm and blocked it. Acksel had tackled him. Malachi had been so intent on fighting with Ren that he hadn’t been prepared for the sneak attack.

Acksel snarled, his teeth bared, as Malachi fought to keep the alpha’s fist at bay. Ren stormed over to them and lifted his booted foot in the air above Malachi’s groin, and every instinct in him went haywire. No one threatened to hurt him like that.

Kicking out, Malachi arched up and rolled, throwing Acksel off and knocking Ren off his feet. Ren hit the ground with a grunt. Malachi snarled as he stood and glared at Ren. “Low blow, man. I use that.”

Ren chuckled as he got to his feet, dusting the snow from his skin. Acksel rolled to his knees, and packed snow into a ball and threw it at Malachi’s chest. It exploded in a burst of white.

Acksel brushed off his jeans as he stood. “You’re right about one thing. I don’t think that Damien’s pack is above fighting dirty. I’m going to increase the guards at the house here. Mia and Jack can stay here while we’re gone; I’ll have one of the omegas help Brynn make up the spare bedroom for your family, and Mia can crash on the couch. I don’t trust that pack not to try something funny while we’re distracted.”

Malachi nodded.

Ren picked up his shirt and jacket. “You’re ready. All I did was hint at screwing up your ability to have sex with your mate and you went nuts. When you’re face to face with her ex, I have no doubt that you and your wolf will protect her just fine and beat that sorry fuck within an inch of his life.”

Malachi shook Ren’s hand. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

Ren walked away, and Malachi and Acksel stood on the snow-packed ground watching him disappear around to the front of the house where his car was parked. Acksel cleared his throat and said, “If something happens to you tonight, I hope you know that we won’t let Nila be hurt. I don’t care what the alpha thinks is going to happen, but if by some small chance Damien beats you, I won’t let her be taken against her will. She’s human, and not bound by the mating laws.”

Malachi felt some of the tension leave him. Not much, but some. “Thanks, Acksel.”

“Hey, our women are friends. Brynn wouldn’t let me live it down if I let her friend be hurt. Besides, she thinks of you as a brother, and that means we’re family as much as we are pack members in my mind. Family sticks together.”

Malachi nodded. “I feel the same way.”

Grabbing his shirt and jacket from where they’d landed in the snow when he tossed them aside during training, he jogged around the corner of the house and headed to his SUV. He glanced at the clock on the dash, surprised to see it was after one. He’d head home, shower, change, and then pick up his mate and son. They had to leave early so they could make it to Dorlan by sunset.

In a few hours, he’d be facing off against the male who had terrorized his mate. He would set her free and then bring her back to their home, where they’d celebrate his win with a tumble in the sheets. It sounded like an excellent way to enjoy her first night of freedom.

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Malachi held Nila close as he sat in the second row of Sam's SUV. Acksel was in the passenger seat while Sam drove. In two more vehicles behind them, six more protectors and Dade were traveling with them. Nila shivered, and he hugged her closer.

"It's going to be fine," he whispered to her.

She looked up at him and fisted his shirt. "I don't want you to get hurt because of me."

"It's a given, sweetheart. But I'll take whatever he dishes out to make sure he leaves you alone."

She blinked rapidly, and tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. "You promise you'll take me home with you tonight?"

He brushed a tear away with his thumb. "I swear."

She swallowed audibly. "Tell me I'm yours, Malachi."

He smiled softly at her. "You're mine, Nila. And I'm yours, too."

She shivered in his arms, and he kissed her. He wasn't going to tell her not to worry, because he didn't think she'd stop. He didn't believe she was nervous because she didn't trust him, but nervous because she knew what weighed in the balance. The fight tonight held her future and Jack's in the balance. Nothing had ever been as important.

Their small caravan arrived at the park just before sunset. Acksel, Sam, and Dade walked ahead of Malachi and Nila, the other protectors bringing up the rear. They walked to the center of the park, where Damien's pack was gathered. He'd been worried about Nila and how she would feel when she came face to face with her ex. If Isaiah hadn't made it a condition of the fight, Malachi would have made sure she stayed home, away from the violence.

As they walked closer, he felt her begin to grow tense. She shrugged off his arm and grasped his hand, linking their fingers. She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. Malachi was proud of her.

They stopped walking and Acksel met Isaiah. The other pack had formed a semi-circle around the open area. Dade said that Isaiah's pack wasn't much bigger than Wilde Creek's pack, and Malachi saw no females in the group. Acksel hadn't brought along their entire pack because it wasn't a show of strength between packs, but a mate challenge, which had an entirely different set of rules—among them, no interference from pack members.

Malachi scanned the group and picked Damien out easily. He looked like a younger version of Isaiah. He was tall and lanky—not as tall as Malachi and certainly not as well-muscled, but Malachi wasn't going to underestimate the male. He stood casually, his arms crossed and a blank look on his face as if he didn't have a thought in his brain, but his eyes were sharp and Malachi knew that Damien was used to people believing he wasn't as dangerous as he actually was. Unlike his father, Damien was clean-cut, but his ugly went soul-deep as far as Malachi was concerned.

Isaiah spoke loudly. “The Dorlan Pack welcomes the Wilde Creek Pack for this challenge. Challengers, please step forward.”

Malachi kissed Nila and slipped out of his coat, handing it to her. He watched her put it on, and then joined Acksel. Damien slunk forward, sneering at Malachi and then looking past him to Nila.

“Female!” Isaiah bellowed.

Malachi snarled, and Acksel put his hand on his chest and kept him from leaping forward.

Acksel looked at Nila. “It's safe here, Nila; its part of the challenge.”

Malachi bared his teeth but stopped pressing against Acksel's hand. Nila hurried forward and stopped just behind

Malachi. He reached for her hand and she grasped it. Her fingers were ice cold, and he knew it was from fear as well as cold.

Isaiah looked at her with complete disdain. “The challenge is for mating rights to the human, winner takes all. No complete shifting, no weapons, and no killing. The winner is chosen when the loser is unconscious or gives up.”

Malachi smiled at Nila, but she didn't return it. Her eyes were filled with worry and fear, and he could see that she was trembling. She'd spent a long time being afraid of Damien.

“I'm making things right for all three of us,” Malachi said softly, tweaking her chin with his thumb and finger.

“Be careful,” she whispered.

He nodded and she and Acksel stepped away from him, joining the other wolves from the pack. Cracking his neck, he looked at Damien as he stood, his hands loose at his sides.

Damien smirked. “I see the marks you left on her neck. I'll be sure to cut them off slowly when she's kneeling at my feet tonight.”

Malachi recognized that he was baiting him into making the first move, but he was too well trained to do that. He'd just beat him a little harder for the threat. His wolf growled, stretching and rolling under his skin, and wanting to harm the male who had hurt their mate for so long.

It was time to end her suffering.

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Nila watched as Malachi and Damien stared at each other. Only a few feet separated them, but they were so different. Malachi was strong and self-possessed. He looked like he could stand there in his dry fit shirt and loose jeans all night. Damien looked like he was about to twitch out of his skin. The sneer he'd directed at her almost nightly during their time together was plastered to his face, but there was no real bravado behind it. She'd known he was violent and had first-

hand experience with it, but aside from hearing the odd bit of gossip in town about pack fights, she hadn't ever seen him fight with another male. Maybe he only liked to beat up women.

Her gaze strayed to Isaiah, who looked both aggravated and bored. It probably killed him to see his son fighting over her, since he hadn't considered her worthy of even having his last name. She wondered if Damien's mom had been beaten by Isaiah, too, and that's where Damien learned the behavior. Were all the mated she-wolves in their pack mistreated, with the alpha's blessing?

Malachi raised his hands, curling them into fists just a second before Damien bellowed and threw himself forward. They clashed, and she cringed as they fought hard. Damien's fists flew with blinding speed, but Malachi was faster. Damien's fists never seemed to really touch Malachi, but Malachi's fists, on the other hand, always landed where they were supposed to. Damien's head snapped back as Malachi's punch landed on his chin. Damien grunted, spitting blood on the ground and snarling as he came back with both hands swinging. Malachi kicked him, his booted foot catching Damien in the stomach and shoving him back several feet.

Damien howled and she saw fangs in his mouth. His hands lengthened and his body bulked slightly as he took on part of his wolf shift. She'd only seen it once, when he'd taken her to his parents' home on the night of a full moon and left her inside while he went out to carouse. Someone had wanted the female he was talking to, and he'd shifted slightly and mauled the male. She'd been terrified, and so had the female, who screamed and begged for help as Damien dragged her into the woods.

"Son of a bitch," Acksel growled. "No wonder he said no complete shifting."

Her heart jumped into her throat. She didn't know a lot about wolves, but she knew that they were stronger than humans, even in half-form. She wanted to run out and put herself between Malachi and Damien, but she knew she

couldn't interfere. Malachi would win. The other option meant her life was over.

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Sneaky son of a bitch, Malachi thought as he watched Damien partially shift. In his book, that was cheating. You either fought as a man or a wolf. This wasn't some street fight with no rules, this was a sanctioned mate challenge. Damien was no honorable male. Not that he'd ever thought he was in the first place. Anyone who tormented and hurt a female was a total scumbag.

One clawed hand swung out at him and Malachi dodged it, aiming for Damien's stomach with his fist, enjoying the grunt of pain as he hit his target. Claws grasped his shoulders, but Malachi twisted loose as Damien's frustration grew. Damien lurched forward, and Malachi jerked to the side as the male rushed past him. The world spun suddenly as Malachi was jerked off his feet by a clawed hand gripping his ankle. He hit the ground hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs. He was dazed, but he knew he couldn't lay there until he got his bearings. Rolling abruptly, he missed being stomped on by just a fraction.

Damien leaped at him and Malachi wasn't fast enough to avoid being caught under him. The other male snapped his teeth, fangs glinting, and Malachi palmed Damien's chin and pushed against him, knowing that if he got his jaws around his neck, things could go bad in a heartbeat.

Damien grasped Malachi's rib cage and squeezed. The claws broke through his skin and Malachi grunted at the pain, feeling his blood begin to run down his sides and soak his shirt. The pressure was intense; he felt something crack on his right side, and grunted.

He saw something in Damien's eyes then—a menacing promise of what would happen to Nila if he ever got his hands on her again. The corners of his mouth curled up over his fangs, and he snapped and lunged again. Malachi snarled in

rage, smashing his palm into Damien's chin and grabbing his exposed throat with his other hand. As quickly as he'd been pinned, Malachi turned the tables on the male, flipping him over and squeezing his windpipe. Malachi wanted to dig clawed fingers into his throat and kill him. Squeeze hard until his fingertips met through the blood and meat of his neck, and make sure that he never breathed the same air as Nila again. But this wasn't a fight to the death.

Malachi ignored the claws as they raked down his sides, focusing on the deepening red of Damien's face as he struggled to breathe. He grew weaker with each moment. Malachi could hear his heart pounding, and his movements turned from attacking to defending as he used his last bit of consciousness to try to push Malachi away.

"She's mine. I claim her and Jack as my own. Touch them and die."

Anger sparked in Damien's eyes for a brief moment; then he went limp, and his eyes lost focus and closed. Malachi was still tempted to kill him. His wolf wanted the male dead.

Acksel and Isaiah came to stand before him as he slowly released his hold on the male's neck and stood up. He didn't want to show any weakness, so he clenched his teeth together and ignored the lightheadedness that the blood loss caused him.

Isaiah knelt and touched his fingers to Damien's throat. He glanced up with a grimace. "He lives. By the rules of the mate-challenge, the human female is yours to do with as you will."

Acksel pulled a manila envelope from inside his jacket and said, "The papers."

Isaiah nodded at a young male, who darted forward and took them from Acksel. "I'll ensure they're signed and delivered on Friday, to the human's place of business."

Malachi nodded and turned toward Nila, who was standing between Dade and Sam, tears streaming down her face.

She stumbled forward and closed the distance to him, but she didn't touch anything but his forearm. "Let's get you to a



hospital,” she whispered.

“We’ll go to Doc’s,” Dade said, joining them.

She bit her lip. “If you’re sure?”

Malachi was grateful when Dade answered for him. “It’s for the best.”

The pain that Malachi had been ignoring was starting to overwhelm him, and it wouldn’t look good if he passed out leaving the fight.

Sam opened the passenger door. Nila climbed in first, and Malachi flopped onto the seat next to her. In minutes they were on their way. Nila turned to face him and reached for him, her fingers hovering over his cheek. “I want to touch you but I can’t see enough in the dark to know where,” she whispered thickly.

He covered her hand with his and pressed them into his neck. “I’m already healing, love.”

Her thumb rubbed back and forth on his skin, and he smiled at her, even though it made his lip split open further, and blood ran down his chin.

“Thank you.”

“It was my honor and duty to see you safe.” He chuckled when he realized how corny that sounded. Trying again, he said, “Sweetheart, you’re my mate, my other half. Anyone that threatens you has to get through me, first, okay? I want you to be able to make your own choices and to stop looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life. I’d go to the grave to see you free from your past.”

That was a really harsh truth, and he could see that his words affected Nila. Even in the dark of the vehicle he could see tears glittering in her eyes.

He bit back his groan as he reached for her and pulled her into his arms. He urged his healing nature to work faster, but his body didn’t listen to him. Broken ribs, deep bruises, claw marks—they all took time to heal, but he didn’t want to wait until he was well to comfort her. She sobbed quietly against

his shoulder, and he closed his eyes, wishing that he was already healed and they were already home.

“I’ve got him,” a voice spoke from a distance as Malachi felt himself being lifted in the air and laid down on something soft. He fought to open his eyes, but when he did, he was met with a blinding light.

“Oops, sorry, Malachi,” Doc said, flicking the penlight away.

He felt the air moving around him and it took his mind a minute to figure out that they were at Doc’s and he was on a hospital bed being wheeled into the clinic. His vision kept blinking in and out, and he really wanted to just go back to being unconscious, even though he was mildly embarrassed that he’d passed out.

“What do you need, Doctor?” Nila asked as the bed stopped moving and the scent of strong cleanser filled his nose. Her tone was brusque and businesslike, but he could hear a thread of worry.

“You’ve had training?” Doc asked.

“I’m a nursing assistant.”

Doc hummed in surprise. “Let’s find out. Malachi? Malachi? Open your eyes, son.”

Malachi forced his eyes to open, not sure when they’d even closed again, and blinked to clear the blur.

“Do you want to shift or do you want me to heal you?”

He felt Nila’s hand squeeze his arm, and he knew he wanted to be healed as soon as possible. He needed to get Nila, pick up Jack, and take them both home and keep them safe.

“Heal.”

“Right, this is not going to be fun for you,” Doc said.

“Wait, what?” Nila asked.

Malachi’s vision cleared enough for him to see her perfectly. “Faster.”

“Shouldn’t you shift? I thought...”

Her voice trailed off as Doc came to the bedside and handed Nila a small vial of clear liquid. “Put this on his wounds. It’s a healing potion that will speed up his natural abilities. He’ll be able to walk out of here in an hour.” Doc glanced at him and said, “It won’t be a fun hour, though.”

Malachi didn’t care. Shifting meant he couldn’t talk to Nila for several hours, and the stress of shifting while wounded would make him tired and he’d probably pass out. He was already pissed off that he’d passed out in the SUV on the way to Doc’s; he didn’t want to do it again. The healing potion would keep him awake, and he’d be better able to protect her and take care of her.

Nila uncorked the bottle and sniffed at the contents. “It smells a bit like eucalyptus.”

Malachi ground his teeth together for a minute as his vision blurred out from the pain. When he could talk without cursing, he said, “Sweetheart, please.”

Nila glanced at Acksel, who was standing at the end of the bed, and then looked at Malachi with resignation in her pretty brown eyes. She insisted on washing her hands first, which she did quickly, and then she began to apply the potion to his wounds. While she worked on his visible wounds, Doc made a poultice and packed it on his side, where he had at least one broken rib, wrapping the thick, antiseptic mush in cotton bandages and tying it tightly to his chest. Immediately he felt the poultice begin to work, seeping into his skin like it was laced with a million red-hot ants with razors for teeth. Nila said nothing as she worked, and Malachi kept his teeth clenched together so he didn’t scare her with the curse words he wanted to shout. Once, when he’d first shifted as a teenager, he’d been tumbling around with some of the other males and fallen into a bonfire. He’d rolled out of it quickly, but had singed his back leg and burned part of his skin. It had been painful as he’d waited for his body to heal him. This, though, was far worse. Between the potion that Nila was methodically applying to his cuts and bruises and the wrap

around his chest, he felt like he was being cut apart slowly and stitched back together by sadistic doctors.

He blinked and Nila was pressing a cool cloth to his forehead. Had he passed out? Again? She touched his mouth with the cloth and it appeared red-tinged with blood. Her cheeks were wet with tears, her mouth puckered into a frown.

His voice cracked when he whispered, “You okay?”

She laughed, but it was high and forced. “Did you just ask me that? I wasn’t the one who went toe to toe with a psycho and then asked my girlfriend to torture me with some weird liquid.”

“Mate,” he said hoarsely.

“What?”

He inhaled slowly and found that he could breathe easier. The poultice was doing its job, and the feeling of being eaten alive was slowly easing.

“You’re my mate, not my girlfriend.”

She rolled her eyes and smacked his shoulder with the wet cloth. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Thanks, baby.”

She laughed for real this time, and then the tears slipped down her cheeks as she started to cry. Even though his wounds weren’t entirely healed yet, he pulled her onto the hospital bed and cradled her as close as he could. She didn’t say what was bothering her, but he could guess it was a culmination of all the events of the last few days, compounded with her happiness at being free.

Eventually she stopped crying and tilted her face up to him, her eyes shining brightly and her cheeks flushed. She lifted herself from him slowly, her eyes darkening. He could hear her heart beating fast. Her gaze drifted to his mouth, and she made a soft, almost growling sound before she kissed him. Possessiveness stole through him with the taste of her and the feel of her over him, and he rolled her underneath him and

snarled at the small bite of pain in his side as he still wasn't entirely healed.

Not that he cared. The pain was forgotten as he kissed her again and slid his hand under her top. Her skin was silky and warm, and he inched his way up her side until he felt the satin of her bra.

"For fuck's sake, Malachi, you're still healing," Doc grumbled from the doorway.

Malachi growled as he lifted from Nila's tempting mouth. "Go. Away."

"No. No one has sex in my house but me, and especially not in one of the patient rooms."

Nila grinned at him. "Later," she mouthed.

"No, not later. You're sleeping at my house tonight and nobody is having sex there, either." Acksel said.

Malachi grinned as Nila whispered, "How did he hear that?"

"I guessed," Acksel said with a snort.

Doc said, "If you're done molesting each other, I'd like to check out the poultice and get you two the heck out of here."

Malachi rolled onto his back. Nila slipped from the bed but stayed by his side, holding his hand tightly as Doc removed the poultice. It had been a yellowish-green color to start with, but now it was nearly entirely black. Doc said it was what happened as it healed. The herbs and minerals it was made from were bespelled with magic from his brother-in-law, Noah, who was a natural healer.

"That potion was a real potion, wasn't it?" Nila asked.

"Yes. Our people don't normally need a lot of medical attention, but there are times when having some magical healing items are beneficial." Doc gave her a look as if he were sizing her up. "Are you interested in a job?"

"Excuse me?" Nila asked, her mouth falling open in surprise.

“I could use an assistant. The female who lives next door to me could watch your son while you’re here. You wouldn’t have to work every day, only when I have appointments with pregnant females or any emergencies that crop up during the daytime, although I have to admit that my filing system could use some serious updating, too. I’d pay you fairly, but you’d have more time with your son, if you’d be interested.”

Malachi couldn’t believe that Doc was offering Nila a job, but he liked the idea.

She was quiet for a moment, and then she said, “Can I think about it?”

“Of course.”

Doc cleaned the residue of the poultice off Malachi’s skin and checked the area with a portable ultrasound machine. Doc talked to Nila about the healing poultice and potion and Malachi watched her as they spoke. She seemed fascinated with what she called the “holistic” aspects of the magical concoctions, and Doc offered to bring Noah to the clinic someday to meet her so she could talk to him. Malachi didn’t know Noah very well. As a supernaturally gifted human, he wasn’t part of the pack and didn’t live in Wilde Creek, but he was Doc’s brother-in-law, and that meant he was family.

“As long as Malachi’s with me,” Nila said, at the offer to meet with Noah.

Doc chuckled in a knowing way. “She’s got your number already.”

Malachi smiled and shrugged. He didn’t mind that she could guess he would want to be there when she met with another unmated male. After a few more minutes, Doc declared him fit to leave.

“Next time you go to a fight, try not to let the other guy get any hits in,” Doc said, his face alight with amusement.

“I’ll remember that. Thanks, Doc.”

Nila thanked him, too, and promised to be in touch soon to chat. Malachi put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close as they walked out of the warm home that doubled as a

clinic for the pack members and out to the waiting SUV. Acksel turned from the front passenger seat and said, “How are you feeling?”

“Good.”

“You could still shift when we get back to the house. I’ll go for a run with you if you want.”

“Thanks, but I just want to check on Jack and get Nila to bed. It’s been a long day.”

Nila curled against him, tucking her feet under her as Sam pulled the SUV away from the curb.

“You okay, sweetheart?” he whispered.

She snuggled a little closer and sighed. “I’m just glad you won.”

“Me, too.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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The next morning, Nila, Jack, and Malachi ate breakfast with Brynn and Acksel. She still couldn't believe that she was done with Damien. She wasn't really sure she believed he would comply with the rules of the fight and turn over the divorce papers on Friday. But even though his dad was a jerk, he was still alpha, and he'd made a promise to Acksel that the papers would be signed.

"What are you thinking about so seriously?" Malachi asked as he dredged a corner of toast though runny eggs and took a bite.

"I'm wondering what would happen if he doesn't send the papers on Friday."

"He will," Acksel said, leaning back in his chair.

He seemed so confident that Nila didn't want to question him in case it made him mad.

Brynn said, "Worry about Friday on Friday, okay? Let's talk about how adorable your son is."

Nila looked at Jack as he sat in a highchair that Brynn and Acksel had bought for their own baby. Jack was going to town on banana slices and strawberry yogurt.

"I hope he was good for you last night," she said as she tucked a lock of hair behind his ear.

"He was a dream. There was one thing, though."

"What?"



“He kept asking for carrots, but when I gave him some, he wouldn’t eat them.”

Malachi’s face flushed and Nila tried to keep from laughing, but she couldn’t help it. Her amusement bubbled up inside her and spilled out her mouth. It felt good to laugh. She felt like she hadn’t done much laughing in the last few years.

“I’m missing something,” Acksel said.

“Yeah, well, it’s private,” Malachi groused.

Nila stifled another wave of laughter and helped Jack grip the plastic kid-size spoon better so he could shovel the yogurt into his mouth faster. “He loves his carrot.”

Malachi kissed her cheek. “Carrot loves him, too.”

After breakfast, Malachi drove them home, and when she put Jack down for his nap, she insisted on checking over Malachi’s wounds once more.

He humored her as she tugged the shirt over his head and tossed it to the bedroom floor. “You already did this last night and again this morning,” he pointed out. He didn’t stop her, though, as she gently poked and prodded where she’d seen so much damage the night before. Although Malachi was a better fighter, Damien had used his claws on him, and he’d also landed several good punches and kicks.

“You saw the ultrasound, sweetheart, you know I’m okay, inside and out.”

She ran her fingertips over the smooth skin of his side. She could still see the deep gouges and smell the blood that had flowed freely from them. Her clothes had been covered in his blood by the time they got to Doc’s, but she hadn’t cared. She really hadn’t even noticed until Sam brought in clothes for them to change into, which he’d sent one of the omegas to their home to gather. Then she’d seen the evidence of what he’d endured.

After they’d arrived at Acksel’s home, she’d checked on Jack and found him asleep in the playpen in the spare bedroom. Then she pushed Malachi into an attached bathroom and insisted on helping him clean up. They’d stayed in the

shower until every bit of blood was washed from their skin and then fallen asleep together while Jack slept soundly next to the bed.

“I can still see it,” she whispered.

He picked up her hands and kissed her palms. “I’m okay. You’re not going to work today, and neither am I. Sam is handling my shift at the clinic with Brynn, so it’s just the three of us.”

“It’s technically just the two of us right now,” she said, stepping close and looking up at him.

“So it is, love.” He smiled, cupping her face and lowering his head to kiss her. She let herself go into his warmth, letting him lead where they’d go in this precious time alone. He’d given himself for her last night. He could have died, or been seriously injured, but he was standing in front of her without a mark on him, and she would be forever grateful for her mate and protector.

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Friday came fast, and Nila felt like there was a gun pointed at her head all morning. She wasn’t sure that Damien would sign the papers or that Isaiah would send them. If that didn’t happen, she didn’t know what Acksel would do, but Malachi had hinted that it wouldn’t be good. Alphas apparently took their promises very seriously.

Every time she was called to the front to get a patient, she expected to find a furious Damien there, ready to attack. She knew she was being silly, but old fears died hard.

At lunchtime, Malachi pulled her into the breakroom and held her. “It’ll be okay.”

“How can you be sure? The day is half over and we haven’t heard anything one way or the other.”

“Because Isaiah might be an asshole, but he’s still an alpha and their word is important to them. Isaiah is old-school and

follows the laws. He swore that the papers would be delivered, and I trust that they will be.”

“What happens if they aren’t?”

He shrugged slightly, a non-committal movement, but she could guess what might happen. A war between the packs. More blood. More pain.

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. Worrying doesn’t solve problems.”

“That’s very philosophical.”

He snorted good-naturedly. They ate together and talked about everything except whether the packs would end up going to war because Damien was an asshole. When they were finished eating, he walked her to the reception desk and tugged her around to sit with him behind Brynn for the last few minutes of her lunch break. Brynn spun in her chair and said, “I’m hungry for ice cream.”

Malachi’s brow rose. “I’m a guard not an errand boy.”

Brynn laughed. “I wasn’t asking you to go get some, I was just making a statement. Since Nila is up here, do you mind if I run back to the breakroom? I think I saw a tub of ice cream in the freezer a few days ago.”

Nila opened her mouth to tell Brynn it was fine, when Malachi tensed suddenly, rising slowly from his seat behind the reception desk. In a heartbeat, she and Brynn were behind him as a man walked into the clinic with a manila envelope. The man paused at the open door and glanced around the waiting room. Two mothers were sitting with their sick kids, but they didn’t pay him any attention.

He strode to the reception desk.

“I’m to give these papers to the human,” he said.

Nila peeked around Malachi’s body and said, “I’m the human.”

Malachi snarled and the man's eyes widened. Nila stepped to Malachi's side and reached for the papers. "Check them," Malachi said. His voice was deeper than usual, growly and angry.

She opened the envelope and pulled out the stack of papers, quickly checking the sticky tags that marked where Damien was supposed to sign. She found his scrawled signature everywhere, even on the papers that waived his parental rights to Jack.

Tears pooled in her eyes as the realization that Jack was really hers and she was free for good from Damien dawned on her.

"He did it," she said thickly, rubbing at her cheeks to wipe away the tears. "I'm done, I'm really done with him."

Malachi sent the delivery man away and then hugged her. "How does it feel to be free?"

"Like I just won the lottery."

Brynn squealed in happiness and hugged Nila, and she embraced her friend. "Thank you for helping me," she said, sniffing.

"Oh, babe, of course! You can bring Jack to the house tonight and I'll watch him while you two go celebrate."

Malachi chuckled. "I think you're just trying to get Acksel used to having a kid around the house."

"Jack is very handy, and he's so adorable."

Nila pressed the signed papers to her chest and sighed in relief. "We can drop these off at my lawyer's office on the way home tonight."

"I'll have one of the omegas take them over," Malachi said, reaching for his phone. As he pulled it from his pocket it buzzed, and he glanced at the screen with a frown, stepping away from the desk and few paces down the hallway.

"Wonder what that was about?" Brynn asked as she sat behind the desk.

Nila shrugged, but something about the way that Malachi suddenly tensed made worry streak through her.

Malachi cursed and disappeared into the breakroom so fast he was just a blur. When he raced back to the reception desk, he had her purse and coat. “Someone set a fire at the daycare.”

“What?” she shrieked, the papers falling to the ground as panic clawed at her.

Malachi held her coat for her, and it took her a second to realize he wanted her to put it on. “The guards went in to help get the kids out, and they realized that Jack was gone. Someone took him while the teachers and kids were panicking.”

Her legs turned to jelly and it was only Malachi’s strong grip that kept her from hitting the tile floor. He gave her a little shake. “Sweetheart, stay with me. We need to go to Acksel’s house and figure out how to get Jack back.”

She swallowed back the fear that lodged in her throat and put her coat on, following Malachi out of the clinic and into the bitter cold.

She tried not to think about how scared Jack must be. Had Damien grabbed him, or sent some of his buddies? Had they gotten his jacket and hat? Was he hungry or hurt or scared? Questions wheeled through her mind as Malachi tore out of the parking lot, the engine of his SUV roaring like a lion.

“We’ll get him back safely, Nila, I swear on my life.”

She wanted to trust him, but she was too terrified to do anything but stare out the windshield and pray that her son was okay.

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Acksel’s house was bustling with activity. Nila sat on the couch while Malachi, Acksel, and a large group of men talked about Jack and her crazy ex. She was trying to be strong for her son, but she was scared senseless. She had no idea what

Damien would do to Jack. She glanced at the clock. An hour had passed already.

She reached for a cup of hot tea that Jeremiah had made for her. He and a few other men were standing at the back of the room, not participating in the discussion on how to get her son back, and she glanced over her shoulder and looked at them.

Jeremiah stepped forward quickly and knelt behind her. “Did you need anything else, Nila?” he whispered.

“No, I just... I’m trying to distract myself by not thinking about what’s going on with my son.”

He smiled sadly. “I’m sorry for what you’re going through. Malachi will get him back.”

He patted her shoulder and moved to the back of the room again. She realized she was wondering about him and the other men back there because she didn’t want to think too hard about what was going on with Jack right now. She was about one dark thought away from losing it. Damien didn’t have a paternal bone in his body. She’d only left Jack with him once when he was a baby. She’d needed to go to the doctor and Damien had said he’d watch him, but when she’d come back a few hours later, Damien was gone and Jack was screaming in his crib. Damien said later that his dad had called a meeting and he wasn’t about to take a half-breed with him, so he’d left him, and then he blamed her for being a bad mother and not being there when her son needed her. She’d never made that mistake again, never trusted Damien alone with him.

Her phone danced on the coffee table as it vibrated, and she reached for it automatically. Everyone went quiet in the room as she checked out the screen and saw that it read ‘unknown.’ Swallowing hard, she answered.

The first thing she heard was Jack crying. Her heart clenched and her stomach dropped into her feet. Damien said, “I don’t have to tell you how disappointed I am in you, bitch. I told you that you would never be free from me. I own you, no matter what marks are on your neck.”

“Please don’t hurt Jack.”

He chuckled mirthlessly. “Half-breeds are of little value to the pack, and I’m too busy to keep an eye on him.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out as fear choked her. She managed to whisper, “Damien, please.”

“You’ll come crawling back to me by sunset, or your little half-breed takes a long walk in the dark woods. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes,” she squeaked.

“I’ll meet you at the place where you first spread your legs. Come alone, or you’ll never see him alive again.”

The call ended and she sat frozen, the phone pressed to her ear, her eyes filling with tears.

Malachi pulled the phone away, set it on the coffee table and sat down next to her, pulling her close.

“Where does he want to meet?”

“The movie theater in Dorlan. It’s abandoned now, it closed two years ago.” She didn’t want to think about how humiliating it was that Damien wanted to meet there.

She closed her eyes, leaning her head against Malachi’s strong shoulder. If this was the last time that she was going to be with him, she wanted to remember every detail. Inhaling slowly, she let the natural spicy scent of him fill her. The way he smelled to her—at the same time comforting and exciting—was something she never wanted to forget.

She opened her eyes and looked at him, drinking in his features. He was so gorgeous. Blue eyes like a summer sky, a straight nose, strong jaw, and the stubble that resided there now made her want to rub against him like a cat.

Malachi turned his head and narrowed his eyes. “Why are you staring at me like you’re never going to see me again?”

Leaning back slightly, she said, “I know you heard the conversation I had with Damien with your super-sharp

hearing. You know what he asked for, what I have to do to keep Jack safe.”

His eyes flashed to the amber of his wolf and his lip curled as a growl rumbled in his chest. “I heard it.”

“Then you know I have to go alone.”

The low growl turned to a full on snarl. “No.”

“Malachi,” she started, but he cut her off.

“We’ll be there, Nila. There’s no way in hell I’m going to allow you to go there like a lamb to the slaughter. He could still hurt Jack, just to spite you. I’ll be there, and so will the pack.”

Acksel, arms folded across his chest and a defiant look in his eyes, said, “You’re Malachi’s mate and that makes you, and Jack, members of my pack. No one threatens my pack and gets away with it.”

She looked at the males behind him. Dade, Acksel’s father; Ren, the beta; Sam the leader of the protectors; and several of the protectors who had been watching over her and Jack. They all wore identical looks of fury and resolve. Acksel was speaking for them, but it was clear they felt the same way that he did. She was part of their world now, and no one messed with a mate, even if she was human.

The support was overwhelming, and she didn’t think she’d ever be able to thank them enough, even if all they were doing right now was standing with her.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank us, Nila. Jack got taken because the protectors were deceived. It’s not going to happen again,” Sam said.

“Take a couple minutes to calm down, but we need to get on the road,” Acksel said, making a gesture that seemed to snap the wolves into action. Within a few seconds, the room was empty except for her and Malachi.

“What’s going to happen?”



“The only thing I know for sure is that your son is going to be in your arms at the end of the night. Nothing else matters except for getting him home.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, and when he pulled her into his lap, she snuggled as close as she could. His strong arms surrounded her, and she tucked her head under his chin and let the tears she'd been holding back fall. She could afford to be weak right now, but only for a minute. Jack needed her to be strong, and with Malachi by her side, she could do that. Her son's life depended on it.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Malachi didn't like anything about the situation they were walking into. Or, rather, the situation that Nila was walking into. They'd been very careful to conceal themselves before they entered Dorlan, so that it would appear as if Nila was truly alone, even though she was anything but. Malachi's pack members were spread inconspicuously throughout the area around the abandoned movie theater.

At one time, Malachi imagined it was a decent place to go, but now it showed signs of neglect. The marquee was empty, the windows and doors boarded up, and trash littered the brick entrance. Nila stood underneath the marquee, the wind whipping her hair around her face and blowing snow in every direction. From where he, Acksel, and Ren watched her from behind a dumpster in an alley across the street, he could see that she was shivering. It was cold as hell, but she was probably scared out of her mind, too.

Acksel looked up and then rolled his neck. "It's almost sunset."

"She's where he said to meet her," Ren said. "They couldn't have seen any of us, we were very careful."

Malachi knew that Nila would never forgive herself if something happened to Jack. She had wanted to come alone and trade herself for Jack's safety, but Malachi knew that nothing good would come from her running off to Dorlan by herself.

Her head whipped to the side and her body tensed up. Malachi crept forward, worry streaking through him. His wolf wanted to be right there with her, not using her as bait.

A male strode toward her, stopping a few feet away. He knew it wasn't Damien, and alarm raced through him. He straightened from his crouch and sprinted toward her as a large, dark SUV squealed its tires down the street and paused only long enough for the male to grab Nila and toss her into the vehicle. Malachi just missed grabbing hold of the bumper as it sped away.

He snarled in rage. Ren grabbed Malachi's arm and jerked him back to the alley where their SUV was waiting. "Let's go!"

Acksel was behind the wheel; Malachi climbed into the backseat. The engine roared as Acksel raced from the alley, turning sharply and following the SUV. Malachi's phone buzzed, and he looked at the screen. Nila's name came across it.

"Sweetheart?"

A male snorted. "Sorry, lover boy, but I ain't your sweetheart. Back off or we'll throw the human out of the SUV."

"Don't hurt her." He ground the words out between clenched teeth.

"If I have to tell you to back off again, she's going to pay with her life."

The call ended and Malachi quickly pressed a button on his phone to trace the call. His heart pounded in his ears as he told Acksel to stop driving and watched the program as it loaded her location.

The dot burned steady on a map for a few seconds and then blinked out, and he knew that they'd destroyed her phone.

"She's headed toward the park," Malachi said.

"Let's go get your mate," Acksel said, his voice a dark growl.

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After Tanner, one of Damien's cronies, had approached Nila, she knew something was up and she wasn't going to see Jack or Damien in front of the old movie theater. Maybe Damien sent her there to humiliate her, forcing her to re-live one of her least favorite moments, when they'd had sex for the first time in the back row of one of the deserted screening rooms, and the manager had caught them. Damien had been furious at the manager for the interruption, and while Nila had tried hurriedly to right her clothes, Damien had given the human manager a few good punches and sent him scurrying away. She'd been impressed that Damien had defended her like that, but now she saw it for what it was—he'd just been pissed that he'd been interrupted by a human.

Tanner had thrown her into the back seat of the SUV and pushed her face into the seat as his bulky body pressed against hers. Panic had clawed at her as she fought to breathe, and then he'd added to the fear that rode hard through her by tugging on her clothes. She'd kicked and struggled, her lungs burning and lights sparking before her eyes as he dug her cell phone from her pocket and then eased up from her. While she caught her breath, he tied her hands behind her back, then lifted her up and shoved her over the second row of seats into the storage area. Without use of her hands, she'd been unable to stop herself from landing hard, her head cracking against the floor.

As her head spun and her ears rang, she heard Tanner talking to someone and telling them to back off. Malachi! Tanner's warning to Malachi made her blood turn to ice. How could he find her if he couldn't follow her?

Something crunched loudly and a window was rolled down, letting in a blast of freezing air. She didn't have to see it to know that Tanner had destroyed her phone. The SUV stopped suddenly, and Nila groaned as she rolled toward the back of the SUV, unable to stop herself. She kicked both legs

out, barely preventing herself from being flattened against the back door.

She thought the back door would open, but instead someone fisted her hair tightly and began to pull her over the seat. She screamed in pain as Tanner used her hair to drag her into the second seat. Tanner hooked an arm under her and jerked her out of the truck, throwing her to the ground. She rolled with a sob as her body impacted hard, the jolt making her bones rattle.

Gasping for breath, she heard Jack cry, and everything inside her froze.

“Get up, bitch,” Damien said. She looked up and found him standing in the center of the park just outside of Dorlan, the place where his pack gathered for meetings. Scrambling to her knees, she struggled with the rope tying her wrists, but it was tied too tightly. Already her fingers were numb.

With some effort, she managed to get to her feet. She glanced around, looking for Jack, but didn’t see him.

“Where is my son? I showed up where you asked me to.”

Damien moved so fast she couldn’t track him. He was suddenly in her face, gripping her throat and digging his fingers into her neck. He lifted her off the ground and she kicked out, never touching him.

“You never could follow directions. I said you had to come alone. Did you really think I wouldn’t know those human-loving wolves would come along and try to screw things up? You’re mine, and no one is going to take you from me.”

She opened her mouth, but he tightened his grip and she wheezed but couldn’t form any words. He lowered her to the ground and eased his grip, but his hand remained wrapped around her throat, as if he wasn’t done reminding her that he could kill her.

He snapped the fingers of his free hand. The wolves who were standing around watching parted and a young woman came forward, carrying Jack on her hip. Nila jerked, trying to

push past Damien to get to Jack, and his hand tightened on her throat again.

“Now, now, bitch, don’t think I’m going to give you back the kid so quickly. Maura is going to take care of Jack while you make up for your sins on your knees.”

Jack’s face was wet with tears, and he wasn’t wearing a coat. She whimpered as Damien increased his hold on her throat and then he relaxed it again. Her eyes blurred with tears as she watched Jack reach for her, “Mama,” he pleaded.

Gasping in a breath, she said, “It’s okay, baby.”

Damien gazed at her with cold eyes. Had he ever really cared about her? Why had he stayed with her for so long when all she could see now was his hatred?

“Is it, Nila? Is it really going to be okay?” he said, a sneer twisting his mouth into something gruesome.

“Please don’t hurt him, Damien. I’ll do whatever you want,” she said, sniffing and wishing desperately that she could wipe her eyes. It was so cold that the tears were freezing on her cheeks.

“You’ll do whatever I want anyway, bitch. You’re not in control here, I am.” Damien motioned to Maura and she turned to carry Jack away, when Jack suddenly shouted, “Carrot!”

Nila gasped in surprise as something furry flew over her head and knocked Damien down. Hands grasped her wrists, and she screamed but then she realized she was free.

She turned and found Malachi sheathing a knife. “Get Jack and get in the SUV. Go straight to Acksel’s house.”

“Malachi!” She shouted his name as he pushed her away from Damien, who was struggling with the wolf, obviously someone from Malachi’s pack.

“Go, Nila. Now!” Malachi turned and kicked out as a male from Damien’s pack rushed him.

She looked over her shoulder to see Maura hurrying away with Jack.

“Give me back my son, you bitch!” She screamed the words, tearing after the woman, determined to get Jack back.

She closed the distance to Maura and lunged, grabbing Jack’s outstretched hand and shoving the woman away. Jack cried out in pain as Maura kept hold of his ankle, trying to pull him out of Nila’s grip.

Instead of pulling harder and hurting her son, she let go and kicked out, her foot landing against Maura’s knee. Maura howled and let go of Jack, and Nila snatched him up before he hit the ground.

Nila sprinted around the fighting wolves, not wanting to give Maura a chance to catch up to her. The SUV that they’d come in was parked with others from Malachi’s pack, and Nila opened the driver’s door and set a squirming, crying Jack on the passenger seat and started to climb in.

“Not so fast,” Tanner growled, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her out of the SUV.

“NO!” She grabbed the console in between the seats and kicked with all her might. Tanner punched her in the side and she grunted in pain, but didn’t let go of her grip on the console.

Jack cried in fear and reached for her. Tanner grabbed her waist and gave a mighty tug that made her feel like he was going to pull her in half. One of his hands landed on top of hers, and claws emerged through his fingertips. He curled his hand and she knew he was going to shred her skin. If she let go, then Jack was defenseless.

She jerked her head back and connected with Tanner’s face, nearly passing out from the pain.

“Ah, bitch,” he snarled and dug his claws into her hand.

She opened her mouth to scream, but the pain was so great that nothing came out.

A soft growl sounded so close she thought it was Tanner shifting into his wolf form, ready to tear her to pieces, but as she blinked away the fog from nearly braining herself on Tanner’s hard head, she saw that Jack was the one growling.

He perched on his legs, tiny needle-like claws springing from his fingers and thick fangs erupting from his gums. He gave a warning growl and then he sank his fangs into the top of Tanner's hand.

Nila heard his bones break and Tanner screeched in agony. The thick, metallic scent of blood filled the air. Jack growled and snarled, shaking Tanner's hand like a dog shaking a bone. When Tanner lifted off her, she flipped to her back, bunched her legs up, and kicked hard, sending him flying.

She watched Tanner roll on the ground and clutch his hand, which seemed to be missing at least one finger.

Oh man, had Jack eaten his finger?

She'd deal with the ramifications of her son partially shifting and saving their lives later. Shaking herself back to reality, she grabbed the door and slammed it shut, turning the key in the ignition and pressing the door lock. Not that it would stop anyone from getting into the SUV because they could just shatter the windows, but at least it would slow them down.

She looked toward the park where she could hear the fighting still going on. She didn't want to leave Malachi, but knew he would be pissed if she waited for him.

Jack crawled into her lap, softly sobbing and babbling. She put the car in gear and drew him close with one arm, gripping the steering wheel with her free hand.

"It's okay now, baby," she crooned, even though she wasn't sure that was true. Whatever happened tonight, she didn't think they'd ever be safe, no matter how many security systems they had.

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Malachi watched Nila drive away. He'd been distracted with Damien, and looked over to see one of Damien's friends falling away from the SUV, clutching his bloody hand.



Damien ducked a punch and Malachi threw another one, which connected with his cheek. Damien spit blood onto the ground and laughed. "I'll get her eventually. You can't watch her every second."

Malachi growled and launched himself at the male, but another male barreled into him and pushed him away. A fist flew at Malachi and he barely dodged it, shoving the male off and leaping to his feet in time to see Damien shift into his wolf form and race out of the park.

"Shit! He's going after Nila!" he yelled to Acksel, who was facing off against another wolf.

"Go with Ren, I've got this!" Acksel yelled back.

Malachi and Ren raced to the other SUV, and they followed the road out of the park.

"Where would she go?" Ren asked.

"I told her to go to Acksel's."

Ren nodded. Malachi used the corner of his shirt to wipe the blood off his face. He was going to be in a hell of a lot of pain later, but right now all he could think about was keeping Nila safe.

They sailed down a dark road, and in the distance he saw the SUV's taillights. Suddenly, the SUV jerked to the right and then sharply to the left as the brakes squealed. It spun around until it was facing them and didn't move.

Ren stopped the SUV in front of the one Nila was driving and they both got out. Malachi scented the air and smelled fresh blood. Ren went around the other side of the vehicle as Malachi rapped on the driver's side window.

Nila looked especially pale. Even in the glow from the dashboard he thought she looked like she was going to pass out. Jack was in her lap, and he turned his head and met Malachi's eyes and smiled.

"Carrot," he said, the word muffled through the closed window. Malachi's eyes widened as he caught a glimpse of fangs in Jack's mouth.

What the hell?

“Nila?” Malachi said, but she didn’t move, her hand gripping the steering wheel and her gaze straight forward.

“Mal? Come back here for a second,” Ren called.

Malachi told Jack he’d be right back and walked around to the back of the truck, stopping in surprise as he saw the body of a wolf. He recognized the coloring as belonging to Damien. Ren knelt next to the wolf and looked up at Malachi.

“He’s dead.”

“What the hell happened?”

Ren shrugged. “I’m guessing that he ran out into the road to try to stop her. Maybe he thought she’d crash instead of hitting and killing him.”

Malachi looked at the SUV. Did Nila know she’d killed Damien?

“Damn it,” he spoke softly. He didn’t want Nila to suffer with the knowledge that she’d killed someone, even if it was her psycho ex.

Ren stood slowly and said, “Get your mate and son out of the SUV and take the other one home. I’ll wait for Acksel here.”

“This is my mess, Ren.”

“It’s pack business. When are you going to learn that?”

“I’m pretty hardheaded,” Malachi said.

“Yeah, well, I know that, but I still like your sorry ass.” Ren pulled his phone from his pocket and Malachi went to the driver’s door. Jack had his face pressed to the glass, and he squeaked in excitement when Malachi stopped in front of him. Banging his little palm against the window, he said, “Carrot!”

“Yeah, buddy. Nila. Nila!” He called her name and jerked on the handle a few times, hoping that Jack had just suddenly figured out how to unlock the doors.

“Nila!” He shouted her name sternly and she seemed to react to that, at least a little. He wondered if she was in shock. “Open the door now, Nila. Jack needs help.”

Her whole body jerked and she blinked several times, looking around before locking eyes with Malachi. He knew then that she did know what she’d done. “Don’t break down on me now, sweetheart,” he said loudly. “Open the door and let me take you and Jack out of here.”

Her hand moved so slowly he wasn’t sure it would ever reach the button to unlock the door. The second the door clicked, Malachi wrenched it open and lifted Jack from her lap. He clung to Malachi like a monkey, repeating carrot and burying his face in Malachi’s neck. Malachi reached for Nila and helped her out. She was stiff as a board, but followed him dutifully to the other SUV. He cursed not thinking of putting in a car seat before they left, but he’d been so focused on getting Jack back that he hadn’t gotten the car seat out of his own SUV.

Malachi helped Nila buckle in and put Jack in her lap, and she held him tightly. Malachi grabbed a jacket from the backseat and laid it over Jack to warm him up, turning the heater on high. When he started the engine, Jack laid his cold little hand on Malachi’s bicep and whispered, “Dada.”

“We’ll be home soon, son,” Malachi said, glancing at Nila and seeing her eyes fill with tears. “Did you hear me, sweetheart? Home.”

“I heard you, Mal. We both did.”

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Nila wasn’t watching the scenery blur by as Malachi drove them home; she just looked at Jack. She desperately wanted to check him over, but the dim lighting from the dashboard wasn’t enough for her to see anything.

She was trying not to think of what had happened, how things had gone from bad to worse in a heartbeat. What would happen to her now that Damien was dead and she was the one

who had killed him? It probably didn't matter to Isaiah that Damien had run out of the woods so fast she hadn't seen him until he was standing in front of her vehicle. Even though she jerked the steering wheel, she'd still hit him.

The sickening sound of the body thumping under the tire. The way the SUV bobbed a bit as she jerked the wheel the other direction and then spun entirely, until all she could see was another set of bright headlights heading her way.

"Am I," her voice caught in her throat and she coughed to clear it. "Is he going to come after me because D-Damien's dead?" She didn't want to cry. She felt like she'd been crying for months because of Damien.

Malachi slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry about Isaiah, sweetheart. What happened was an accident, and you can't be held accountable for that. Regardless, I'm here to keep you and Jack safe."

She mulled over his words as they drove back to Wilde Creek. Since he'd told her he wanted her to drive directly to Acksel's house, she wasn't surprised when he took her there. They must have been expecting them, because a handful of males were standing on the sidewalk.

Malachi got out, came around to her side and opened the door. As he helped her and Jack out of the vehicle, he said over his shoulder, "Has Sam apprised you of what's going on?"

A male she didn't recognize said, "Yes, we're on it. Patrols have been stepped up around town."

"Good. Thanks, Robert. I'm going to get my mate inside; it's been a hell of a night."

Another male said, "Let us know if you need anything. Adam and Jeremiah are inside to help."

Malachi held her against him as they walked up the now-familiar sidewalk leading to Acksel and Brynn's home. Jack was awake but silent; her normally talkative son was either too traumatized or too tired to talk. She hugged him a little closer.

Jeremiah opened the door and Malachi ushered her in, following close behind as the door was shut and locked.

Brynn and Mia stood a few steps away from them, both looking concerned, and it took only a second for Malachi to step away and the girls to surround her and Jack.

“We’re so glad you’re okay,” Mia said, sniffing.

“Are you hurt? Doc is here,” Brynn said.

She felt Malachi’s hand on her back and he said, “Yes, she needs to see Doc and so does Jack.”

Doc appeared out of the kitchen and joined them as Brynn and Mia moved out of the way but still stayed close. He took one look at Nila and Jack and said, “Let’s go in the spare bedroom and see what we’re dealing with.”

Malachi led her to the bedroom they’d stayed in before, and she squinted at the brightness of the overhead light when Doc flipped the switch. Malachi grabbed a towel from the bathroom and laid it on the bed. She laid Jack down on it, stripping him so Doc could look him over. For the first time since he’d been taken, she got a good look at her son. His fingers were still claw-tipped, and when he opened his mouth and yawned, she could see his fangs.

“I thought I was imagining things,” she said as she rubbed Jack’s shoulder and smiled down at him.

Malachi said, “I’ve never seen anything like it. Doc?”

Doc didn’t answer for several minutes as he checked Jack over, testing his limbs and checking him for injuries. After listening to his heart, Doc laid the stethoscope over his neck and gripped the ends, exhaling deeply.

“Physically, he’s fine. There’s some minor bruising on his arms and chest, probably from being grabbed or held while he struggled. He wasn’t fed, though; I can hear his stomach grumbling.”

Nila lifted him from the bed and he snuggled into her, resting his head on her shoulder. “Mama,” he cooed, fisting her hair.

“Hey little man,” she said, relief twining through her.

“And the claws and fangs?” Malachi asked.

Doc sat down on the edge of the bed and rubbed his temple. “I have to tell you that I’m stumped. Wolf shifters, even full-blooded ones, don’t shift until their teens. Partially shifting is very unusual for wolves, even close to the time they’re ready to shift. Occasionally in a time of high stress, a teenager might partially shift, but not a baby.”

She lifted one of Jack’s hands and looked at the dark claws. They looked like tiny, curved needles.

“Is he stuck like this?” she asked.

“What happened before he partially shifted?”

Nila looked at Malachi and he moved closer, lending her his strength. She told them what happened, starting with getting Jack away from Maura, Tanner’s attack, and Jack’s sudden shifting.

“I think he took off one of Tanner’s fingers, but I...I don’t want to think he actually ate it.”

Doc’s nose wrinkled in disgust. “That’s probably unlikely considering how small Jack is. You’d have noticed him chewing on a finger. It most likely dropped away during the struggle. I think what we have here is a case of high stress causing the partial shift. Jack was already traumatized from being taken and kept away from you for several hours. Then he sees you being hurt and someone trying to take you away. He might be a baby, but babies can be intuitive about danger, especially shifter children. He’s enough of a wolf that he was able to summon the ability to protect you.”

She repeated herself. “Is he stuck like this?”

Doc smiled gently. “I doubt it. After you get him cleaned up and he eats a good meal and gets a good night’s sleep, I expect he’ll wake up perfectly normal.”

“Is this something we’re going to need to worry about in the future, like him getting worked up and partially shifting?” Malachi asked.

“I don’t know. I want to say no, because I think this was an extraordinary circumstance, but the truth is I’ve never known such a young child to grow claws and fangs. I would suggest being cautious in the future, and as he grows older to make sure you teach him how to handle himself in stressful situations.”

She lifted Jack into her arms and carried him into the bathroom. Malachi drew a bath while Nila tried not to look at herself in the mirror. She was certain she looked like she’d been to hell and back. As she knelt next to the tub and settled Jack into the water, she realized there was a bottle of baby soap on the edge of the tub and a washcloth decorated with yellow ducks was folded next to it.

“These are Jack’s,” she said as she dunked the washcloth in the water and opened the bottle.

“Adam took Mia to the house and she packed an overnight bag for the three of us.”

She fought the tears that stung her eyes at the sweet gesture. Malachi’s family and pack treated her and Jack like they were one of them. She soaped Jack’s skin, noticing that the bruises were fading quickly.

“He’ll shift when he’s older, won’t he? He’s more wolf than human,” she said as Jack grabbed a small cup from her hand and dumped the water over his head, babbling as it rinsed off the soap.

“Most likely,” Malachi answered.

When he was clean, she pulled the plug to drain the water and lifted him from the tub. Malachi wrapped a towel around him, patting his skin gently. Within a few minutes, he was dressed in footy pajamas and hugging his favorite stuffed wolf.

Malachi picked Jack up and turned away slightly when she reached for him. “It’s your turn, sweetheart.”

“Turn?”

“To get checked out. I know I appear to be calm, but seeing your injuries and the blood on your skin, knowing what

you went through without me—I need you to get fixed up and cleaned up. Now.”

She looked down at herself. Washing Jack had cleaned some of the blood from her hands, but Malachi’s reminder of her injuries suddenly made everything hurt.

“Ouch.” She looked at the gouges in the top of her hand.

Malachi snorted and said to Jack, “How about some dinner, big guy?”

“Carrot?”

“I’m right here, buddy.”

She smiled as he carried her son out of the bathroom and then looked at Doc, who was watching her with a serious expression. “I’m sure you’re anxious to get back to your son, so why don’t you grab a quick shower and then I’ll examine you.”

She nodded and he slipped out of the bathroom, shutting the door. She stripped and turned to face the mirror. Her eyes widened as she took in the injuries to her body. She was glad that Malachi wasn’t there to see her right now, he’d probably flip out. As it was, she felt like she was just hanging on by a thread.

One thing at a time, she reminded herself.

She gave herself a once-over. There were bruises around her waist from where Tanner had grabbed her. Her wrists were raw and red from the rope. She had light bruises up and down her legs and arms. The worst damage seemed to be her hand, where Tanner had curled his claws into her flesh.

Inhaling slowly and deeply, she let out the breath and met her own eyes in the mirror. She’d survived. No matter what scars she retained, they were badges of honor now. Jack was safe now because of her actions and Malachi and the pack members who had come to their aid.

She showered, using Jack’s soap because it was mild and wouldn’t irritate her wounds, and then she dried herself off



carefully, once more cataloging her injuries so she could tell Doc everything.

A large duffel was on the counter, and she found her clothes on top and dressed in a pair of soft lounge pants and a tank top. She slipped socks on her feet and grabbed a sweater to cover up with after Doc examined her.

After he finished examining her, he bandaged her hand and wrists and put his supplies away. He gave her a silver mesh ball that dangled from a thin chain with a hook on the end. She could smell herbs, and looked at it curiously.

“It’s a tea ball, an infuser. It’s filled with healing herbs that have been magically enhanced. Boil two cups of water and steep the herbs in it for three minutes, then remove it. Give Jack one quarter cup of the cooled tea and drink the rest yourself. For Jack it’s more of a calmative than for healing, but it will promote a restful sleep for you both and help your body’s natural healing ability to work even better.”

She didn’t have to ask Doc if it was safe for Jack, because she knew he’d never give anything to her or her son that would harm them. “Thank you, Doc.”

He smiled, and she walked out of the bedroom with him. She found Jack on Malachi’s lap in the kitchen. Malachi was feeding him cut-up chicken nuggets from a large plate that also contained cheese cubes, halved grapes, and carrot coins.

“Mama,” Jack said, grinning around a mouthful of chicken.

“Hi, baby.” She bent and kissed his forehead.

“What’s the diagnosis, Doc?” Malachi asked. He was smiling, but his words were serious.

“She should wear the bandages until tomorrow, and if they’re healed over, which they should be, then she can remove them. Ibuprofen for pain, and it wouldn’t hurt if someone let her rest tomorrow and kept an eye on Jack.”

Mia and Brynn both said, “I’ll do it.”

They laughed and agreed to watch him while she took it easy. Adam took the infuser from her, and Nila watched him go to the stove and turn a burner on under a teapot as he listened to Doc's instructions for the tea.

Adam was handsome—tall and muscular with dark hair and piercing blue eyes, the color of faded denim. As he turned from the stove to open a nearby cabinet, she noticed he had a scar on his neck that traveled up his jaw and curled over his cheek. She'd seen enough injuries as a nursing assistant to recognize a burn scar when she saw one, and her heart went out to him. He'd clearly been burned severely, and if he was scarred then it must mean that he was young when it happened and hadn't been able to shift to help heal himself. Although she could admit she didn't really know that much about wolves and their physiology.

"I'll check in tomorrow evening," Doc said, and Brynn walked him to the door, speaking quietly.

"Sit, sweetheart," Malachi said, pushing a nearby chair out with his foot.

The tea kettle whistled and as she looked at Malachi while he fed her son in his alpha's kitchen, and the only thing she could think of was that she'd finally found a place she could call home. It wasn't about the walls or the roof or the furnishings, it was about the people. She'd found a home with Malachi and his pack, and she didn't ever want to be anywhere else.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Malachi waited for Nila to fall asleep on the guest bed before he slipped away and shut the door. She and Jack had passed out after drinking Doc's special tea, and although she'd walked into the bedroom while he carried Jack, she hadn't stayed awake very long. Jack slept soundly in the playpen next to the bed, and Nila had curled up next to Malachi. She stayed awake long enough to bare her soul to him, crying softly and breaking his heart a thousand times as she struggled with the guilt over her actions. When she'd told him everything, she seemed to relax. Whether it was from the tea or from her heartfelt confession, he didn't know, but he was glad she finally found some peace.

He walked out to the family room and found Acksel and the other pack members who had joined him in getting Jack back. He paused next to the couch, too damn overwhelmed by the events of the evening to really say much of anything, but he did manage a heartfelt, "Thanks."

Acksel was letting Brynn fuss over his injuries, although Malachi didn't think he'd been hurt too much. He glanced at everyone and noticed that none of his friends had been gravely injured. He was thankful for small miracles.

Malachi sat down on the couch next to Mia and said, "Is there anything I need to know?"

Adam and Jeremiah brought the kitchen chairs into the family room and everyone sat down. They left and returned with beer and a tray of roast beef sandwiches.

“Thanks guys,” Brynn said as she reached for two sandwiches, giving one to Acksel.

Malachi twisted the top off a beer and took a long drink. Acksel watched Brynn devour the sandwich, shaking his head with an amused grin. Turning serious, he said, “Isaiah showed up after the fight was over. He said he didn’t know what Damien was planning to do and didn’t condone it. He ordered his people back to their homes, and then he seemed to realize that Damien wasn’t there. Ren showed up with the body and took the blame.”

Malachi’s eyes widened as he looked at his beta. Ren shrugged. “I wasn’t sure what would happen to Nila if Isaiah knew that she’d killed Damien, regardless of whether it was an accident or not. If he wanted physical retribution, I figured I could handle it better than she could anyway.”

“I don’t know what to say, except thank you,” Malachi said, feeling completely humbled by his pack member’s actions.

Ren smiled. “Someday you can repay the favor and take the fall for me, okay?”

“You got it.”

Acksel cleared his throat. “I’m sure it’s no hardship, but Isaiah said that he doesn’t want our pack to step foot in Dorlan again, even if the zombie apocalypse has come and the world is ending. He never wants to see Nila or Jack again and, in front of his pack members, he renounced his genetic tie to Jack.”

Brynn swallowed a large bite of her second sandwich and said, “What does that mean?”

Dade scrubbed his fingers across his stubble-laden jaw. “It means that he no longer claims Jack as his flesh and blood.”

“Um, he can’t just make a statement like that; it’s a scientific fact that they’re related.”

“Not according to pack law. It’s an old-school thing, love,” Acksel said. “If he hadn’t renounced his claim on Jack, then

Jack could have possibly shown up at his pack some day and asked for sanctuary.”

“Like at a church?” Brynn gave another confused look.

“Yes, like at a church. A relative is required to offer sanctuary if it’s asked for, unless the relative has publicly renounced their relation, which Isaiah did. Now, Jack is on his own, severed from contact with that side of his family. Nila never has to worry about Isaiah or anyone else from Damien’s pack or family members coming for Jack.”

“That’s good news,” she said.

“It’s the best damn news I’ve heard all day,” Malachi said.

Ren said, “By the way, I found that asshole’s finger on the floorboard.”

Mia made a gagging sound and Malachi chuckled. “I think Nila will be glad to hear that Jack didn’t eat it. Did you give it back to him?”

“Hell, no. He tried to hurt your mate. I stomped on it and then kicked it into the gutter.”

“Thanks, man.”

Ren chuckled and took another swig of beer.

The conversation switched to lighter topics, including the upcoming full moon. In a week, Malachi would have to leave Nila and Jack and go hunting. He wasn’t crazy about it, especially when he knew that she harbored bad memories from many full moons waiting for Damien to come back and knowing he’d been unfaithful to her.

When the tray of sandwiches was gone and beer bottles littered the top of the coffee table, Acksel sent the pack members home to rest, save for those protectors who were on schedule to patrol. Adam and Jeremiah began to clean up while Acksel and Brynn argued about her ability to help clean. In the end, Acksel won, because Brynn kept yawning and making his point.

“See you guys in the morning,” she grouched.

“I think I can head home, right? I don’t need to stay here?”  
Mia asked.

“Don’t like my couch?” Acksel asked.

“It’s not that, I just want to sleep in my own bed. Mal?”

“I think its fine. Do you want me to run you home?”

“Nah, Adam said he’d drop me off on his way.”

Acksel watched Mia and the omegas clear the table and then he turned to Malachi and said, “What do you want to do about the full moon? I know I don’t have to tell you that my home is open for Nila and Jack that night. Brynn and Eveny would enjoy the company.”

“Thanks. I’ll take you up on that. I’d like to claim her and Jack.”

“I’ll have my dad and the elders make the arrangements, and you can do it before we go hunt.”

A weight lifted off his shoulders and he breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks for everything, Acksel, I mean it. You’re a good alpha and a good friend. You went above and beyond tonight; I’m indebted to you.”

“I’m a great alpha,” he amended.

Malachi said goodnight to Mia in the kitchen and made Adam promise to get her home safely, and then he strode silently back to the guest bedroom. He really wished he’d been able to take Nila home tonight, but he’d needed to hear what had happened while he was gone. He was surprised that Ren had taken the fall for Nila, but in a way he also wasn’t surprised. Although Ren could be a tough son of a bitch, he was a good guy at heart. Someday Malachi would be able to repay the favor.

Jack and Nila were still asleep, and he stood at the bottom of the bed and watched them, Jack in the playpen, his favorite stuffed wolf tucked up under his chin, and Nila just as he’d left her, on her side with her hand under her cheek. Jack’s lips were parted and Malachi could see that his teeth had returned to normal and the claws were gone from his fingertips, too.

Whatever stress had brought on the partial shifting, it didn't linger. He knew Nila would be happy about that. Stripping, he stepped into the bathroom and took a quick shower to wash off the dried blood and sweat from the fight. He put on clean shorts from the duffel and slid under the covers, pulling Nila close. He inhaled her sweet scent and closed his eyes, thankful she and Jack were safe now.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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*M*onday morning, Nila and Malachi dropped Jack off at the house of a widowed she-wolf named Olive. She lived next door to Doc, and was happy to take care of Jack while Nila worked. The daycare had contacted her on Sunday night and told her that Jack was no longer welcome due to his dangerous associations with wolves. She hadn't been surprised. After dropping Jack off, Malachi took her to Doc's and she accepted his job offer.

Malachi hung up her coat in the breakroom of the clinic. "I won't need you to drive me to work every day once I start working for Doc. He lives close to your house."

"I like doing it."

"It makes Brynn late."

"Acksel makes her late."

She giggled. "I like driving with you, Mal, but it's important to me to do some things on my own."

"At least let me drive you through the winter. I don't like your car."

"Don't bad mouth the car."

"You know what I mean. I'm going to get you a nicer car, by the way."

"You don't have to."

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to his chest. "Don't be surprised if you wake up one morning and



find a new car in the driveway with your name on it.”

“Hmm, how will I ever repay you?”

“I’ll think of a few hundred ways.”

“I’ll bet,” she laughed. He kissed her and gave her a gentle push toward the door and the conversation she wasn’t looking forward to having with Doctor Kimmi.

Glancing over her shoulder, she smiled at his thumbs-up. She straightened her shoulders and walked down the hall to Doctor Kimmi’s office. Rapping on the doorjamb, she said, “Do you have a minute? We need to talk.”

“Uh-oh,” Doctor Kimmi said, looking up from her paperwork. “I never like conversations that start that way. Have a seat.”

Nila sat down and pressed her hands together, willing the nerves away. She had truly enjoyed working at the clinic, especially Doctor Kimmi’s kindness and her willingness to overlook all of her infractions when a lesser person would have fired her after a week.

“I’ve accepted a job with the wolf doctor. I’ll have less hours and more freedom to be with Jack. It’s not as demanding, since he doesn’t have a ton of patients, but I can learn about holistic healing from him and also learn more about wolves, which will help Jack when he gets older.”

“Aw, I’m so sorry to see you go. I really want to ask you if there’s anything I can do to get you to stay, but I don’t want to take you away from Jack and what sounds like a perfect job for you. How long can you give me?”

“Two weeks.”

“All right. Damn, I was hoping to get you to work here for about thirty years.”

She chuckled in surprise. “I’ve enjoyed working here, Kimmi. I hope you know that I care about you and Frank a great deal, and I wouldn’t leave if it wasn’t the best thing for me and my family. You’ve been so good to me. I can never repay you for all that you’ve done.”

“You can give me a hug,” she said, smiling sadly.

“Sounds good to me,” Nila said as she stood and moved around the desk, hugging Kimmi as she stood.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Doctor Kimmi said.

“I won’t.”

Nila left the office and went into the employee bathroom, giving herself a few moments to collect her thoughts. She didn’t think she’d be so sad to be moving on, but she was. A little bit, anyway. Kimmi and her husband had been really wonderful to her.

A knock at the door made her twist the handle to unlock it. Malachi stood in the doorway. “You okay, sweetheart?”

“I’m great.” She stepped out of the bathroom and into his arms. He always seemed ready to give her a hug, to offer emotional and physical support whenever she needed it. She peered up at him. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

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The full moon was the day after Christmas. Malachi’s family had descended on his and Nila’s home at the crack of dawn on Christmas Day, his parents’ car filled with so many gifts that he was surprised his father didn’t get pulled over for not being able to see out the back window. Jack had taken to his parents immediately, but they’d also brought plenty of toys for him as bribes. They’d loved Nila, too, not that he was surprised. She was amazing. The day had passed quickly in a flurry of torn paper, ribbons, and bows, and when his parents and Mia left after dinner, they made him promise to bring Nila and Jack to visit, wanting to reinstate their weekly Sunday dinners, which had fallen by the wayside when Malachi moved back to Wilde Creek. He was happy to share the weekly dinners with Nila and Jack. Some of his favorite memories growing up revolved around those dinners, when he got to stay in the dining room

and listen to the adults in his family talk about hunting and the pack. He wanted that for Jack, too.

Malachi spent the afternoon of the full moon waffling between staying home and going to Acksel's house. The pack would gather behind his home before the hunt, but because it was so cold out, there wouldn't be the usual pre-hunt get-together. Those wouldn't pick up again until spring. For now, only those that Acksel personally invited would be at the house before the pack gathered, among them his father, the elders of the pack, his sister Eveny and her human mate Luke, and Mia, because she and Brynn were best friends. Malachi, Nila, and Jack were invited, but the more he thought about it, the less he wanted Nila to experience anything even remotely close to what she'd been through before with her ex's pack.

Something soft hit his shoulder and he looked down to see one of Jack's stuffed animals at his feet.

"Did you throw this at me?" he asked, bending down and picking it up.

"I've been saying your name for two minutes, where are you?" Nila asked from where she sat next to Jack on the family room floor.

"Sorry, sweetheart, I'm just thinking." He sat down across from her with Jack between them and put the toy in the pile of animals he was stacking. When the pile was five animals high, Jack shoved it over and laughed loudly. Then he began the process all over again.

"What are you thinking about so seriously?"

"About staying home."

He looked at her and she smiled knowingly. "You're not him, and you never will be. I trust you. I know you won't cheat on me. If you want to stay here, do it because it's something you want to do, not because you think I'm going to have a meltdown when you go off into the woods."

Her gaze was steady, and there wasn't a hint of her trying to pretend that she was anything but honest in that moment. He loved that she trusted him, even when her history told her

wolf males were dishonest to the core. Besides, if he didn't bring her to the pack tonight, he wouldn't be able to claim her and Jack, and that was something he wanted to do badly.

He glanced at the marks on her neck and his wolf made a humming noise that seemed to sound a lot like a purr when it rumbled from his chest.

Jack's head shot up from where he'd been studiously watching the stuffed animals, and he lumbered to his feet. Malachi went down to one knee and Jack pressed his palm to Malachi's heart. "Carrot?"

He growled again, louder this time, and Jack grinned. "Woof."

Malachi's wolf huffed in indignation. His growl sounded nothing like a dog. Nila chuckled and said, "No, kiddo, woollfff," she sounded the word out slowly.

Jack looked at his hand and then at Malachi and said, "Woof."

Malachi grabbed Jack, hoisting him into the air and he squealed in delight.

"One of these days he'll get it right," Nila said.

He set Jack on the floor and said, "I want to go tonight, and I want you and Jack there to watch me shift, and I want you to be waiting for me to come back from the hunt so I can bring you home and we can...you know."

"Go to sleep?" she asked with what he supposed she believed was an innocent look.

"Eventually," he said, grinning.

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Nila wasn't honestly worried about Malachi. He had too much character to cheat on her. When they walked into Acksel's home, he left her with Brynn, Mia, and Eveny, and went to speak to Acksel and the other wolves inside the house. Eveny, who she hadn't met officially, gave her a hug and said,

“Welcome to the pack, Nila. I’m so glad that Malachi has finally found someone willing to put up with him.”

“He’s not so bad,” she promised.

Jack reached for Eveny, and Nila let him go. “Wow, what a cutie pie. No wonder you want him here all the time,” Eveny said to Brynn.

“Besides being a fun kid, it’s neat to watch Acksel with him. I hope we have a boy.”

Mia shrugged. “Girls are easier.”

“Says the girl who painted her bedroom walls solid black during her junior year of high school and her ‘goth phase,’” Brynn said.

“I’ll never live that down,” Mia complained.

“I don’t care what we have as long as he or she is healthy and happy. Acksel said there’s only a 50/50 chance that our children will shift, depending on whether they take more after me or him.”

“I think it would be easier if our kids could shift, but if they can’t then at least they’re growing up in a pack that accepts them, unlike others that are strictly full-wolves only,” Eveny said. She walked away with Jack to a handsome blond male, and Brynn said that he was Luke, her human mate.

“Malachi told me about the changes to pack law. It was because of her, and you, that things are the way they are now, right?” Nila asked Brynn.

“Yes. If Acksel and I weren’t mates, then he wouldn’t have made all the changes that he did, but because he wants our pack to be inclusive and not exclusive, he changed all the laws pertaining to mates and children. One of our children may one day lead the pack.”

Because Brynn was human, Acksel wouldn’t have been allowed to take her as his mate without being banished. Since he was alpha, instead of taking the banishment, he chose to change the laws that dictated that action. Some pack members left because they didn’t like those changes and wanted the

pack to remain wolf-only. She was glad that he'd changed the laws, because she benefited from it as Malachi's mate. She wasn't considered a complete outsider. Although she'd never be part of pack meetings or have authority in any way, she was welcome at the gatherings and had the protection of the pack members, and so did Jack.

"I can't imagine Jack ever shifting into a full wolf, but Doc said that it's most likely going to happen, since he partially shifted already." She was envious in a way, of the freedom and the power that came with being a shifter, and she was glad her son could enjoy it. It would be better to be a half wolf who could shift than one who couldn't. "Thanks for letting me and Jack hang out here tonight."

"You two are welcome anytime. Now that you're leaving the clinic, I'll miss our chats."

"Are you going to keep working through the pregnancy?"

"Acksel wants me to quit now, but I told him I wanted to work a little longer. I like getting out of the house and being around people. With you going to work for Doc, you'll be there when I deliver the baby, right?"

"I suppose, I mean if you'd like me to be."

"Hell yes!" She lowered her voice. "I'm scared as crap. I mean, how am I supposed to get a baby out of there? Did you know that she-wolves can shift after they have a baby and then when they shift back to their human form, they're all healed? How unfair is that?"

Nila remembered Jack's birth vividly, mostly because she'd been all alone in the hospital room. Even though the nurses had been friendly, it wasn't the same as having someone she knew and cared about there with her. She'd wished that Diane had been able to be there with her, but she'd been out of town on vacation and had come to see her as soon as she got home.

She squeezed Brynn's shoulder. "We're made for it, you know. Even if you're scared, your body will still know what to do. I remember what having Jack was like, but the pain and

stuff is fuzzy in my memory. The thing I remember the most is that when they took him away after he was first born and did all the testing and cleaned him up, he was squalling like he was being tortured. Then they brought him back in to me and the minute they laid him on my chest, he quieted, as if he knew he was with someone who loved him and would take care of him. That right there is what makes the pain worth it.”

Brynn sniffled and rubbed away a tear. “That’s so sweet.”

Acksel and Malachi were suddenly between her and Brynn, and Nila looked up at Malachi in confusion.

“Are you okay?” Acksel asked Brynn.

“I’m fine, geez. Overreact much?”

Then Nila realized that Malachi was putting himself between her and Acksel, because Acksel was obviously the sort of guy who didn’t like his mate being upset. She wrapped her arms around Malachi’s waist and hugged him. “You’re awesome.”

He chuckled. “Yeah?”

“You put yourself between me and your leader. That’s pretty amazing in my book.”

“For the record, I would never hit a woman,” Acksel said with a huff.

“I disagree with that statement,” Eveny said from where she and her mate stood while Jack played on the floor with some toys at their feet. “In fact, I have photographic proof that you’ve hit me on many, many occasions.”

Acksel made a face. “Not since we were little, Ev, don’t make me out to be an ogre.”

Mia snorted and choked on her drink, spilling some of the dark soda onto the floor. Acksel snarled and Mia groaned. “Great. I’m the one who pisses him off and no one is here to protect me.”

Malachi said, “I’d get over there. Eventually.”

She made a face at him and everyone dissolved into laughter. Nila rested her cheek on Malachi's chest and listened to his heart as he, Acksel, Brynn, and Mia teased each other. She really loved the camaraderie of the pack. Jack would get to grow up in this. In school, Nila had friends, but they hadn't been the lifelong sort like Mia and Brynn or Acksel and Malachi. Being part of the pack, even only as a mate, meant that Nila was part of something bigger than her own small family, and Jack was too.

Acksel clapped his hands together and everyone fell silent. "The pack is gathering outside now. It's cold as hell, so let's get this show on the road. Ready, Malachi?"

"Yeah, we'll be right out."

Acksel and Brynn walked out onto the back deck after she bundled up, and Mia, Dade, and the elders followed. Eveny brought Jack to her and then she and Luke left as well, until it was just the three of them.

"After I've claimed you and Jack in front of the pack, we're going hunting. I always hunt with Acksel and Dade and usually Sam or Ren. There isn't anything other than hunting going on."

"You're not going to bring back any dead things, are you?" She made a face.

Laughing, he kissed her forehead. "Nah. We'll be gone a few hours and then when I get back, I'm taking you and Jack home and, once he's tucked in his crib, you and I are going to celebrate our mating night."

A shiver raced down her spine. "Oh?"

He practically purred as he kissed her, and then he tousled Jack's hair. "Let's get you two ready."

Malachi wrestled a very wiggly Jack into his snowsuit while Nila tugged on boots and a coat. They stepped out onto the deck and found an elder named Hollis standing between Acksel and Brynn. Hollis held a thick book in his hands. Torches were flickering on the deck, and the pack was



gathered in the yard. Mia, Eveny, and Luke were in front of the group.

Nila, Jack, and Malachi stood in front of the trio. Malachi held Jack with one arm and gripped Nila's hand, linking their fingers.

Hollis spoke in a loud, clear voice. "On this night, Malachi Slattery brings Nila Caruthers and her son, Jack Caruthers, before the alphas, the elders, and the pack, to declare them his mate and his son. The laws of our people are clear: a wolf may claim any person as his or her mate and that person is welcome into the pack. If there are any among us who would disagree, speak now or remain silent forever."

She wondered if someone would say something. A she-wolf who thought she was better suited for Malachi, or a wolf who didn't think that humans should be part of the pack. But no one said anything. After what felt like an eternity, Hollis smiled at them and took a step back. Acksel and Brynn grasped hands, and Acksel said loudly, "As alpha of the Wilde Creek Pack, I declare Nila and Jack Caruthers honored members, under the authority of the alphas and the protection of the pack. Welcome to the pack."

He lifted his head and howled, the sound piercing the silent night in a way that shook her to her very soul. Brynn smiled and hugged her and Jack as Malachi and the other pack members joined in the howling. To her surprise, and everyone else's, Jack howled too, although his howl sounded more like a playful yip than the deep-throated cry of the others.

Malachi curled his hand around her neck and gently pulled her to his mouth. The nearly-chaste kiss made her smile as he pressed his forehead to hers and whispered, "My mate." Then he kissed Jack on the top of the head and said, "My son." He smiled at her, eyes brimming with love. "I love you, Nila. My life wouldn't be the same without you and Jack in it."

"I love you, too, Malachi."

Acksel called for the wolves to shift and Eveny appeared on the deck with Luke, offering to take Jack inside while Nila remained with Malachi. Nila glanced around surreptitiously as

the wolves began to strip. Malachi took her hand and gently pulled her down the steps onto the snowy grass and around the corner of the house.

“What are we doing over here?” she asked as the shadows closed around them and the sounds of the pack were muted.

“I don’t want you looking at any other guys.”

“Are you serious?”

“Of course I am. The only naked guy I want you ogling is me.”

“Did you just say ‘ogle’?”

“I did, woman.” He growled the words at her, jerking her close until they were pressed together.

“I can’t see you in the dark,” she pointed out.

He kissed her hard, delving his tongue in her mouth like he was staking a claim, making her toes curl with the intensity. With a grunt, he released his hold on her and took a few steps back until he was out of the shadows and began to strip. She’d seen Damien shift once, but he’d been showing off. Malachi wasn’t showing off for her, he was shifting because he needed to, and keeping it between them because he wanted it that way. This was their time.

She caught his shirt as he tossed it to her. He toed off his boots and stood barefoot in the snow with his fingers at the waistband of his jeans. Warmth snaked through her, and his lip curled up in a snarl.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to want to stay here.” His voice was gruff, and she could see his muscles were bunched and tense.

“You’re gorgeous, Mal, and you’re mine.” She let the word roll around in her mind for a second and smiled at the possessive way it made her feel. He didn’t own her, and she didn’t own him, but they belonged to each other all the same. “I’ll be here when you get back, and then we can go home and celebrate.”

He shoved his jeans down and stepped from them, tossing them to her as he straightened. She was tempted to ask for a quickie, or to drop on her knees and lick him like a lollipop, but for one, her son was in the house waiting for her, and for another, Malachi needed to hunt.

“Have fun hunting, Mal,” she said, smiling and hugging his still-warm clothes to her chest.

He winked and dropped to his knees, the shift overtaking him quickly. He shook himself out and she closed the distance between them and knelt next to him. His fur was thick, coarse along his back but soft on his belly. He nuzzled her cheek and made a soft sound, a cross between a purr and a growl, and she looped her arm around his neck and gave him a hug and kiss on his muzzle. Wishing him a good hunt, she walked to the deck, and he followed her to where several wolves were waiting. Nila joined Brynn on the deck, and they watched the wolves head off into the woods.

“I’m jealous of them getting to shift, but I’m glad that I can’t because I don’t really have to let Acksel boss me around like I would if I was a wolf.”

“I’m sure he bosses you around enough as it is,” Nila said as she folded Malachi’s clothes and set them on the top step of the porch. She walked into the house with Brynn. Luke was sitting on the couch and Eveny was on the floor with Jack, stacking blocks.

“Acksel tries,” Brynn winked. “How is Diane doing? Kammie stopped by while you and Mal were around the corner and said that everything was going well, but I didn’t know if you’d talked to her or not.”

“I went to see her yesterday, and we talk every few days. She’s healing fine, and having fun with Kammie. Malachi said the repairs on Diane’s house are finished now, so she can go home as soon as she’s able to take care of herself.”

“I think it’s been good for Kammie to have someone to take care of. She likes to be helpful.”

Eveny looked up from the floor. “She told me it’s easier to be around humans than wolves because humans don’t expect as much from her, not like the pack does.”

“Mal said that all females are automatically omegas except for the alpha female. Why aren’t females ranked like the guys?” Nila asked, joining Eveny on the floor.

Jack handed her a block and she stacked it on top of another. Eveny said, “Packs are still very male-centric, even ones that are as progressive as ours is becoming. I heard there are a few packs where females are also ranked, but even in those situations, the females are a separate ranking from the males and not a truly cohesive ranking of everyone together.”

Nila thought of Ren and Sam and the other males she’d met in the pack. “I don’t suppose there are many guys who would like having a woman be higher ranked.”

Brynn snorted. “That’s an understatement. As alpha female I get away with the authority because of Acksel. His power, in essence, is mine. The pack knows if anyone messes with me, he’ll beat them within an inch of their lives. No one wants to be on the receiving end of one of Acksel’s bad moods. My authority is like an extension of his, I suppose. What I say goes, unless it’s in conflict with something he’s already said, and then his word is law.”

Eveny looked thoughtful. “If it weren’t for me falling in love with Luke and Brynn getting preggers, the pack would still be the way it was before that stuff happened. Everyone is happier now that the pack’s laws are less restrictive. The omegas enjoy being useful to the pack, and the way that Acksel has them working together now—like with the monthly parties for the full moon and working for pack members around town—it’s like heaven compared to what it was before.”

“Working for pack members?”

“Some of us have real jobs—I work for Ferrity’s Construction, for example. But others work for the pack and are paid through a fund. Jeremiah and Adam are pretty much

at Acksel's disposal and handle everything from shopping to repairs to cleaning."

Nila thought about Adam and Jeremiah and wondered if they minded being lackeys. Looking at Eveny, she asked, "You don't mind being an omega?"

"Nah." She shook her head with a smile. "Some people get hung up on titles, but I'm not one of them. There are some omegas who aren't happy because injury or circumstance have taken them out of the ranking, but for the most part we're the ones that keep everything together. I like that aspect of it. I get to be part of an amazing pack, help it run smoothly, and I don't have any of the responsibility of the ranked males."

Jack yawned loudly and Nila picked him up as she stood. "Someday he might shift and then he'll be part of the pack as a ranked male, or if he doesn't shift, then he'll be an omega. I don't care which one, as long as he's happy."

"Who knows what the pack will be like in fifteen or twenty years anyway?" Brynn said. "We don't need to worry about it now. All we need to worry about is our kids being happy and safe."

Nila agreed. Carrying Jack back to the spare bedroom to put him in his jammies, she kissed his cheek and laid him on the bed. "I don't care if you ever shift, kiddo, just so long as you take after Malachi."

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Malachi loved hunting. Since the first time his father had taken him out when he shifted at sixteen, he'd been hooked. Being in his shift meant he didn't have to think about anything but finding something to hunt. Even if he didn't actually catch what he was hunting, it was still fun in a primal way, although he rarely went without actually taking down some animal at some point. When he was younger, he and his friends would hunt all night, chasing deer and rabbits until the sun came up. Then they'd stagger back to the alpha's house, shift, get dressed, go home and pass out for a day. Life was simpler back when he was a teenager, but he liked his life now even better. He never anticipated mating a female who already had a child from another male, but he couldn't imagine his life without both Nila and Jack in it.

Malachi barked at Acksel, who was nearby with Ren and Dade. It was time for him to head home and get Nila. Thoughts of a different kind of activity—one without clothes—was enough to get his wolf turned off of the hunt and ready to go back and claim Nila. The simple ceremony in front of the pack had been not only for the pack's benefit—to make it known that she and Jack were Malachi's family now—but also for their own. Malachi's wolf wanted Nila and Jack to be pack, because the pack would protect them if something happened to him. Malachi wanted to share everything about his life with Nila, and that meant having her with him during the full moons.

Acksel chuffed at Malachi in understanding and Malachi headed back to the house to take his family home. When the

house came into view, he found Nila standing at the sliding back door, staring into the woods. He stopped in the shadows and watched her, wondering what she was thinking about. His sensitive ears picked up Jack's voice, as he toddled to the door and pressed his face to the glass.

“Carrot!” His voice was muffled, but Malachi could still hear it. He grinned inwardly. Jack had felt him coming back to the house. Even as a baby, he was showing signs of being a powerful wolf.

Malachi hurried into the yard and found his clothes folded neatly on the porch step. He shifted and tugged the ice-cold clothing on. Nila opened the back door for him, welcoming him with a warm smile. Jack latched onto his pants leg and began to babble. He'd spent enough time with him to understand some of what he was saying.

“He felt me, didn't he?” Malachi asked, lifting Jack into his arms.

She smiled. “Yeah. He was playing on the floor and then he looked at the door suddenly and I knew you were close. I was watching for you, and he kept pacing back and forth in the kitchen.”

“Are you ready to go home, kiddo?” he asked.

Jack answered by yawning, tucking his head into Malachi's neck with a sigh. While Nila got her coat and grabbed their things, Malachi said goodbye to Luke. Eveny was asleep on the couch next to him, and Brynn wasn't around, which told him she was probably in bed already. He and Nila walked out to his SUV. He glanced at the house and saw two protectors in their shifts watching as they got Jack settled inside and then climbed in themselves.

“Did you have fun tonight?” he asked.

“I was just about to ask you that.”

Chuckling, he said, “It's always fun to hunt, but it's even better coming home now, since you're waiting for me.”

She leaned over and rested her head on his shoulder. “I had a good time talking to Brynn and Eveny. We talked about the

pack and the new laws.”

“You can ask me anything, too, you know.”

“I know.”

He was glad his home wasn't too far from Acksel's. Ten minutes after they'd left the alphas' home, he was watching Nila lay Jack in his crib. He'd stayed awake until Malachi was back from hunting and then he'd fallen asleep as soon as he was in the car seat and hadn't woken up when he'd been carried into the house.

Malachi turned from watching Jack to watching Nila. She stroked a finger down Jack's cheek and said goodnight in a low voice. Switching on the nightlight, she paused at the door and looked at her son for a long moment.

“I can't tell you how much I've wanted this for him. For both of us.”

“What, love?” he asked.

She pulled the door shut and faced him. “A home, a safe place for him to grow up. Acceptance. Love. All of it's here, with you.”

“Without you and Jack, it's just a house, just four walls and a roof. I didn't know what was missing from my life until you came into it.”

She smiled up at him. “That was so freaking romantic.”

Chuckling, he swept her up into his arms. “I aim to please.”

He carried her into the bedroom and set her on her feet. He wanted to kiss her. Devour her. But first he needed to brush his teeth. On the full moons, his wolf was always a little closer to the surface and he didn't want to scare her if he became too aggressive.

“Why don't you get comfortable and I'll be right back.” He pressed his lips to her forehead and then walked quickly to the bathroom. He flipped on the light and shut the door, then reached for his toothbrush on the counter. While he brushed and splashed cold water on his face, his wolf was panting to go



into the room and make love to Nila, to claim her again and again.

He turned off the bathroom light and entered the bedroom, his eyes adjusting to the moonlight streaming through the window. Nila was naked, standing next to the bed and pulling the covers back. He moved behind her, fast enough that he clearly surprised her. She gasped softly and then moaned as he cupped her breasts and pressed himself against her back. Her nipples pebbled against his palms. He nuzzled her neck, stroking his tongue up the column of her throat. She shivered and turned her head, their lips meeting as the world dropped away and it was only them.

Their tongues touched and everything in him relaxed, the tension from being away from his mate during the hunt disappearing as the sweet taste of her and the heady scent of her arousal surrounded him. He pulled her close and slid one hand down the center of her body, his fingers making their way slowly toward the apex of her thighs. His shamelessly hard cock was pressed against her lower back and he knew he could just slide into her with a simple shift of his hips, but he wanted her to come first.

His fingers circled her hipbone and slid down the soft skin of her thigh. He bent slightly, hooking his hand around her knee and lifting it to the bed, spreading her lower body apart. She leaned into his hand, which was tucked between her breasts and he pulled her more firmly to his chest. He trailed invisible patterns up the inside of her leg and then cupped her pussy. She was hot and wet, the silky evidence of her arousal rubbing against his palm as she moved her hips.

Easing from their kiss, he watched her face as he curled his middle finger and slowly pushed inside, the hot walls of her pussy gripping his finger. Her eyes darkened and her mouth fell open. He felt her relax against him and she lifted her arms and locked her fingers behind his head, holding herself upright, her body on display for him.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he whispered into her ear, letting his teeth sink into the lobe gently before licking away the slight pain.

“Malachi,” she moaned.

Rubbing her clit with his palm, he slipped another finger into her pussy, stroking her slowly. He closed his teeth on the side of her neck, pressing hard enough for her to feel them but not hard enough to break the skin. Her body began to tremble as she drew closer to climax; he could smell the heady sweetness of her body as it heated. He slipped his fingers from her pussy and rubbed the soaked tips around the tight bud of her clit. She trembled in his arms as he pushed her forward to bliss, and her nails sank into his neck as she came, a sharp cry of pleasure on her lips. Her body bowed, her breasts jutting up as her clit throbbed under his fingers and the sweet scent of her climax filled the air.

He unwound her hands from the back of his head and stretched her forward on the bed, one foot on the floor and one leg bent at the knee and resting on the mattress. She curled her arms under her head and smiled, wiggling a little on the bed.

His hands curled around her hips, and he watched as his cock pressed into the hot, wet heaven of her body. When their bodies met, they sighed at the same time, and he grinned. Gripping her hips, he watched her face as he pulled completely out of her body and then, waiting only a brief moment, plunged inside again. Her eyes shuttered and she sank her teeth into her lower lip. Pulling out and pressing in again, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm the raging wolf inside him that wanted to fuck her hard and fast.

He released his grip on her hip and smoothed his hand over her back. She trembled under him, her pussy clenching his cock, and he tweaked her side until she giggled.

“Not sexy,” she grouched, straightening on her arms and pushing back against him.

He growled. “Feels pretty sexy to me.”

Her hair slid off her shoulder as she peered at him. She slipped one hand underneath her and he was about to ask what she was up to when he felt her cup her pussy, her fingers separating so they framed his cock. “Oh, fuck, yes,” she

moaned the words, her fingers massaging his shaft, the tips grazing his balls.

“I think I’m supposed to say that,” he chuckled. He pulled from her pussy, feeling her fingers on his dick the entire time. Splaying his hands on her hips, he tightened his grip and began to move, flexing his hips in time to the wild thrum of his heartbeat which pounded in his ears. Her fingers moved back and forth against him, and he knew she was rubbing her clit, too. He rode her hard, pushing himself to give her everything she needed. He wanted her to fall apart while he was inside her, to feel her clenching him again and again.

He thrust harder. Faster. Gripping her tighter, he shook the sweat from his eyes and pounded into her, until his vision began to blur and his heart threatened to pound out of his chest. Her fingers curled and she cried out, her body locking down on him like a vise. He came hard, his whole body shuddering as he filled her.

Slumping over her, he pressed a kiss between her shoulders and waited for his bones to resolidify. She wiggled away from him, rolling to her back and scooting up the bed until her head rested on a pillow. She beckoned him, and he joined her. She curled up next to him, her head resting on his chest. He stroked her back and cuddled her closer. This was his heaven. There wasn’t anything better than being with Nila. They’d been through hell to get here, but the thorn-filled journey was over and their new journey—their life together—was just beginning.

“Sweetheart?”

She didn’t answer, and he realized she’d fallen asleep. He smiled. He’d loved her that well. Reaching for the covers, he pulled them up and closed his eyes.

He’d never been happier.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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*Four Weeks Later*

Nila sat at a large table at Luna's and watched Brynn open another bridal shower gift. Inside the pretty silver and white paper was a set of pots and pans. Everyone oohed and ahed over them as Brynn thanked the three she-wolves who had gone in together on the gift.

Eveny sat next to Nila, her hand resting on her swollen stomach. As Mia handed Brynn the next gift, Eveny said in a low voice, "When are you and Mal tying the knot?"

Nila's thumb rubbed the underside of the engagement ring that Malachi had given her a week earlier. The simple but stunning diamond solitaire winked in the overhead lights as it wiggled back and forth on her finger.

"Not until after Acksel and Brynn are married. Mal was threatened."

Eveny laughed and Brynn threw a wad of silver wrapping paper at Nila. "He was not."

Mia snorted and said, "Oh yes he was. I heard that Acksel said you'd skin Mal alive and leave him for dead if they got married first."

"Oh, now you're exaggerating," Brynn complained. Then she grinned. "I wouldn't leave him for dead."

"What about you?" Nila asked Eveny when Brynn turned her attention to another gift and began to pull the tissue paper out of a gift bag.

“We’re going to get married in March. It doesn’t matter to me when we get married, but Luke’s grandma threatened to disown him if we weren’t married by the time the baby is born. Since I’m due in June, that doesn’t leave us much time.” She lowered her voice. “I was also threatened.”

“I heard that,” Brynn said, grousing.

“Mal and I are talking about April because the weather will be nicer. It doesn’t matter to me, either, but he wants me and Jack to have his last name as soon as possible.”

“Males are territorial, aren’t they? Human and wolf.”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

After all the gifts were open and the top of the table was covered with pretty paper and bows, the party guests milled around and talked. Nila, Mia, and Eveny offered to help clean up, but Paula, who owned the restaurant with her husband Quentin, turned them down.

“Thank you so much for the cappuccino machine, I can’t wait to make one,” Brynn said, hugging Nila and kissing her cheek.

“A decaf one, right?” Mia asked.

Brynn grimaced. “As soon as this kid is born I’m having a cup of coffee the size of my head. This caffeine embargo is killing me.” Then her face brightened. “You’re going to be at Doc’s on Monday when I come by for my checkup, right?”

“You bet,” Nila said, smiling.

They said goodbye and headed toward the front door. Eveny’s mate, Luke, was standing just inside the door, and Nila noticed how his face lit up when he saw Eveny.

“Does anyone need a ride?” Eveny asked as Luke helped her with her jacket.

“Mia and I rode together, but thanks for the offer,” Nila said as she put on her coat.

“See you at the full moon,” Eveny said, kissing Nila and Mia on the cheek and waving.

“How did the month go by so fast?” Mia groused. “It seems like just yesterday was December’s full moon and now the full moon for January is in two days. I’m stunned at how time flies lately.”

“Because you’ve been busy at work?” Nila asked as she gripped the handrail and navigated the salted steps to the parking lot.

“Not necessarily, I just feel like life is passing me by. Twenty-nine, single, no kids. I feel like everyone I know is getting mated.”

Nila opened the passenger door and sat down, pulling it firmly closed and rubbing her hands together to warm them while Mia turned on the car and fiddled with the heater.

“There are a lot of single females in the pack, though. You’re not alone by any stretch.”

“I mean people I care about. Until you came along, Mal never even thought about mating and having a family. I always figured I’d be the first one to get married.”

“Well, you don’t want to rush down the altar with the wrong guy. Trust me on that.”

“I know. I’m just feeling happy for my friends but bummed for myself. Ignore me.”

“Never.” Nila knew what Malachi had told her about Mia’s crush, Lucian, and how dangerous his life was. She’d never met the man, but Mia seemed despondent, and maybe that’s what happened when wolves went without their mates. “When Mal and I get married, will you be my maid of honor?”

Mia gasped and smiled. “Of course, thank you for asking me.”

“Well, you’re Mal’s sister and you’re my friend. I wouldn’t want anyone else to stand up with me.” And, she added silently, with Lucian as Malachi’s best man, Mia and Lucian would be together and maybe something would happen between them.

“What’s up with that?” Mia asked, slowing the car and peering through the windshield. Nila looked ahead and saw a car off to the side of the road, hazard lights blinking. Mia pulled to a stop in front of the car and said, “I’m going to see what’s up.”

Nila watched as Mia got out and walked quickly back to the car. A few minutes later, Mia got back in. “I’m going to call Ren and ask him to send a tow.”

“What’s the story?” Nila asked after Mia called Ren.

“Her name is Honey and her car broke down. She’s a wolf, but her pack is a few states away.”

Nila frowned. “It’s nearly the full moon. Shouldn’t she be home?”

“I didn’t invite her into the car because she’s a stranger, but I told her we’d wait until the tow showed up.”

“Is she going to freeze to death while we wait?” Nila felt bad that she was back there all alone in a broken-down car.

“Malachi would skin me alive if I brought a stranger into the car. She said she understood why I couldn’t invite her into our car, and besides, Ren will come quickly. He owns the garage, so he can help her.”

“Where will she stay if the car can’t be fixed tonight?”

Mia blew out a breath. “I guess I should call Acksel, especially since she’s a wolf.”

Nila listened as Mia called her alpha. By the time Mia had explained the situation to him, a tow truck appeared and Ren helped the woman into the cab of the truck and disappeared behind it.

“We can go now. Acksel’s on his way and I’m hungry. The finger sandwiches and veggie trays did not fill me up,” Mia said as she put the car in gear and pulled onto the street.

Nila chuckled, “Me, either.”

Mia dropped Nila off at home. Nila stomped her boots on the front mat, kicking the snow from them, and then walked

inside. Malachi and Jack were sitting on the couch. Jack was in his lap with a large storybook. Malachi was reading, or at least trying to. Every word that he said, Jack would interrupt and repeat the word, looking up at Mal for confirmation that he'd said it correctly.

“Mama,” Jack squealed, bouncing on Malachi’s lap.

“Hi baby.” She removed her boots and hung up her coat before crossing the room to them, bending over to kiss Jack’s cheek. She sat next to them and kissed Malachi. “Hi to you, too.”

“How was the shower?”

“Fun. I heard that the baby shower involves the she-wolves hunting and bringing back dead animals. Is that true?”

He laughed. “Just for the alpha.”

“I don’t have to try to hunt, do I? I don’t think I’d be fast enough to catch a mouse, let alone a bunny or something bigger. Plus, you know...ick.”

“You can get her something normal, don’t worry.”

“Do you think about having kids, Mal?” She rested her head on his arm, which was draped over the back of the couch.

His eyes darkened, and a soft smile played on his lips. “Yeah. I’d love to have a baby with you. As many as you want.”

He leaned forward to kiss her but Jack put his hand up between them. “Dada? Woof.”

Malachi made a face. “Woollff.”

“Woof.”

“I think he’s doing it on purpose,” Malachi said.

Nila grinned. “Not my little angel.”

Malachi put Jack on the floor and grabbed Nila, pulling her into his lap. “You’re my angel. My heart. My life.”

Her stomach flipped at the heated look and then she felt Jack fist her shirt and tug as he pulled himself to standing.



“Oose.”

“Juice? Sure, baby. Just tell Daddy to let me go.”

Malachi growled lightly and nipped her neck. “That is never happening.”

She wiggled off Malachi’s lap and headed into the kitchen. Malachi snatched Jack off the floor and tickled him until he giggled hysterically. Nila handed a sippy cup of apple juice to Jack and sat down next to her mate as Jack climbed off the couch and toddled around. Malachi kissed her temple and pulled her close. “However many we have, whether they end up shifting or not—the only thing I care about is that they’re happy and healthy.”

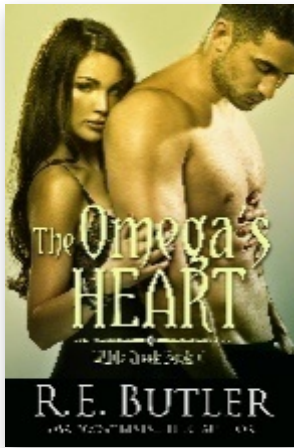
“Me, too,” she said, smiling as she watched Jack bang the cup on the table a few times before taking another drink.

She never expected to find herself engaged to a wolf, not when so much bad had happened before. Malachi had protected her when she didn’t want him to, saved her when she needed him, and was the kind of father to Jack that she had always wished for him. The journey had been a disaster at times, but the reward was sweet. She’d never felt more loved and cared for than she did with Malachi, her fierce protector and the only wolf to ever steal her heart.

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Thank you so much for reading **The Protector’s Heart**, Book Three in the Wilde Creek Series. I hope you enjoyed visiting the wolves in Wilde Creek. The Wilde Creek Pack stories continue in Book Four, **The Omega’s Heart**, coming September 7<sup>th</sup> exclusively on Amazon and FREE in Kindle Unlimited.

**Jeremiah Kincaid has always felt like an outsider**, unable to shift even though he’s a full-blooded wolf. As his twenty-eighth birthday approaches, he finds himself reaching the limit of what he can tolerate, and makes plans to leave the pack.



Honey Williams' alpha father has been acting strangely ever since she turned twenty-five, and as the January full moon draws near, she begins to feel like something bad is going to happen to her so she leaves town under the guise of visiting a friend. To ensure her father can't order her home for the full moon, she disables her car and asks the alpha of the local pack to allow her to stay.

Jeremiah never expected to be sitting on his back porch the night of the full moon and have his life change forever. One look at the sultry beauty who shifts in his yard and he knows he's in the presence of his mate. Honey's father demands she return home, and the truth of his betrayal is revealed. Can Jeremiah keep Honey safe and keep her forever?

Click [HERE](#) to learn more about *The Omega's Heart*!

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## EXCERPT FROM THE OMEGA'S HEART

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**B** rushing the snow off the deck, Jeremiah he sat down and rested his bare feet on the step. He gazed up at the dark sky and let his mind wander. His wolf was pacing in his mind, and he felt the familiar urge to run into the woods and hunt, but he tamped it down. The closest he could come to shifting was if he was in a rage, and then fur would sprout on his arms and legs, claws would extend from his fingers, and fangs would erupt from his gums. Over the years he'd occasionally gotten pissed off enough to partially shift like that, but it wasn't enough for him to be considered anything but an omega. He should be thankful. If he'd been born fifty years ago, he would have been killed because he couldn't shift, to prevent his damaged genes from contaminating any future generations.

A slight wind kicked up and he dropped his head quickly to scan the woods. Something was coming. His wolf whined and paced, and Jeremiah found himself unable to move from where he was.

A wolf trotted from the woods into the yard and stared at him. He'd never seen her before, and he wondered if it was the female who'd been staying at the garage after her car broke down. He'd heard Acksel and the ranked males discussing her. He hadn't seen her until this moment, and he had the almost uncontrollable urge to go to her.

He opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't find any words to say. Things like *don't go* and *please come here* flitted through his mind, but all he could manage was a soft growl

that to him sounded pleading. He'd never been so drawn to someone before, and he was afraid to move for fear that he'd spook her and she'd run.

Before he could muster the nerve to speak, she began to shift, and he sat, mesmerized, as the pretty wolf transformed into a beautiful woman.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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R. E. Butler is a USA Today Best Selling Author of Paranormal Romance such as the Were Zoo and Cider Falls series. She lives on the water in New Jersey with her husband, kids, and furry pup.

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Thanks to Mandy Pederick for beta-reading.

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